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Enhancing professional growth: Exploring the development of soft skills in students for quality improvement

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Abstract

Relevance. In modern education, there is a great demand for the release of highly professional specialists who will cooperate and build constructive relationships with others, solve problems, and have unified skills or soft skills. The soft skills group includes a large group of skills that do not depend on training programmes, but have a great impact on the professional growth of a person and the successful development of solid professional skills.

Purpose. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to investigate the problem of the development of soft skills in higher school students in the process of fostering their professional qualities, and to identify and create conditions (methods or courses) under which the complex development of soft skills of students will be provided.

Methodology. The research methods chosen were questionnaires, surveys, psychological diagnostic methods, and the rank standardisation method.

Results. The findings of the study determined which soft skills students need to develop (understanding of management, development of self-control and self-realisation, development of leadership and communicative qualities), and in which area. In addition, the state of development of these skills in students of higher educational institutions and the ways of their development were diagnosed. Moreover, scientific and methodological foundations were created for the development of soft skills in the educational process.

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Conclusions. In the course of the study, a model for the development of soft skills and a course programme were created that can be introduced into the educational process of higher education in order to develop high professional qualities. The results of the study, the model and the course can be used in further research on this problem.

Keywords: leadership qualities; communication skills; emotional intelligence; educational process; unified skills.

Introduction

Nowadays, employers choose and give jobs to people who are able to easily transfer their knowledge to various fields of activity, who have a full set of professional and personal qualities that will be useful in various areas. In this regard, education should follow new social trends and reveal new tasks that will focus on the development of soft skills. This means that there is an increased demand for employees who possess these qualities and, accordingly, an increased demand for the workforce. Soft skills are an integral system of skills that are non-specialised and not attached to a specific field of activity, and therefore, are unique qualities that focus solely on personal indicators, and not on professional ones.

In the process of training future teachers in the educational system of Kazakhstan, much attention is paid to the competence approach and the development of flexible competencies in students. This issue has been investigated by N. Mirza *et al.*, who suggest that people's professional skills and their relationship with society begin precisely with their training in educational institutions [1]. The concept of the term "soft skills" is defined as the ability of people to possess such qualities that would help them quickly adapt and cooperate with people without harm and with maximum benefit. According to R. Shakir, soft skills contribute to success by using qualities at a high level [2].

D.S. Yanchuk described what soft skills are, and what it means [3]. The researcher proved that in order to properly develop soft skills, it is necessary first to make the correct diagnosis of these qualities in students, as an important psychological and pedagogical support. The study by V.P. Riklefs *et al.* investigated individual learning styles, including thinking activities [4]. The findings revealed the relationship between learning styles and the information itself, which contributes to the development of the necessary qualities.

It is quite important to develop these qualities in future teachers, who should contribute to the development of universal qualities for a future professional. This issue is considered in the paper by A. Nurzhanova, who investigated the process of developing soft skills in future primary school teachers as the first source in the development of creative and logical skills [5]. R. Reichenbach notes that soft skills are polyvalent and multifunctional skills that are important for personal and professional success [6]. Some researchers call soft skills interdisciplinary competence and point out that this type of skills is vital.

The phenomenon of soft skills and subsequently the synergetic effect was investigated by D. Makhmetova & M.A. Sozer [7]. As a result of the research, methods were derived that allow determining the level of development of soft skills in students. H.A. Shaikhutdinova characterised the state and process of developing soft skills among engineering students [8]. As a result, it was proved that students at universities in Kazakhstan do not quite

understand what "soft skills" are, so it is advisable to use and introduce new trainings and courses into education that would contribute to the development of these skills. According to the author of the paper "Modern students need to develop soft skills", in addition to professional qualities, highly developed professional skills (soft skills) are valued in the labour market [9]. The researcher notes that the main skills are: adaptability of personality, ability to solve complex tasks, teamwork skills, creative thinking, and risk management. Modern students need to develop emotional intelligence, as it reflects the level of education, culture, and self-control over the degree of expression of certain emotions.

Therefore, the purpose of the study was to investigate the features of the development of soft skills in students of a higher educational institution, as one of the first steps to professional growth and career, to create a model and a course programme for the development of these skills in students.

Materials and Methods

The object of the study was the educational process at the university, and the subject of the study was the development of soft skills in the learning process among students of a higher educational institution. 233 students from the total contingent of 277 people from the Higher School of Pedagogy and Psychology at Zhetysu University took part in the survey. All participants were in the 18-25 age bracket. The survey was conducted anonymously after a preliminary explanation of its purpose and with the voluntary consent of all participants.

Both theoretical and empirical methods were used as research methods. In the process of analysing the literature, the state of the problem under study was highlighted (what qualities the educational process in Kazakhstan focuses on and whether there are special educational courses that will develop students' soft skills within the university). Among the empirical methods, the most used method was a questionnaire, which was conducted in several stages and included different topics: to choose methods that should develop soft skills, to understand what soft skills are, and to determine the courses that would develop the studied qualities most qualitatively. Questionnaires for students were developed to answer research questions. The questionnaires consisted of open questions about soft skills. A list of academic disciplines was also proposed, which, according to the participants, most effectively affect the development of soft skills. The third block of questionnaires involves choosing from the proposed teaching methods those that most effectively affect the development of soft skills. In addition, the method of standardisation was used in the course of the study, and a level approach was applied to assess the development of soft skills, creating a ranking of the attributes of the soft skills categories.

In the course of the study, the most significant existing classifications of soft skills were analysed and

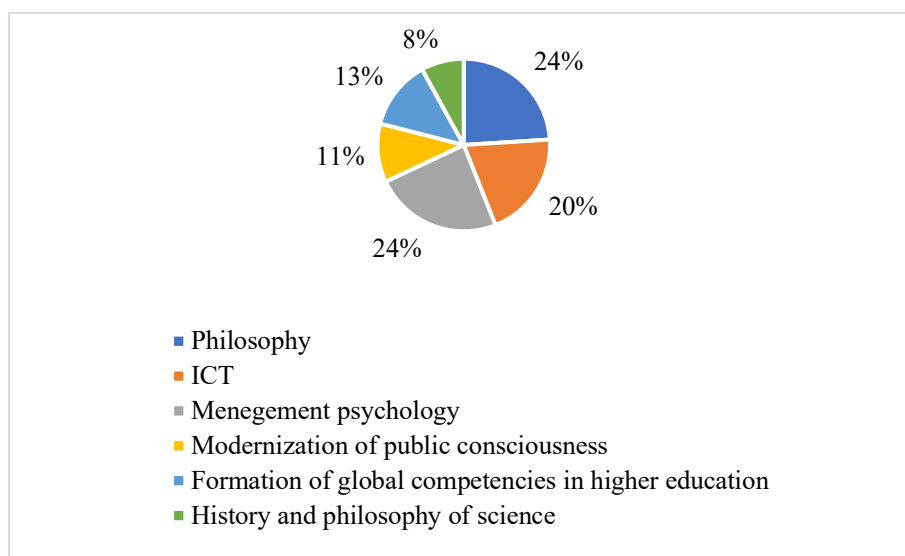
summarised. Scientific papers were selected by indexing in international databases on the subject area, by availability in regulatory documents of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and international documents that reflect the classification or definition of “soft skills”. After interviewing the students, an experiment was organised and carried out to determine their current level of development of soft skills. Based on the results obtained, priority areas for the formative experiment were determined.

The stage of the formative experiment was conducted with students of the Higher School of Pedagogy and Psychology. The formative experiment was aimed at developing soft skills in the conditions of the educational process. 137 people took part in the experiment. The formative experiment was aimed at developing soft skills. The control group consisted of 96 people. The control and

experimental groups were determined randomly. All the participants of the study were students of the Higher School of Pedagogy and Psychology of Zhetysu University. At the stage of theoretical research, a model of skills that contribute to the development of professional skills was developed.

Results

At the first stage of the ascertaining experiment, a survey was conducted aimed at identifying the presence of ideas about the concept of soft skills and the students’ perceptions of academic disciplines that can influence the development of soft skills. The survey identified the disciplines that, according to students, most deeply develop the concept of soft skills (Figure 1).



Disciplines that develop soft skills

Source: developed by the authors

Fig. 1 shows that the following have a great influence on the development of soft skills: “Management Psychology” (contributes to the development of knowledge in the field of general psychology, and also helps develop knowledge about psychological management) and “Philosophy” (which is a basic discipline and increases knowledge in the field of culture and worldview). ICT (“Information and Communication

Technologies”) allows acquiring and developing digital skills, and improving knowledge in the process of using technology. And the “History of Philosophy” contributes to the development of systemically organised knowledge about the world. The next block of the questionnaire included a list of methods that are used in the educational process and contribute to the development of soft skills. The following results were obtained (Figure 2).

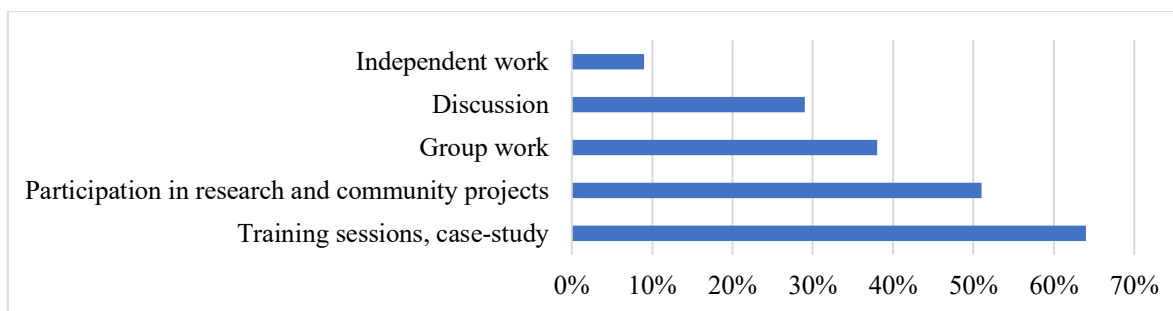


Figure 2. Methods that develop soft skills

Source: developed by the authors

Based on Fig. 2, it can be seen that most students consider the most effective method for the development of

soft skills to be the case-study method, that is, a method that is based on the use of different situations and ways to

solve them. Participation in scientific projects promotes the development of critical thinking, and group work and discussion – develop human socialisation and communication skills. And responsibility and discipline are developed by independent work. The last block of the questionnaire was to determine the most popular soft skills according to the students (out of 36 qualities, students needed to determine the most suitable, in their opinion):

- 94% of the participants placed management skills in the first place, justifying their choice by the fact that this type of skills is necessary for a modern specialist;

- 87% of respondents noted that self-regulation and self-control skills are most important as they determine the establishment of constructive relationships in all spheres of human life;

- 53% of respondents put communication skills in the third position. For the successful implementation of collective or own plans, a person needs to be able to communicate information to other people in an accessible and competent way. These skills are also important for establishing favourable relationships in the personal and professional spheres.

Further, in the second part of the ascertaining experiment with students, the diagnosis of the level of development of the components of soft skills was carried out, according to the classification that was presented during the theoretical study. To diagnose individual components of soft skills, various psychological and pedagogical techniques were used, which were tested and verified by researchers. 248 people participated in the experiment. The results of the ascertaining experiment showed the following results: 86% of participants (213) have a high level of development of communication skills. Moreover, 89% of respondents (221) showed a high level of creativity. At the same time, 96% of respondents (238) had a high level of emotional intelligence. However, it was revealed that only 47% of participants (116) possess critical thinking skills at a high level. 34% of the participants (84) of the tests showed a low level of leadership and organisational skills. The data are presented in the percentage ratio of categories of soft skills according to the results of the ascertaining experiment. 24% are communication skills, 25% – creativity, 28% – emotional intelligence, 10% – leadership and organisational skills, 13% – critical thinking (Figure 3).

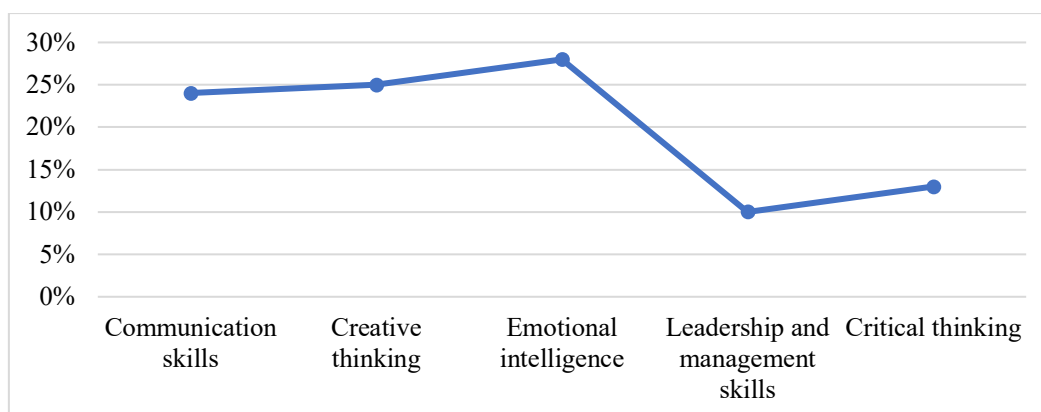


Figure 3. Ratio of categories of soft skills of students

Source: developed by the authors

The content of the soft skills development course includes practical activities such as drawing up a testing matrix, which is useful for evaluating a new idea. In this case, the positive and negative sides of the idea and the task were determined. Insights on the problematic issue were recorded, and “blind spots” were also indicated, that is, those aspects that were overlooked and caused misunderstandings. In the process of mastering the programme, the main attention was paid to the idea of transforming theoretical knowledge, the transformation of which would stimulate the informational development of personality in a harmonious balance of personal and professional skills. The implementation of the programme of the course “Development of soft skills” contributes to the improvement of personal potential, the quality of educational activities of students and, as a result, a high level of professionalism of graduates and competitiveness in the labour market. In other words, the level of human

capital is increasing. For the socio-economic field – this implies meeting the diverse needs of society in general and of the individual.

To summarise, a control experiment was conducted to determine the level of development of soft skills, the

students independently assessed the work done and drew conclusions. To assess the development of soft skills, a level approach (low, medium, high) was used. Thus, the more significant the contribution of a feature to a category, the higher the rank. The number of ranks is equal to the number of features in the category (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of category features by rank

No.	Categories of soft skills	Features	Rank
1	Critical thinking	Ability to search for information	4
		Ability to critically analyse information	3
		Ability to make a conclusion based on the information received	2
		Ability to perform tasks consistently	1
2	Creative thinking	Ability to generate new ideas	4
		Ability to evaluate originality	3
		Ability to abandon templates and generally accepted patterns of action	2
		Ability to express thoughts metaphorically	1
3	Communication skills	Ability to provide verbal support	6
		Ability to coordinate words and actions	3
		Ability to use verbal and nonverbal means of communication	2
		Ability to evaluate the result of joint communication	4
		Ability to evaluate the correspondence of verbal and nonverbal signals in other people	1
		Ability to use personal skills in solving collective problems	5
4	Leadership and management skills	Ability to interact socially and be aware of their role in the team	6
		Ability to organise and manage the work of a team	5
		Responsibility	3
		Ability to develop a team strategy to achieve a goal	4
		Ability to overcome conflict situations	1
		Stress resistance	2
5	Emotional intelligence	Self-expression	5
		Ability to adapt quickly to new conditions or people	4
		Self-regulation	6
		Ability to understand other people's nonverbal signals	1
		Introspection Reflection	2
		Empathy	3

Source: developed by the authors

Further, the obtained ranks of features are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Rank values based on soft skills categories

No. of category	Assigned ranks					
1	1	2	3	4		
2	1	2	3	4		
3	1	2	3	4	5	6
4	1	2	3	4	5	6
5	1	2	3	4	5	6

Source: developed by the authors

Table 3 was created to visually represent the standardised ranks.

Table 3. Functional values in determining the level of developed soft skills

X	1	2	3	4	5	6
Y	1	1.2	1.4	1.6	1.8	5.2

Source: developed by the authors

Based on the available data, a graph was constructed from which it can be seen that the interval (1-6) is divided by points 2 and 5 into three regions (Figure 4).

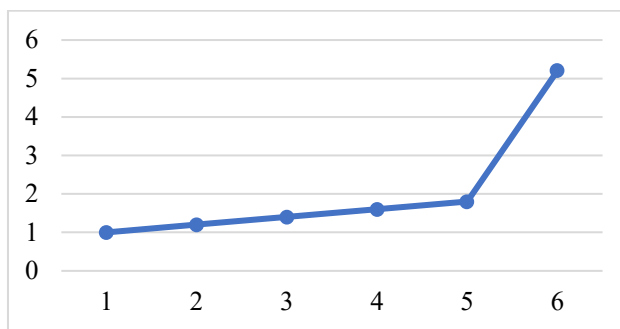


Figure 4. Dependence of the average values of the ranks on the values of the assigned ranks of the category
Source: developed by the authors

The boundary points were recalculated to determine the estimated intervals. After conducting a formative experiment in the experimental group, a control test was conducted using the previously described methodology for assessing the development of soft skills. Repeated diagnostics of the level of development of soft skills of students allowed comparing it with the data before the

forming experiment with control data and distributing them by levels. Of the 137 participants in the formative experiment, 23.4% of participants (32 people) showed a high level of development of soft skills. About 45% of respondents had a moderate level of development of soft skills. 32% of participants showed a low level of development of soft skills (Table 4).

Table 4. Dynamics of the development of soft skills in experimental groups at the beginning and at the end of the experiment

Levels	High		Moderate		Low	
	Before the experiment	After the experiment	Before the experiment	After the experiment	Before the experiment	After the experiment
	19%	23.4%	39.4%	44.5%	41.6%	32.1%

Source: developed by the authors

No formative experiment was conducted in the control groups, so the students were in natural educational conditions. Based on this, it is possible to compare the data

on the results of the ascertaining and control diagnostics (Table 5).

Table 5. Level of development of soft skills in control groups

Levels	High		Moderate		Low	
	Ascertaining	Control	Ascertaining	Control	Ascertaining	Control
	31.3%	33.3%	51%	53.1%	17.7%	13.6%

Source: developed by the authors

The proposed model for the development of soft skills allowed the experimental groups to determine the category of students who had a low level of this type of skills. Considering the weaknesses of this group of participants in the experiment, special methods for practising certain skills were included in the development programme. They include communicative adaptability, structured thinking, analytical abilities, etc. As a result, it is clear that the participants from the “low level” category have moved to the “moderate level” category. Moreover, the results of the control experiment in the experimental groups show an increase in the number of students who have moved from the “moderate level” group to the “high level”. This indicates that the underdeveloped components of soft skills have been worked out and the previously well-developed sides of soft skills have been strengthened. It can also be noted that the results of the control experiment in the control groups reflect the low dynamics of the development of soft skills in students.

Discussion

Soft skills are one of the important criteria for a future specialist, since they are associated with a person’s ability to perform different work with different levels of complexity. Therefore, it is so important to develop these skills in the process of professional training of students. To do this, it is necessary to implement some training courses or use tasks in the process of studying some academic disciplines.

C. Succi & M. Canovi came to the conclusion that those people who have highly developed soft skills, which take into account communication, leadership skills, and the ability to self-control, have great success in the labour market [10]. This statement has the main message to the need to analyse information for the development of soft skills.

A.T. Imron in his paper characterised the ability to develop soft skills in students in the learning process [11]. In his opinion, soft skills allow entering the workforce and

performing work efficiently. However, the percentage of social skills in the higher education programme is only about 10%. The results of the study showed that the use of integrated social skills in teaching general psychology showed a positive impact on improving the quality of soft skills of students. With regard to this study, it can be concluded that soft skills not only help in professional activities but also facilitate adaption in society.

S. Malik & A. Mohan studied the basic interpersonal communication skills that are necessary not only for society, but also for the professional qualities of the individual: communication skills, initiative skills, technological skills, and leadership skills [12]. According to the students, it is these skills that need to be developed in order to achieve a high level of professionalism. A.D. Talosa *et al.* determined the relevance of alternative teaching methods from conventional to flexible teaching and learning [13]. Using in-depth individual interviews as a method, it can be seen that self-regulated learning and digital or technological self-efficacy are two topics discovered as a learning opportunity with the current learning modality.

The same problem was investigated by V. Suryaningsih [14] and L.N. Schneider *et al.* [15], who in the course of their research determined what students know about soft skills and how they are developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of new teaching methods is based on the development of many personal qualities using situational solutions to problems. Thus, in the study, a new course and methods were proposed that can be used not only as an independent scientific discipline, but also implemented in the learning process using some elements. As studies have shown, the most relevant is the development of management abilities, that is, the ability to manage a process or other people for the benefit of the activity. In addition, it is important to develop communication skills, that is, the ability to communicate with people and interact with them. Not a little important for a professional is the ability to self-realisation and self-control, which allows the person to determine and evaluate their abilities and work.

According to M. Wats & R.K. Wats, it is the development of communicative abilities that is influenced by the environment and the dynamics of solving tasks [16]. That is, the means and activity influenced the development of these qualities. S. Zach & M. Ophir suggest that the development of cognitive abilities and flexibility (the ability to transform, store, and use information) is important in the process of forming soft skills, which also contributes to the rapid completion of creative tasks [17]. Communicative abilities are a set of individual psychological and psychophysical characteristics of people.

According to W.K. Bickel *et al.*, communication skills do not depend on a specific communicative situation, but on the inclinations and properties of the personality itself [18]. These abilities are defined as a system that includes the ability to choose and implement ways to solve problems. Summing up the opinions of researchers on communicative and cognitive skills, and analysing the results of the survey of students, it can be concluded that the ability to communicate and interact with people should be developed gradually, paying attention to the

environment in which the student is, the relationship with family and friends. In addition, one of the best educational programmes, according to students, are “Philosophy” and “Psychology”, which develop thinking and understanding of the behaviour of other people during communication.

H. Hyder *et al.* have proved that the current generation does not know how to cope with numerous problems and cannot find appropriate solutions, which is why it is so important to develop soft skills, that is, the ability to communicate and interact with others in an accessible, friendly, and cordial manner [19]. Various parameters of soft skills include negotiation, conflict resolution, networking, effective communication with others, offering the best services to clients, effective teamwork, problem-solving skills, pressure management at work, etc. Thus, teachers need to focus on soft skills so that the next generation can easily cope with the problems of personal development and achieve success in their careers. This statement expediently shows that not only students are the main subjects, but also an important role in their development depends on teachers who will choose the methodology for the development of soft skills and monitor the development process.

The ability to think critically is one of the primary skills that a specialist should possess. Kazakh researcher A.A. Tashetov in his study on the problem of using media resources in developing critical thinking in future psychology teachers considers the possibilities of media resources and critical thinking technology, which ensure the development of critical thinking of future psychology teachers [20]. A harmoniously developed personality should also be able to search/find the necessary information and use it in specific situations. Information retrieval skills belong to a complex of structural components of personality that help develop horizons, and as a consequence, the literacy of a leader and manager. It is necessary for the analysis of global social processes and, accordingly, making important decisions. Therefore, analysing the necessary information is an important skill.

But the role of non-cognitive skills in professionals is also important. According to F. Vera & E. Tejada, the inclusion of these interpersonal qualities in the curriculum is a huge problem [21]. In fact, some universities are currently integrating these general skills through direct learning, while others are from an interdisciplinary approach. More importantly, the development of soft skills in new generations has the potential to have a profound and transformative impact on the professional sphere. As the study showed, and according to M. Asumpta & E. Marlina, one of the main factors that influence the development of all types of soft skills is teamwork [22]. Therefore, it is so important to use group work during training, which activates and improves leadership abilities, the ability to express thoughts, and defend own opinion.

Based on the analysed studies on the problem, the main types of soft skills were identified, which are most in demand in most classifications and are of high importance when evaluating candidates in the labour market. Thus, a classification of soft skills was formulated, which formed the basis of the study. The following categories of soft skills were selected:

1. Critical thinking – ability to search for information; ability to critically analyse new information.

Ability to make a conclusion based on the information received; ability to perform tasks consistently.

2. Creativity – ability to generate new ideas. Ability to evaluate originality; ability to abandon templates and generally accepted patterns; ability to express thoughts metaphorically.

3. Communication skills – ability to provide verbal support; ability to coordinate words and actions; ability to use verbal and nonverbal means of communication; ability to evaluate the result of joint communication; ability to evaluate the correspondence of verbal and nonverbal signals in other people; ability to use personal skills in solving collective problems).

4. Leadership and management skills – ability to carry out social interaction and realise their role in the team; ability to organise and manage the work of the team; responsibility; ability to create a team strategy to achieve the goal; ability to overcome conflict situations; stress resistance.

5. Emotional intelligence – ability to quickly adapt to new conditions or people, self-expression, self-regulation; ability to understand nonverbal signals of other people, introspection, empathy.

At the stage of theoretical research, we have developed a model for the development of soft skills of students studying in the conditions of vocational education at a higher educational institution. The model reflects the strategies, conditions and content components of the development of soft skills in the conditions of the educational process in a higher educational institution. The model includes the following components:

1. Goal setting component.
2. Content and technology block.
3. Criterion and evaluation component.

Conclusions

Now the development of future specialists who will have universal qualities remains relevant, that is, they will have developed soft skills that will help a person cope with different types of complexity of tasks and easily overcome problems. But for this, first of all, it is necessary to develop these skills in students as part of the learning process.

In the course of the study, the experiment confirmed the effectiveness of using the developed methods and models for the development of soft skills using a systematic

approach, which determines the need to consider the structural components of the educational process and the characteristics of its participants. Soft skills are an integral part of the professional structure of the future specialist, which is the totality of the competence model of professional training in higher education. In the course of this study, all the set goals were achieved. Studies have shown that the use of new methods of education, trainings, and additional courses during training increases the level of personal development, while conventional teaching methods are less effective for improving the complex of soft skills in future specialists.

The results obtained indicate that innovative teaching methods are optimal for the development of soft skills. The results of the study are: firstly, the formulation of the definition of “soft skills”; the identification of the most effective approaches that determine the essence of soft skills; the definition of the main areas for the development of soft skills in the educational process of a higher educational institution. Secondly, the level of development of soft skills of students was diagnosed, based on which they were able to create effective ways of developing soft skills in the conditions of the educational process in higher education. Thirdly, in the course of the study, scientific and methodological foundations for the development of soft skills in higher education were created.

Thus, it was proved that an innovative approach to the development of soft skills, studying in the conditions of vocational education at the university, is necessary for the personal and professional development of a person, and also further determines the competitiveness of a specialist in the labour market. An improved set of methods will better shape the skills of learners in vocational education, and thereby, pre-determine future occupational preferences.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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Сприяння професійному зростанню: Вивчення розвитку м'яких навичок у студентів для підвищення якості освіти

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Анотація

Актуальність. У сучасній освіті існує великий попит на випуск високопрофесійних фахівців, які вміють співпрацювати та будувати конструктивні стосунки з іншими, розв'язувати проблеми, володіють уніфікованими навичками або м'якими навичками. До групи м'яких навичок належить велика група навичок, які не залежать від навчальних програм, але мають великий вплив на професійне зростання людини та успішний розвиток твердих професійних навичок.

Мета. Тому метою дослідження було дослідити проблему розвитку м'яких навичок у студентів вищих навчальних закладів у процесі формування їхніх професійних якостей, а також визначити та створити умови (методи або курси), за яких буде забезпечено комплексний розвиток м'яких навичок студентів.

Методологія. Методами дослідження були обрані анкетування, опитування, психологічні діагностичні методи та метод рангової стандартизації.

Результати. За результатами дослідження було визначено, які саме м'які навички студентам необхідно розвивати (розуміння менеджменту, розвиток самоконтролю та самореалізації, розвиток лідерських та комунікативних якостей) і в якій сфері. Крім того, було продіагностовано стан розвитку цих навичок у студентів вищих навчальних закладів та визначено шляхи їх розвитку. Крім того, було створено науково-методичні засади розвитку м'яких навичок в освітньому процесі.

Висновки. У ході дослідження було створено модель розвитку м'яких навичок та програму курсу, які можуть бути впроваджені в освітній процес вищих навчальних закладів з метою розвитку високих професійних якостей. Результати дослідження, модель та курс можуть бути використані у подальших дослідженнях з даної проблематики.

Ключові слова: лідерські якості; комунікативні навички; емоційний інтелект; навчальний процес; уніфіковані навички.