

## DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS IN UKRAINIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND ESP INTEGRATION STRATEGIES

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**Abstract:** *In response to ongoing socio-economic changes, Ukrainian universities are striving to bridge the gap between quality education and the labour market. As the demand for adaptable and skilled graduates increases, higher educational institutions are integrating soft skills into their curricula to meet labour market needs. The authors provide a descriptive analysis of the definitions and characteristics of soft skills and the ways to develop them in order to raise graduates' employability within definite higher education contexts. While Ukrainian graduates exhibit strengths in communication and adaptability, there is a notable deficiency in skills such as problem-solving, stress management, and critical thinking. The article focuses on challenges in Ukrainian higher education policies, innovative curricular changes (e.g. portfolio development, collaborative projects) and English for specific purposes (ESP) integration strategies which can be implemented into academic environments at the national level to equip students with these essential skills. The research is theoretically grounded and outlines the conceptual recommendations for modernizing the Ukrainian professional training system according to European standards.*

**Keywords:** *soft skill; Ukrainian university students; teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP); labour market demands; critical thinking; curriculum innovation.*

### Introduction

In our modern society, the young workforce has many things to offer to the employers – brand new ideas, new energy, and a new worldview. However, possessing all the above-mentioned and a university degree cannot guarantee graduate students a job that could be turned into a successful career. Several factors have contributed to the current situation in the labour market.

First and foremost, unprecedented technological advance has spurred ongoing changes in skill requirements for successful employment. New challenges have brought accelerated progress in equipment and technologies which are being developed for the workplace at a very high speed (Rossi 2017). Constantly evolving computer software has increased the organizations' capability of storing, creating, retrieving, and computing a great amount of information in a very small amount of space and time. Today's

office employees can communicate by inter- or outer-office, global e-mail, instant messaging, virtual chats, and video conferences (Ellis, Kisling, & Hackworth 433). Internet expansion provides the widespread distribution of knowledge, helping to promote the equipment and technologies worldwide (Schilling 2010). Besides, new knowledge doubles every 13 months, in the general run of things, with nanotechnology knowledge doubling every two years, and clinical knowledge doubling every 18 months (Dehkord et al. 2017).

Under such conditions, universities experience difficulties in providing the brand new knowledge and skills needed for the modern labour market. In their turn, university graduates cannot master all the skills and knowledge needed on the job market by the time of their graduation, because their professional knowledge needs time to be acquired during practical activities. At the same time, employers want new employees to get their job going at once with enough knowledge and experience because they do not want to spend time and money on training them (Tran xi). Therefore, only advanced employees who can bring their proficiency, together with a university degree, are able to persuade employers to give them a job.

Another factor is the fact that employment reality is characterized by continuous change and career flexibility. Permanent jobs are decreasing whereas temporary ones are increasing (Lewchuk 402-19). For example, in Germany, between 2000 and 2010, the number of people with full-time jobs dropped by approximately 2.55 million, while the amount of people with part-time jobs increased by 1.83 million (Lehndorff 169-96). In Ukraine, one of the strategies of unemployment mitigation during the Covid 19 pandemic was the creation of temporary part-time jobs (Slovo i Dilo). During their transition periods, graduates require non-technical skills that allow them to pick out work opportunities relevant to their competencies, and manifest their proficiency to potential employers before they can make use of their technical skills for their work.

The modern working place is becoming more and more complex, demanding expertise and skills from different spheres. To complete different projects, employees must be capable of working both individually and in a team. A successful project is often a combination of all the workers' knowledge and skills. It means that to perform the tasks properly, employees need both technical and non-technical knowledge rather than merely a university degree.

As a reaction to these changes, higher educational institutions are developing their curricula to teach their students employability skills – a combination of abilities, knowledge, and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and succeed in their careers (Yorke

23; Oliver 56). These skills enable individuals to adapt, learn continuously, and contribute meaningfully to their workplaces and communities.

These skills comprise two sets of knowledge: technical and non-technical. The technical skills include the knowledge distinctive to a discipline – specialized knowledge. They can be similar between higher educational institutions in a country, or even across different countries. The non-technical skills are understood as non-discipline specific, transferable knowledge that is applied at work, study, and life contexts (Jackson, Hancock). They are also described as generic skills, transferable skills, and soft skills (Cinque 392-94). In contrast with technical skills, soft skills are more idiosyncratic in nature, non-exclusively tied to a single task, and, accordingly, interchangeable across jobs (Varela, Burke, & Michel 437).

Different research works suggest that employers want their prospective employees to possess a set of soft skills. For instance, employment advertisements and employer surveys across various sectors and countries frequently highlighted such qualities as reliability, motivation, trustworthiness, a willingness to learn, communication skills (McMurray et al.); time management, deadline orientation, collaboration (Brunner et al.). The research conducted among 173 apparel retailers showed that their decisions were influenced by prospective employees' personalities (79.7%), appearance (68.2%), qualifications (4.6%) and working experience (41.1%) (Nickson et al.). Fernando, Amaratunga and Haigh (2014) emphasized that women's career success depends on soft skills rather than technical skills.

Insights from a firm survey and a dataset of 2015 job vacancies in Ukraine show that advanced cognitive skills that allow workers to analyze and solve problems, manage their time, gain new knowledge, learn new methods, and communicate effectively are highly demanded. Employers not only look for workers who think well but also for those who demonstrate socio-emotional skills that help manage one's emotions and behaviors (like self-management, resilience, ethics), goal setting and willingness to learn (achievement motivation), and the ability to work with others (teamwork) (Del Carpio et al. xviii).

The extensive research on soft-skills teaching, which is mostly derived from the Western English-speaking literature, reveals a variety of points of view, initiatives, and projects. They help students acquire these skills, determined by the institutional environment. For example, soft skills can be enhanced by extracurricular activities, work-integrated learning, and community services (Jackson 25). They can also be developed via add-on units at the beginning of a degree course or incorporated into the curriculum and taught simultaneously with technical skills (Al-Mahmood, Gruba). Nevertheless, different studies often reveal that universities are not properly

funded, academics are not engaged enough, and students ignore developing soft skills (de la Harpe, David; Tran xv).

In conclusion, the present-day labour market situation is becoming more and more complex and needs graduates to have more than a university degree and technical knowledge. Soft skills greatly contribute to graduates' finding a job and succeeding in their careers. However, the process of soft skills teaching in higher educational institutions is disintegrated and disregarded by some stakeholders. Soft skills integration in higher education is determined by contextual factors. Therefore, it is important to examine the whole phenomenon of soft skills and how they are enhanced to raise graduates' employability within definite higher education contexts.

### **Definition, nature, components, and demand for soft skills**

The definitions for soft skills are numerous among countries, contexts, and disciplines. Generally, soft skills are typically conceptualized alongside or in opposition to technical skills. The latter are defined as skills obtained through education and training or learned at work and are specific to each work surroundings (Litecky, Arnett, & Prabhakar 69). Robles (2012) differentiated soft skills from hard skills in such a way that the former included interpersonal skills and personal attributes while the latter were the technical knowledge and expertise needed for a job.

Cinque (2016) claims that soft skills “include both social/interpersonal skills and ... the capacity to work on competencies, to reframe and transfer them from one field to another, even from informal to formal learning” (Cinque 394). Heckman and Kautz (2012) determine them as personality traits, preferences, motivations, and goals which are appreciated in the labour market, in educational institutions, and many other domains. Varela, Burke, & Michel (2013) define them as interpersonal (e.g., teamwork) and personal (e.g., time management) capacities that facilitate the performance of technical tasks (Varela, Burke, & Michel 437).

These definitions illustrate the ambiguity and context-dependence of soft skills. Their importance in the modern labour market has been discussed a lot, but when it comes to giving a clear explanation of what they are, it is quite difficult. Representatives of various professional spheres may describe soft skills differently according to their stances. If they are business-orientated, they observe these skills through a socio-economic perspective. If they are orientated to social values, they observe soft skills in terms of social gain. The elusive nature of these skills causes many problems for the execution of soft skills policy in higher education, as stakeholders have not reached a consensus on what they should teach, and how to teach and assess these skills (Tran 4).

Based on the extensive research of literature and experience in the field, **this study defines soft skills as competencies that are non-technical,**

**non-technological, or basic personality-specific skills. They are social and interpersonal skills that manifest an employee's ability to organize, manage, negotiate, and build relationships.**

Market realities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are transforming very quickly demanding the change of the soft skills needed. Still, there is a tendency among international organizations to recommend which skills should be taught to young generations so that they can succeed in the modern world.

A timely detailed taxonomy of the issue is given by Cinque (396-99). She claims that the main frameworks are the following: 1) life skills; 2) transversal skills; 3) key competencies for a successful life and a well-functioning society; 4) key competences for lifelong learning; 5) generic competences; 6) 21st century skills; 7) future work skills.

Tran provides a useful account of soft skills commonalities which can be classified as follows (Tran 5-7): **1) basic skills:** *literacy, using numbers, using technology;* **2) people-related skills:** *communication, interpersonal, teamwork, customer service skills;* **3) conceptual/thinking skills:** *collecting and organizing information, problem solving, planning and organizing, learning-to-learn skills, critical thinking, creativity;* **4) personal skills and attributes:** *being responsible, resourceful, flexible, having self-esteem, management skills;* **5) skills related to the business world:** *innovation skills, enterprise skills;* **6) skills related to the community:** *civic or citizenship knowledge and skills* (ibid).

The social network for finding and establishing business contacts LinkedIn published a list of “The Most In-Demand Hard and Soft Skills of 2020” (Hard & Soft Skills Institute), which included such soft skills as *creativity, persuasion, collaboration, adaptability, and emotional intelligence*. The latter is new to the list and is determined as a mix of self-awareness, self-regulation, social skill, empathy, and motivation (Goleman). Very often employees work on several projects at the same time with multiple managers or move from team to team for different projects. In such an environment, it is desirable to involve people who can control their emotions and be effective team workers. Hence, the development of our emotional intelligence is critical to success in any branch of business. Chamorro-Premuzic rightfully claims that a high level of emotional intelligence increases success in career, entrepreneurial potential, leadership talent, health, relationship satisfaction, humor, and happiness. It is also the best antidote against work stress (Chamorro-Premuzic).

The reviewed literature indicates that there is no definite general record of soft skills. Different international, local, and administrative factors influence the creation of all such lists. Besides, soft skills change over time, taking into consideration different societal key factors.

In Ukraine, a cross-sectional study involving 60 students and 40 teachers explored challenges in developing soft skills in higher education. Using questionnaires with closed questions and a Likert scale, the survey revealed that both groups highly value soft skills (students: 4.3; teachers: 4.0). Key difficulties of soft skills integration into the higher education system include low motivation, outdated curricula, limited resources, and teachers' resistance to change (Cherusheva et al. 128-29).

The results of another online survey in Ukraine on the skills of the 21<sup>st</sup> century among young people of 14-34 years old (2001 respondents) (Tilikina, Krymova 21-28) have shown that the most developed soft skills among them are: teamwork (40% of all respondents), creativity (39.2%), communication (36.8%), flexibility (36.3%), and adaptability (35.6%). The respondents also recognized the least developed skills: leadership (28.6%), media literacy (25.2%), and technological literacy (23.8%). An important understanding of the need to improve soft skills was demonstrated in the areas of leadership (28.6%), critical thinking (24.8%), media literacy (24.1%), and technological literacy (23.1%) (see Table 1). The survey is not representative by gender, age, type of settlement, and region, as it was conducted among Internet users. The sum of the answers is more than 100% because the respondents could choose several answer options.

Table 1. Soft skills in Ukraine: percentage among all respondents  
(Tilikina, Krymova 25)

<b>Developed</b>	<b>14-19 years old %</b>	<b>20-24 years old %</b>	<b>25-29 years old %</b>	<b>30-34 years old %</b>
Teamwork	41.8	47.1	37.2	37.0
Creativity	46.0	38.5	38.5	36.1
Communication	39.4	38.8	37.8	33.2
Flexibility	38.4	38.0	34.1	35.6
Adaptability	39.6	39.8	33.5	32.3
Mobility	37.9	40.6	32.6	30.3
Ability to learn quickly	39.9	37.0	27.8	30.9
Information literacy	34.0	36.0	31.9	30.4
Critical thinking	34.2	30.5	32.4	27.4
Leadership	35.2	28.5	29.6	27.7
Media literacy	26.7	31.2	24.8	20.9

Technological literacy	26.4	27.0	25.0	19.4
<i>Difficult to answer</i>	8.1	9.1	12.6	9.9
<b>Need to be improved</b>	<b>14-19 years old %</b>	<b>20-24 years old %</b>	<b>25-29 years old %</b>	<b>30-34 years old %</b>
Teamwork	22.0	18.6	18.7	17.4
Creativity	18.6	18.4	19.3	16.8
Communication	22.5	25.2	19.3	16.2
Flexibility	18.3	20.7	19.8	17.4
Adaptability	18.1	16.9	21.9	17.9
Mobility	22.5	16.1	20.2	16.7
Ability to learn quickly	24.4	17.1	19.4	18.8
Information literacy	24.9	22.2	25.0	22.6
Critical thinking	28.4	24.2	26.5	21.7
Leadership	29.1	32.2	25.9	28.4
Media literacy	23.0	25.9	25.6	22.5
Technological literacy	24.2	27.7	20.6	21.9
<i>Difficult to answer</i>	22.7	16.6	20.6	22.2

(Source: Tilikina, Nataliia, Krymova, Maria. Skills of the 21st century as a condition for young people to enter the labor market. *Investments: practice and experience*, 5-6, (2020): 21-28).

The data analysis has revealed that the youngest age groups (14-19 and 20-24 years old) are more confident of having certain skills than the older age groups (Table 1). This is primarily due to their lack of real professional experience that could help them determine the degree of skills development more objectively. On the other hand, there were no statistically significant differences in the skills that young people needed to improve. According to respondents' gender and settlement type, no significant statistical differences were detected.

One more analysis (Tilikina, Krymova 26) reveals the soft skills in Ukraine which are scarce and the most popular among young people and employers nowadays and in the foreseeable future (see Table 2).

Table 2. Analysis of supply and demand for youth skills  
in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Ukraine  
(Tilikina, Krymova 26)

	Young people			Employers	
	possess	possess the worst	lack during the first year of work	in demand 2020	in demand 2030
Adaptability	+				+
Teamwork	+			+	+
Communication and negotiation	+		+	+	
Literacy in written and oral language	+				
Ability to learn quickly	+				+
Initiative	+				+
Critical and analytical thinking		+	+	+	+
Emotional intelligence		+		+	+
Ability to solve problems comprehensively		+		+	+
Management competencies		+		+	+
Strategic thinking		+			+
Computer literacy	+		+		
Customer orientation				+	
Creativity				+	
Public speaking			+		
Decision-making			+	+	+
Ability to work under pressure			+		
Conflict management			+		



(Source: Tilikina, Nataliia, Krymova, Maria. Skills of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a condition for young people to enter the labor market. *Investments: practice and experience*, 5-6, (2020): 21-28).

In short, modern Ukrainian young people satisfactorily possess the following skills: adaptability, teamwork, communication and negotiation, literacy in written and oral language, ability to learn quickly, initiative, and computer literacy. According to employers' opinion, most of these skills are important and in-demand today. The most acute, in today's conditions, is the deficit of such skills as critical and analytical thinking, emotional intelligence, ability to solve problems comprehensively, ability to work under pressure, conflict management, and reaction to stressful situations. From young people's perspective, the least developed are the skills of critical and analytical thinking, empathy, emotional intelligence, ability to solve problems comprehensively, management competencies, and strategic thinking. During the first year of work, young people experience the greatest shortage of skills in such competencies as communication and negotiation, critical and analytical thinking, computer literacy, public speaking, decision-making, ability to work under pressure, and conflict management.

Most employers claim that currently important soft skills are not developed properly in young people. The most critical situation is with adaptability, teamwork, critical and analytical thinking, the ability to solve problems comprehensively, and quick response to emerging problems and challenges. The analysis of the given research shows a general tendency for young people to overestimate soft skills accumulated during their study at educational institutions. On average, graduates assess their level of readiness for work as good or excellent, while employers, on the contrary, remain dissatisfied with the existing graduates' competencies and complain about the need to retrain or further develop the necessary soft skills.

This gap between graduates' self-perceptions and employers' expectations highlights a significant shortfall in how soft skills are currently taught and developed within higher education. To resolve this problem, targeted instructional strategies must be implemented. Particularly, they should be integrated in foreign language learning contexts where communication and adaptability are already key focal points.

### **Methods for soft skills integration in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes**

In the context of an increasingly competitive professional environment, foreign language proficiency alone is no longer sufficient for Ukrainian university students. They must also develop essential soft skills to communicate effectively and adapt to real-world challenges. Integrating soft

skills development into ESP classes ensures that learners not only gain functional language abilities but also build the interpersonal and cognitive competencies necessary for workplace success.

Unlike traditional, one-way teaching methods, modern approaches emphasize active learning that fosters behavioral, cognitive, and motivational growth. Activities such as presentations, email writing, and negotiations not only enhance language proficiency but also build key soft skills like confidence, clarity, and communication. These skills are essential for students' professional success and employability. In ESP settings, English language teachers develop soft skills such as communication skills (language proficiency, conversation, presentation, and behavioral patterns). These communication skills form the basis of developing other soft skills. Recognizing and intentionally nurturing them can greatly improve classroom outcomes. Moreover, there's mutual relationship between soft skills training and ESP as teaching a foreign language includes developing communication skills, negotiating, presenting, public speaking, active listening, decision-making, and problem solving skills (Kic-Drgas 30).

Recent Ukrainian studies also confirm the effectiveness of soft skills integration into ESP instruction. Kolosova and Lytvyn (2023) investigate how ESP trainings, compared to traditional ESP classes, enhance students' soft skills by promoting creativity, interactivity, and practical language competence through well-prepared instruction (Kolosova, Lytvyn 279-83). Similarly, Goncharenko and Podolska (2023) analyze the integration of soft skills – communication, cooperation, critical thinking, and creativity – into a competence-oriented ESP course for IT students, demonstrating their correlation with professional competencies and learning outcomes (Goncharenko, Podolska 230-36).

Presentation skills are essential for ESP learners aiming for employment across various fields. They enable effective and appropriate communication and mastering them plays a key role in professional success. Teaching presentation skills within ESP course to undergraduates should be aimed at improving students' skills in presenting information both orally and in writing. They are expected to be able to choose a topic, plan, prepare, and present orally to the class; to know how to lead a discussion; to master the art of questioning and answering; to interact with peers firstly and audience at large; to carry out peer assessment and to provide constructive feedback (Mousawa, Elyas 1061).

Educational strategies used in soft skills-focused ESP instruction are the following (Price):

- Professionalism/work ethic:
  - 1) encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning by using checklists to monitor their progress and stay motivated;

- 2) concluding each lesson by highlighting how the day's learning connects to students' real lives and future goals;
  - 3) fostering teamwork and intercultural skills by engaging students in collaborative activities like peer interviews and making bar graphs of the results.
- Oral communication:
    - 1) promoting interaction by having students interview their fellow students to complete a chart;
    - 2) reinforcing new vocabulary through pair or group practice;
    - 3) using conversation cards to encourage active listening and spontaneous speaking during peer interactions;
    - 4) practising useful language functions in context.
  - Written communication:
    - 1) practising different genres like emails, letters, summaries, and paragraphs;
    - 2) encouraging students to revise each other's writing through peer feedback;
    - 3) teaching useful phrases for giving advice or suggestions in writing.
  - Critical thinking and problem solving:
    - 1) modeling organization through a clear class agenda;
    - 2) using problem-based illustrations with a template to guide group discussions and decision-making;
    - 3) encouraging anonymous problem solving through a "Problem box" and collaborative group work.

The recent research on integrating content and language integrated learning (CLIL) approach in ESP classes for non-language majors led to two models aimed at improving English proficiency, communication, and professional skills (Myronenko et al. 304). The models include the principles of CLIL: cognition, culture, content, competence and communication. According to these models the professionally oriented English courses of the university curricula are modified in compliance with CLIL and ESP integration. Lessons are co-designed by language and subject teachers using major-specific content. The authors state that the advantage of CLIL and ESP implementation is the use of English in a particular context to solve real professional needs in communication. On the other hand, they observed certain challenges such a shortage of subject teachers proficient in English and managing integrated instruction (Myronenko et al. 305).

As these methods demonstrate, soft skills can be purposefully and effectively integrated into ESP instruction through targeted, real-life communicative tasks. The effectiveness of these classroom-based methods highlights the importance of aligning educational practices with broader

institutional and policy-level initiatives. While classroom instruction lays the foundation for soft skills acquisition, large-scale projects and reforms are needed to support and sustain this development on a national scale. In Ukraine both international and national projects have been actively promoting soft skills development across educational contexts.

### **International and national projects on soft skills development in Ukraine**

At the national level, soft skills acquisition has become the main concern of academics, employers, and policymakers. It has been influenced by cultural, political, and socioeconomic contexts. European countries have instituted national qualification frameworks, specifying the outcomes for all education levels in each country. At the higher education level, soft skills are considered to be an indispensable part of the learning outcomes and are coherent with public-funding schemes and quality-assurance (Danish Government; National Qualifications Framework). For example, The National Qualifications Framework in Ukraine and The Danish National Qualification Framework focus on developing abilities to solve complex problems and challenges together with lifelong learning for students, which stems from the demand for better usage of labour forces and enhancement of the flexicurity economic model (Bredgaard, Madsen). Thus, the workforce characteristics of the economy influence the choice of appropriate soft skills for students' development.

In Ukraine, under the umbrella of The National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (NAQA), the accreditation of higher educational institutions is found to influence the implementation of soft skills. NAQA is a permanent collegial body authorized by the Law of Ukraine "On Higher Education" to implement the state policy in the field of higher education quality assurance. The mission of NAQA is to catalyze positive changes in higher education and to shape its quality culture. The NAQA Strategy to 2022 was approved by the decision of NAQA on April 16, 2019. The strategic goals of the National Agency are realized in three main directions:

- Quality of educational services;
- Recognition of the quality of scientific results;
- Ensuring the systemic impact of the National Agency's activities.

NAQA's values are partnership, innovation, responsibility, integrity, openness, transparency, independence, reliability, professionalism, demand, and trust (National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance 2019).

NAQA has a great impact on the teaching activities of higher educational institutions. If the latter do not teach students according to the outcomes required by NAQA, they may be unaccredited, which can result in the termination of programmes or institutions. Unfortunately, this professional accreditation agency seems to only determine the outcomes for the universities

to comply with. It has not supported the higher educational institutions with methods, instruments, and approaches which facilitate the implementation of soft skills. This means that Ukrainian universities are having difficulties with providing the specified soft skills. Nonetheless, explicit teaching of soft skills indicates a significant change in higher education because previously, developing these skills was not among the priorities of higher education curricular or academics' responsibility.

In November 2015, the extensive research by the World Bank Group "Skills for a Modern Ukraine" (Del Carpio et al.) was conducted to analyze the nature of skills valued at the modern Ukrainian labor market. The authors indicated aspects that needed improvement, discussed how education and employment institutions affected investment in skills, and suggested practical solutions to existing problems. The analysis showed that in Ukraine, creative, proactive, perseverant, responsible, adaptable, and emotionally stable people were rewarded with higher wages, higher occupational status, or more active participation in the labor market. On the contrary, basic cognitive skills did not appear to be significantly associated with these outcomes. The World Bank experts concluded that socio-emotional skills were often lacking from formal education or training programs but should be part of a comprehensive skill development strategy. Moreover, the current education system lacked flexibility, quality standards, and relevance for the labour market needs.

The problem of soft skills training in Ukraine was also researched within the international TEMPUS project "IMPRESS" (Improving the Efficiency of Student Services). Under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, this project brought together four leading Ukrainian classical universities: Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, Donetsk National University, and Ivan Franko National University of Lviv. The project coordinator was Northumbria University, Newcastle (UK) (Vyshcha osvita).

The main goal of the project was to create modern student service support centers in four leading classical universities of Ukraine. These centers should systematize and modernize student services in the following way: improve the student recruitment processes (especially foreign ones); update the student employment services, which would increase future employment opportunities; train students' personal skills so that they correspond to the target positions; modernize students' activities and experience in a knowledge-based economy; improve the activities of Alumni Associations and career support services; develop strategic cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine; train university staff in the context of lifelong learning and encourage the improvement of students' social competencies; cooperate closely with all stakeholders in the labor and education markets; improve the regional economy and social infrastructure;

introduce the best practices and achievements of European student services in Ukraine.

Based on the project goals and objectives, the work of project participants was carried out in four areas: placement, recruitment, student activities, and soft skills. The latter were grouped into seven fundamental soft skills paramount for Ukrainian students:

- self-management (includes self-motivation, acceptance of responsibility, goal setting/prioritization, and time management);
- critical thinking;
- reflexive thinking;
- ability to communicate with the audience;
- academic discussion skills;
- ability to work in a group/team;
- peer interaction.

The IMPRESS team of experts developed a curriculum of the course “Soft skills” for teaching these basic soft skills to create the future labour force competitive not only in the domestic labor market but also in Europe.

Within the framework of the World Bank strategy in Ukraine, connected with the intensive teaching of leadership and social skills to civil servants, the elective course “Soft skills” was implemented into Ukrainian university curricula in 2016. The course focuses on the training and development of social and personal skills of the future specialist. Therefore, it aims to help students and future employees to become effective, independent, confident, and capable of lifelong learning. It is also designed to improve the abilities of self-control, critical and reflective thinking, communication with the audience, academic discussion skills, teamwork, and student interaction on a peer-to-peer basis. The learning outcomes of this course are to provide the formation of oral and written communication skills, the increase of interpersonal communication effectiveness and problem-solving, and the management of educational and professional activities.

Within the course, students develop their own portfolio – a set of essays, presentations, mind maps, etc. At the same time, students will work on joint projects, conduct scientific debates, and draw up strategies for personal development. This will allow students to set life goals and assess their progress towards achieving their goals in professional and personal growth. The portfolios and joint projects should be used for continuous feedback with students.

This course is designed for first-year students who have just left school and have to adapt emotionally and culturally to adult student life. At the same time, the course modules are flexible and can be adapted for students of Master and Ph.D. programmes. The emphasis is mostly put on academic debates,

critical and abstract writing, skills of successful presentations, and project work methods.

Soft skills are imparted to students with the help of a student-centered approach which consists of work-integrated, community-service, and problem-based learning. The latter can be successfully incorporated through ‘case study’ method – a research approach that is used to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context (Crowe et al.). Therefore, the ‘case study’ method uses a snapshot of reality to help students understand the situation and provoke discussion in the classroom. This special teaching technique involves the use of specific situations (cases, stories) for common analysis, discussion, and decision-making by students on a particular section or topic of the course. The relevance of the ‘case study’ method can be explained by the main trend in Ukrainian higher education: the focus on skills of mental activity together with the ability to process huge amounts of information and the ability to behave efficiently in different crises.

At the institutional level, most Ukrainian universities put their mission statements and learning outcomes, along with soft skills, on their websites. On the one hand, they seem to vary across higher educational institutions and reflect their fundamental characteristics and surrounding contexts. On the other hand, they look the same regarding the word choice. In general, interpersonal skills, problem-solving, analytical and critical thinking, and communication skills are mostly mentioned in the learning outcome statements across Ukrainian higher educational institutions.

However, we can observe that strategies related to the implementation of soft skills are often invisible and not communicated to all the stakeholders. Very often, the soft skills policy is incorporated in strategies related to students’ learning outcomes rather than being a university philosophy. This fact brings down the stakeholders’ interest and participation. Teachers and students keep treating soft skills as subsidiary to technical skills and knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

The study confirms the critical importance of soft skills for modern careers, yet reveals a lack of consensus on their definition, teaching, and assessment. To address this, higher education institutions should adopt flexible frameworks that reflect evolving market needs and align with international classifications of the 21st-century competencies. Emotional intelligence, creativity, communication, adaptability, and teamwork should be prioritized, as they are in high demand and currently underdeveloped in Ukraine. Educational institutions should modernize curricula, invest in teacher training, and integrate practical activities such as case studies, volunteer projects, and leadership initiatives. Targeted support for skills like media and technological

literacy, especially among youth, is essential for preparing them for future challenges.

It is concluded that effective development of students' soft skills in ESP classes should integrate real-life communicative tasks such as presentations, negotiations, and email writing. The use of active learning strategies, including peer interviews, collaborative problem-solving and structured peer feedback develops communication skills and critical thinking. Embedding soft skills into ESP courses requires aligning content with students' majors and co-developing lessons with subject specialists, as demonstrated by CLIL-based models. Educational institutions should support teachers with targeted training and address challenges like insufficient subject-matter English proficiency. For sustainable impact, classroom practices must be complemented by national-level reforms and international initiatives that prioritize soft skills development in higher education.

The paper describes the implementation of best European practices and international projects on soft skills development, changes in curricula design, and Ukrainian universities' attempts to meet the demands of NAQA on their way to joining the European Higher Education Area.

This study has several limitations. First, the research primarily relies on secondary data and theoretical analysis without empirical validation through fieldwork or quantitative measurements. Additionally, the concept of soft skills itself remains context-dependent and loosely defined which complicates the development of standardized curricula and assessment tools.

Future research should include empirical studies to evaluate the direct impact of specific soft skills teaching strategies within ESP curricula. Additionally, comparative international perspectives could enrich understanding of context-specific challenges and effective pedagogical practices.

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