Future Challenges and Opportunities in the Development of Soft Skills in Higher Education: Scenarios and Responses

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Abstract

Given the current technological changes in the requirements of professional activity, the development of soft skills in students is an important task of modern higher education. Accordingly, the purpose of the study is to analyse the main difficulties in the development of social skills in higher education and to identify opportunities and scenarios for improving the integration of soft skills in higher education. This cross-sectional study collected data from 2 groups: teachers (40) and students (60). The inclusion of respondents was based on a stratified sample, which allowed us to take into account different groups of participants. Students of full-time higher education institutions and teachers with at least 1 year of experience were selected for the analysis. The students and teachers also had different specialities. All respondents had different experiences of involvement in modern educational initiatives and activities that contributed to the development of social skills. The main tool was a questionnaire consisting of closed questions and a Likert scale. The results showed that all participants in the educational process attach considerable importance to soft skills (4.3 points among students and 4 points among teachers). The main obstacles to further integration of soft skills into the higher education system are lack of motivation, imperfection of modern curricula, limited resources and resistance to change in the environment of teachers. The conclusions identify the main promising opportunities for improving the state of soft skills development. In particular, in the future, significant attention should be paid to participation in volunteer projects, individual consultations with specialists, and the case study method. For teachers, training and especially internships offer a significant opportunity to develop their social skills.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, leadership, survey, communication skills, soft skills

1. Introduction

In today's professional world, where rapid technological and social changes dictate new requirements for professional activity, the development of social skills is becoming an important area of development for the higher education system. In particular, in modern conditions, a future specialist plays the role of not just a qualified employee but also a person with the ability to quickly adapt to the diverse and fluid requirements of the labour market, mobility, communication skills, critical and creative thinking, tolerance, self-presentation skills, appropriate attitude to others and a desire for continuous personal and professional development (Fajari et al., 2020). Therefore, employers are increasingly paying attention to the requirements for the development of such personal qualities as

creativity, sociability, balance, ability to control one's own emotional state, negotiation skills, ability to respond quickly in atypical situations, quick adaptation to change, etc. Thus, a culture that promotes the formation of so-called soft skills, which are becoming increasingly in demand in the current labour market, is becoming extremely necessary and relevant.

1.1 Importance of the Problem

In view of the previous statements, the development of soft skills in current higher education is increasingly recognised as an important factor for the professional preparation of students for the main challenges of the modern labour market and society. Despite the fact that there is a general scientific awareness of their value, certain issues remain unresolved and poorly researched, such as the definition and the state of integration into curricula in different educational institutions. The identified gaps require the creation of new professional research to address both theoretical and practical issues related to the process of active implementation of soft skills in current higher education. In addition, it should also be recognised that the modern education system faces various challenges to the development of soft skills. Among them is the insufficient synthesis of these skills in modern curricula and the difference between traditional employer expectations and the professional training of graduates. However, these challenges are only typical, and other scholars have also overlooked other potential local challenges. For this reason, it is important to identify different challenges in the soft skills development system. Therefore, the main research problem in this paper will focus on analysing the challenges and opportunities for soft skills development that arise in the higher education system. This paper will consider the main potential scenarios of development and ways of responding to changes, which can later become an important basis for creating various strategies for adapting to the requirements and needs of the future market.

1.2 Describe Relevant Scholarship

Modern scholars have described the main aspects of integrating soft skills into the modern education system and identified them as important for the further professional development of graduates. Berry and Routon (2020) identified the importance of developing social skills and described students' perceptions regarding integrating practical tasks to develop soft skills. Caeiro-Rodriguez et al. (2021) described the features of soft skills integration for technical specialities based on a critical analysis of the European educational experience. Deep et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of using project-based learning methods to develop students' communication skills, leadership, critical thinking, and other social skills. According to some studies, one of the tasks of the modern educational system today is to train a competent, educated person who wants to implement their own analytical and creative work actively, has an appropriate level of motivation, self-development and self-realisation (Akour & Alenezi, 2022). It is essential to implement this task in higher education with the involvement of modern digital technologies and innovations (Bakhov et al., 2021; Bonfield et al., 2020).

According to a number of scholarly works, soft skills are skills that are developed and shaped throughout a person's life. In particular, these are personal traits that cannot be measured, such as creativity, social skills, perseverance, willpower, ability to withstand stress, emotional intelligence, skills of finding a common language with others, ability to adapt quickly, ability to learn, etc. However, modern scholars point out that a key component of such skills is the desire and readiness for further self-development (Lyu & Liu, 2021). Accordingly, the development of soft skills also requires a high level of emotional intelligence, in particular, the ability of an individual to be aware of their own emotional states and effectively manage them, as well as to be aware of and distinguish between the feelings of others (Mazur et al., 2023). In particular, the study by Lyu and Liu (2021) compared soft and hard skills. The authors proved that soft skills are opposed to hard or professional skills. The latter corresponds to those skills that can be mastered with the help of human intelligence (IQ), i.e. with the help of basic mental abilities (Lyu & Liu, 2021). In the education system, we are talking about subject knowledge and skills. At the same time, as can be seen from the previous analysis of the scientific literature, soft skills are based on emotional intelligence. According to Fernández-Arias et al. (2021), current employers increasingly value soft skills, which the authors identify as particularly important for professional success. Likewise, these skills are necessary to be able to act as individuals in today's changing society. Given this situation, current academic discourse indicates that the future educational system, after the extended period of COVID-19, should develop effective curricula that will promote both hard and soft skills. This also highlights the requirement for modern university teachers to have an optimal and appropriate level of soft skills (Fernández-Arias et al., 2021).

In several studies, modern employers point to the fact that there is a mismatch between the technical knowledge of graduates and their interpersonal and adaptive skills. This research problem is also an important subject of debate among academic communities. In particular, some scholars emphasise the importance of developing social skills by

integrating practical tasks (Dolce et al., 2019; Kumar, 2024; Vakarov et al., 2024). At the same time, others focus on systemic reform of pedagogical approaches (Fernández-Arias et al., 2021; Mitsea et al., 2021). Thus, this study will aim to overcome specific methodological and applied differences. The study of the main aspects of incorporating soft skills into the educational process is an important scientific gap, as this analysis will help ensure adequate training of young professionals who will be ready for future challenges. This urgent task will be addressed by this study, which aims to analyse the main challenges and opportunities for developing soft skills in higher education.

1.3 State Hypotheses and Their Correspondence to Research Design

Thus, the main objective of this study is to identify the main challenges and opportunities in developing soft skills in the higher education system and formulate practical recommendations for their integration into curricula. This comprehensive goal will help improve the quality of graduates' training and ensure that their skills meet the basic needs of employers. Several hypotheses have been formed for this study:

d1. According to the first hypothesis, integrating interactive techniques with real-world tasks that are in line with the demands of the contemporary labor market is positively correlated with the development of leadership, communication, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence.
2. According to the second hypothesis, obstacles like inadequate teacher preparation, a dearth of interactive learning materials, and inadequate soft skills monitoring have a negative correlation with how well students in higher education develop their soft skills.

To confirm or refute these hypotheses, the author identifies several key research questions:

1. What soft skills are the most important in the modern educational environment?
2. What are the main obstacles to developing soft skills in higher education?
3. What recommendations can be offered to optimise integrating soft skills into higher education?

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

The methodological type of work is a cross-sectional study, the data from which are collected from different people at the same time. In particular, the study collected and processed data from 2 groups: students and teachers. In order to avoid temporal variations in the information received from the groups, the data was collected at the same time: December 2024. A cross-sectional study is important for studying the peculiarities of soft skills development, as it does not require special equipment and is a simple way to collect basic data.

Since the study used a cross-sectional design, it has several key limitations in establishing causal relationships. The first limitation concerns the lack of a time perspective. In this study, data are collected at a single point in time. This, in turn, makes it impossible to track changes and establish the direction of causal relationships between variables.

On the other hand, the problem of reverse causality stands out. In particular, it is impossible to determine, clearly determine whether interactive methods contribute to the development of soft skills, or vice versa - students with a higher level of soft skills are more often involved in such learning methods.

Finally, the last factor is the influence of extraneous variables. In particular, the possible influence of uncontrolled factors (individual characteristics of students), which may have influenced the distortion of the identified associations.

2.2 Sample and Participants

For this study, a stratified sample was chosen to consider different participant groups: students and teachers. This type of sampling allows for different groups to be considered and ensures that the data obtained are representative and can be compared between groups. Information about the study and invitation to participate was disseminated through social media and email. In addition, information about the study was also disseminated through the official websites of individual educational institutions and people who work or study there. A total of 137 people (including students and teachers) agreed to participate. However, their inclusion was based on clear criteria: potential participants who did not meet them did not participate in the survey. Separate inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed for students and teachers (see Table 1).

Table 1. Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion of Participants in the Study

Inclusion criteria		
For students	Studying at a higher education institution	The study includes both bachelors and masters.
	Type of training	Studying at an educational institution on a full-time basis
	Experience	They have experience in project activities, student organisations, NGOs, volunteer meetings, or other activities that influence the development of soft skills.
For teachers		
	Educational experience	Teachers must have at least 1 year of teaching experience in higher education.
	Experience	The participants have experience in developing curricula and syllabi that focus on the development of competencies and social skills.
	Engagement	Teachers should have experience of participating in various educational and methodological seminars, advanced training courses, workshops, etc.
Exclusion criteria		
For students	Type of training	Persons who are not full-time students.
	Lack of understanding of social skills and participation in activities	Lack of participation in activities that promote the development of social skills.
	Consent to data processing	Lack of consent to the processing of the answers provided.
For teachers		
	Work experience	Persons who have been working at a university for less than 1 year.
	Engagement	Teachers with no experience of participating in activities that promote the development of soft skills, no experience of creating curricula, etc.
	Consent to data processing	Lack of consent to the processing of the answers provided.

Source: compiled by the authors

Table 2. Demographic Data of Respondents

Category	*N*	*Sub-typing of the product*	*An additional merger criterion*
Students	60		
Bachelors (18-21 ages)	40	20 humanitarian aid workers 20 people technical/science majors	All participants are full-time students, have experience in social skills development programmes, and are involved in student associations, NGOs or volunteer work.
Masters (average 23 years)	20	15 humanities students 5 technical specialities	
Teachers	40		
Younger (aged 25 - 35)	15	8 humanitarian aid 7 technical/natural sciences	1-5 years of teaching experience, participation in various educational and methodological seminars, advanced training courses, workshops, creation of training silabuses and curricula
Middle-aged (35 - 43)	15	7 humanitarian aid 8 technical/natural sciences	6 -15 years of teaching experience, participation in educational vebinars, methodological seminars, advanced training courses, workshops, creation of training silabuses and curricula
Experienced teachers	10	5 humanitarian activities 5 technical/natural sciences	16+ years of experience, managing various programmes or trainings

Source: compiled by the authors

Therefore, meeting all the above inclusion criteria, we selected full-time students of higher education institutions and teachers with at least 1 year of experience. The students and teachers were also from different faculties. The students were studying at both bachelor's and master's level. In addition, all participants had experience of involvement in various educational initiatives and events. A total of 60 students were included (30 humanities and 30 technical/science majors). There are 40 teachers. Table 2-3 shows the balance between the groups of respondents.

Therefore, as can be seen from both tables, the participants had experience participating in various projects, which influenced the development of their soft skills. This led to the fact that they had the opportunity to practically apply theoretical knowledge in real conditions, interact with different people, and solve specific problems. Therefore, this fact should be taken into account when interpreting the results obtained and taking into account the fact that the participants had experience in participating in various projects and, accordingly, taking into account the fact that the participants had different experiences and states of social learning. The following table provides detailed information about the age of all participants and specialization.

Table 3. Specialization and Age of Respondents

Specialty / Gender	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Students		
Humanities	35	58.33%
Technical/ natural specialties	25	41.67%
Male	18	30%
Female	42	70%
Teachers		
Humanities	15	37,5
Technical/natural specialties	25	52,5%
Male	17	42,5
Female	23	57,2

2.3 Tools and Procedure

First, all participants gave their informed consent to the processing of their answers. The main research tool was a questionnaire consisting of closed-ended questions and a Likert scale. These types of questions were chosen from the point of view that the survey of different people took place at the same time, and closed questions were chosen to save time for the participants. However, some questions were still open-ended, as they required clear impressions and opinions of the respondents. The survey covered both the respondents' demographic data and the importance of soft skills development (see Table 4).

In addition, a non-parametric test was also used to analyze the differences between the assessments of the importance of developing soft skills among students and teachers. According to the Likert scale, the Mann-Whitney test was used. For this, two hypotheses were formed:

1. H0: There is no statistically significant difference in the assessments of the importance of developing soft skills between students and teachers.

2. H1: There is a statistically significant difference in the assessments of the importance of developing soft skills between students and teachers.

Accordingly, the Mann-Whitney test was used to check whether there is a difference in the assessments between the two groups. This was done in a statistical program such as SPSS.

The questionnaire was also subjected to internal consistency (Cronbach's α). Cronbach's α made it possible to assess how interconnected the elements of the scale or set of questions are. The value of α can vary from 0 to 1. Indicators such as $0.7 \leq \alpha \leq 0.9$ are responsible for reliable internal consistency, $\alpha < 0.7$ indicates individual problems, and $\alpha > 0.9$ indicates excessive similarity of the scale elements. The analysis was conducted in the following SPSS program.

To conduct test-retest reliability, testing was first conducted among several teachers before the start of the general final testing. The same questionnaire was used for this. After passing it (after 4 weeks), testing was conducted among students and teachers. The so-called final testing. Next, the correlation between the two results was calculated. For this, the Pearson correlation method was chosen and the answers to those questions in the first and final testing were

calculated.

Table 4. Key Questions from the Survey

Section	Question
Demographic data	For teachers:
	Please indicate which field you teach in: humanities, engineering, science?
	Please indicate your work experience?
	Have you participated in any initiatives that promote the development of soft skills?
	For students:
	Please indicate which field of study you are pursuing: humanities, engineering, natural sciences?
	What educational level are you at: bachelor's or master's?
	Have you participated in any initiatives that promote the development of soft skills?
The importance of soft skills	Rate the importance of developing soft skills (from 1 to 5)
	What social skills do you consider to be the most important?
Identify the main difficulties	What are the barriers to the development of soft skills in higher education institutions?
	Imperfect educational programmes
	Lack of motivation or desire
	Limited resources, underdeveloped material and technical base?
	Resistance to changes in teaching
Potential areas of soft skills integration	What areas of soft skills integration can you identify?
	Outline some potential recommendations for the development of soft skills in higher education

Source: compiled by the authors

Thus, the internal consistency of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's α. The α value was 0.85. This showed high internal consistency and reliability of the scale. Test-retest reliability was checked using the correlation between the results of the first and second testing, which showed a correlation coefficient of 0.90. This indicator also testified to the high stability of the questionnaire results.

2.3 Data Analysis

First, the data quality was checked, and possible missing data or incorrect answers were identified. Next, the responses were grouped into categories: students and teachers. After that, the answers were coded, and the main thematic areas were identified. To do this, the following table was created using Excel software: category (students, teachers), assessment of the importance of skills, identification of key skills, identification of the main difficulties, and outlining potential development scenarios. This table made it possible to effectively divide the data obtained and carry out their systematic analysis. The study also used the thematic analysis method to analyze open-ended questions, which was applied to identify and interpret meaningful themes in text data. Clarke & Braun (2014) identified six key stages of analysis, including familiarization with the data (reading the respondents' texts), coding (highlighting significant fragments of the text), and code formation: formation of social skills, attitude to their importance, understanding what soft skills and hard skills are, and level of formation. After that, the codes were grouped into themes and the structure of the themes was formed: features of the formation of social skills, level of importance of soft skills, level of awareness of soft skills. After that, the themes were checked and clarified and the relationships between the themes were analyzed. Next, the meaning of each theme in the context of the study was interpreted. To check the consistency of thematic analysis between different evaluators, the κ coefficient (Cohen's Kappa) is used, which allows measuring the level of agreement between the data coding, taking into account random agreement. This involved independent raters analyzing the text data and generating codes. A $\kappa \geqslant 0.7$ was obtained, indicating that inter-rater agreement was considered acceptable.After that, a comparative analysis of the

data between the answers obtained and the results presented in the scientific literature was carried out.

3. Results

Modern requirements for the organisation of the educational process define soft skills, or as they are also called, "applied skills", as one of the most differentiating factors for self-realisation and success in modern conditions. Certain results and empirical measurements researchers point to soft skills' importance. For example, according to some reports, up to 80% of achievements in professional activities are realised due to the successful use of soft skills. In comparison, only 20% depend directly on clear knowledge and skills - the so-called hard skills (Morrell et al., 2020). It has also been determined that separate surveys of executives of successful companies included in the ranking lists have shown that in about ¾ of cases, long-term and stable success is due to the use of soft skills, while only about a quarter of successful work is due to the implementation of "hard" knowledge gained through training (Morrell et al., 2020; Iskakova, 2023). Other experts looked at the situation from the employers' perspective. They noted that 9 and 10 stakeholders consider soft skills relevant for recruiting a specialist as acquiring an appropriate level of hard skills (Rebele et al., 2019; Lyu & Liu, 2021). Teams of employees with high soft skills achieve greater joint performance than teams with overt difficulties in interaction, even though they may consist of more experienced professionals. Such calculations contribute to further research on soft skills as an important phenomenon in modern education. It should be noted, however, that there is no firm definition of soft skills in the scientific discourse. It is noted, for example, that soft skills are an important aspect of achieving employment, further career growth, and success in the workplace but also of simply feeling happy in everyday life. Soft skills are primarily cognitive and depend on human intelligence. Their classification and assessment of the development quality are extremely complex processes that are difficult to calculate using the traditional approach (Poláková et al., 2023). Soft skills are not limited to a profession or occupation, which distinguishes them from hard skills. The latter allows you to perform certain tasks, work or engage in certain activities. Soft skills are primarily interpersonal skills that can be used in various fields, which makes them cross-cutting (Succi & Wieandt, 2019). At the same time, an important list of skills forms the basis of soft skills (see Table 5).

Table 5. Key Soft Skills

№	Skill	Characteristics
1	Communication	The ability to express oneself clearly and concisely, both in speech and in writing, and to apply active listening to others. Well-developed communication skills allow you to interact with clients, partners, peers, colleagues, etc., and present yourself and your achievements in everyday communication or the workplace. This approach promotes a positive and productive professional environment (Fajari et al., 2020).
2	Time management	The ability to manage your time efficiently, set priorities, and complete tasks or projects within a set time frame is valued in today's digital world, where remote work involves project-oriented work with a deadline in mind (Shkola, 2023).
3	Leadership	The ability to work independently and inspire and motivate others to complete tasks. It also involves delegating tasks and the ability to lead others. Although leadership skills are formed gradually, their development, even during the student years, is important in learning to make decisions, find motivation, etc. (Bulavko et al., 2015; Dirani et al., 2020; Dopson et al., 2018).
4	Critical thinking	The ability to analyse, evaluate, identify and interpret information in order to make informed conclusions that lead to effective decision-making. This skill will allow not only accepting information but also researching it and determining its reliability, logic, and possibility (Dirani et al., 2020).
5	Teamwork	The ability to interact effectively with other people in professional activities, share one's own knowledge or experience, make compromises, and achieve one's own goals. Stakeholders highly value the ability to work in a team, as today's challenges require the ability to make a positive contribution to the work environment that contributes to overall success. The importance of resolving and avoiding conflicts, which are also part of teamwork skills, should be noted separately (Krap et al., 2024).
6	Emotional intelligence	The ability to understand and manage one's emotions, understand the emotions of others, be an active listener, be able to empathise, build strong relationships, etc.

Source: compiled by the authors

Thus, the higher education environment not only provides in-depth knowledge of specific academic disciplines but also contributes to the comprehensive development of students and teachers, which is extremely important for their future professional and personal development. Experts who have studied this issue advise that soft skills should be developed in higher education students from the moment they enter university in their junior year (Succi & Wieandt, 2019). To achieve this effect, it is proposed that soft skills development be integrated into all academic courses, disciplines, educational and scientific training programmes, etc. For this reason, it is most important that higher education institutions not only provide effective training and education for future specialists but also improve their personal character qualities, which is essential for further productive work in the modern professional environment. Taking these aspects into account, there is a need to identify and characterise the importance of individual soft skills, according to the survey results. Teachers and students were asked to define the importance of soft skills in the modern pedagogical process, as well as for future employment (see Figure 1).

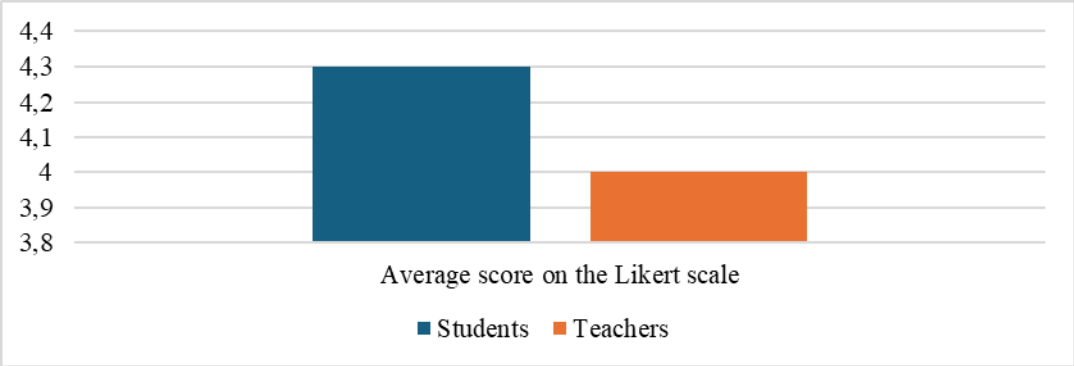

Figure 1. How Important is Soft Skills Development?

The Mann-Whitney test was used to test whether there was a difference in scores between the two groups. Accordingly, the p-value was greater than 0.05, meaning that no difference between the groups was found at a statistically significant level. The survey has shown that higher education students attach greater importance to soft skills than representatives of the teaching team. Although the difference is quite small (4.3 among students vs. 4 among teachers), it demonstrates the importance of the modern perception of soft skills among young people who are just studying and seeking to integrate into their professional and social lives. The opinions of the surveyed categories also differed with regard to personal priorities for the development of soft skills, including those that are most important for a successful career and professional activity (see Figure 2).

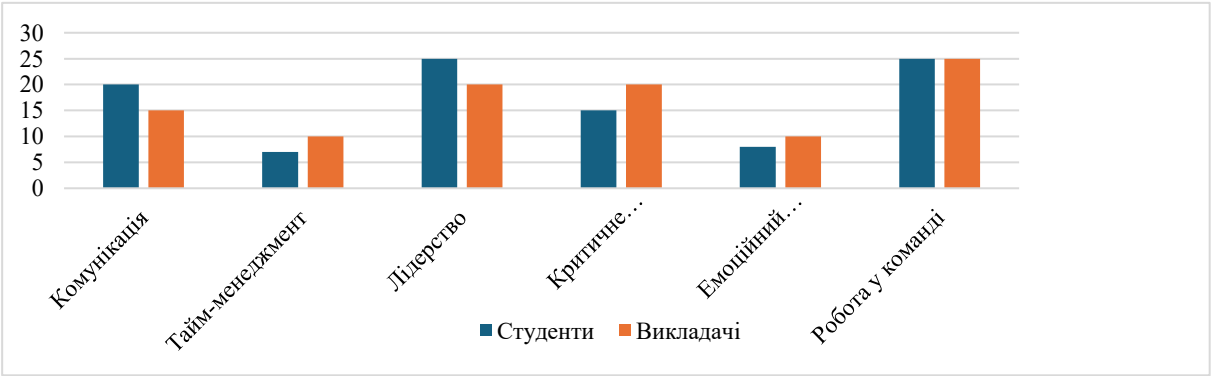

Figure 2. The Most Important Soft Skills (%)

For each indicator, the survey determined the number of respondents who consider this type of soft skill the most relevant for the modern professional environment. Thus, communication is considered important by 20% of students and 15% of teachers, which is the same, although young students prefer this area more. On the contrary, 8% of students and 10% of teachers considered time management important. Teachers: Based on their own experience,

teachers put more weight on the ability to complete tasks and plan promptly. Leadership as an important soft skill was rated by 25% of students and 20% of teachers, which is also very high. Critical thinking was considered more important by representatives of the teaching team - 20% of teachers compared to 15% of students. However, this skill can also be recognised as relevant for both categories of respondents. Teachers consider Emotional intelligence more relevant (10% vs. 7% of students). Teamwork is considered equally important by representatives of both groups of respondents (25% each). It is worth noting that leadership, communication, critical thinking and teamwork were recognised as the most popular soft skills (considering the total number of respondents). At the same time, the respondents also noted the difficulties in developing soft skills (see Figure 3).

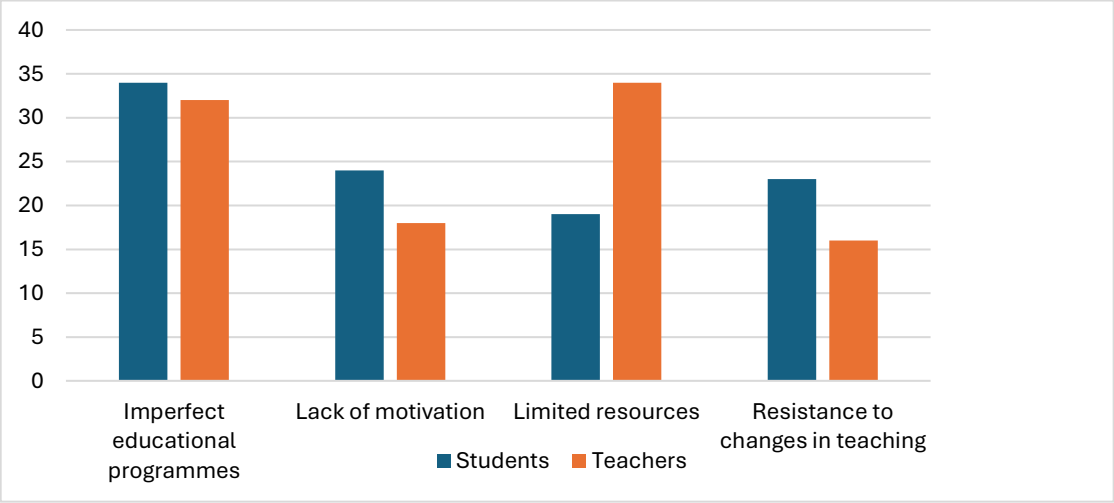

Figure 3. Main Obstacles to Soft Skills Development (%)

Respondents identified the main difficulties in developing soft skills in higher education. In particular, teachers and students consider the lack of integration of soft skills into modern educational programmes equally important (32% and 34%, respectively). Instead, students more often mention the lack of motivation as a destructive factor (24% vs. 18% among teachers). Representatives of the teaching environment complain about the unsatisfactory state of resources (material, digital, methodological, infrastructural, etc.) - 34% of respondents mentioned this factor. However, only 19% recognise limited resources as an important negative factor. Students believe there is a general resistance to changes in the teaching system (23%). A similar problem is also noted by teachers (16%), although they seem to be much less inclined to consider it relevant. Importantly, students and teachers envision improving the situation, including recommendations for further development (see Figure 5).

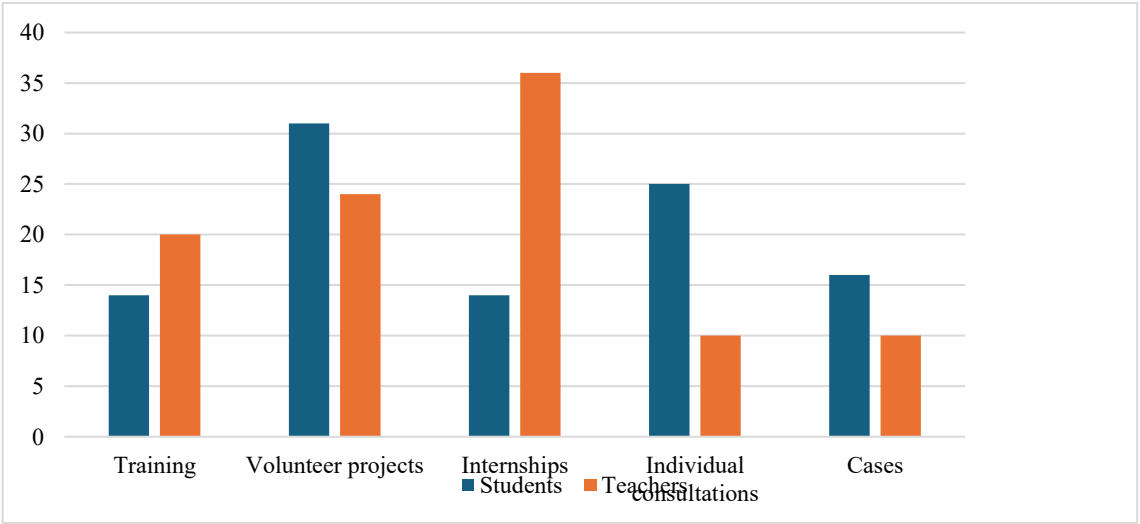

Figure 4. Recommendations for Improving Soft Skills (%)

Respondents assessed the opportunities for improving soft skills. In particular, 14% of students and 20% of teachers surveyed recognised the conduct and participation in special training as quite effective methods of improving soft skills in general. Volunteer projects among students were the most popular (31%), although teachers also noted their effectiveness (24% of respondents). Obviously, communication (partly international), joint tasks, and high motivation and responsibility offered by volunteer work are highly valued among higher education representatives. Teachers were the most appreciative of participation in internships (36% compared to 14% of students). This probably refers to cooperation with teachers of equal status from other educational institutions, solving common problems, which also determines personal self-development. Consultations with soft skills development specialists were mentioned by 25% of students and 10% of teachers. Working on individual case studies was considered useful by 16% of students and 10% of teachers. It is worth noting that internships (teachers) and volunteer work (students) are recognised as the most effective ways to improve soft skills.

Therefore, internships, training and various volunteer projects have the potential to develop soft skills in both students and teachers. In particular, for students, internships provide an opportunity to gain valuable experience, develop a networking network, and influence the acquisition of important access to the professional environment. For teachers, internships allow them to improve teaching methods and expand the circle of additional contacts that can be valuable for further professional development. Training is also valuable for both teachers and students, as it allows them to develop specific skills (leadership, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and communication). In addition, for teachers, professional development trainings allow teachers to better interact with students. At the same time, participation in volunteer programs allows students to develop social responsibility skills, empathy, and the ability to communicate and cooperate with different people. Also, in some volunteer events, students have the opportunity to demonstrate leadership qualities and independently organize events. This affects their ability to develop soft skills in modern society. For teachers, volunteering also has certain advantages. In particular, it allows for the formation of partnerships with public organizations, opens up opportunities for cross-sectoral projects and, in some situations, helps to strengthen relationships with students. Thus, the synthesis of internships, training, and volunteer projects is an important approach to the development of soft skills since each of these approaches is clearly aimed at different aspects of personal growth.

4. Discussion

The use and development of soft skills is an important task of the modern educational system, which opens up new perspectives and challenges for the evolution of the educational process. The purpose of the article is to analyse the challenges and opportunities in the development of soft skills in modern higher education, identify possible scenarios of development, and respond to them.

The survey results show that higher education students attach greater importance to soft skills than representatives of the teaching team. This indicates the importance of perceiving this vector among young people who are studying and understanding the challenges the future professional environment will pose. These results confirm the findings of other researchers, which indicate that students' representatives understand the importance of acquiring not only knowledge in a particular speciality but also additional social skills that will contribute to their professional realisation in the future (Saad Fadhil et al., 2021; Stal & Paliwoda-Pękosz., 2018; Bingham, 2024). Accordingly, in the future, teachers will also have to consider this direction of educational process development, which will pose an additional challenge for their activities (the results indicate that only a part of teachers understand how important the development of soft skills is). The results presented here assess the importance (in the respondents' opinion) of the most relevant soft skills (Krasnoshchok et al., 2024). It was determined that leadership, communication, critical thinking, and teamwork were recognised as the most in-demand skills among respondents. At the same time, such indicators as communication and leadership were more prevalent among students. Teachers, on the other hand, rated time management, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence higher. Both teachers and students equally appreciated teamwork as a relevant soft skill. These results confirm the findings of other researchers (Zayed et al., 2022; Hirudayaraj et al., 2021; Fajari et al., 2020). For example, Kozlovskyi et al. (2023) and Lavrov et al. (2022) noted a similar situation with attention to teamwork as an important element of establishing cooperation. Other experts note the importance of the personal experience of students and teachers, as age differences, individual experience, and subjective views mark the views on the core set of soft skills (Vovchenko et al., 2022; Zayed et al., 2022; Tsekhmister, 2023). This aspect should be taken into account, but more empirically grounded are the authors' conclusions that point to the influence of not only existing experience but also potential future development based on cognitive awareness of the opportunities that are opening up. Accordingly, when answering this question, there is a need to understand not only the existing experience of respondents but also their real perceptions of the prospects for

further development.

The proposed results identify the main difficulties in developing soft skills in higher education. First, the lack of integration of soft skills into modern educational programmes was pointed out, which was equally important for students and teachers. Students emphasised the lack of motivation as a destructive factor more than resistance to changes in the learning process (Mulyadi et al., 2022; Tsirkas et al., 2020; Fajari et al., 2020). These results align with the trend identified in other studies, which indicates that students are more open to change (respectively, the problem of introducing soft skills is related to the lack of transformation in teaching). At the same time, teachers point to the inadequacy of resources (primarily material and financial) as an important problem for further introducing soft skills into the educational process. Other researchers also note that in the Ukrainian context, insufficient attention to the financial support of the educational process is an important challenge for the existing educational system. This leads to a certain distrust of reforms in the field of education, the search for new educational mechanisms, the implementation of promising strategies, etc. This trend is also noticeable in introducing soft skills into the educational process. Therefore, searching for future scenarios for developing this area in higher education indicates the importance of considering the appropriate material, methodological and other types of support. The study generally indicates that resource constraints, in particular, access to technology, learning materials, and physical infrastructure, complicate the implementation of constructivist approaches to learning that require students to actively interact with the material. Here, the connection with theory becomes noticeable. In particular, according to the constructivist approach, learning is a process in which students actively construct their knowledge through experience and interaction with the environment. This requires resources that allow for the organization of interactive learning environments, for example, through digital platforms or group projects (Mulyadi et al., 2022). The study also suggests a response to these challenges. In particular, the implementation of accessible technologies: free online courses or open resources will make it possible to qualitatively solve the problem of limited material resources and allow students to actively apply constructivist strategies. A notable challenge is the lack of a system or inaccuracy of soft skills assessment in the educational process. Such a problem makes it difficult to measure students' progress in these areas. The theoretical concept of formative assessment has pointed out the importance of continuous feedback and an adaptive approach to assessment. This in turn affects the stimulation of the development of these skills. If the assessment system does not take into account soft skills or does not allow for effective feedback, the educational process becomes less effective. The results also partially highlight the response to these processes. In particular, new assessment methods should be developed and indicators such as portfolios, self-reflection or collective assessments should be taken into account. As a result, this will allow for a more effective system for the development and monitoring of soft skills.

The results show how respondents see opportunities to improve the state of soft skills development. Thus, the majority of students recognised participation in volunteer projects, individual consultations with specialists, and the case study method as being more effective in the future. At the same time, teachers noted that training, especially internships, is more promising. These results are confirmed in other studies (Iqbal et al., 2022; Lysenko et al., 2024; Bobro et al., 2024). It is about the benefits of volunteer work, which allows higher education students to communicate with representatives of other universities (sometimes even international institutions), implement various projects, etc. This helps to develop communication skills. According to the authors, volunteer work is also popular among teachers for similar reasons (Fajari et al., 2020; Portuguez Castro & Gómez Zermeño, 2020; Kuzmina et al., 2021). The present results show that teachers consider the organisation of internships that meet the challenges of teaching to be a more productive way to improve soft skills (as noted by Succi & Canovi, 2019). Taking these criteria into account also demonstrates an important trend in the further integration of soft skills in the scenarios of educational process development.

It is also important to note certain limitations in the methodology used in the study, which should also be taken into account in the following steps to interpret the proposed research results. First of all, we are talking about the use of the Likert scale, which has certain limitations. This is due to the individual subjective experiences of teachers and higher education students, for whom the phenomena may have subjective assessments. It is about the difficulty of unambiguous digital interpretation of the experience: for some respondents, a certain phenomenon can be defined as quite positive, while for others, it is neutral. In addition, it is worth recognising that the use of the Likert scale Variability in responses reduces the comparability of data and can create "noise" in the results, making their interpretation difficult. A closed questionnaire was also proposed for consideration, which has limitations, as it does not allow for full expression of one's opinion (if it does not coincide with the proposed answer options). When designing the respective questionnaires, the authors were guided by the existing research ideas about soft skills in the literature. At the same time, the factor of a closed survey should also be considered when referring to the proposed

results.

However, to avoid these limitations, the method of cross-sectional data analysis was used. The data obtained were compared in detail with other results. Morover, to check the consistency of thematic analysis between different evaluators, the κ coefficient (Cohen's Kappa) is used, which allows measuring the level of agreement between the data coding, taking into account random agreement. Errors in the use of Likert scales and closed questions can be part of any survey; however, understanding their nature and using cross-sectional analysis allowed to reduce their impact on the reliability of the results. Therefore, this provided an objective assessment of the development of soft skills.

5. Conclusions

The use and development of soft skills are important tasks in the modern educational system, and they open up new perspectives and new challenges for the evolution of the educational process. Higher education students attach greater importance to soft skills than representatives of the teaching team. This indicates the importance of perceiving this vector among young people who study and understand the current challenges of the future professional environment. At the same time, leadership, communication, critical thinking and teamwork were recognised as the most popular among respondents. At the same time, such indicators as communication and leadership were more prevalent among students, while teachers rated time management, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence higher. Both teachers and students equally appreciated teamwork as a relevant soft skill. Among the difficulties is the lack of integration of soft skills into modern educational programmes, which was equally important for students and teachers. Students emphasised the lack of motivation as a destructive factor more than resistance to changes in the learning process. These results indicate that students are more open to change (thus, the problem of introducing soft skills is related to the lack of transformation in learning). At the same time, teachers point to the inadequacy of resources (primarily material and financial) as an important problem for further introducing soft skills into the educational process. Most students recognised participation in volunteer projects, individual consultations with specialists, and the case study method as more effective in improving soft skills in the future. At the same time, teachers noted that training esp, especially internships, is more promising. Taking these criteria into account opens up opportunities for further механізмів development of the educational process. Therefore, to effectively adapt educational programs to modern challenges related to the development of soft skills, it is necessary to introduce strategies that consider the labour market's requirements and new technological trends.

In particular, for teachers and administration, the main recommendations concern the following solutions:

1. Detailed inclusion of soft skills in core courses. For example, teachers can integrate elements of teamwork and communication through practical tasks or group projects. This will affect the way students are able to develop these skills through specific examples.
2. Another important direction is to consider technologies for the development of soft skills. The teacher should use innovative tools to implement a common learning space and organize collective discussions. This will allow applicants to practice communicative skills and collaborate in the digital space.
3. The last notable direction is to improve the monitoring system. Teachers should assess not only academic knowledge but also teamwork, communication, and leadership skills.

Hence, the use of these areas will influence the development of important relevant skills in students through modern educational programs.

The last notable area is the improvement of the monitoring system. Teachers should assess not only academic knowledge but also teamwork, communication, and leadership skills. Thus, using these areas will ensure that modern educational programmes develop important relevant skills in students.

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Galyna Cherusheva and Inna Krasnoshchok were responsible for study design and literature review. Tamara Gumennykova collected and analysed the data. Tetiana Volotovska drafted the manuscript. Olena Barabanchyk contributed to the interpretation of the results and revised the manuscript critically for important intellectual content. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. Galyna Cherusheva and Inna Krasnoshchok contributed equally to the study.

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