

# The teacher's role in the development of soft skills in distance and blended learning

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**Abstract.** The background for this research includes both theoretical results concerning the development of soft skills in the process of learning and some practical approaches for the development of soft skills in distance learning environments which have become common during the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective of this research is to determine the teacher's role in the development of soft skills and to identify any particular characteristics of this role in distance and blended learning contexts. This research relied on both general scientific and special methods. General scientific methods, in particular, included analysis, synthesis, inductive and deductive reasoning, comparison, analogy, etc., while special research methods included content analysis, case studies, secondary statistical analysis, historical method, etc. The outcome of the research is the finding that education now should involve the development and building of soft skills in students as a prerequisite for personal and professional growth. As teachers play a critical role in the development of such skills they should promote the creation and operation of a specific environment conducive to the development of communication skills, critical thinking and creative problem-solving abilities, as well as students' individual and group work. The findings of this research are new for Russian science and also draw the attention of the research community to the particular features of distance learning amid the global COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** soft skills, hard skills, distance learning, online learning, blended learning, COVID-19, digital technologies

## 1 Introduction

A mass transition of universities to distance and blended education due to the coronavirus pandemic has posed new challenges for the management of educational institutions and educators. The main concern is to maintain the effectiveness of learning in the new environment [1]. Higher education should always aim to create a workforce that can adapt to an increasingly demanding and ever-changing labor market [2]. As far back as in the late 1990s, it became clear that this required the enhancement of soft skills as well as hard skills

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[3]. While theoretical knowledge (hard skills) was the main basis for hiring personnel for a long time, now, however, when most processes are automated and digitalized, for a professional to be competitive, this knowledge must be supplemented by communicative abilities, creativity, empathy, that is, soft skills [4-6]. Therefore, the curriculum should also include the development of these competencies [7-11].

Researchers emphasize the difficulty of teaching soft skills, also known as employability skills because they are difficult to assess and measure, are cumulative and depend on personal characteristics of students. Hard skills, on the other hand, relate to specific information and taught materials and can be easily demonstrated and evaluated [12, 13]. At the same time, many research works indicate that mastering soft skills is a key to a future successful career, while hard skills are reflected in high academic performance [14]. According to Scheiner [15], hard skills tend to change over time and require updating, whereas soft skills are harder to acquire, but last longer.

Although there are sufficient articles on the significance of soft skills and the need to develop them in the higher education sector, there has not been sufficient research on the teacher's role in the development of such skills and any related specific challenges arising in distance learning, and the objective of this article is to cover this research gap. In this regard, the goals were to: review the literature to identify opportunities for the development of soft skills in higher education; determine the teacher's role in the development of soft skills during learning; develop recommendations for teachers on the development of soft skills in distance learning.

## **2 Methods**

To achieve the objective and to meet the goals outlined in the introduction we have used both general scientific and special methods in this research. General scientific methods, in particular, included analysis, synthesis, inductive and deductive reasoning, comparison, analogy, etc., while special research methods included content analysis, case studies, secondary statistical analysis, historical method, etc.

## **3 Results**

The literature review identified two main points of view on the possibility of developing soft skills in university education. One point of view suggests that the development of these competencies is associated with personality traits and, therefore, cannot be corrected by learning [16-18]. The development of these competencies is possible in childhood [19] or adolescence [20, 21].

According to the other point of view, however, not all personality traits shaped in childhood influence the development of soft skills and many traits can be developed in late adolescence and early adulthood [22], since it is during this period that there arise opportunities for socialization and interpersonal connections in the university and professional environment [21, 23]. Higher education should support the student's personal development, create opportunities for self-realization and personal growth [22], possibly through active and collaborative learning methods (business and role-play games, debates, case studies) [21, 24].

Thus, the teacher plays an active role of a tutor and facilitator in the development of soft skills in higher education. Based on the literature review the following recommendations can be offered to teachers conducting classes in a remote and blended mode:

- Focus on debates both as a class and in subgroups by allowing students to have their own opinion and encouraging them to defend it;
- Customize business games for distance learning mode by sending the rules of the game and detailed instructions, including technical aspects (order, turning cameras on, etc.), in advance;
- Select for analysis those cases which are real, relevant, interesting, and useful for learning the topic;
- Encourage work in teams at the preparatory stage and during seminars;
- Invite subject matter professionals to classes to answer questions and participate in discussions;
- Add creative components that help develop out-of-the-box thinking and creativity in students;
- Include those activities in seminars which are as close to professional activities as possible.

## **4 Discussion**

Until now, most educational institutions have failed to fully include the development of soft skills in the educational process. The teacher's role in the building of these skills was limited and very isolated [25]. This general inefficiency in the development of soft skills has been further exacerbated by the transition of many educational institutions to distance learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic [25].

At the same time, the forced transition to new learning modes has triggered an exponential growth of the importance of the teacher's role in the building of soft skills. The need to teach in a new environment has made teachers strive to help students develop skills to adapt to new conditions, skills for searching independently for available learning modes, creative thinking skills, and the ability to solve problems independently (Naamati Schneider, 2020). In other words, in such circumstances teachers have begun to more actively develop soft skills in students.

At the same time, as shown by D. Pezer in 2021, the educational process has indeed demonstrated serious progress in the area under consideration [26]. Thus, a survey found that 90% of respondents were satisfied with the level of empathy and understanding on the part of teachers; 64% of respondents rated positively the activities aimed at critical thinking and creativity development and team work; and 80% of respondents reported positive dynamics in the growth of communication and public speaking skills [26].

But it is important to mention, that studies conducted in 2020-2021 clearly indicated that distance education had a reduced potential for developing soft skills in students. For example, V. Condrat said in her paper that after transition to online education most students reported a decrease in the effectiveness of communications with the teacher (Condrat, 2020).

Such problems can be largely attributed to the suddenness of the transition to distance learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of tested and effective distance learning programs, modern digital learning materials, and skills of teaching and learning in the digital environment has created additional obstacles [27].

All of this brings us back to our main point that to be effective the development of soft skills in a distance education environment should be implemented systematically and should be backed by specific well-designed teaching techniques and methods. In the absence of such systematic foundation the development of soft skills will inevitably be difficult.

Thus, it can be suggested that the effective performance by the teacher of the role of tutor and facilitator should be based on a set of teaching methods and approaches. The recommendations that we formulated in the previous section of this paper for teachers conducting classes in a distance and blended mode seem to be fully suitable to be used as such approaches.

## 5 Conclusion

Our analysis of the teacher's role in the development of soft skills in distance and blended learning has led us to deduce that the development of soft skills in the learning process was indeed possible. We found that because of the ways in which people socialize the development of these skills could be quite successful both in adolescence and in early adulthood.

Furthermore, since professional socialization at these stages takes place mainly in educational institutions, the teacher plays an important role.

The teacher's role in the development of soft skills is even greater in a distance and blended learning environment as evidenced by research findings concerning online education during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Thus, it was found that when teachers approached the development of soft skills in online learning on a systematic basis and were able to quickly develop effective educational and methodological frameworks for the delivery of educational services, students were satisfied with the results of home-based classes and reported their high effectiveness in developing soft skills. In these situations, the teacher usually acted as a tutor and facilitator.

On the contrary, where the teacher's efforts were insufficient to develop effective online education programs, students reported a decrease in the level of their soft skills. They pointed to a lack of communication with the teacher, a sense of detachment from the learning process, etc.

This highlights the importance of developing a systematic approach to the building of soft skills customized for distance and blended learning modes. Such a systematic approach should be based on special educational programs that take into account the peculiarities of online education, the peculiarities of the utilization of modern digital technologies in the learning process, etc. In addition, special teaching and learning materials should be developed.

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