

COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR MASTER STUDENTS

COMPETENCIAS DE COMUNICACIÓN PARA ESTUDIANTES DE MÁSTER

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ABSTRACT: Introduction: Soft skills are a present field of research with numerous applications in all types of institutions, as professionals of all kinds need soft skills. This requirement means that soft skills, such as those of students, must develop in professionals' life-long learning but be observed, fostered, and assessed at earlier stages. This paper presents the results from a project to measure the level of soft skills obtained utilising a standard questionnaire. **Method:** The testing was conducted with two groups of students enrolled in Master's programs. The research project findings are presented and discussed to impact the required teaching models for soft skills within education and training contexts. This research is promoted by the idea that changes require Higher Education to rethink and redesign pedagogical approaches to teaching and teaching objectives included in the university curriculum. **Conclusions and Discussions:** The Paper underscores indirectly that competence-oriented pedagogy can hardly be considered adequate any more. In contrast, a goal-oriented and student-centred pedagogy can meaningfully address current educational and didactic needs at all levels. The analysis of data collection in the academic field, which focuses on soft skills, needs to be at all educational, training, and school levels.

KEYWORDS: communication skills; soft skills; teaching methods; blended training.

ABSTRACT: Introduzione: Le *soft skills* sono un campo di ricerca attuale con numerose applicazioni in tutti i tipi di istituzioni, poiché i professionisti di ogni tipo hanno bisogno di soft skills. Questo requisito significa che le soft skills, come quelle degli studenti, devono svilupparsi nell'apprendimento permanente dei professionisti, ma devono essere osservate, promosse e valutate nelle fasi precedenti. Questo articolo presenta i risultati di un progetto di

misurazione del livello di soft skills ottenuto utilizzando un questionario standard. **Metodo:** Il test è stato condotto con due gruppi di studenti iscritti a programmi di Master. I risultati del progetto di ricerca sono presentati e discussi al fine di influenzare i modelli di insegnamento delle *soft skills* nei contesti educativi e formativi. Questa ricerca è promossa dall'idea che i cambiamenti richiedono all'istruzione superiore di ripensare e riprogettare gli approcci pedagogici all'insegnamento e gli obiettivi didattici inclusi nel curriculum universitario. **Conclusioni e discussioni:** Il documento sottolinea indirettamente che la pedagogia orientata alle competenze non può più essere considerata adeguata. Al contrario, una pedagogia orientata agli obiettivi e incentrata sullo studente può rispondere in modo significativo alle attuali esigenze educative e didattiche a tutti i livelli. L'analisi della raccolta dei dati in ambito accademico, che si concentra sulle *soft skills*, deve avvenire a tutti i livelli educativi, formativi e scolastici.

PAROLE CHIAVE: competenze comunicative; soft skills; metodi didattici; formazione mista.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global job changes have produced a far-reaching impact on the assessment by job employers of human capabilities, in specific the skills and expertise expected of new university graduates; the increasingly complex organisation of the Information Society nowadays underlines the requirement for extra skills in using communication tools, in adopting communication styles, and in adopting a broader and more intense flexibility (Schleutker, 2019). In decades, technical or hard skills were the only ones required in career jobs; today, the working world shows that technical skills are not the ones we must pay attention to (Redomero *et al.*, 2019). Soft Skills are becoming so crucial to workplace performances that their characteristics and qualities are emphasised in-depth. Nevertheless, while technical skills are the subject of many vital curricula in universities, soft skills still need to be rethought. Even among academics and students, the perception of their importance is rather limited (Caggiano, 2018).

Literature indicates soft skills may not be perceived as job-specific, cannot be subjectively measured and can not be directly instructed, but hard skills are distinct: they are job-specific, objectively measurable and can be directly assessed and instructed (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006; Heckman & Kautz, 2013). Soft skills are related to the personality traits, goals, reasons and expectations that are valued in the labour market; they should be considered as a considerable value-added that enables the individual to perform to a broader and higher degree (Heckman & Kautz, 2012), delivering more consistently and more accurate results, while improving the quality of the chosen targets and the procedures, methods and strategies adopted. The defining, assessing and assessing of soft skills cannot be considered easy; they are defined as close to personality skills, innate (Robins & Webster, 1999; Grugulis & Vincent, 2009). The goal of providing university graduates with the opportunity to strengthen their soft skill is strictly related to the educational system's ability to support students in gaining

skills and competencies relevant to their employers (Purcell *et al.*, 2004; Bennis, & O'Toole, 2005; Andrews & Higson, 2008). This work is the result of a study previously carried out in the framework of the research project for the academic year 2022/2023 of the Dipartimento di Scienze della Formazione of the Università degli Studi Roma Tre, in collaboration with the Rome Business School and the Chair of Pedagogy.

2. TEACHING SOFT SKILLS AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL

The European Qualification Framework (Commission 2008) and its model of knowledge, abilities and competencies (KSC). At the same time, the project European Skills, Competencies, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO), which covers the period from 2013 to 2020, aims at creating distinctive classifications of skills, competences, qualification and occupations. Both accept the challenge of change and demand universities refresh their curricula and educational objectives designed for their learners over the past decades (Méhaut & Winch, 2012). The reasons for the profound compatibility between the achievement of technical/methodical skills and the strengthening of soft skills should underpin a new discussion on the goals of education and the role of academics (Méhaut & Winch, 2012). In recent years, soft skills have even been considered something that can be learned and thus taught (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Tynjäl *et al.*, 2016). Universities in Europe are increasingly called upon to produce highly professional graduates capable of responding to the changing needs of today's world of work (Andrews & Higson, 2008).

A strong need exists to more intensively redesign the significant types of learning outputs in education and training programs to fit specific job occupations (Tardif, 2006) and improve quality performance. Universities are expected to take charge of the training of professional practitioners, keeping in mind that they must also be skilled in performing their duties (Jesu *et al.*, 2000). The professional's decline in reputation also bring the institution into discredit. It is essential, accordingly, for the university to take care of their training quality, which is closely connected to the requirements of the institution with regard to qualities that a professionals must have (Robles, 2012). However, the quality of training does not only depend on technical skills. Training processes ought to consider the development of attitudes, skills and values, so that the development of 'soft skills' is fundamental and a prerequisite for the employability (Mendoza Lira, 2013). These prior aspects imply the improvement of the gap between education and the labor market (Brew, 1995; Mir *et al.*, 2003; García Aracil & Mora Ruiz, 2004). Skills that have been previously trained at work should already be developed by the university (Maura & Tirados, 2008). Is it possible to create the ideal profile in the workplace? To search for the soft skills most valued in the world of work, Manpower conducted a study, Soft Skills 4 Talent (Study), in which 3,791 companies from 8 European countries were consulted. Most respondents were HR professionals (45 %), given the subject matter. The results showed that the skills most in high demand were social skills, highlighting problem-solving, goal orientation, collaboration and teamwork, and decision-making. Remarkably, multinational and large companies

attach great importance to soft skills and individual motivation as talent characteristics. The results of this study are useful in two scenarios. On the one hand, firms can define their own models of soft skills. While on the individual level, students and prospective candidates can know what characteristics they desire and what competencies they should develop in order to have more opportunities for growth in the labour market. This is why skill level is a critical performance differentiator (Bustamante *et al.*, 2015).

3. THE APPLIED RESEARCH

3.1. METHODS AND FIRST RESULTS

Sample and Tools: A cross-sectional descriptive study was carried out in a group of graduated Master Students to know their soft skills profile comparatively. The tool used is an adaptation of the BIP questionnaire. The questions were split into two sections: the first refers to socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, sector, work experience), and the second corresponds to the assessment of soft skills. The questionnaire evaluates 14 scales, grouped into four domains plus the impression management scale. In this case, soft skills were assessed: Communication and the skills relative to this. The researcher applied descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations), one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), and an independent t-test for the interactions among the variables of the study using SPSS software (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), version 26. For this purpose, a sample of 180 recently graduated, students at their first year studies in Master of Education Science have been selected at random. The group of was predominantly male (60.4%), The age of interviewees in both groups (22,3). Regarding location, more than 65 % of the students are from Rome and 24,3 % from the rural area around Rome.

Tab 1. Communication category

		Obs	Mean	St. Dev	T-test	P- value
Communication	MasterStudents	75	3.21	0.08	3.83	0
	Graduated	105	2.4	0.11	0.52	0.3

Data source: Ragusa, A., Caggiano, V., Trigueros Ramos, R., González-Bernal, J. J., Gentil-Gutiérrez, A., Bastos, S. A. M. C.,... & Santamaría-Peláez, M. (2022).

Tab 2. Skill levels belonging to the communication category

Soft Skills x Master Students	Significance			Development		
	Average	St. Dev	Coef. Var	Average	St. Dev	Coef. Var.

Category: Communication						
Leadership	4.25	0.50	11%	3.24	1.37	42%
Work in team, cooperation	4.63	0.49	11%	3.62	0.77	22%
Self confidence	4.34	0.65	15%	3.53	1.11	31%
Networking	3.78	0.83	22%	4.06	0.91	22%
Creativity	3.78	0.66	18%	3.43	0.67	18%
Strategic orientation	4.78	0.49	11%	3.93	0.82	22%

Data source: Ragusa, A., Caggiano, V., Trigueros Ramos, R., González-Bernal, J. J., Gentil-Gutiérrez, A., Bastos, S. A. M. C.,... & Santamaría-Peláez, M. (2022).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Claiming that soft skills increase employability levels (Succi, 2019) has become an assumption that confirms all our work. The human and social capital, hitherto always accounted for by the mere formal education levels, is being interpreted in more recent studies in the light of the recognised role of non-formal and informal learning (Caggiano & Schleutker, 2019). The traditionally active players in leadership training – business schools, corporate universities and expert training and advisory firms – have been joined by other newcomers. In our view, the decline of the standard classroom programmes for executive management development, such as those offered mainly by business schools and universities, is partly attributable to the limited opportunity to incorporate humanistic knowledge, such as studying biographies and reading history, that can develop critical thinking. Moreover, the proposed methodology involves pre- and post-tests that can test critical thinking and self-reflection. The evolving digital environment has led to the consideration and use of virtual teams (Arzarello *et al.*, 2019). It is not only about being able to communicate and cooperate between humans, but also between human beings and machines, which claim to be smart.

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