



SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ROLE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Dr.K.Karuna Devi

Associate Professor of English

Andhra Mahila Sabha

Arts & Science College for Women, Autonomous, NAAC Re-Accredited, OU Campus, Hyderabad

Abstract

Nowadays, as a result of economic changes, employers are eager to look for employees with applied skills rather than cognitive skills. Diplomas are not being considered as a definitive indicator of students' professional intelligence as they used to be before. Fourth the Industrial Revolution has dramatically changed the labor market and knowledge is now acknowledged as a strength of productivity and economic growth, and information technology has acquired great importance. In such a situation, whether employees start their careers or change a job, they can show successful performance, if they can change and update themselves continuously, build positive interpersonal relationships in the workplace, and learn and win in the unpredictable challenges of the workplace. Accordingly, today the graduates of Higher Education need to master not only the professional skills of their job, but also various soft skills, including the ability to communicate, coordinate, work under pressure, and solve problems. The purpose of this article is to provide literature on the connection of soft skills with employability and the world labour market, and the role of soft skills in career success for future professionals. The article also examines the definition and selection of the most demanding soft skills from the perspective of different literature. The role of Higher Education in forming and developing soft skills will then be discussed. It is concluded by emphasizing the need to build, modify, or transform teaching practice to promote a scenario of higher education focusing on the parallel development of being and doing.

Keywords: Skill Learning; Colleges; Training, Effectiveness, Evaluation Etc.

Introduction

Universities are currently assuming a fundamental challenge in the construction of society, for which they are called upon to pay special attention to the training of soft skills as an essential part of the integral formation. This theoretical study aims to provide the pedagogue with a clear conceptualization based on a panoramic review of the literature of classical authors, specifying the general definition of the concept and each of the skills, reviewing the theory of social learning as a reference model for training, and presenting the main practices and strategies to be promoted in the context of higher education to develop them. Training in technical skills or "hard skills" - as cognitive skills are referred to - for the development of a profession has been and, in some cases, continues to be of central interest to higher education institutions, given that as mentioned by Singer, Guzmán & Donoso (2009), the evaluation of educational institutions at national and international level is carried out through instruments that measure skills of this type, such as the SABER-PRO (Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación, 2016) and PISA (Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo Económicos, 2016) tests. Indeed, in some cases, these have been considered necessary to obtain good employment and professional success. However, this aspect is contradictory as it has also been found that the results of these tests and academic reports are not necessarily predictors of professional success. In recent years and as a result of an approach to social and pedagogical reality, it has been identified that the training and development of soft skills in university students should be of central interest to higher education institutions since they are closely related to personal well-being, social adjustment, and adaptation to the work context. However, very few studies have focused on evaluating the effect of soft skills training on university students and its relationship to job performance.



Objectives of Curriculum

The curriculum in English includes the objectives of teaching, methods of instruction, textbooks, learning materials, guidance and counseling, the pupils' involvement in literary and cultural activities, their participation in seminars and conferences, and evaluation. The principles to be adopted in preparing the curriculum are:

Meet the changing needs of the learners

Follow certain objectives

The subject matter should be in tune with the learning environment of the students

Train the students both academically and professionally

The evaluation pattern should be outlined

With the altering educational tendencies, flexibility in educational courses, attainability of masses of qualified personnel, the competition for job acquisition and job sustainability is becoming more and more challenging. In today's labor market where workplaces are resizing and decreasing positions, it has been evident that professional skills alone are not sufficient to keep individuals employed. To get an advantage over the competitors, applicants are left with no choice but to add merits to their hard skills to expand their potential, which are called soft skills. As Klaus P. asserts the lack of soft skills can sink the promising career of someone who has professional expertise but no interpersonal qualities.

The actuality of the study is based on the fact that today, the government of the Republic of Uzbekistan is paying special attention to reorganizing the educational system radically to raise it to the level of modern standards. The laws on Youth Policy accentuate the organization of a complex system of learning and teaching foreign languages in the country, concentrated on the upbringing of the harmoniously developed, educated, and intellectual young generation of people, who can meet the requirements of modern work labor. To achieve the aims and objectives introduced by the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Education" (1997) and the "National Program of Personnel Training" (1997) the compounded system of reorganizing the structure and the content of personnel training is being developed in the country, that are grounded on perspectives of the social, economic development of the society, contemporary achievements of science, culture, technique and technology. It has been revealed that to achieve above mentioned goals and improve the degree of employability of Higher Education graduates requires educators to develop students' not only academic knowledge or "hard skills", but also transversal or "soft" skills to make them worthy of the demands of modern work labor. In turn, it requires to revise curriculum and syllabuses in Higher Education.

The article aims to discuss the significance of soft skills development in the Higher Education system and study different approaches dedicated to the current problem. Relying on the aim the article sets the following objectives:

- To define, describe, and discuss relevant studies toward taxonomy of soft skills;
- To investigate suggested definitions of soft skills as a term and work out general characteristics;
- To identify the most demanding soft skills that enable students to respond to the ever-changing and complex needs of the contemporary workplace.

The scientific novelty of the article can be explained with the following statements:

1. To classify different suggested terms to the notion of soft skills;



2. To justify the prominence of Higher Education in developing soft skills as it is the level where advanced professional skills are developed;
3. To review diverse classifications of soft skills in different sources.
4. To analyze the curriculum for the bachelor's degree on specialization of philologist- English language teacher and syllabus on Study Skills from the point of soft skill consolidation;

2.1 Soft skill

Soft skills are defined as skills and life skills necessary to live either alone, in groups, in society, or with the creator (Hyder et al., 2020). Having soft skills makes one's existence more meaningful in the community. The most important soft skills, among others, are: being able to handle interpersonal relations, taking appropriate decisions, communicating effectively, and having a good impression and impact to gain professional development (Vasanthakumari, 2019). Several studies have concluded that soft skills have a greater influence on performance in the business and industrial world than hard skills (Ibrahim et al., 2017). Furthermore, studies by the Stanford Research Institute and the Carnegie Mellon Foundation among Fortune 500 CEOs established that 75% of long-term job success results from soft skills mastery and only 25% from technical skills (Doyle, 2021)

All occupations can benefit from soft skills, commonly referred to as power skills, common skills, or core talents. Soft skills are those that everyone possesses naturally and uniquely. Communication, teamwork, problem-solving, creativity, emotional intelligence, leadership, flexibility, time management, organization, conflict resolution, critical thinking, project management, interpersonal communication, active listening, work ethics, decision-making, collaboration, and management are examples of soft skills. Other soft skills include persuasion, empathy, and flexibility. Hard talents, on the other hand, are those that are learned by practical experience, instruction, or education. A team's and a company's success depend on more than simply its employees' technical proficiency. Soft talents enable employees to fully utilize their hard abilities, yet it also depends on how they engage with clients and one another. In the workplace, abilities like dispute resolution, emotional intelligence, time management, and functioning well under pressure are crucial. Soft-skill workers make for effective supervisors and good team players. They are able to establish relationships well and are friendlier. They may advance in their position and in their firm, and they make effective brand ambassadors. Employers should evaluate candidates for both hard and soft skills during the hiring process, depending on the position. The business can also wish to assist current workers in acquiring the soft skills they require.

Soft skills are generally interpersonal skills that help individuals to interact with others. People who possess skills are considered to be easy to work and spend time with. Succi and Canovi (2019) define soft skills as a dynamic combination of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, interpersonal, intellectual, and practical skills. Soft skills help people to adapt and behave positively so that they can deal effectively with the challenges of their professional and everyday lives.

Soft skills are also known as noncognitive, interpersonal, and core competencies. Soft skills are character qualities and personality traits that show how a person interacts with the world in general, other people, and themselves. Both for their academic work and for their future employment, students must develop a wide range of soft skills. Students who understand the value of soft skills early on are better able to master their studies, complete their academic obligations without incident, make more friends who may be helpful in the future, and better represent themselves to teachers who may also have a significant impact on their careers. Soft skills should be developed by students for the benefit of their education and future employment because they are directly related to better academic performance. Students must develop desirable and suitable kinds of conduct, qualities, and skills to match their social and academic position because they will eventually join the ranks of academic citizens after graduating. They should, then, set an example of a mature, balanced person who possesses the characteristics and



qualities that are expected of someone with their education. Students are prepared for their future professional duties that is, the positions of authorities in the disciplines they have chosen during their studies. With that in mind, the significance of soft skills for students is fairly obvious, as the next step is finding a job where they are expected to behave appropriately towards their co-workers, to be able to express their thoughts and feelings, to be cooperative, accommodating, and capable of teamwork, to possess stable ethical principles to guide them, to be cordial and assertive, to be professional and principled in interpersonal relationships, and more,

Soft skills are even more crucial for students to gain for their future professional responsibilities because the goal is to prepare them for their chosen professional vocation during their studies. For these reasons, students should start working on their soft skills right away. Despite the fact that there are many examples of soft skills, some of the most common ones are communication, teamwork, problem solving, creativity, emotional intelligence, leadership, adaptability, time management, organization, conflict resolution, critical thinking, project management, interpersonal communication, active listening, work ethics, decision making, collaboration, management, dependability, persuasion, empathy, and flexibility. Hard skills, also known as technical skills, are acquired via education, training, and practical experience in a particular field. Hard skills include things like computer programming, culinary competence, and linguistic proficiency. No matter the field of study or the place of employment, soft skills can be applied across all levels of education and employment.

According to Macqual, Umi, and Hutkemri (2021), many free programs that teach soft skills provide middle school-level tasks that are both high-interest and age-appropriate, allowing children to consider and reflect on their soft skill development. Yet, integrating development into all facets of the curriculum is the most effective strategy to improve students' soft skills. The following tactics are used to help pupils strengthen their soft skills. According to Macqual, Umi, and Hutkemri (2021), many free programs that teach soft skills provide middle school-level tasks that are both high interest and age-appropriate, allowing children to consider and reflect on their own soft skill development. Yet, integrating development into all facets of the curriculum is the most effective strategy to improve students' soft skills. The following tactics are used to help pupils strengthen their soft skills.

1. Integrity: Encourage integrity by adding group projects into lessons. Each group member ought to be in charge of a certain task or result. The teacher should ask the students to reflect on how they contributed to the work and why they want a piece of the final grade at the conclusion of the group project.
2. Communication: Students' communication abilities should be developed through group discussions, writing for real audiences, and public speaking. Throughout a class discussion, they should be able to exhibit academically fruitful speech.
3. Courtesy: Demand that students treat one another with respect and decorum both in the classroom and when working on projects with others online. One technique for encouraging respectful and polite conversation is accountable discourse.
4. Responsibility: It is not advisable to teach responsibility by giving zero points for being late or skipping class. Pupils who don't turn in their work should be asked to justify their actions and outline how they'll avoid making the same mistakes in the future. If a student wants to turn in their work late, they must ask for an extension rather than suggesting it.
5. Professionalism: Encourage professionalism by having students adhere to the class's standards, which include being on time, prepared, and considerate of others. completing tasks and modifying the text to meet audience demands.



6. Flexibility: Let students choose how long-term, problem-based projects should be completed within predetermined boundaries and interim deadlines. They will be inspired by these exercises to be organized, focused, and capable of problem-solving and self-auditing.

7. Teamwork: Promote teamwork and collaboration by allowing diverse pupils to work together in groups. Place a strong emphasis on cooperation, communication, integrity, and responsibility. Teachers can encourage the development of soft skills outside the classroom by giving students the chance to tour workplaces or take part in job shadowing activities. But modelling soft skills is the quickest and most effective approach to teaching them. Students learn the value of soft skills and how to use them in real-life circumstances when they consistently observe professionals who exhibit these abilities by working together, showing respect for students and other teachers, communicating effectively, being on time, and being prepared.

2. The Role of Higher Education Institutions

One of the main objectives of higher education is to mold students into people who have strong morals, soft skills, and are relevant to the demands of the workplace (Abbot, 2016). Universities are dedicated to the issue of ensuring that students have all the skills necessary to react to the constantly changing demands of modern society and the workplace (Cornali, 2018). As a result, if students pursue further education, it is crucial to help them develop their character and soft skills. The university must act as a catalyst for implementing character education and all-encompassing soft skills.

Depending on how important and appropriate the education is, soft skill development can be done to mold the character of university graduates. University initiatives to enhance students' technical and soft skills competency result in people with impeccable character who are prepared to participate in the workforce ((Tres) Bishop, 2017). It is possible to determine how and when to infuse the appropriate character through routine and closely supervised soft skills training by understanding the requirements and problems associated with infusing good character with the necessary soft skills.

Numerous studies (King, 2003; Mourshed et al., 2012; Yunus & Li, 2005) have raised serious concerns about the widening gap between graduates' skills and capabilities, and the demands of the work environment in an increasingly mobile and globalized society. The existence of an imbalance between the ownership of hard skills and soft skills of students in tertiary institutions requires concrete steps to be developed to overcome them, so that the quality of graduates has two competencies required by beneficiaries (Trinder, 2008)

The Promotion of Soft Skills in Higher Education

Digital technology currently plays a central role in the (re)construction of higher education identity, both in individual terms – i.e., in the identity of the various actors that make up the institution, namely students, teaching and non-teaching staff, and institutional leaders – and in institutional terms – i.e., in the identity of higher education institutions themselves (Sá, Serpa, Ferreira, & Santos, 2020). In this scenario of (re)identity construction of the higher education system and academics themselves in an increasingly digital society, it is critical to rethink the role of academics in the teaching-learning process (Sá et al., 2020). On the other hand, these dynamics may be an opportunity for change, reshaping, and reinvention of the academy and its place in society. In this process, it is, however, important to safeguard the respect for the academics' professional autonomy (Sá, Ferreira, & Serpa, 2020).

The Role of Universities

Universities are where students can obtain knowledge and grow a variety of attitudes and characteristics for personal development and association with society. Along with learning hard skills, soft skills are also requirements for students to obtain during their education period. However, the responsibility of universities to prepare their students with appropriate knowledge and skills is clouded with challenges.



To fulfill their responsibility, universities have to ensure that their curriculum and co-curriculum can incorporate both hard and soft skills required by graduates for sustainable purposes in the labour market. It was also stated by Fahimirad et al. (2019) that jobs are evolving and in 20 years current graduates might be hired for jobs that have not existed yet. These future jobs would certainly require ample soft skills that can be applied across multiple disciplines.

The worrisome situation of skills disparity between students' acquired skills and actual skills of labour market demands can be due to universities that are not catering well to the issue. Labour market demands are ever-growing and universities need to be prepared by revolutionizing the education content. Universities need to ensure that their role as providers of education is substantial and that their graduates are imparted with relevant skill set ready for labour market demands. Therefore, universities need to also prepare their graduates for the workforce by aligning their curriculum to match current and even future labour market demands. In a study investigating soft skills, Cimatti (2016) reported that the role of universities does not only include academic aspects but also to create citizens that can participate well in society. This is why the development of soft skills is not only important for students' career but also to support their everyday life. Thus, universities need to be able to come up with methodologies and techniques to generate soft skills among their students.

Subsequently, Cimatti (2016) also highlights that a lecturer's job is not only to provide knowledge related to examinations but also to help students develop soft skills too. This can be done when lecturers integrate soft skills in their courses. Soft skills can be embedded in certain courses to develop discipline-related skills or through specific activities like projects or case studies. To further support the integration of soft skills, teaching pedagogy should always be updated. Lecturers can include seminars and workshops to give more exposure to their students. Finally, Cimatti (2016) proposes that universities can collaborate with industries to give students first-hand experience of the working world. Visits, internships and joined-programs can open the students' eyes to see the importance of skills in their career and this could indirectly motivate them to constantly develop the necessary skills. This is because soft skills is a lifelong learning process that can be obtained through educational institutions and also through personal experiences through engagement and involvement with the industries.

Digitalization and Sustainable Higher Education Development

Society 5.0, one of the paradigms of digital society, is based on the idea that the approach and resolution of social issues are carried out using technologies, based on artificial intelligence, to offer services that improve citizens' lives, namely with the development and increase of digital infrastructures. According to these authors, the goal of this new social functioning is to enable the "[...] establishment of societal foundations where anyone can develop value, at any time and place, in a safe environment and according to natural environments". This concept of Society 5.0 assumes, in short, that the resolution of everyday social problems occurs through (or with the support of) advanced technology, promoting a people-centered society. The process that Society 5.0 uses to address and solve social issues begins with the collection of data in the context where they occur, i.e., in the real world. Subsequently, these data are processed using information technology, and the results of this processing are then implemented in the real world. An iterative cycle underlies this process, which starts with the collection of data in the real context where social issues occur, which are analysed and form the basis for solutions implemented in the real world. There is a close connection between virtual and physical space, and the central goal of Society 5.0 is to create, in virtual space, models based on the real world, which are applied in this same real world in a differentiated and particular way according to the real problems that they intend to solve, involving society as a whole in this integrative process. Furthermore, the ability of the various social actors to demonstrate digital literacy as consumers but also as producers of digital artifacts is vital for a necessarily sustainable development: a sustainable digital society.



The Role of Curriculum

The curriculum encompasses a diverse range that includes process, syllabus, product, and practical course. It highlights education as designers set objectives, and outcomes and come up with a plan. It helps to implement teaching-learning methods, learning engagement, and students' experiences. The curriculum also needs to be continuously assessed to know what is valuable. As for higher education, the curriculum is designed with social, economic, physical, and cultural environments in mind. It is supposed to identify society and students' needs. A well-designed curriculum by universities is paramount in achieving not only academic excellence but also the inculcation of skills and competencies. This should be the main goal of policymakers, managers of universities, and lecturers. However, effective curriculums are scarce and they are currently designed in a way that does not support the labour market demands as they lack in developing graduates' soft skills.

Many companies have indicated that they find the curriculum of universities is still quite traditional which leads to graduates failing at real career situations. The curriculum should be designed to not only develop the students' soft skills but also for them to be effective members of society. Nevertheless, there are some criticisms towards incorporating soft skills in the curriculum. One of them is that soft skills would cause less emphasis to be placed on hard skills causing graduates to lack the knowledge required for their profession. Another criticism is that the soft skills might be restrictive to that particular discipline which then would not support soft skills across multi-disciplines. However, these criticisms could provide a platform for the universities to design a well-balanced curriculum. Part of the curriculum to generate soft skills would be an internship stint that undergraduates have to undergo. After going through classroom-based activities for soft skills development, employment-based training is another great platform. Internship periods are suitable for undergraduates to practice their academic skills, hone soft skills, and gain real-time experience before entering the real working world. Universities too can collaborate with companies to enable their students to undergo internships with coaching and mentoring that could further develop soft skills and give them the support they need to transition into the working world.

Another curriculum component at universities is the co-curriculum which is a requirement for students to complete their studies. Co-curriculum is essential in generating holistic graduates that are equipped physically, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually. According to Selamat et al. (2013), the eight principles of co-curriculum, include experiential learning, authentic, total learning experience, and soft skills. The implementation of co-curriculum is essential in ensuring that students get to experience skills first-hand, which can be one of the best ways to learn.

Conclusion

Soft skills refer to non-technical abilities that describe a person's way of working and relating to others. In contrast to hard talents like data analytics or programming, soft skills are not always something a person will study in a school. Instead, they are a reflection of a person's communication, work, and work ethic. Understanding the difference between hard talents and soft skills, as well as why both are crucial, is essential to landing a job in any industry. Ordinary workers are distinguished for future leadership roles by their soft skills. Also, demonstrating empathy and attentiveness to clients demonstrates a genuine desire to address their needs or find solutions to their problems. Through this research, it has been found that graduates lack soft skills that employers value and look for. Graduates are not aware of this situation which contributes to the slow development of soft skills among university graduates. To solve this ongoing issue, both the university and the government are making efforts to develop holistic graduates ready for the labour market. These collaborative efforts are necessary for the development of steady economic progression in our country. More importantly, the development of soft skills in university graduates can create holistic individuals for the betterment of the nation. This study implicates the necessity for all higher institutions to review their initiatives in developing soft skills and create mechanisms to assess this development among their graduates.



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