

Teaching Soft Skills in Higher Education

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Abstract

Universities have recognized the significance of including soft skills studies in their curricula in order to meet the demand of the labour market in terms of the most important employability skills. Institutions of higher education employ diverse practices of soft skills teaching. The present paper makes an attempt to explore the different approaches and practices of soft skills enhancement in higher education and identify the most efficient methods by examining the soft skills course offerings of some business universities.

The research methodology included primary and secondary, quantitative and qualitative methods: besides conducting a survey with the guest lecturers of the International Week event of a French business university, the authors relied on the content analysis of university webpages and the topic-related literature.

The research revealed that the majority of the universities examined offer comprehensive or single-skill courses integrated in their curricula, while others take the embedded approach, which involves the practice of improving soft skills through diverse activities included in the syllabi of field specific courses.

Keywords:

soft skills, employability skills, higher education, teaching practices

Introduction

The significance of soft skills, especially that of employability skills is getting widely recognized in higher education. Both business managers and the faculties of universities agree that soft skills studies should be included in the curricula and given as much attention as field-specific knowledge acquisition.

The present paper will make an attempt to investigate the different approaches and practices of soft skills enhancement in higher education and identify the most efficient methods by examining the soft skills course offerings of business universities in order to get an insight into possibilities for future improvement of the strategy of soft skills teaching in higher education.

The research methodology included both primary and secondary, quantitative and qualitative methods: besides conducting a survey with the participants of the International Week event of a French business school, the authors relied on the content analysis of university webpages and aimed at producing a synthesis of the topic-related literature.

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Gaps between employers' expectations and graduates' skills

Special emphasis should be placed on soft skills at universities as there seems to be a gap between the employers' expectations and the university graduates' skills. It is essential to bridge this gap as the analysis of practical researches conducted by Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation and the Stanford Research Institute show that the success in the professional sphere depends on the level of soft skills by 75–85%, and on hard skills only by 15–25% (Klaus, 2010; Watts and Watts, 2008). M.M. Robles identifies the following ten soft skills perceived as the most important by business executives: integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic (2012).

According to Theurelle-Stein and Barth soft skills are the key to success, they differentiate top managers from others. “ce sont elles qui conditionnent la réussite : ‘ *C’est ce qui fait la différence entre les top managers et les autres* ’ ” (2017).

Interestingly, the soft skills included in the top skills forecast for 2025 of The World Economic Forum highlights different skills from the above mentioned ones: analytical thinking and innovation, active learning and learning strategies, complex problem-solving, critical thinking and analysis, creativity, originality and initiative, leadership and social influence, technology use, monitoring and control, technology design and programming, resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility, and reasoning, problem-solving and ideation (2020).

Approaches to soft skills enhancement at universities

When designing the soft skills teaching programme of universities, the following questions need consideration:

1. Should universities offer independent skills courses or activities specifically targeting the teaching or enhancement of soft skills, integrated in the curriculum, or should soft skills enhancement be embedded, as a “side product”, in the syllabus of the other academic courses?
2. If opting for the former approach, should institutions of higher education teach one single soft skill per course or should they include one comprehensive soft skills course in their programme?
3. In the case of offering a comprehensive course, is it to be accompanied by several individual, ‘single soft skill’ course offerings and other occasional activities?
4. Should the courses have a credit-based assessment?
5. Is it possible to improve the students' soft skills through e-learning programmes on a self-study basis? If so, is this method sufficient to reach the required level of employability skills or should it be accompanied or completed by any of the above learning opportunities?
6. Should the courses be taught through the medium of a foreign language using the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) method?

A research paper by Melacarne, Orefice and Giampaolo makes a distinction between two approaches of soft skills development. The parallel approach offers students activities in parallel with the curriculum. The activities are recognized by credits or certificates at universities. The authors criticize this approach as these activities have a low impact on the organizational or the teaching culture. The second approach is the embedded approach, which is characterized by the integration of soft skills development in the learning process of the professional courses through creating a simulated environment for students. Innovative, learner-centred educational practices and the change of the teaching culture are needed in order to reach the goal of skills enhancement. The authors conclude that the embedded approach could guarantee more efficiency and more sustainability within the educational organizations as disciplinary and non-disciplinary skills cannot be separated (2018, pp.183-184).

Otmar E. Varela recommends the longitudinal approach to tackle the problem of time constraints and limited practice opportunities. Besides the two credit-based courses of the MBA programmes of the University of Arkansas, one of which includes a two-day workshop, the

author assumes that managerial skills, especially oral presentation, teamwork and critical thinking skills should be developed throughout the whole programme, in all the core courses, that is a combination of embedded and integrated approach is recommended with special emphasis on making soft skills development an integral part of all core courses, through activities like role-playing, case studies, teams projects, simulations. (2020).

However, it can be challenging to develop soft skills embedded in courses. One possible solution is to apply the practices of active-cooperative learning. The example of an essay writing assignment as a team project for the Foreign Language for International Business course at the Budapest Business School may illustrate the diversity of soft skills this activity may involve. The students were instructed to write an essay of 1200 words in teams of four about the current Hungarian tax system in English as a foreign language. The follow-up tasks included peer-evaluation: annotations with critical remarks and the identification of the structural elements of the essay. Besides the obvious academic writing and foreign language skills, team-working, project management, time management, reading, organizing and synthesizing skills, creativity, listening skills, oral communication skill, intercultural competence (with international students in the group), problem-solving, logical and analytical thinking, and critical thinking skills were developed while executing the project work. Drawing the consequences from the inconsistent nature of the essays, it seems that the skills most students lacked were team-working, project management, conflict management, decision-making, organizing and critical thinking skills, several of which are crucial business employability soft skills. From the students' reaction to the teacher's assessment it seemed that they were not aware of the fact that it was not sufficient for every team member to write their part of the essay but individual work had to be preceded by a discussion and mutual agreement on the structure, content, terminology and style of the essay, and, before submission, it needed to be proofread, edited, and revised in collaboration with all the team members.

Another, although more time-consuming option of embedding soft skills in academic courses is the recreation in class of the same conditions as in real life to experiment forms of thinking and actions ([Melacarne](#) et al. 2018, p.182). This is possible by experiential learning, defined as “the process of learning by doing”, and “by engaging students in hands-on experiences and reflection, they are better able to connect theories and knowledge learned in the classroom to real-world situations” (Kent State University).

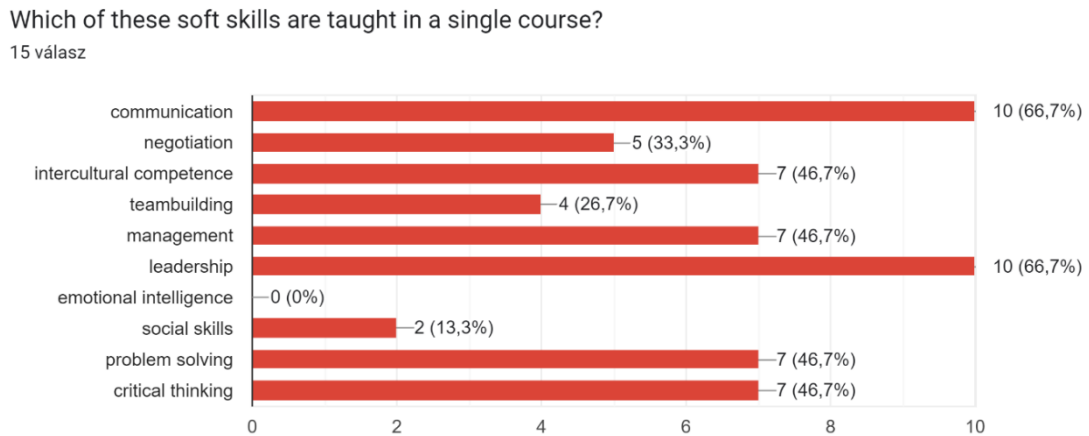
Soft skills course offerings of business universities

A mini-survey was conducted online in January 2023. The respondents were lecturers of the following business universities or business faculties of universities : University of Sherbrooke, Business Administration (Canada), University of North Carolina at Charlotte (USA), John Moores University(UK), Liverpool John Moores University (UK), Dokuz Eylül University / Business Faculty (Turkey), Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology, LUT Business School (Finland), Szegedi Tudományegyetem Gazdaságtudományi Kar (Hungary), Universidad de los Andes, School of Business Economics (Chile), EM Normandie Business School (France), University of Pavia (Italy), Prague University of Economics and Business (Check Republic), Tec de Monterrey (Mexico, two respondents), University Lyon 3 - School of management iaelyon (France), CESA Colombia (Colombia). The questionnaire was filled in anonymously and consisted of ten multiple-choice questions.

The result of the survey was as follows: 66,7% of the respondents said that there was a comprehensive soft skills course integrated in the curriculum at their university. Similarly,

66,7% of the skills courses are core subjects, and only 33,3% are electives. Based on the questionnaire, several business soft skills are taught in a single course, as well (see Fig. 1).

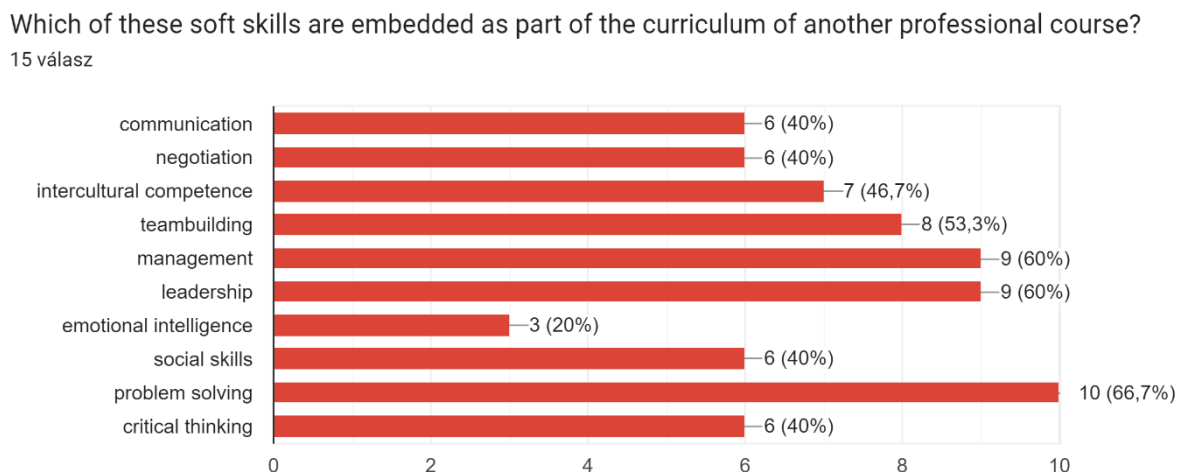
Figure 1: *Soft skills taught individually, in a single course*



Source: *authors' own research*

From the above chart it is obvious that the most popular single course soft skills at the respondents' institutions are communication, leadership skills, intercultural competence, management, problem solving and critical thinking. At the same time business soft skills, especially management (60%), leadership (60%), problem solving (66,7%) and team-building (53,3%) are also embedded in the curriculum of another professional course (see Fig.2).

Figure 2: *Soft skills embedded in the curriculum of another professional course*

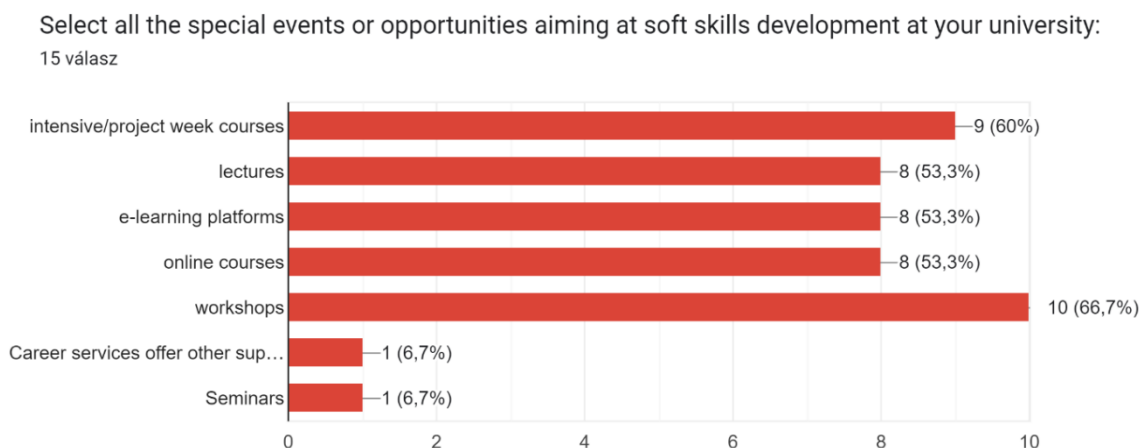


Source: *authors' own research*

Business soft skills, especially intercultural competence and communication are improved as part of the curriculum of a language course, while 60% of the respondents' universities turn to the Content and Language Integrated Learning method when offering soft skills courses in a foreign language. In 86,7% of the institutions observed the soft skills courses, both comprehensive and single soft skill courses are credit based. Besides these, the majority

of the universities also organize special events with the objective of enhancing the students' soft skills (see Fig.3).

Figure 3: *Special event aiming at soft skills development*



Source: *authors' own research*

As a summary of the findings of the survey, it can be concluded that the majority of the institutions examined offer both integrated and single soft skill courses as credit-based core subjects. These courses can be conducted in a foreign language and complemented by special skills enhancement events like workshops or project week courses.

Conclusion

As the above research demonstrates, institutions of higher education have recognized the significance of soft skills for graduates entering the labour market. Focusing on those which are regarded as essential employability skills by employers, diverse approaches and different practices may be employed for soft skills teaching or development. Universities may design credit-based courses which are integrated in the curriculum as core subjects or electives. The integrated course offerings may include a selection of independent courses targeting the teaching of one specific soft skill or a comprehensive course incorporating several ones. Taking the integrated approach, many universities offer both types of courses.

The coverage of soft skills may be completed by occasional, short-term trainings, workshops or lectures. Some universities also invite coaching experts, professional groups, and human resource managers (Loup et al. 2017). The embedded approach involves the practice of improving soft skills through assignments and activities, for instance simulations, case studies, team projects or presentations, included in the syllabus of the professional, field-specific courses. Furthermore, universities may offer online materials for self-study, for example e-learning programmes to enhance the students' soft skills level and knowledge.

A combination of the integrated and the embedded approach preferably with the application of the CLIL method is recommended in order to increase the intensity and efficiency of the teaching of soft skills. A continuous, longitudinal immersion in skills development is needed to raise the awareness of both the faculties and the students and improve their motivation while seeking untapped opportunities and creative strategies of the teaching of soft skills.

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