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TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE OF SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN BUSINESS STUDIES

Abstract

Education and employment stakeholders worldwide have increasingly acknowledged the need to teach students soft skills to improve their academic performance and long-term prospects. Soft skills are transferable across jobs and industries and related to personal and social competencies. Their development aims to empower and increase personal growth and learning participation and improve job opportunities. Given their central role in shaping students' educational experiences, teachers must be well-versed in the value of cultivating soft skills and awareness of the necessity to incorporate their study into various curricular frameworks. As a result, this article investigates whether business schools adequately prepare their students for the soft skills demanded by today's labor market. Business teachers in Bosnia and Herzegovina were the subjects of the survey. The findings indicate that teachers recognize the value of teaching students soft skills but that current curricula may be strengthened in this area.

Keywords: business studies, soft skills, teachers

1. INTRODUCTION

Changes in how people work, live, and learn are unavoidable consequences of the modern world, with its emphasis on science and technology, globalization, and other factors. Being an expert in a tiny topic or profile is no longer sufficient. People today have greater responsibilities, work more collaboratively, and their success on the job does not necessarily depend solely on their technical expertise. Interdisciplinarity is essential in the current world, as there will always be clients, contractors, colleagues, and the need to work together to get the job done effectively. It should be noted that the media world has a significant impact. There is a considerable deal of information flowing; there is difficulty with efficient memorizing and clip thinking, and consequently, there is a need for critical thinking and time management.

Additionally, the availability of appropriate skills for leveraging emerging technologies is a crucial determinant of national competitiveness and innovation capabilities (Spötti & Windelband, 2021). Companies have trouble defining their skill requirements due to rapid technological development (Brown et al., 2019). But, people's ability to contribute to and benefit from a more equitable and sustainable future largely depends on the education they get. The ability to set well-defined objectives, collaborate effectively with others, see unrealized potential, and generate alternative approaches to difficult situations will be crucial in the years ahead. The purpose of education should be to do more than just get students ready for the workforce; it should also give them the tools they need to become contributing members of society. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are working hard to increase their students' chances of finding work after graduation by equipping them with skills and expertise appreciated and rewarded by businesses and, when possible, proofed against future changes. That is where soft skills emerge. Namely, today, it is typical to categorize skills into two broad categories: hard skills and soft skills. Hard skills refer to concrete, job-related abilities. Soft skills refer to a person's emotional intelligence, a collection of personal attributes somewhat related to effective interpersonal interaction (Savchenko, 2021).

Educators and employers across Europe have begun to acknowledge the value of soft skills in helping students succeed academically and in the workplace. Soft skills are transferable across jobs and industries and are related to personal and social competencies. Its development aims to empower and increase personal growth and learning participation and improve job opportunities (SKILLS4EMPLOYABILITY, 2020).

Today's graduates are expected to be flexible enough to work in various fields and easily switch careers (Rowland et al., 2020). As indicated by Fettes et al. (2020), soft skills have a longer lifespan than technical or hard skills due to their transferability from one profession to another and beyond.

However, recent studies have shown that many graduates lack the skills and knowledge necessary for success in the job (Plewa, Galán-Muros & Davey, 2015; Cabus & Somers, 2017; Cattani & Pedrini, 2021). Many HEIs stick to their old ways of teaching rather than adapting to the changing employment market (McGunagle & Zizka, 2020). Another issue, as Doherty and Stephens (2021) point out, is that the link between industry and higher education creates an expectation from businesses that HEIs will respond swiftly to industry calls for changes to existing programs and/or the addition of new ones.

According to Sarkar et al. (2020), employers appear dissatisfied with graduates' soft skills because they are insufficient to contribute effectively to the workplace. Furthermore, many graduates believe that institutions do not adequately prepare them for soft skills and just serve as a beginning point for their skill development (Tholen, 2019). Universities are encouraged to avoid treating students as mere statistic consumers and instead focus on supporting their personal growth and equipping them to face the demands of the twenty-first century (Parkes et al., 2020).

Several authors in the academic literature (Rampasso et al., 2021; Woods, Doherty & Stephens, 2021) express skepticism that HEIs can react quickly enough to the needs of their industrial partners. Disruptive technologies significantly impact traditional businesses while spawning a plethora of new ones (Iman, Tan, & Tan, 2020). HEIs must restructure how they provide their programs in light of technological developments and the spread of innovation and creativity across industries (Pereira, Vilas-Boas, and Rebelo, 2020; Mian et al., 2020). Changes are made, and new courses are added to university curricula over time. Despite efforts, there is still a major disconnect between industry skill requirements and higher education institutions (Cabus & Somers, 2017; Doherty & Stephens, 2021; Luo et al., 2022). Researchers have long argued over the new possibilities for businesses and customers and the displacements in the labor force produced by technological innovation (Jang et al., 2021). The rise of new industries calls for reevaluating higher education's function in skilling, reskilling, and upskilling the workforce.

All those mentioned above motivated the authors to investigate whether business schools adequately prepare their students for the soft skills demanded by today's labor market. The authors created a questionnaire to explore teachers' perspectives on soft skills development during business studies. The following research questions (RQ) were posed:

- RQ1: How do teachers interpret the concept of soft skills?
- RQ2: What are teachers' attitudes about soft skills in the context of the educational process?
- RQ3: What soft skills can students develop during their classes?

2. RELEVANCE OF SOFT SKILLS IN BUSINESS STUDIES

The importance of soft skills in the global economy of the twenty-first century has been widely acknowledged. According to the Human Capital Index (World Bank, 2020), the key to boosting economic growth is investing in the skills people acquire over their lifetimes.

Soft skills are inextricably linked to the humanistic domain, which seeks to cultivate an individual who is a responsible thinker and doer with a strong sense of cultural identity and national pride. In today's more competitive and interconnected knowledge economy, soft skills involve cultivating originality, independence, and initiative (Howard, 2018; Hilt et al., 2019).

2.1. Soft skills

The concept of "soft skills" has been around for half a century, from its first use at the Conference of US Army Air Defense School (Whitmore, 1972), and is now widely used in the business world (Royo, 2019). Soft skills are widely acknowledged as crucial for success in today's complex, fast-paced, and uncertain workplace (Hagemann et al., 2017; Succi, 2019). However, even after more than a half-century of research, their definition remains ambiguous (Cukier et al., 2015; Matteson et al., 2016).

Soft skills have always been contrasted with their more technical counterparts, or hard skills (Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Whitmore, 1972). That approach to soft skills is generally associated with the assertion that many predictors of job performance are not sufficiently recognized and trained within the educational system and firms, resulting in a gap between employers' expectations and employees' capacities (Hamid et al., 2014; Hurrell, 2016).

As was previously said, there are several problems with defining soft skills because there is no single accepted definition. To begin, "non-cognitive skills" is occasionally used to describe soft skills to highlight their underrepresentation in formal education and professional evaluation (Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Kautz et al., 2014). Divergent thinking, reflexivity, and critical thinking are all examples of "soft skills" that contribute to cognitive processes emphasized by other authors (Cinque, 2016; Snape, 2017; Royo, 2019). Some elements cited as soft skills, such as "resource management" or "goal setting" (Cinque, 2016; Mahasneh & Thabet, 2016), do not necessarily involve social or emotional stimuli but are nonetheless often equated with "social and emotional skills" (Schleicher, 2017) or "people skills" (Matteson et al., 2016, p. 1). That exemplifies the general inclination to focus just on the most prominent aspects of soft skills.

Several authors have pointed out that the term "employability skills" is often used interchangeably with "soft skills," "transferable skills," "key skills," and "core skills" (Goggin et al., 2019, p. 1). Some publications even expose a more extensive set of equivalents (Cinque, 2016). Others, however, have pointed out that the similarities aren't universal (Goggin et al., 2019), with Kechagias (2011, p. 33) arguing that soft skills are a subset of generic skills.

The inconsistency in the literature on soft skills demonstrates how malleable the concept of soft skills is and how widely varying factors, such as author preference and field of study, can influence whether or not a given skill is included in the category. That highlights that soft skills are

discipline-dependent and helps explain differences in local or domain-specific taxonomies of soft skills found in the literature (Abayadeera & Watty, 2016; Kiryakova-Dineva et al., 2019).

According to a review of related literature, no widely acknowledged accurate and clear definition of soft skills exists. Because of their interdependence and connection with particular traits of people, soft skills cannot be clearly differentiated, unlike hard skills (Sá &8 Serpa, 2022). Cinque (2017) gives one of the broader definitions: "Soft skills represent a dynamic combination of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills. Soft skills help people to adapt and behave positively to deal effectively with the challenges of their professional and everyday life" (p. 85). For this work, the authors defined soft skills more comprehensively: "Soft skills are supra-disciplinary, supra-professional skills and competencies that can be used in any profession and everyday life" (Gilyazova et al. 2021, p.244).

Also, there is no agreement in the literature on which skills belong to soft skills. Table 1 shows the essential soft skills recognized by some authors.

Table 1 Top soft skills by authors

Top soft skills	Authors and papers
1. General communication 2. Problem-solving 3. Critical thinking 4. Teamwork 5. Presentation skills 6. Oral communication 7. Time management/organization 8. Positive attitude 9. Flexibility and adaptability 10. Professional networking	Aziz, S., Zaidoune, S. (2022). Moroccan Higher Education Teachers' Perceptions of the Most Important Soft Skills for Employability. International Journal of Social Science And Human Research, 5(10), 4534-4545
1. Managing teamwork 2. Interpersonal relationships 3. Dealing with problematic situations 4. Key cognitive abilities 5. Gathering, treating, and restituting information 6. Communication 7. Ethical and reliable behavior 8. Monitoring internal resources 9. Moving up collective projects 10. Aware, learning, and flexible	Joie-La Marle, C., Parmentier, F., Coltel, M., Lubart, T., & Borteyrou, X. (2022). A Systematic Review of Soft Skills Taxonomies: Descriptive and Conceptual Work.
1. Teamwork 2. Creativity 3. Problem-solving 4. Leadership skills 5. Resolving conflicts 6. Tolerance 7. Communication 8. Critical thinking 9. Emotional intelligence 10. Oratory skills	Vykhliaiev, Y., Bannikova, K., Bazyl, O., Voichenko, O., Trinko, O. (2022). On the Formation of "Soft Skills" as the Equivalent of Professional Competencies: A Forecast of Educational Trends. Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice, 22(18) Kolyada, & Kravchenko. (2020). Practical experience of "soft-skills" formation in the conditions of an institution of higher education. Humanities Science Current Issues, 3(27), 137–145.

Source: author's preparations

2.2. Why HEIs need soft skills

Higher education is expected to equip graduates with the expertise necessary to help businesses thrive in the modern information economy (Chernikova et al., 2020; Trinidad, Raz, & Magsalin, 2021). It is also widely accepted that contemporary HEIs can adapt quickly to the shifting demands of the business world, both in terms of their curriculum and their research (Pereira, Vilas-Boas, & Rebelo, 2020; Woods, Doherty & Stephens, 2021). Higher education institutions nowadays need to

be agile. High-quality dynamic learning open to iterative improvements requires a well-designed feedback loop. Given the difficulty in anticipating future skill needs due to the quick speed of technology development, an agile HEI can engage meaningfully with stakeholders and their needs and give students the freedom to make many iterative decisions (Doherty & Stephens, 2023).

Although it is methodologically sound to focus on soft skills in contrast to hard skills, the connection between them should not be ignored in the classroom. Soft skill development should occur in tandem with content-based instruction or the potential of specific fields of study. Developing soft skills in tandem with the study of professional disciplines has proven to be more effective than attempts to create separate training courses for their acquisition outside of disciplinary contexts (Gilyazova et al., 2021). Soft skills are unique because their dispositions and traits can be applied across various professions and fields. Students who develop their soft skills—such as collaborating effectively, communicating clearly, and thinking creatively—may have a better chance of succeeding in today's competitive job market. Competency-based learning is one framework in which they could be nurtured, shifting the educational emphasis from knowledge acquisition to skill application. In the new model, students are given a more central role in the educational process, and professors are transformed into instructional guides rather than content experts (Gilyazova et al., 2021).

According to the preceding, HEIs are primarily responsible for developing students' soft skills in preparation for their entry into the workforce (Caggiano et al., 2020). Some authors claim that higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide have recently developed a keen awareness of their responsibility to help students acquire hard and soft skills. As a result, they have been increasingly adopting and promoting new and innovative methodologies in the teaching-learning and assessment processes while also cautioning that educators should themselves be subject matter experts in these areas (Fernández-Arias et al., 2021). Despite widespread agreement about the value of teaching students to cultivate their soft skills, many educators still find it challenging to adjust their methods. Unfortunately, a training process focused on soft skills is often hampered by the prevalence of expository and traditional approaches in today's higher education teaching, learning, and assessment procedures (Cornali, 2018).

As a result, there is a misalignment between the employability skills taught in HEIs and those needed in the real world of work. For this reason, Arnold, Mazalu, and Uggeri (2019) argue that HEIs should encourage collaboration among all relevant parties (faculty, students, providers, and employers) in order to develop and implement effective educational processes, models, and curricular approaches for fostering the growth and mastery of soft skills among higher education students.

2.3. Soft skills in business studies

To improve graduates' chances of finding work after college, soft skills like leadership, communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving should be incorporated into the business studies curriculum (Tang, 2019). In addition, studies have shown that students majoring in business studies at the university level (Tang, 2018; Tang, 2019; Tang, Mohamed, Somprach, 2015) need to develop the following essential "soft skills":
- leadership,
- critical thinking,
- problem-solving,
- and communication.

They found that these three soft skills are crucial for aspiring business owners to have in order to succeed in the business world.

Several research (Succi & Canovi, 2020; Kenayathulla et al., 2019; Abbasi et al., 2018), among others, have identified a discrepancy between what students learn in business classes and what is

needed in the workplace. Employers continue to assert that fresh graduates lack the required soft skills for employment (Mainga et al., 2022; Clarke, 2018; Moore & Morton, 2017). It is clear from the preceding that most studies have focused on employer expectations, the gap between what business studies provide and employer expectations, the importance of developing specific soft skills for increased employability, the challenges associated with implementing such programs, and student expectations. The authors are aware of a lack of studies like Varas et al.'s (2023) that describe teachers' perspectives on soft skills. To be specific, effective learning of soft skills necessitates using constructivist, inquiry-based, reflective, collaborative, and integrative pedagogical techniques in the business curriculum (Bennett et al., 2020; Relleve, 2019). On the other hand, developing employability or soft skills necessitates a shift away from inefficient teaching and learning methods and toward student-centered learning approaches and integrative pedagogies, and teachers play a critical role in this process.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to obtain answers to the research questions (RQs), the authors conducted an empirical study. They prepared a questionnaire consisting of three parts focused on soft skills. In addition, respondents answered three personal questions: age, gender, and length of teaching experience. In the first part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to state their associations with the term soft skills. The second part of the questionnaire offered a set of statements about soft skills placed in the teaching process (importance, need, possibilities). In the third part, respondents chose from several offered soft skills that they think students can develop during their classes. Accordingly, the questionnaire consisted of one open question, 17 statements rated from 1 to 5 (Likert scale, 1 - I do not agree at all; 5 - I completely agree), and a series of 23 closed questions (possible answers: yes, not).

The research was conducted on a convenient sample at the beginning of April 2023. It was conducted online using Google Forms. It included teachers from the field of economics, 32 of them - 7 men and 25 women. The youngest teacher is 25, and the oldest is 65. The length of service varies between 1 and 30 years.

The results are presented as numbers, percentages, mean, standard deviation, and mode. Statistical data processing was performed in Microsoft Excel.

4. RESULTS

As answers to the first research question (RQ1), the respondents offered the following: the ability of individuals to work successfully with others in a business environment, coping skills in the environment, skills that are not easy to measure, and more specifically, communication skills, teamwork, organizational skills, the ability to manage and argue, creativity, responsibility, entrepreneurship, critical thinking, team management, conflict resolution, emotional intelligence, adaptability, presentation skills.

As the answers to the second research question (RQ2), table 2 presents the respondent's evaluations of the offered statements.

Table 2 Selected descriptive indicators for investigated statements

Statements	M	SD	Min - Max	D
Every teacher should develop soft skills in their students	4.7	0.6	3 – 5	5
Soft skills are just as important as hard skills	4.7	0.6	3 – 5	5
I am aware of the importance of teaching students about soft skills	4.6	0.8	2 – 5	5
Soft skills make the student more competitive when hiring	4.8	0.4	4 – 5	5
I am ready to expand my knowledge of soft skills	4.8	0.4	4 – 5	5
Every faculty should pay special attention to the development of soft skills among students	4.4	0.7	3 – 5	5
I am willing to get involved in the development of soft skills among students	4.7	0.6	3 – 5	5
I have adequate (sufficiently developed) soft skills	3.9	0.6	3 – 5	4
I am ready to adapt my way of teaching so that students develop soft skills	4.4	0.7	3 – 5	5
I continuously monitor what employers seek and try to develop soft skills with students through my teaching.	4.0	0.7	3 – 5	4
The faculty pays enough attention to the development of soft skills among its students	3.0	0.7	2 – 4	3
Soft skills are sufficiently included in the Curriculum through different courses	2.7	0.7	2 – 4	3
The Curricula should include separate courses through which students would develop soft skills	4.0	0.9	3 – 5	3
It is not necessary to change the Curricula for the development of soft skills	2.4	1.2	1 – 4	1
Volunteering during studies encourages the development of soft skills	4.4	0.7	3 – 5	5
Teachers are not responsible for the development of soft skills among students	2.1	0.8	1 – 3	3
Career counseling centers play a significant role in the development of soft skills	3.4	0.7	2 – 4	4
To develop soft skills, it is sufficient to apply different teaching methods in-class - group work, role-playing, simulations, debates, discussions, and practical work,...	3.4	0.9	2 – 5	4
Digital technology is necessary for the development of soft skills	3.1	1.0	1 – 5	3

Notes: M-mean; SD-standard deviation; Min-minimum; Max-maximum; D-mode

Source: author's calculations

As an answer to the third research question (RQ3), table 3 shows the self-assessment of the representation of individual soft skills in the teaching activities of the examined teachers.

Table 3 Representation of soft skills in teachers' teaching activities

Soft skills	No		Yes	
	n	%	n	%
Problem-solving	0	0.0	32	100.0
Critical thinking	0	0.0	32	100.0
General knowledge	2	6.3	30	93.8
Compliance with work procedures	2	6.3	30	93.8
Communication skills	3	9.4	29	90.6
Ability to listen	3	9.4	29	90.6
Orientation to results	4	12.5	28	87.5
Decision making	4	12.5	28	87.5
Creativity	4	12.5	28	87.5
Time management	5	15.6	27	84.4
Work ethic	5	15.6	27	84.4
Organization	5	15.6	27	84.4
Digital literacy	6	18.8	26	81.3
Activity management	6	18.8	26	81.3
Teamwork	7	21.9	25	78.1
Adaptability	7	21.9	25	78.1
Responsibility	9	28.1	23	71.9
"Bearing" with criticism	9	28.1	23	71.9
Flexibility	11	34.4	21	65.6
Conflict management	12	37.5	20	62.5
Persuading skills	15	46.9	17	53.1
Negotiation skills	16	50.0	16	50.0
Leadership	17	53.1	15	46.9
Stress management	19	59.4	13	40.6

Notes: n–number of answers; % - the percentage of n=32

Source: author's calculations

5. DISCUSSION

Results obtained for the first research question (RQ1) follow what was said in section 2.1. - teachers perceive soft skills differently and count different skills in the group of soft skills, primarily skills that can help an individual navigate the business environment and solve different business tasks. It is stated in accordance with the broad definition of soft skills given by Cinque (2017) and the extensive definition given by Gilyazova et al. (2021).

According to the teacher's assessment, students can most/best develop problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, results orientation, decision-making, creativity, and listening skills during their classes. The results align relatively with the basic skills the authors list in the soft skills group (Table 1). On the other hand, teachers estimate that in their classes, students can not develop the skills of stress management, leadership, negotiation, and persuasion, as well as conflict/conflict management.

Knowing the ways of functioning and orientation of faculties in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the above results are expected. Unfortunately, through a large number of courses, students only tried to present theoretical facts without significantly focusing on the real problems that await them in business life.

That, along with the continuously emphasized expectations from employers regarding soft skills, should be a guideline for faculty administrations - when revising existing NPPs and developing new ones, special attention should be paid to soft skills. Primarily to offer students new courses that will ensure the development of soft skills, but also new teaching methods in existing courses. In addition, HEIs should offer special additional both curricular and extracurricular activities for students through which they will develop soft skills. Maybe someone will ask why to use a different approach and why not just try to improve the existing courses. Well, negotiation skills, flexibility, stress management, and conflict management, skills that are currently little developed through classes, require different approaches to teaching, and it is most convenient to acquire them through separate courses.

The skills like responsibility, teamwork, acceptance of criticism, and adaptability are in the middle. They are expected to be at the top of the list of skills that students acquire through their studies. Namely, these skills are developed through various homework assignments, teacher comments on the student's work, and project tasks that a group of students jointly solves. These activities are common activities necessary for students to pass a particular course.

The teachers' attitudes showed their recognition of the importance of soft skills in higher education. Thus, teachers agree that they play a significant role in developing soft skills in students because they will be necessary for students when they enter the business world. The answers of the interviewed teachers also show that they are ready to improve their soft skills and to be additionally engaged so that the students get the best during their studies. Teachers are also aware of the fact that their efforts are not enough to achieve adequate results in the field of soft skills. That is supported by the high ratings of statements related to the need to adapt the curriculum, greater faculty involvement, and low levels of agreement with the statements that it is not necessary to change curricula and that soft skills are already sufficiently included in the curriculum.

The above partly agrees with the findings from the literature, according to which HEIs are responsible for developing students' soft skills. Namely, teachers recognize the importance of HEIs, but their answers suggest insufficient engagement. That can also be important for the faculty administration to show a more significant commitment to soft skills and take concrete steps in order for them to take root in the curriculum.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The findings indicate that (examined) teachers understand the significance of fostering students' soft skills, the requirement to modify curricula, and the value of including all HEIs stakeholders. The

teachers expressed their readiness for further learning about soft skills. They are also willing to make additional efforts to develop these skills in their students. It's hard to tell how much these claims reflect actual preparation and how much is simply declaratory.

The provided research was conducted on limited sample size and is the first of a series of studies on this topic that the authors will address. Other stakeholders (students and employers) should be included in subsequent studies, as well as curriculum analysis. In addition, future research will broaden the sample to include teachers from other faculties, not just economics, and from other universities.

Finally, it can be concluded that HEIs need to transform themselves and their educational strategies and practices at all levels of their operation in order to succeed in developing the necessary soft skills of their students, including, among other things, new pedagogical approaches that foster, in addition to formal learning, also non-formal and informal learning, with a focus on the development of transversal competences and the flexibility of the curricula.

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