

Forecast of Educational Trends in the Role of “Soft Skills” for the Professional Development of Future Specialists in the Conditions of Distance Learning: The Challenges of Our Time

Yaroslav Tsekhmister
National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine

Nataliia Stetsenko
South Ukrainian National Pedagogical University Named After K. D Ushinsky

Oleksii Volyk
Kharkiv I.P. Kotlyarevsky National University of Arts

Tamara Gumennykova
IAPM University

Oleksandr Sharov
National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine

The modern requirements of the information society dictate an update on the work of educational institutions, in particular on the formation of soft skills among higher education applicants. The article aims to analyze educational trends and the role of soft skills for the professional development of future specialists in the conditions of distance learning. The article uses general scientific (analysis, synthesis) and special (abstraction, prediction) research methods. In general, it is noted that soft skills are important for career development, but it is difficult to measure them empirically. In European and American universities, the acquisition of soft skills has long been solved by additional classes and additional paid education, but since COVID-19 there are many digital platforms where you can learn them through distance education.

Keywords: soft skills, distance education, perspectives, higher education, methods

INTRODUCTION

The modern development of the information society shows the prospects of using the latest technologies in many spheres of activity. First of all, we are talking about the possibilities of their integration with educational processes, which is extremely relevant against the background of overcoming the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Quarantine restrictions associated with the global spread of this disease have demonstrated the possibilities of distance learning and the prospects for its use in the future. If before 2019

the use of distance education was considered exclusively as an auxiliary type of getting an education, which was used next to traditional pedagogical methods, then after that time it became clear that distance learning, asynchronous learning, and other varieties are also effective and have quite tangible concrete advantages (Tsekhmister et.al., 2021). At the same time, opportunities for further development and use of distance learning technologies for education applicants have encountered certain difficulties and challenges, which concern the development of new paradigms of learning and its structure (Korniichuk et.al., 2021). It is quite obvious that the old benchmarks of hard skills have ceded importance to soft skills, but the introduction of distance learning has demonstrated the dynamism with which learning methodologies are developing. Therefore, the work on the development of the necessary level of soft skills requires a fresher update, taking into account the digitalization of the educational process and the further use of digital technologies, even while reducing the role of distance learning in modern higher education.

Important areas for further research activities will be digital innovations of distance learning, the methodological basis for their application in higher education. In view of the dynamic transformations caused by the digitalization of the educational process, further changes in pedagogical teaching methods require certain updating of theoretical foundations based on the development of improved methods of practical work on the formation of an appropriate level of soft skills among higher education applicants.

The topical issues for research are the problems of the growth of theoretical and methodological principles of pedagogical work in higher education institutions. In particular, it is related to the importance of competent use of digital technologies for the formation of soft skills. Separate attention is also paid to the prospects of further use of digitalization and analyzed some theoretical difficulties that may arise in the implementation of technological innovations in the educational process to improve the mastery of soft skills.

It can already be stated that the rapid transformation of learning points to the further importance of gaining soft skills as a certain guarantee of finding opportunities in the labor market and a kind of substitute for traditional professional competencies. In particular, Engwall (2020) analyzed the likely vectors of future university development, concluding that blended learning will dominate in the future. Laufer et al. (2021) traced the positive elements of the COVID-19 pandemic impact on education. Bondar et al. (2021) identified future directions for distance learning, concluding that it is promising if certain conditions are implemented. Scheerens, van der Werf & de Boer (2020) focused on possible challenges to the development of future education. Also, Şova & Popa (2020) traced the likely scenarios for the further evolution of digital learning, considering the possibilities of the teaching environment regarding the impact on the learning process. Bila et al. (2019) analyzed the key aspects of the use of modern interactive technologies in education through the prism of correlational analysis.

At the same time, scholars have paid little attention to the possibilities of digital technologies for the formation of soft skills, which is a highly relevant vector for future research in the context of modern educational processes. The article aims to analyze the educational trends of the role of “soft skills” for the professional formation of future specialists in the conditions of distance learning, to highlight the possible challenges of our time, and to propose ways to overcome these difficulties.

METHODOLOGY

The work has a theoretical character, so the main methods of its conduct were exactly the theoretical ways of research, which are associated with empirical measurements to demonstrate certain general trends in the development of education.

The methodological basis for writing this study were general and specific methods of theoretical knowledge. We are talking about analysis, synthesis, deduction, and induction, as well as methods of concretization, prediction, abstraction, etc. In particular, the use of the method of content-analysis allowed to review the scientific works devoted to the complex problem of forming soft skills in higher education applicants in the current conditions, the little-studied problems were highlighted and characterized. At the same time, based on the use of synthesis, some elements of soft skills formation were united for a better understanding of the problem moments, arising on the way of their formation among applicants for higher

education. Thanks to the method of forecasting the possible prospects, which are opened by the digitalization of education in the formation of relevant skills and skills of working in society, were disclosed. Based on the method of abstraction the transition from the analysis of general theoretical theses to the formation of specific hypotheses and conclusions.

RESULTS

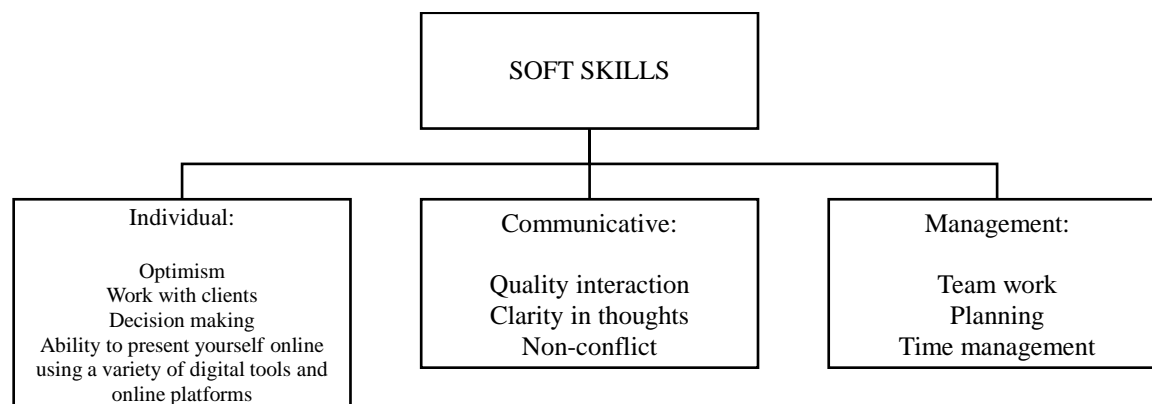
The Importance of Soft Skills for the Labor Market: A Predictive Aspect

Teamwork, stamina for tasks, the ability to persuade or accept necessary compromises are only a small list of the soft skills required in the selection of candidates for vacant positions (Engwall, 2020). For this reason, the recruiters are focused on the kind of recruitment that would meet the necessary requirements of employers. Importantly, hard skills still play an important role in acquiring the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities-they are easy to measure, hard skills are fairly objective in their performance (Liubarets et al., 2022). This category includes specialized knowledge, professional skills, and established practical skills needed to perform tasks efficiently and correctly. At the same time, soft skills are difficult to measure empirically, so the evaluation of such phenomena as the ability to take the initiative, love of work, creativity, and other traits are evaluated in a purely subjective way.

The World Economic Forum in Davos (January 16, 2023) discussed key skills that will be important in the future. The meeting resulted in the publication of the Top 10 skills that will be needed for work in 5 years. Analytical thinking and innovation skills came in first place, followed by active learning and learning strategies. Critical thinking skills, creativity, original thinking skills, and initiative are generally important. New to the list were digital skills, including applying, monitoring and controlling technology. Self-control skills, communication skills, social influence and leadership were also in the top ten. So, social skills will be relevant in the future. So, in European countries and the USA, for a long time already a lot of attention has been paid to soft skills in the university system. In the conditions of distance learning for the professional formation of future specialists their importance has not changed (Scheerens et al., 2020), even on the contrary - for today's globalized world the ability to work and find a common language with representatives of many nations is extremely important.

The definition of soft skills most often explains a set or set of certain competencies that contribute to integration and teamwork. For this reason, these skills are often called not only soft skills but also unified or social skills. In general, soft skills are a sociological phenomenon that refers to the manifestation of people's emotional intelligence, which forms a certain list of personal notable traits associated with effective interaction within human teams (Bondar et al., 2021). It is very difficult to measure the level of their mastery, but experts distinguish individual, communicative, and managerial soft skills (See Figure 1).

FIGURE 1
SOFT SKILLS LEVELS



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So, soft skills are related to social interactions within teams, which are equally important for performing their professional duties as well as for their usual everyday life. Actually, when preparing higher education applicants, it is necessary to take into account that their success in the future will be determined primarily by the levels of soft skills (Da Silva et al., 2020). And students should be aware that it is better to use these skills from the lowest level for the prospects of professional growth. It is also important in distance education to be aware of the key differences between soft skills and hard skills - it is said that soft skills cannot be mastered by trivializing one's duties and by processing only theoretical sources of information (șova & Popa, 2020). For this reason, silabuses of key disciplines during the teaching process need to focus on this component as well.

In particular, researchers rightly point out that in today's world, the important aspect is informational, while the mastery of certain theoretical knowledge is extremely static - such knowledge can quickly become irrelevant, outdated, in need of updating (Murphy, Iniesto & Scanlon, 2022). In such circumstances, modern learning has an important vector - a much more important process is the ability to find the right information in the right amount of time. It should also be noted that the results of empirical measurements carried out at Harvard University and Stanford Research Institute have shown the following trend: professional success due to "hard skills" is only 15%, while "soft skills" is defined as 85%.

Due to the relevance of soft skills and the identified problems with their teaching, it is important to integrate as many of these skills as possible into the learning process (Aldulaimi, 2018). We are talking primarily about such important elements of soft skills as the ability to use different models of behavior in getting into the same life situations, clearly know their own interests and understand the aspirations of other stakeholders, quickly and understandably focus on priorities, make the best choice when possible alternative solutions. promptly adapt to current challenges and circumstances, have a sufficient level of stress resistance and endurance, be able to achieve Direct training of these skills in modern education has many problems, in particular, they are not provided in all current educational standards, especially given the realities of distance learning, which poses additional obstacles to the socialization of the individual.

The way to solve this problem is through specialized, rather high-cost programs of additional university training, which, given the European and American experience, are paid by companies after hiring the corresponding employees (Bashynska et al., 2021). Additional education to acquire soft skills covers various trainings on motivation and self-motivation, leadership basics, implementation of managerial functions, teamwork, temporary management, public speaking and presentations, basics of the latest marketing, self-development, and many other aspects.

Partly the introduction of distance learning can help to resolve this issue. In particular, after the introduction of quarantine restrictions, the number of distance learning platforms has increased, where a lot of materials (including training videos) are available for free access. Thanks to the development of such an educational field, applicants for higher education are able to independently master ways to master soft skills. Quarantine restrictions and the digitalization of education have had a tangible positive impact on independent learning. It is true that gaining soft skills as part of a university education also requires the close attention of teachers, who must also pay attention to these aspects during the educational process.

Methods to Improve Soft Skills in Higher Education Applicants: The Recommendation Aspect

During the educational process and the implementation of the main provisions of educational programs for the training of specialists of the appropriate level, as demonstrated by experience, project-based learning methods become important, which are aimed at self-improvement of personalities of higher education applicants, the formation and implementation of their professional and social requests, which will create professional and socially significant skills to perform future professional duties (Bezlutska et al., 2021). Also, soft skills will certainly give an impetus to the development of creativity and critical thinking.

The development of project-based learning looks promising for soft skills (Laufer et al., 2021). Thanks to its active implementation, as proven by Dugal (2019), it is possible to form the skills for rapid adaptation in a fast-moving world, in particular - to the needs of the modern socio-economic situation. It is also said about the ability to personally outline personal and professional development vectors, to show the ability to do the work on time (which is extremely important for the modern labor market), to unfold

communication and teamwork skills, to demonstrate acquired experience and leadership inclinations - all these and some other opportunities are fulfilled through the acquisition of soft skills among students and during university studies (Mohamad et al., 2017). Along with the use of the project method, digital (interactive) and situational education technologies have considerable potential for creating communication skills, the ability to demonstrate initiative, responsibility, teamwork, etc.

In the distance learning environment, some additional training methods have been developed to form soft skills among higher education applicants. Their active exploitation can lead to the formation of methodological guidelines for improving the educational process in modern universities in general. First of all, we are talking about the methods given in the table (See Table 1).

TABLE 1
METHODS OF IMPROVING THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS TO BETTER OBTAIN
SOFT SKILLS

Methods	Meaning
Case method Research work (writing analytical articles and reviews, essays, etc.) Work with small groups of students	The use of such techniques is aimed at the formation of critical thinking, which in soft skills is extremely important for further self-improvement, obtaining skills for independent work.
Modeling situations Work with creative exercises	These methods are devoted to the development of creativity as an extremely valuable ability in today's labor market. They are best implemented with small groups of higher education applicants
Role Playing Discussion Debate	These methods lead to the formation of leadership and initiative. When applied in groups, it also improves the ability to work in a team, resolve conflicts in a constructive way, etc.
Heuristic conversation Brainstorming Creative work	These methods foster cognitive work skills so that considerable progress is made in the flexibility of decision-making and the ability to implement them in many ways.
Implementation of projects Independent research activity Fulfillment of practical tasks in the specialty	Working with time management is also an important part of soft skills. For this reason, applicants for higher education need to learn how to work with time constraints and make appropriate progress.

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The use of the mentioned methods is based on determining the peculiarities of creating soft skills in higher education applicants, first of all, the necessity of actualization of the mentioned abilities among future specialists at institutional levels of higher education institutions, acquisition of soft skills to guarantee effective professional work among future university graduates. training, which in perspective will complement and enrich each other when applied in the university environment.

The predicted consequence of the implementation of the mentioned teaching methods to the educational process, in addition to the formation of the necessary soft skills, is an increase in levels of competitiveness in the labor market and the readiness of future professionals to work in the professional direction of acquiring an idea about the importance and directions of self-improvement and independent development, awareness of the need for personal performance (Lepeley, 2021). As part of the digitalization of learning and the use of models to enhance the effectiveness and development of soft skills, it is advisable to integrate the structural and logical links of separative educational elements (individual disciplines with practical

direction, etc.) (Kobets et al., 2019), scientific work (refers to holding conferences, student seminars, writing independent research, formation of appropriate scientific circles and problem groups) (Franco & DeLuca, 2019), the performance of mandatory creative components (writing essays, papers, essays, and coursework, etc.), the implementation of creative components (writing essays, essays, coursework, etc., etc.) (Kobets et al., 2019).

In addition, it is extremely relevant to raise awareness of higher education applicants about the possibilities of obtaining the necessary level of soft skills through the use of non-formal education. To this end, we can recommend supplementing the study of certain educational components, syllabuses and work programs of academic disciplines, other program documents with information on available qualified online courses. Particularly important in distance learning is the use of digital learning platforms where some free online courses are available (Rosa et al., 2022). However, courses separated from the main learning array will not have the desired effect (Vivitsou, 2019). Consequently, attention should be drawn to the methodological training of instructors on the systematic formation of soft skills among higher education applicants.

Consequently, teachers' work should take into account not only the learning aspect but also the introductory one. For this purpose, it is important to improve teachers' teaching skills and their readiness to tutor (personal support of higher education applicants during the distance learning process, but also in blended or traditional learning conditions, as such requirements, are dictated by the needs of our time). Also relevant is the analysis of the progress in creating an appropriate level of soft skills, organizing and conducting appropriate counseling for the university environment of students, supporting the interest of applicants for higher education students in the future specialty and independent work, emphasizing self-development and self-improvement as effective elements of specialized activities. (Bila et al., 2019). For this reason, the need to emphasize the development of soft skills is established by social demands and objective public demand for professionals versed in soft skills techniques (Almahameed & Al-Sarairah, 2022). The institutional level of modern higher education institutions should demonstrate and introduce a vector of educational policy aimed at the crosscutting formation of soft skills in the use of individual learning elements, as well as during classroom teaching.

CONCLUSIONS

Consequently, the role of soft skills in the professional development of future specialists in a distance learning environment is a relevant research topic with important predictive results in the future. Note that soft skills play an extremely important role in the labor market, so university graduates should pay attention to this component. Unlike hard skills, soft skills learning levels are difficult to measure. For this reason, it lends itself to difficult adjustments during distance learning, which further complicates the socialization of graduates. In practice, in European and American universities, the acquisition of soft skills has long been solved by additional classes and additional paid education. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated additional learning opportunities: many modern online platforms offer a wide choice of non-formal education. Through their use, opportunities for higher education applicants to improve their own social skills are available.

It has been demonstrated that the formation of soft skills is also influenced by teachers, who, thanks to modern pedagogical methods, can additionally influence students. Due to the introduction of the latest pedagogical methods, it is possible to improve the social practices of students throughout the use of distance learning and digital technologies.

At the same time, the further evolution of digital technologies and their impact on the learning process, including the formation of soft skills, can be considered poorly researched. First of all, the question is that the development of digitalization is quite rapid, so conservative pedagogical environments may not be ready for permanent changes in the learning process.

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