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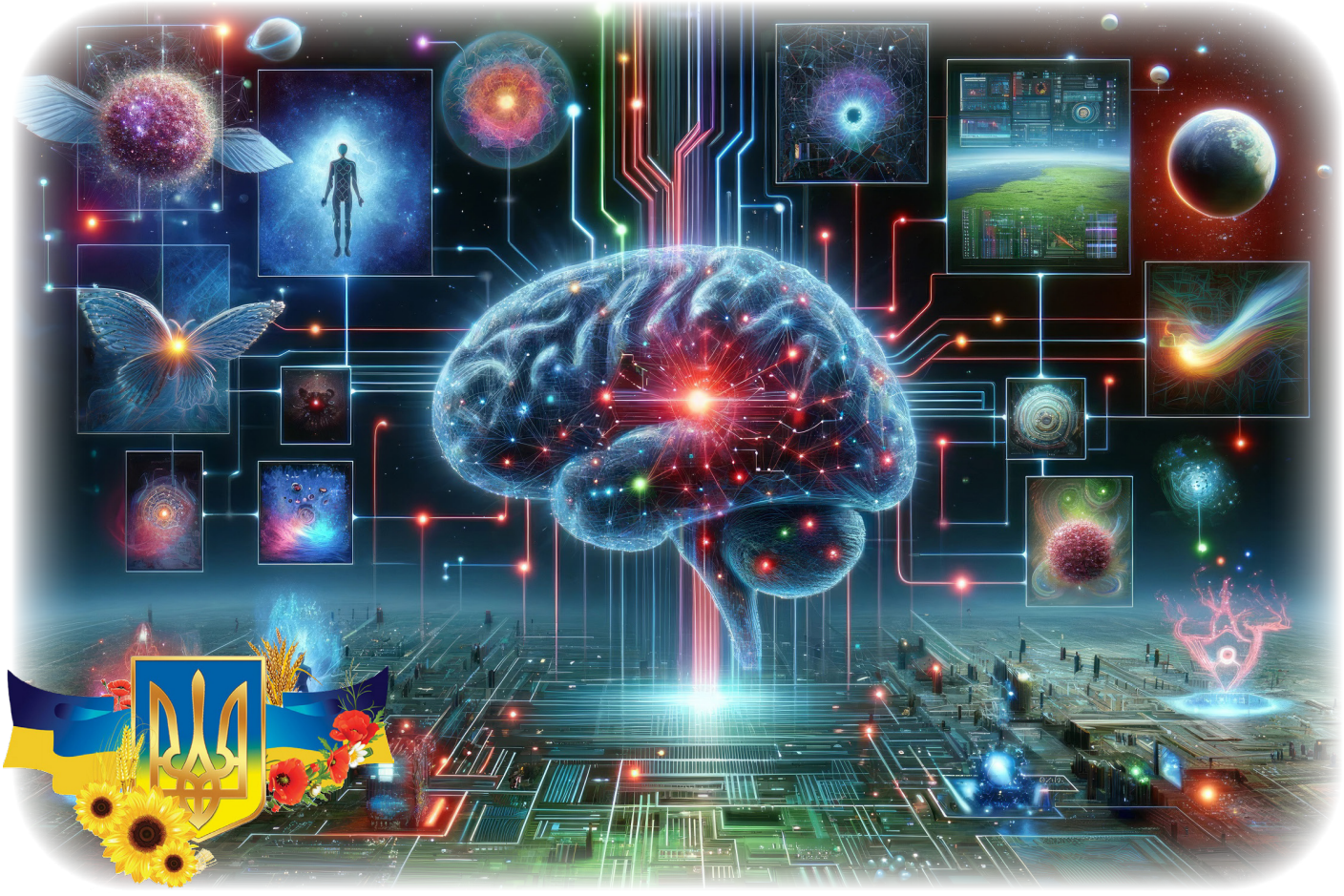

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THE IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Summary. *The article is devoted to the importance of soft skills development in higher education institutions. It is emphasized that soft skills are becoming more important in companies' recruitment decisions. The article also considers how to develop one's employability skills in higher education institutions. It is pointed out that a deeper understanding of employability skills and how to develop them not only helps higher education students to prepare for their future careers, but also increases the chances of success and job satisfaction.*

Key words: *competencies, employability skills, hard skills, higher education institution, professional development, soft skills, teamwork skills.*

Employability, the qualities and skills that make us suitable for paid work, often brings to mind a specific body of knowledge, technical skills or qualifications that are appropriate for a particular position. However, there is an increasing demand from global businesses for their employees to demonstrate effective core skills.

Core skills are often referred to as soft skills, and include social skills (such as the ability to collaborate and communicate effectively with other people), higher level thinking skills (such as thinking critically and solving problems), and more personal, emotional skills (such as personal development and self-awareness).

The Cambridge Employability Skills Framework is based on extensive research into employer needs, and groups employability skills into eight key areas of competency that need to be developed, in addition to learning English. These eight competencies are: collaboration and teamwork, communication, innovation and problem solving, critical thinking and decision making, leadership and global citizenship, personal development and management, emotional intelligence, and digital literacy.

Businesses around the world are finding that their future success depends on having a workforce that has these kinds of social, cognitive and emotional skills. The National Soft Skills Association found that 85% of job success comes from having well-developed soft skills, and a large-scale study into the future of jobs and jobs training identified soft skills as the most important skills needed to succeed in the workplace of the future [1]. Therefore, employability is about far more than just getting a job. It is also about having transferable core skills and appropriate attitudes that enable an individual to do his/her job well, and be successful throughout his/her career. In this article, we will consider the importance of soft skills development and how to develop one's employability skills in higher education institutions.

With the rapid growth in technology, there is a lot of complexity and uncertainty worldwide. As a result, people's expectations and aspirations are rising. However, educational institutions have not kept pace with industry needs, resulting in students' unemployability. The industry's needs are changing rapidly as they have to tune with the tastes and temperaments of the customers. There are several challenges in the current educational system globally.

Designing the course content based on the changing business scenario is the most challenging task for educators. By the time they design curriculum and teach students, the needs are changing. Technology has become both a boon and a bane for educators, where educators get the information at the click of a mouse. At the same time, students also get the same information from the Internet. Students demand more than what is available on the Internet. Therefore, educators must add value by sharing the experiences that students lack. Besides, doing extensive research on each topic helps educators gain an edge over students.

The expectations of the students are rising and the educators find it challenging to meet them. It seems there is constant pressure on educators to do research continuously and present things from a new perspective. The students want quick results, while the educators want to wait for the results because of their experience and age, leading to a gap between the educators and the students.

When we look at teaching methodologies, the educator must teach what the students want, not what the educator knows. Educators must stay updated with rapidly changing technology and evolve their teaching tools and techniques to be appropriate for the classroom. The educators must encourage students to think rather than dump knowledge, leading to creativity and innovation.

Educational institutions still adopt the old pedagogy, which needs to be pruned to meet the needs of the students. The learning and teaching methodologies must be restructured to accommodate the changing times and technology. The right approach towards this is to invite the industry and have a discussion with them. It enables the academia to know the pulse of the industry. It ultimately leads to a change in course curriculum. Another thing to note is to invite the alumni to discuss their needs, and then educational institutions must design their course content. These two measures will eliminate any misalignment between academia and industry, thus dramatically changing how students are shaped. Ultimately, the industry would be very glad to absorb the students as they have been groomed to meet their needs. Besides, they become more employable with the right mindset, skills, and tools.

Both academia and industry cannot operate in different orbits. They have to be within the same orbit, leveraging their strengths to create productive people. The educators must know the needs of the students from time to time and evolve their teaching styles to suit the learning styles of students. Academia must foresee the needs of the students through thorough research and prepare a flexible curriculum with flexible learning styles to achieve the desired results.

Team teaching helps bridge the gap between academia and industry. In this method, both the educator and the industry expert undertake the teaching session, while the educator emphasizes the theory and the industry expert focuses on applying the theoretical concepts. The academic world is under a theoretical perspective, while the industrial world is under a practical perspective. Both need to communicate, understand, empathize, and appreciate the compulsions and constraints and work in harmony to produce industry-compatible and employable students. In addition, it helps them develop their personalities and grow professionally.

It is obvious that there is a need for a symbiotic relationship between academia and industry. Ultimately, what we need is quality over quantity in every area of activity for meaningful results. There is an urgent need to align education with industry, not the other way around, for lasting takeaways. Thus, academics and industry should have an open mind and find out the need to keep the current trends in view [2].

Despite ongoing worries about how artificial intelligence will affect jobs, research shows that employers increasingly value something that only human workers can provide — soft skills. These include knowing how to communicate with co-workers, put others at ease and navigate conflict.

However, these essential skills are often neglected in traditional higher education. Colleges and universities' primary focus is to teach students how to become experts in their fields, but they often fall short in preparing students for the social and emotional demands of the workplace.

This disconnect is not a minor oversight. It is a fundamental flaw in how colleges and universities equip young professionals for success. At best, it creates a communication gap between younger and older workers. At worst, it impacts young workers' job performance as well as their mental health as they struggle to prove themselves. Educational programs that offer applied experiences, such as internships, provide valuable opportunities for students to utilize their skills professionally and develop essential interpersonal skills. But educators can also help develop these skills right in the classroom. Below, there are some ways how to accomplish that goal:

1. Prepare students for the real world by using role-playing simulations. For example, students could act as members of a startup or a corporate team, where they must navigate not only business tasks but also manage interpersonal conflicts, negotiations and decision-making.

2. Create "feedback loops," where students practice giving and receiving constructive feedback with their peers. This helps students develop communication skills, emotional resilience and the ability to navigate criticism gracefully — a key workplace skill.

3. Teach leadership courses that focus on emotional intelligence. These courses would teach students how to lead effectively under pressure, balancing task completion with team well-being and emphasizing empathy and adaptability.

4. Incorporate mental health education and resilience training into the curriculum. This will equip students with the tools to manage stress and maintain well-being on the job.

The transition from education to the workforce is complex and challenging. By cultivating emotional intelligence, communication skills and adaptability, educators can help prepare students for the realities of professional life and bridge the gap into the modern workforce [3].

Whether a teacher specializes in math, English, science, or history, it is important that they master their specific area of expertise. Whereas an educator's proficiency in their subject area can be measured in terms of grades, certifications, and exams, there are some more intangible qualities that cannot be measured but can help them become better, more effective teachers. Sometimes referred to as "soft skills," these qualities of a good teacher cannot be measured, but can still be developed over time to help educators better connect with students, colleagues, and parents of students.

Perhaps the broadest category — and arguably, the most important — of soft skills for teachers is communication. Teachers need to be excellent communicators and know how to speak to a variety of different people in order to do their job effectively. They need to be able to communicate with students, as well as with parents.

At the most basic level, a teacher's job is to educate students and convey information about a particular subject. It is not just regurgitating textbook knowledge, but rather, finding ways to make lessons engaging and to get students involved. Teachers need to know how to pivot their lesson plans, making them relatable to students by either comparing them to current events to help lessons sink in, or by tailoring lessons to better fit different grade levels or learning styles.

Beyond instructing students on course materials, teachers also need to develop lines of communication with students. In instances where students feel alienated or bullied, a teacher should be able to build trust with their students and use their communication skills to help students in need.

In order to foster a sense of trust and improve student-teacher communications, teachers should:

- Learn their students' names.
- Understand students' likes and dislikes.
- Praise good work and offer constructive feedback when a student does poor work.
- Be observant of how each student normally behaves in the classroom and be alert if any behaviors seem unusual.

Teachers should strive to build trust with their students' parents. One way to do so is by listening to parents. While teachers may be used to leading the discussion in the classroom, they should be prepared to listen to parental concerns or in situations where a parent may help them try to understand a child's unique challenges.

Teachers need to convey to parents that they are investing in their child's progress. Teachers can also help parents understand their child's learning style, likes, dislikes, or any behavioral issues by developing an understanding of each student.

Teachers can consider the following ideas in order to help build better communication skills with parents:

- Engaging in regular communication (face-to-face, email, phone) with parents to keep them informed of their child's academic or behavioral progress.
- Not getting defensive if a parent offers a critique or defends their child's behavior.
- Documentation of all communications with parents, including the date of the conversation, names of both parent and student, and a summary of the discussion.

If teachers are hesitant to give out their personal contact information to parents, there are a number of programs and apps available to help open the lines of communication with parents and keep a written record of communications.

Teachers need leadership skills in order to earn the respect of their students, parents, and peers. While the philosopher and politician Niccolo Machiavelli pondered whether it is better for a leader to be feared or loved, modern classroom approaches indicate that there needs to be a healthy balance.

While teachers should always be kind and respect each of their students, they also have to demonstrate that there are consequences for bad behavior. Allowing students to continue misbehaving without any consequences can encourage more missteps and can pose a problem for students in the long run.

Beyond becoming an empathetic, yet authoritative presence in the classrooms, teachers can continue to improve leadership skills by connecting with educators from other schools or from neighboring districts. This can help them gain insight into how other schools and teachers operate, then refine their own approach.

In today's scholastic environment, teachers are expected to do more than just teach. In addition to being educators, teachers must also be problem-solvers and mediators, helping to de-escalate situations where tensions may run hot between students (and sometimes, faculty and parents, too).

Studying social emotional learning (SEL) as a methodology can help teachers, as well as students, be better equipped to handle complex problems. SEL teaches an awareness of emotions and what triggers those emotions, as well as how to deal with those emotions in constructive ways. SEL can help children and adults make better decisions and demonstrate greater empathy for others.

Teachers can lead by example, weaving SEL into the curriculum of a given subject area. For instance, in an English or history class students can be encouraged to talk about a character's actions in a story, or what may have prompted a historical figure to respond the way he or she did — as well explore the consequences of those actions. Group projects, where students work to divide tasks among one another under the supervision of a teacher, can also be an example of SEL-in-action and develop their own problem-solving skills.

Becoming a teacher means constant personal growth. It can be a rewarding experience that not only helps students reach their full potential, but encourages constant self-examination and growth for educators themselves [4].

It should be noted that today most higher education institutions highlight the necessity of including both hard and soft skills in their syllabus to meet the required personal, academic and professional demands for a successful career. Hard skills are considered to be the technical knowledge and experiences needed to carry out a job, whilst soft skills are interpersonal qualities, also understood as an individual's set of social skills and personal attributes. Therefore, soft skills refer to a broad group of skills, behaviours, and personal qualities that enable individuals to function efficiently in their environment, have effective relationships, carry out their work professionally, and achieve

the goals they set. Soft skills are considered excellent complements to traditional hard skills at university due to their significant role in the current context. However, although soft skills are important, there is a lack of consensus regarding their characterisation and implementation.

Universities are aware that having an adequate level of education and training not only implies a certain mastery of the contents of a given syllabus; students also need to fully develop the necessary skills to access the job market. In fact, employers consider social skills to be a significantly important attribute for job seekers, demanding that their new employees' soft skills are as well consolidated as their hard skills, given that current job positions require additional qualities that were previously not demanded. Thus, both employers and academic institutions are slowly becoming aware of the need to equip individuals with the competencies, skills and knowledge that will not only facilitate their incorporation into the job market after their studies but also support their professional development throughout their career so that they can successfully adapt to changes in the job market.

Within this context, teamwork skills have been gaining close attention, as they are considered essential competencies in an increasingly more globalised, dynamic and complex world. New employees are asked if they have teamwork skills, can resolve specific work issues or have the required skills to handle the new challenges posed by today's society. Universities are not oblivious to society's needs, specifically to the demand of companies for students and future workers to be trained in soft skills. Over the past few years, universities have manifested their concern with students' mastery of soft skills, specifically those related to learning to work in teams, given their correlation with employability. Recruiters are looking for employees with soft skills, as they are aware of the link between the former and the successful maintenance and execution of a job. Therefore, in the present day, job adverts frequently list soft skills, including teamwork, as a requirement.

Soft skills are considered essential elements of employees' development. The acquisition of these skills enables attitudinal and behavioural change in workers, as well as increased productivity and well-being. Soft skills facilitate effective teamwork, which is the activity of working together in a group with other people.

Therefore, students in both compulsory and further education need to be trained in these skills if they are to become graduates capable of competing in the variety of situations they may come up against in the workplace. Several works have tried to identify the most relevant soft skills that the job market demands from the point of view of students and company supervisors. They highlight the relevance of ethical commitment, personal skills, professional responsibility, analysis capacity, problem solving, responsibility, learning capacity, motivation, concern for quality and teamwork. Teamwork is one of the key soft skills that students have to acquire for their future professional success.

It is worth pointing out the varying approaches to the definition of teamwork. Our study interprets teamwork as: (a) a group of individuals with commonality of goals across members, (b) synergy that emerges from members' interdependence and (c) the combined actions of a group of people working together effectively to achieve a goal. In addition, we should take into account that "teamwork" is sometimes considered as a skill.

The literature has analysed many techniques and measurements for evaluating teamwork skills. For example, a multi-dimensional scale analyses various dimensions of perceptions of teamwork. It includes the measurement of six key soft skills for teamwork: coordination, decision-making, leadership, interpersonal development, adaptability, and communication.

It is essential to note that studies designed to observe teamwork skills should consider the country's social and cultural context since socio-cultural features can determine individuals' behaviour and attitude towards teamwork. For example, one of the dimensions of culture, collectivism versus individualism, has been demonstrated to influence teamwork since the two positions will approach group work in a different way.

Universities provide ideal environments for developing teamwork skills since these skills can be fostered from formal instruction, curriculum design, and non-formal perspectives. From the formal perspective, educational institutions can promote the organisation and implementation of teamwork training programmes. Specifically, teachers can include these skills in the design of their subjects. Some research has emphasized the role of specific innovative teaching techniques in the classroom, such as the micro flip teaching model, project-based learning or experiential activities.

Likewise, curricular elective subjects and extracurricular training courses have proven to be highly effective for teamwork skills acquisition, so they should be promoted and included at an institutional level. In this way, students can acquire and develop teamwork skills through curricular, academic practices, and university extracurricular or free time leisure activities. Extracurricular activities have been shown to positively impact the acquisition of teamwork skills. University students also acquire these skills when engaging in activities such as sports, volunteering, art and design projects, long-term workshops and courses, travel, or learning to play an instrument. Students who participate in musical activities, carry out multidisciplinary experiences in volunteering and participate in international workgroups have better teamwork skills.

Therefore, given the importance of teamwork skills for students' academic performance and future employability, higher education institutions should endeavour to support and develop teamwork skills training from the first year at university in order to guarantee students' educational, social and professional success [5].

Today, working environments — less stable than they used to be — require both students and graduates and future employees to adopt new strategies that will satisfy the demands of a global market in constant change. Universities tend to focus on the development of formal competencies, whereas employers give primary value to all those related to instrumental, interpersonal and systemic skills. The specialized literature distinguishes these so-called soft skills from other competencies related to specific technical and methodological knowledge, or hard skills. Hard skills are highly valued in the academic world whereas soft skills are highly valued in the working environment. However, if a close link between universities and businesses is to be promoted, higher education needs to include generic competencies — and soft skills specifically — as a learning objective and systematically evaluate them throughout the university learning process regardless of degree or specialization. This seems to be the only way of ensuring that these skills are learned by students and added to their competency expertise in a gradual and efficient manner.

Thus, soft skills refer to personal competencies that affect the way we interact with people and include communication, listening and negotiation skills, as well as teamwork, leadership and planning, reflection and critical thinking, ethics and commitment. Starting in the late 1990s, a series of studies have shown the importance of these skills for business and industry, especially in those jobs demanding a certain level of responsibility and a capacity to organize and structure work autonomously and work in teams. But even when soft skills are essential to achieve efficient work, universities still tend to overlook them. Teachers value interpersonal relationship skills, teamwork, decision making and problem solving throughout students' university education, communication and information management being the skills that are actually developed and most valued in university classrooms. However, teachers do not value leadership, initiative, direction, organization and management skills, which are precisely the most valued competencies in the working environment. Both academics and employers recognize the importance of teamwork, but while academics focus on those competencies related to the learning process (analysis, problem solving, research), employers focus on capacities related to autonomy, the efficient use of time, document writing and the use of technology. In any case, it is necessary to develop both hard and soft competencies and, therefore, the formal university syllabus should systematically include the possibility of developing interpersonal and evaluation skills in a controlled and supervised environment.

The process of learning and evaluation of generic competencies in b-learning environments is one of the outstanding challenges in university education. Teachers' tutoring work and feedback are essential when it comes to achieving students' autonomy and cooperation. However, the process does not end with the development of a particular skill; it is also necessary to take an active part in the evaluation process. Students should be informed of their competency acquisition level in order to facilitate maximum achievement. In relation to this, technology has opened the possibility of making changes in the evaluation process, which is now more automated, quick, self-regulating and collaborative.

Therefore, acquisition and evaluation of generic competencies in b-learning environments is one of the outstanding challenges in university education. For example, the Moodle compatible system is designed for the development and evaluation of interpersonal competencies — teamwork skills specifically — through virtual learning environments (VLE). The Evalsoft system allows learning, follow up and evaluation of generic competencies in a virtual professional environment. It is an application that functions as the persistence layer of a virtual environment running on Moodle; it has been designed and developed to support those needs derived from a problem-based learning (PBL) methodology. This software allows easy and efficient management of students' teamwork and teachers' monitoring by including different skill evaluation tools based on self-evaluation, peer-evaluation and teacher evaluation. The Evalsoft system is based on a blended learning approach that combines game and role-play dynamics with problem-based and collaborative learning strategies. Thus, the pedagogical approach is based on role-plays in which students have to carry out a series of tasks working in teams in order to solve a problem. Although successful PBL strategies require planning, organization and an efficient task distribution, it is necessary to take into account group cooperation and cohesion. The former are part of what constitutes efficient leadership and the latter are related to the capacity to work in teams. Therefore, these two competencies are included in the learning process along with the specific skills applied to solve the problem. Teamwork skills are developed through blended or remote tasks in which the leading role in each mission is rotated. Each team organizes itself, collaborates and self-regulates in order to solve the proposed mission under their teacher's supervision. One of the key aspects of successful performance is grouping. Therefore, teams are set up with 3–5 members in accordance with a diagnosis of students' learning styles. That is, groups are intra-heterogeneous in terms of autonomy level but inter-homogeneous in relation to all the groups in the classroom so as to ensure balance and effectiveness in all teams. Students are assigned a functional role with specific tasks they will be responsible for within their team.

The learning process starts with the presentation of a project or mission that students have to solve by searching for information, analyzing and summarizing it, writing, making decisions, planning, organizing work and cooperating in a virtual environment. The virtual format allows for working remotely, coordinating time zones and reconciling the working pace

of all the team members. As previously mentioned, the system runs under Moodle in order to facilitate teamwork management and evaluation, as well as the specific skills to solve the learning problem proposed. Given that competency is evaluated by carrying out tasks and is developed throughout the learning process, evaluation needs to be anchored in this process in order to collect evidence favoring competency achievement. Therefore, the competencies that students have to apply in action are defined, and the evaluation criteria and indicators that will allow assessment of the acquisition of competencies through students' answers to situations taken from a real context are specified.

Team building and role assignment are carried out based on students' interpersonal skills scores and on the perception of satisfaction and compatibility amongst team members. Moodle provides a series of collaborative instruments that are used to facilitate work development and help complete the mission or project: glossary and private group chat through the whole course of the mission, a private group forum and private group wiki that can be independent in each stage depending on the difficulty and differentiation of the project tasks. Each post created by each group member can be improved, extended and corrected by classmates and, thus, the mission is carried out cooperatively.

To sum up, the possibility of developing soft skills in remote learning environments appears to be an achievable objective thanks to ICT tools, which allow for the creation of enriched learning environments where virtual reality brings students closer to the working world. This results in more effective training and future professional work. The advancement of remote and semi-remote learning environments needs to provide an effective answer to this requirement, one which can guarantee high quality training for future professionals. This kind of training in turn requires a specific focus on skills development, which is essential to personal and professional development [6].

It is clear that education authorities should encourage teachers to help their students develop their soft skills through different activities. High school students should possess soft skills which can be developed over time to help them meet their future needs. Researchers believe that the language classrooms are the most suitable environment for nurturing and instilling these skills through different methods and approaches. They point out that learning a foreign language improves one's creativity and other soft skills. EFL learners have a high chance to develop their soft skills. In this regard, it is going to be of great importance and appreciation if teachers help instill these skills in students using educational technology because of its great benefits.

Teaching soft skills is not an easy task as it may appear. It necessitates that teachers be imaginative and creative. Although it might be challenging to evaluate and teach soft skills performance effectively, teachers should put tremendous effort into class planning and preparation. Teachers must possess soft skills in order to teach them, as well as the ability to integrate this topic into any other subject they are instructing. One of the challenges to teaching and developing soft skills among students is teachers' lack of appropriate information in this area. Teachers training institutions can help in this regard by providing continuous training for novice and experienced teachers about the recent methods of teaching. Teachers should also be innovative in integrating traditional methods of teaching and learning with technology, not only to help the teaching and learning process but also to contribute to enhancing soft skills among students.

Although there is much interest in investing in soft skills, there is still no agreement on how soft skills can be understood, defined, used, taught, and assessed in the education field. It is clear that training works best when it is applied to real world situations. Before being able to teach soft skills, teachers must first recognize and embrace the fact that they must develop their own soft skills. In this regard, teachers ought to receive training on how to transmit soft skills to students. Teachers should attend courses about soft skills in order to master them. They should learn the guidelines on how to embed soft skills in any course, and learn how to assess soft skills appropriately. It is a part of teachers' professional development to make an effort so as to develop their teaching competencies and update them. They need to have access to different methods and approaches so that they can be in a better position to teach and assist students in acquiring and developing soft skills. Researchers have proposed some useful pedagogical approaches and techniques that can help in the process of teaching and learning of soft skills. The following section is going to present some useful methodologies and techniques to teach soft skills.

Researchers have suggested some techniques and methods to teach soft skills, namely cooperative learning, workplace simulations practices, debate and public speaking, and the use of edtech like social media.

To begin with, cooperative learning is considered to be an efficient method for teaching and nurturing soft skills like communication, teamwork, leadership, and analytical skills. Teachers are beginning to shift their pedagogy from a passive to an active one, in which students are an integral part of the learning process. On the one hand, students who learn through passive learning have no say in the design or delivery of their learning experience. On the other hand, students participate in the learning experience and are fully responsible for their learning in the active learning pedagogy.

Cooperative learning is one of the approaches that provides profound learning, which is learning that occurs as a result of the understanding process that we use to define ourselves, other people, and the world. It is a technique that requires group identification and teamwork. Because students participate actively in their learning, this method provides excellent

opportunities for soft skills training and development. This type of learning allows students to develop social skills and learn new concepts by exchanging ideas with their classmates and team members. Furthermore, it aids in the effective development of knowledge and the understanding of a topic when looking for an explanation to a task. Generally speaking, this style of learning, which demands a lot of social interaction, is one of the finest strategies for assisting students in developing soft skills. However, for this strategy to be effective, teachers must organize cooperative learning in advance, take into account cooperative learning's fundamentals, and make sure there is a strategy in place for the teamwork conversations.

Secondly, simulation learning or real life scenarios practices are good for soft skills development. Participating in on-site training gives students and recent graduates of vocational training a fantastic opportunity to gain practical knowledge and to improve their soft skills. These three key traits must be met for this form of learning to be real and authentic. First of all, it needs to combine organized, coherent experience with the particular skills that need to be developed and taught. Second, it promotes thought and analysis over experience. Lastly, this facilitates the incorporation of experience through self-assessment, analysis of results, and application of newly acquired abilities to real-world contexts and circumstances.

Adding to what is mentioned above, teachers can also implement the techniques of debate and public speaking in order to enhance students' soft skills. Debate is a good educational technique that helps in the development of students' communication and argumentation skills. To accomplish the desired outcomes of the teaching and learning process, teachers should make effective use of it.

Besides debate, teachers can make use of public speaking in order to develop students' communication skills. Because public speaking demands a special set of communication abilities, it sets itself apart from other types of communication. People must be able to speak confidently, clearly, and logically while under the added pressure of having others listening to them when they speak in front of them. Effective public speakers understand their audience and how to communicate with them. For instance, while speaking to a group of highly technical audiences, they utilize the language that they are familiar with. To suit the audience, the language can be technical with a focus on procedures created to address organizational problems. However, they might need to use less technical jargon and concentrate more attentively on the solutions that were produced and how the organization profited from them for a business-oriented audience.

Finally, teachers can make use of education technology and basically social media in order to help students develop soft skills. Students nowadays are heavily dependent on social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Snapchat. Students can use this type of media to share and discuss their concerns and opinions online. They can also create content and share it with the rest of the world. Teachers can make use of social media creatively and wisely in order to make their teaching material interesting and authentic. Additionally, these tools will support teachers in keeping students engaged in their work and prepared to learn. Likewise, these technology tools allow teachers to communicate with their students outside the classroom boundaries. Students who are timid, hesitant, or introverted can participate in class discussions successfully via social media. Thus, social media platforms help students acquire the most essential skills, namely communication ones. Through social media people all over the world stay connected and they share information and news. As a result, social media platforms allow students to improve their communication skills while also providing numerous opportunities for them to seek information and entertain themselves. Furthermore, teachers can use social media to encourage students with entrepreneurial traits to find good networking in order to market their products or inventions through social media. Social media also improves students' collaboration and teamwork skills by allowing students to work together and provide feedback to each other. Teachers should encourage students to work on their projects while providing guidance via video conferences. In general, social media is a great technological invention that has many advantages and can have a positive influence on students' development of soft skills. Social media allows teachers and students to communicate in a low-anxiety environment in which all types of students can participate in the learning process. Moreover, students can improve their time management skills by keeping track of the deadlines for their tasks [7].

It should be pointed out that international higher education is facing unprecedented challenges in attracting students and giving them a positive experience. Students need to be confident that it is safe to travel, that they will benefit from the full student experience when they arrive, and above all that their investment of time and money will give them long-term benefits. As Covid-19 restrictions ease in many parts of the world, we are seeing a rapid resurgence in demand for Cambridge English Qualifications, with some countries already returning to pre-pandemic levels. We are also seeing clear evidence that students are picking up their plans for international travel and higher education. Even before the Covid-19 crisis, a survey by the QS Intelligence Unit suggested that students see employment prospects as the most important benefit of attending an internationally-recognised university, far ahead of other benefits such as quality of education or the student experience.

Employability is likely to be an even more important factor after the crisis, as students prepare for an increasingly competitive labour market. With graduate

jobs in short supply, the insecurity of the 'gig economy' and the awareness that more and more professions will be affected by automation, prospective students need to know that their education will give them the skills they need for success.

We often say that as educators we are preparing students for careers that do not yet exist, but it is clear that tomorrow's professions will require a wide range of social, cognitive and emotional skills, which will be essential for success in any career.

To help identify these skills, Cambridge University Press and Cambridge Assessment have developed the Employability Skills Framework. The framework is based on extensive research into employers' needs and is aligned with the Cambridge Life Competencies Framework. By providing a map of the most important employability skills, the framework gives a deeper understanding of what each of the skills involves and helps educators to implement them in their teaching.

These are just a few examples of the skills covered by the Framework:

- Collaboration and teamwork. *Can students … manage collaborative tasks? Work well together in a group? Deliver group tasks effectively?*
- Communication. *Can students … present their views clearly and effectively? Adapt the way they communicate for different audiences and purposes? Understand others?*
- Innovation and problem solving. *Can students … elaborate and combine ideas? Develop alternative scenarios and proposals? Consider the perspectives of other stakeholders?*
- Critical thinking and decision-making. *Can students … analyse information and arguments? Evaluate options to come to a decision? Evaluate the effectiveness of implemented solutions?*
- Leadership and global citizenship. *Can students … generate support for action through effective communication strategies? Understand an organisation's role in global issues such as the environment, inclusivity and equality?*
- Personal development and management. *Can students … set goals for professional development? Take action to develop new skills and knowledge? Use feedback to improve performance?*
- Emotional intelligence. *Can students… develop a positive attitude and work ethic? Establish and maintain positive relationships?*
- Digital literacy. *Can students … use digital and online tools? Follow safe online practices? Behave appropriately to others online?*

It is striking that all of these 'soft skills' need sophisticated language and communication, and in most professions, much of this communication will be in English. Quite simply, graduates who can communicate effectively in English will have a massive advantage in getting themselves on the career ladder, and this advantage will last throughout their careers.

Cambridge English Qualifications — especially but not limited to B2 First, C1 Advanced and C2 Proficiency — are designed to help students to get the maximum possible benefit from their studies in further and higher education. They are known world-wide as an excellent way to prepare students for many of the tasks they will face at university, such as listening to lectures, writing essays, understanding by reading across multiple texts, and giving presentations. But beyond that, they also ensure that successful candidates have work-ready language skills that will help them in the transition from education to work and professional development [8].

To sum up, it is necessary to emphasize that soft skills are becoming more important in companies' recruitment decisions. A deeper understanding of employability skills and how to develop them not only helps higher education students to prepare for their future careers, but also increases the chances of success and job satisfaction.

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