

DEVELOPMENT OF GENERAL COMPETENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS: SOFT SKILLS AND BASICS OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

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Abstract: The problem of developing the structure and content of “soft skills” as general competence, as well as their formation, has been widely discussed by scientists in the last decade. The need to actively develop soft skills in the process of professional training is becoming increasingly important. In the article, the authors characterize soft skills as strategic competencies of the 21st century. The prospects of developing and implementing a methodology for the formation of soft skills among university students are considered. It is concluded that it is necessary to develop additional curricula and other activities within the framework of educational and upbringing work for the development of personal qualities in all components of soft skills in order to successfully train future specialists. Obviously, in the educational process of a modern university, it is possible to create conditions for the development of social and personal competencies.

Keywords: soft skills; communication; creativity; transprofessional skills.

1 Introduction

Today, the global economic and political dynamics, often associated with instability and uncertainty in the conditions for the development of society (and, as a result, intensification of competition), actualizes the demand for new forms of educational training for future specialists, regardless of the intended areas of professional activity. First of all, in the context of rapidly changing technologies and innovative breakthroughs, there is a growing need for employees who are flexible and highly creative, capable not only of individual work, but also of teamwork, including in different cultural conditions and with different technological environments – thus requirements for basic vocational education are changing. At the same time, the rapid “obsolescence” of knowledge and the constant technological sophistication of activities generate a demand for high-speed highly specialized professional training related to the performance of specific tasks, while simultaneously requesting the development of so-called “general competencies” – “supra-professional”, “transprofessional” skills (skills for searching and analyzing information, skills of decision-making in situations of uncertainty, etc.) [23]. Finally, models of end-to-end learning throughout life (life-long learning) are becoming increasingly relevant, allowing supporting the continuous development of personnel in accordance with the changing conditions of the social environment, and, accordingly, professional activity.

While in the last decades of the last century, first of all, attention was paid to professional qualifications and such personal virtues as diligence, punctuality, and discipline, which characterized the “ideal” employee in strictly hierarchical structures, now, in the context of globalization, the list of necessary personal qualities and social competencies has expanded significantly. At the present stage of development of society, not an obedient performer is required, but a creative person capable of solving complex problems.

World integration processes, the response of the higher education system to the development of high technologies in all areas of production, the unstable situation in the field of employment, increasing competition, and the level of employers' requirements have led to reforming the content and structure of

higher professional education in almost all of its branches. The transition from one level of education to another implies an increase in the role of creative, educational and research components in the structure of professional training. The competency-based approach is one of the priority ideas of the Bologna process, along with such as a multi-level training system (bachelor's degree - master's degree - postgraduate studies), a system of credits, a discrete-continuous organization of education, a modular construction of curricula, etc. At the same time, the researchers note insufficient attention to such aspects of higher education as the development of the individuality of a specialist, his communication culture, creativity, mobility, emotional intelligence - that is, the so-called “soft skills”. These are acquired competencies that are necessary for a future specialist, regardless of his professional field.

Hence, the tasks of the educational system include not only the formation of technical competencies among young specialists, but also the training of their soft skills and the development of certain personal qualities in them, since employers are paying increasingly more attention to the possession of soft skills by young specialists. It is noted by experts that the importance of social competencies is reflected in the criteria of international councils and organizations that accredit university curricula and certify the professional qualifications of their graduates [4; 9]. The importance of soft skills is emphasized by Economic Forum analysts who have established ten core competencies that will be in demand by 2025 [21]. According to this forecast, the most relevant of them will be the ability to solve complex problems, in particular, based on strong skills of scientific research. The second most important one is critical thinking, and the third is creativity. This is followed by people management competence, coordination and interaction skills, emotional intelligence, judgment and decision making, customer focus, negotiation skills, and cognitive flexibility [6]. All indicated characteristics refer namely to soft skills.

The literature also notes that the key competencies of the professional of the future will imply the following [1; 2; 5; 11; 13; 16; 18]:

- Introspection (self-analysis, the ability to constantly reflect and understand one's own strengths and weaknesses, both personal and professional)
- Conscious self-development (the ability to build your own educational trajectory, consistent with the challenges of the time)
- Flexibility and adaptability (the ability to rebuild and master new competencies and even professions)
- Leadership qualities (ability to motivate and receive support from other members of the group to achieve the goal)
- Effective communications (ability to successfully interact with people, overcoming barriers and conflicts)
- Teamwork (the ability to cooperate with members of the team and employees of related departments; willingness to compromise for the good of a common goal).

As can be seen from this list, the role of “supraprofessional” soft skills is significantly increasing in the competence model of a professional. This is a set of non-specialized, personal skills that allow a person to harmoniously interact with other people, increase the efficiency of work in his industry, and also give the opportunity to move between industries while maintaining own competitiveness as employee, the state of being in demand. They are universal in nature and are not associated with a specific field of activity. On the contrary, hard skills are technical competencies associated with specific activities performed in the field of formalized technologies.

In turn, problems in communication and unwillingness to develop communication skills, lack of readiness for intensive work and teamwork are factors that negatively affect the

achievement of professional success by young professionals. According to employers, soft skills are as important as hard skills. Therefore, it is time to develop them already in student years. According to a study by the American company Talbots, 97% of employers surveyed value soft skills as much as basic professional skills [16]. Namely good soft skills distinguish a graduate from all other graduates, which means that the chances of getting a well-paid job will increase. Later, these skills will help to move up the career ladder: after all, namely soft skills become the main ones in leadership positions.

For soft skills, as for multi-purpose skills that are significant regardless of the field of activity, universality is characteristic. In connection with the need for a high level of formation of non-specialized skills, various online courses, coaches, consultants, as well as private schools that conduct trainings are already appearing on the market of additional education. State educational institutions in this sense do not provide conditions for the proper development of universal skills for future specialists, so the course of innovative changes in the field of education is difficult. Graduates in the workplace understand their gaps in certain competencies, so they turn to various specialized organizations for additional education to develop and acquire the level of soft skills that will help them be successful in their work.

A 2019 survey by the Society for Human Resource Management found that three-quarters of employers struggle to find graduates with the soft skills their companies need [24]. That is why today the issue of the formation of these skills is especially relevant.

2 Materials and Method

The methodological basis of the study is represented by general scientific principles, which include the following:

- The principle of development, according to which a person is defined as a developing system
- The principle of determination and mutual determination, reflecting the objective mechanisms of cause-and-effect relationships of communication processes
- A systematic approach, according to which flexible communication skills can be considered as a multidimensional structure in interaction with the surrounding reality.

General scientific methods are used, which include analysis, synthesis, generalization of theoretical sources on the research problem, investigation of best practices, as well as the empirical method of research (pedagogical experiment). The theoretical and methodological basis of the study was the concept of the integrity of the individual and the pedagogical space, the methodology for modeling situations of personality development, the study of specific mechanisms for the development of the individual's personal functions (motivational, creative, reflexive and responsibility functions).

3 Results and Discussion

Modern scientists emphasize the need for the formation of soft skills among students of various specialties as an indicator of the presence of an active creative position in relation to their own lives and formed motivation to develop effective behavior strategies in their future professional activities.

The theoretical and methodological foundations of soft skills are, first of all, of an applied nature. To determine the essence of soft skills, interdisciplinary research has been repeatedly carried out. In particular, scientists at the Max Planck Institute in Munich define personal dynamics, the area of interpersonal relationships, the desire for success, and endurance as the main components of soft skills. In this regard, additional training programs for the development of personal qualities are being created for all components of soft skills [15; 19]. The psychological and pedagogical concept of soft skills was proposed by P. Salovey, J. Mayer, and D. Caruso. Within the framework of this approach, the central concept is emotional intelligence - a certain group of

abilities that leads to an understanding of both one's own emotions and the emotions of others, such as self-control, self-awareness, sensitivity, etc. [24].

Despite the many approaches to defining the essence of soft skills and the presence of qualitative differences in them, they still have a single theoretical and methodological core, the essence of which is to define soft skills through the synthesis of activity' and communicative approaches. In this case, soft skills are considered as a system of communicative and personal competencies, which includes any non-professional skills that increase the efficiency of a specialist's work.

In the scientific field, one of the first mentions of soft skills dates back to 1972. At the CONARC (Continental Army Command) Soft Skills Conference, scientist P. Whitmore made a presentation aimed at finding out how the term "soft skills" is understood in various areas of CONARC. After the speech of the scientist, a new definition of "soft skills" was formulated: "these are important work-related skills that practically do not involve interaction with machines and the use of which in the workplace is rather generalized" [1]. Since then, the use of the term "soft skills" within the concept of general competence at the official level has begun and many definitions have appeared that intersect with the concepts of non-cognitive and social skills, emotional intelligence, etc.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) in the United States, with the help of human resources experts, has identified eight competencies that, according to their research, are currently underdeveloped in university and college graduates: critical thinking; problem solving; public speaking; teamwork; digital literacy; management; professional and work ethic; intercultural orientation [10]. Basics of scientific research should also be mentioned, which are also, to some extent namely soft skills, universal for any specialty.

Academic scientists view soft skills as "skills that help to quickly find a common language with others, make and maintain ties, successfully convey own ideas - be a good communicator and leader" [22]. They focus on the fact that such skills are essential in social interaction.

Researchers in the field of personnel competency management interpret "soft skills" as "those competencies that are characterized by development in professional activities and the presence of which causes close attention of employers when hiring and when forming a competency model for specific positions" [8]. In other words, scientists emphasize the importance of "flexible" skills in employment, as well as for professional development in general.

American scientists Lippman, Rayberg, Carney, and Moore give the following definition of soft skills: "this is a set of communication and social skills, personality features, worldview, way of thinking, professional affiliation, emotional intelligence - in general, a set of those skills that allow people to navigate in society, interact with others and achieve their professional goals in combination with hard skills" [14, p. 15].

Thus, integrating the scientific and practical works of scientists, we can say that soft skills are a set of supra-professional skills and personality traits of the individual that determine his success and relevance both in life and in study or work. Soft skills are not quantifiable, but they are the ones that provide high performance and labor productivity in any industry.

The results of a study conducted by the Stanford Research Institute in collaboration with the Carnegie Mellon Foundation among CEOs of companies from the Fortune 500 list found that their success and career growth are for 75% determined by soft skills and only for 25% by hard skills [20]. There are also attempts to identify critically important soft skills for an effective specialist in separate studies - among them, the following are most often mentioned: leadership, teamwork, communication skills, creative thinking, self-management skills [4; 12; 13]. At the same time, if to analyze the dependence of the

priority of “hard” and “soft” competencies on the status and place of the employee in the job hierarchy of the organization, a pattern is visible: the higher the level of management, the higher the proportion of “soft” competencies, and the lower the proportion of “hard” competencies.

As it was mentioned above, supra-professional skills of the “soft skills” category are inherently universal and important for specialists in various industries. Mastering them allows the employee to increase the efficiency of professional activity in his industry, provides career growth potential, and also expands his ability to move between industries while maintaining demand in him as a professional.

Determining the main trends in the development of professions of the future, the compilers of the Atlas of Professions provide a list of some general (supra- or interprofessional) skills that employers already today mark as the most promising. Among them, there are the following [17]:

- Systems thinking (the ability to identify complex systems and work with them).
- Cross-industry communication skills (understanding technologies, processes and market situation in various related and non-related industries).
- Ability to manage projects and processes.
- Designing IT solutions / Working with artificial intelligence.
- Customer focus, ability to work with consumer requests.
- Multilingualism and multiculturalism (fluency in English and preferably knowledge of a second foreign language, understanding of the national and cultural context of partner countries, understanding of the specifics of working in industries in other countries).
- Ability to work with teams, groups, and individuals.
- Work in the mode of high uncertainty and rapid change of task conditions (ability to make decisions quickly, respond to changing working conditions, ability to allocate resources and manage own time).
- The ability for artistic creativity, the presence of a developed aesthetic taste.
- Lean production.

In this context, it is obvious that the development of many competencies, especially in the field of “flexible” (soft skills), including leadership, teamwork, facilitation, systems thinking, etc., is impossible only within the framework of the assimilation of knowledge as the main component of traditionally built disciplines. This contradiction leads to an increase in demand for project-oriented education that can ensure that students work in teams on projects to solve real problems (preferably with the involvement of experts from professional communities).

In response to this educational challenge, digital platforms for educational projects and personal growth contests for students are actively developing. However, within the framework of the educational activities of “classical” universities, work towards increasing the “flexibility” of training modules, their ability to respond to the actual needs of the student and the end customer - the employer - is not yet systematic. But even within the framework of the usual educational process, it is possible to create new curricula that use the principle of project-based training and pay attention to the development of “flexible skills” [25]. In one of the American universities, a business game is actively practiced in the context of project-based learning for students undergoing training in the specialty “Customs”. In this case, “Customers” are involved in the game - external practitioners who set a real task for students. During the game, project teams develop their own solutions to the proposed problem situation. As a result, a “Solutions Fair” is held (with presentations, design of team stands), to which Customers are invited. They take an active part in the discussion of projects and choose the best of the presented ones, similar to real tender process. Thus, students receive not only invaluable experience of immersion in solving real problems, but also develop relevant

teamwork skills, self-presentation, and (which is especially valuable) receive live feedback from practitioners [17].

Another way to form flexible competencies is to create targeted educational products aimed exclusively at developing the given qualities. As an example, we can cite a training program aimed at developing such a “soft” competence as the skill of public speaking among students at Columbia University in the USA [20]:

1. Theoretical block “Public and private space”. It implies the exercise aimed at creating a “general” group content of public speaking based on the individual semantic fields of the training participants. For this exercise, associative cards can be used. Answering the question: “What is public speaking for me?”, each participant chooses one card and voices his associations related to his perception of public speaking.

2. Theoretical block “Goals of public speaking and their effective implementation at the behavioral level”. It implies analysis of video recordings of public speeches of various types (Speech at a conference, rally, lecture, seminar of famous people). The analysis is recommended to be carried out according to the following criteria: presentation of the speaker's image with the help of behavioral and emotional-aesthetic means of expression; means of establishing and maintaining contact with the audience; the content of the speech and its relevance to the topic and actual needs of the audience.

3. Theoretical block “Fears and anxiety in public speaking and ways to overcome them”. Exercises within this block are as follows: “Speech from the chair” (group members are invited to stand on a chair for 1 minute to talk about their strengths in oratory) or “Personal legend” (standing in front of the audience to tell the “legend” of their family). The discussion of the exercise focuses on the emotional state during the performance, individual ways of self-regulation and receiving support from the audience. This block is also aimed at mastering techniques for creating a favorable atmosphere for public speaking.

4. Theoretical block “Types of public speaking: strategy and tactics of speech”. It implies content analysis of public speeches (based on the public speeches of US presidents over the past two decades). The work is carried out in microgroups, each of which analyzes one speech according to the following indicators: the length of the text and the number of semantic units; value component (mentioned events and facts); sensory-perceptual component (used adjectives and verbs), motivational component (calls and parting words); emotional-affective component (general emotional tone of the speech).

5. Theoretical block “Preparing the text of a public speech (stages and structural elements)”. It includes video recording and analysis of public speeches. Preparation in microgroups of a public performance for TV on a free topic is conducted. The analysis of the speech includes the following units: topic, purpose and objectives of the speech; novelty and relevance of the speech for the target audience; style, logic and compositional parts of the presentation; ways to maintain attention of imaginary audiences and influence them; the presence and structure of argumentation: verbal and non-verbal expressiveness; culture and technique of speech; visual aids used. Each microgroup analyzes one video and presents the results of the analysis to the general circle.

6. Theoretical block “Psychological ways of establishing contact, managing attention and influencing the audience during public speaking”. Exercise “Tower” is implied here. The group is divided into micro-groups, which are invited to construct a model of a tower called “New York Sea Gate” from 20 sheets of paper, which will be built on the New York seafont and should correspond to the cultural and historical style of the city and be of social importance for the citizens. The groups should also prepare a presentation of the project. The analysis of presentations is carried out according to the scheme worked out in the previous lesson in a group discussion.

7. Theoretical block "Laws of perception. Filters. Beginning and end of speech. Structure of communication". Exercise: "Monologue". Students are asked to split into pairs. Each of the duet participants in the monologue mode should tell the partner about something interesting, exciting or important for 5 minutes while standing next to the partner, standing above the partner, sitting next to the partner, sitting next to the standing partner, sitting back to back. In this case, the partner can only use non-reflective listening techniques. In the analysis, the emphasis is made on the personal feelings of both listeners and speakers.

8 Theoretical block "Presentation of information, argumentation and counter-argumentation". Exercise: "Argumentation spinner". Each participant of the training is invited to formulate a controversial thesis and pick up arguments for it. The group is divided into 2 subgroups, which sit in a circle (inner and outer) in pairs. At the first stage of the exercise, participants sitting in the inner circle are invited to convince their opponent who is sitting opposite, of the correctness of their thesis, or at least win him over to their side. The opponent builds a counterargument. After each stage, the partners shift (change in pairs) and change roles. Each participant must be in the role of an argumentator and counter-argumentator at least 2 times. Before each change of partners, the participants give each other feedback (what was effective in the argument, and what prevented them from taking the side of the opponent).

9. Theoretical block "Dialogue with the audience. Difficult listeners and opponents". Exercise: "Dialogue with an 'uncomfortable' person". This exercise uses a set of cards with images of different people (one can use a set of metaphorical cards Persona). Each participant is invited to choose from a set 1 or 2 cards depicting a listener or opponent difficult for him and in microgroups of 4 people to give him or them a psychological characteristic, answering the question: "Why is this person 'uncomfortable' for you?". The group helps the participant develop an effective strategy for interacting with this category of opponents.

10. Debate on the topic: "The role and necessity of presentations in public speaking". The group is divided into "supporters" and "opponents" of presentations in public speaking. The first are invited to build arguments in defense of presentations, while the second are to substantiate the negative aspects of presentations during speeches. It is a theoretical block "Requirements for the preparation of presentations and their use in public speaking".

11. Reflection. Summing up the training.

This program is designed for 16-24 hours of classroom work and contains sequentially presented theoretical and practical blocks in its structure. A "prolonged" form of organization of training in the form of a cycle of 4 trainings or a "marathon" option of immersion in a two-three-day training is possible.

The training was tested in work with students of the Odessa National University named after I.I. Mechnikov. According to the feedback of the students, the program was recognized as highly effective in terms of developing the skill of public speaking, deserving further replication.

The role game "City mayor" is also of interest for the formation of soft skills. The purpose of the game is the formation of managerial skills, the development of creative thinking, the improvement of speaking skills: building a monologue statement, developing teamwork skills. Run time is 40 minutes. The teacher divides the group into equal teams. Students' actions are as follows: 1) each group needs to come up with a name for their city; 2) a student has to choose a participant who will play the role of the mayor of the city, distribute the duties of each team member - responsible for the field of education, healthcare, transport, economy, sports, recreation, industry, etc.; 3) a representative of each industry needs to come up with an optimized plan for the arrangement and development of the city and present it; 4) after the presentations, it should be discussed whose plan is the best and why.

For students of the Odessa National University named after I.I. Mechnikov, we developed the creative task "So many activities". Its goal is to encourage introspection, development of self-organizational skills, development of creative thinking, improvement of communication skills. Run time is 15 minutes. Students' actions are as follows: 1) draw up a plan of affairs for the day off, taking into account the fact that every two hours there should be a change of activity; 2) present the plan to classmates.

Also, as part of our pilot project, we offered students the "Habit Tracker" creative task aimed at developing self-organization skills, introspection, developing creative thinking, improving speaking skills: building a monologue statement. Runtime is 10 minutes. Student actions imply the following: 1) create own habit tracker; 2) present it to classmates, justify its expediency.

In general, the pilot project for the formation of soft skills was perceived by students very positively. The number of students who took part in the project is 200 people studying in the specialty "Romano-Germanic Philology", "Automation and Computer-Integrated Technologies", "Finance, Banking and Insurance". After the completion of the project, we asked the students to rate, in percentage terms, how much, in their understanding, their soft skills had improved - they were asked to choose one of the following answer options: 0-5%; 10%-15%; 20%-30%; 40-50%; 60-70%; 80% and more. There were no students who chose the answer "0-5%" and 80% and more. 97 students chose the answer "20%-30%", 46 students chose the answer "40-50%", and 57 participants estimated their soft skills improvement as 60-70%. For short-term pilot project, it can be fairly considered quite encouraging result.

This set of exercises can be used both in conjunction with other tasks in the classroom in various disciplines and independently.

Overall, the most useful exercise will be the preparation of presentations, public speaking, participation in seminars. Developed communication skills mean that a person can build relationships with others and cooperate. This improves work efficiency and reduces stress. It is especially important to be able to 'find a common language' with people who have different experiences and life values. In particular, in large international companies, a graduate will encounter them constantly.

Time management and critical thinking are also very important - this is actually a whole group of skills, and all of them are very necessary for work. A person has critical thinking if he:

- Considers the problem from several sides;
- Uses different sources of information;
- Is able to highlight the important and cut off the unnecessary;
- Argues his position on the basis of the collected data;
- Is able to independently find a solution to the problem;
- Is able to cope with a non-standard task, quickly filling in the missing knowledge.

One should not underestimate such a soft skills development tool as internships at enterprises and companies. Internships have a significant impact on preparing students for future professional activities in general: they develop not only professional skills, but also communication skills. During internships, professional ethics are formed and the network of professional contacts is expanded. Often, namely the successful completion of internships by students is the decisive factor in hiring.

Moreover, an underestimated, but very effective resource for developing the soft skills of students is volunteering. According to the results of some recent studies, active participation in volunteering forms not only an active citizenship position and the values of humanism, but also contributes to professional self-determination and increased motivation to master the disciplines of the educational program. Various authors highlight the following advantages of volunteering in ensuring the personal and professional growth of students: the organic formation of universal and professional competencies; acquisition of

experience in socially oriented activities and development of civic qualities; acquisition of the necessary acquaintances, contacts, connections; increasing the level of responsibility and independence [9-11].

Also, the organization of discussion clubs, following the example of business schools and public speaking courses, would undoubtedly allow students to learn how to express and defend their opinions, learn eloquence, and also help to remove the fear of speaking in front of a large audience. In the classroom, more attention should be paid to teamwork and project work. Probably, additional training programs for personal growth in all components of soft skills should be created.

The modern realities of the development of the educational system, which is made dependent on the instability and uncertainty of economic dynamics (and, as a result, is generating an increased demand for competitive and adaptive employees), set such educational trends as individualization and the development of a competency-based approach. For each of the sought-after "professions of the future", competency maps are created, designed to become a 'template' for the candidate's compliance with the desired position. And a competence, an integral component of which today is soft skills becomes the unit of measurement of "educational capital". An effective way to develop general competencies (soft skills) in the higher education system is purposefully formed trainings for each of the competencies, as well as training programs based on project work.

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