

*A MANUAL GUIDE FOR  
BLENDED INTENSIVE PROGRAMME (BIP)*

# SKILLS@UNI

DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS THROUGH  
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AT  
UNIVERSITY

AN INTERNATIONAL PEDAGOGICAL EXPERIENCE

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through experiential learning at  
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# Technical Page

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# Chapter 2

## Soft Skills in Higher Education: A Pedagogic Conceptualization

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### Brief Theoretical Framework

The current job market has become increasingly complex, with a growing range of demands placed on both individuals and teams within organizations (Caines et al., 2017; Poláková et al., 2023). Mastery of specific technical skills is no longer sufficient for achieving success in the job or across individuals' career paths. The business environment increasingly requires and values behavioral and transversal competencies, also known as "soft skills", which enable and facilitate adaptation in challenging organizational settings and high-performance team dynamics (Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Romanenko et al., 2024). During the industrial era, the focus was almost exclusively on "hard skills," i.e. the technical competencies required for a job, the ideal worker was one who possessed high technical proficiency and was capable of performing mass-production functions and repetitive tasks at maximum efficiency (Howcroft & Taylor, 2022). In the mid-20th century, modern management dynamics emerged, along with the consolidation of organizational structures that began to genuinely value leadership, communication, and employee motivation, highlighting the idea that the "human factor" has a direct impact on productivity (Howcroft & Taylor, 2022). By the end of the 20th century and into the 21st century, there was a significant expansion of technology and work automation. Work ceased to be primarily manual and

became intellectual and collaborative, with dynamic and uncertain work environments, culturally diverse settings, and a demand for autonomy grounded in clear and constant communication (Howcroft & Taylor, 2022). These changes toward greater humanization and relational investment in workplace dynamics have highlighted soft skills as an indispensable component in preparing workers, from their education in higher education to the practical application of tasks in the workplace (Howcroft & Taylor, 2022; Poláková et al., 2023; Romanenko et al., 2024). In parallel, models of individual performance have become increasingly multidimensional, reflecting the assumption that successful workers demonstrate a range of extra-role behaviors and skills that extend beyond the efficient planning, coordination, and execution of prescribed technical duties, yet are equally critical to organizational success and competitiveness (Campbell & Wiernik, 2015). These actions primarily relate to the dimensions of citizenship performance and innovative performance, both of which depend to a large extent on soft skills (Harari et al., 2016; Organ, 2018). Specifically, citizenship performance includes discretionary actions that contribute to a positive social and psychological context, which is essential for the efficacy of technical processes (Borman et al., 2014; Organ, 2018). These behaviors include supporting colleagues through active cooperation, professional courtesy, and motivation during periods of adversity. They also include showing initiative and supporting the organization by defending its reputation, supporting its mission, and complying with its internal policies (Borman et al., 2014). The dimension of innovative performance encompasses employees' behaviors involved in the suggestion, promotion, and implementation of new and useful ideas in the workplace for the benefit of their job, team, and organization's products, services, and overall functioning (Anderson et al., 2018; Harari et al., 2016). Therefore, these creative and innovative behaviors are essential for driving positive change, fostering organizational innovation, and achieving a competitive advantage in the current dynamic business environment (Anderson et al., 2018). As

illustrated, the complex and multifaceted nature of performance at work implies that hard skills must be complemented by soft skills to fulfill current job requirements and demands successfully. The same applies to other achievement contexts, like higher education, where both types of skills are essential for effectively dealing with the study demands of a given degree or tertiary education program, as discussed in the following sections (Orih et al., 2024; Urkia-Basterra et al., 2025).

### **Soft Skills and Associated Concepts**

Soft skills refer to competencies that are transversal across any professional field, of an emotional, relational, and behavioral nature, which influences how individuals make decisions, face challenges, manage time, and interact with others (Laker & Powell, 2011; Marin-Zapata et al., 2021). These are developed throughout life through an experiential approach across various social and academic contexts and may include skills such as adaptability, emotional intelligence, planning and organization, leadership, empathy, problem-solving, assertive communication, critical thinking, and teamwork (Marin-Zapata et al., 2021; Robles, 2012). Soft skills are increasingly valued in the job market, as recent evidence consistently shows that they improve the work environment, reduce conflicts, increase productivity, and also facilitate leadership within teams, ultimately supporting high levels of task, citizenship and innovative performance (Campbell & Wiernik, 2015; Marin-Zapata et al., 2021; Poláková et al., 2023). A complementary concept is that of hard skills, also known as technical competencies. These can be easily and directly quantified and refer to specific technical skills within a given field of work, matching its task performance formal duties, such as using Excel, conducting a medical or psychological clinical history (anamnesis), or programming in Python (Hendarman & Cantner, 2017; Laker & Powell, 2011). The complementarity and balance between these two concepts is essential, as hard skills assess what a worker knows how to do in technical terms, while soft skills

evaluate the competencies through which the worker applies, communicates, and shares what they do and, above all, how they do it (Hendarman & Cantner, 2017; Laker & Powell, 2011). A worker with strong hard skills and weak soft skills may have difficulty working in a team, while the opposite may result in difficulties in properly performing technical tasks (Hendarman & Cantner, 2017). Therefore, the attainment of high levels of task and citizenship performance is compromised in both cases (Borman et al., 2014; Campbell & Wiernik, 2015). Current literature describes another concept known as “power skills,” which represents a conceptual variation of traditional soft skills, removing the notion that “soft” may imply less important competencies in contrast to hard skills, and highlighting the critical and strategic nature of these abilities (Arora, 2025; Marin-Zapata et al., 2021). Further, the concept of “transversal competencies” has been increasingly used, referring to a combination of soft skills and certain hard skills that can be applied across various fields, jobs and professions, and are required in different organizational settings (Hendarman & Cantner, 2017; Marin-Zapata et al., 2021). Lastly, recent reviews also highlight the concept of “meta-skills,” which refers to lifelong learning-based abilities that enable workers to adapt to a constantly changing labor market. These skills encourage the development of new competencies, help individuals remain open and receptive to change, and allow them to adjust their way of thinking as needed while learning new methods and tools (Spencer & Lucas, 2021; Prasittichok & Klaykaew, 2022). All these concepts are essential in today's job market, with soft skills being particularly crucial in the training of new professionals within higher education (Marin-Zapata et al., 2021; Spencer & Lucas, 2021).

### **Soft Skills in Higher Education**

Academia often functions as a “laboratory” for the transition to the labour market, increasingly integrating the central role of soft skills in learning dynamics

beyond academic performance (Orih et al., 2024; Urkia-Basterra et al., 2025). While hard skills are essential for successfully completing courses and academic disciplines, soft skills are vital for students to stand out among their peers, facilitate adaptation to changing contexts and new challenges, enhance their own technical competence, and foster autonomy and critical thinking in academic work. They also support relationship-building and increase employability (Aziz, 2025; Nazaré de Freitas et al., 2022). In this sense, academia is a primary and essential source for personal development and the development of soft skills. In teaching methodologies, it is important that course units go beyond a lecture-based approach, incorporating group work, case studies, and problem-based learning, encouraging students to communicate, argue, and make integrated decisions (Aziz, 2025; Urkia-Basterra et al., 2025). Providing opportunities for presentations and class participation, such as seminars, oral presentations, or debates, also actively contributes to the development of synthesis and communication skills (Aziz, 2025; Nazaré de Freitas et al., 2022). Group work is one of the main “workshops” for developing soft skills, incorporating dynamics of conflict management, cooperation, and shared responsibility (Orih et al., 2024; Urkia-Basterra et al., 2025). Increasingly, universities also provide a diverse and autonomous environment, exposing students to people from different backgrounds, cultures, beliefs, and ideas, thereby fostering adaptability, autonomy, and empathy (Aziz, 2025; Romanenko et al., 2024). The important component of feedback and continuous assessment is also essential for the development of self-awareness and behavioral adjustment skills, particularly when based on feedback from teachers and peer evaluation (Aziz, 2025; Hendarman & Cantner, 2017). Universities also provide opportunities to build networks and pursue development outside the classroom, through volunteering activities, participation in events, and projects, which actively contribute to skills such as initiative, organization, time management, networking, and even leadership (Arora, 2025; Aziz, 2025). Universities create conditions that require more than technical knowledge, they

establish an environment that enables interaction, challenges, and responsibilities where individuals can develop transversal competencies as part of their personal development (Aziz, 2025).

Soft skills are now indispensable competencies in academic and professional development. In this sense, the ability to communicate, collaborate, solve problems, and adapt to complex contexts can make the difference between an ordinary candidate and a professional prepared to lead and prosper (Aziz, 2025; Caines et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important for universities to move beyond strictly traditional teaching of “hard skills” and start including soft skills in higher education curricula to give students the best chances for the intense, fast and ever-changing labor market they will enter in the near future (Aibekkyzy, et al., 2025). If universities do not prepare their students, they risk leaving them unprepared for the job market (Otermans, et al., 2025, p.85). Hence, the use of experiential and interactive teaching methodologies, such as case studies, debates or project-development, can be a tremendous and effective way to promote these soft skills (Aibekkyzy, et al., 2025). Additionally, as Otermans, et al. (2025, p.85) mentioned it is important for universities to create an environment that is open to “create opportunities whereby students can cultivate a wider range of skills”. Therefore, academia should try to incorporate experiential learning within the curricula, ensuring that students acknowledge the importance of soft skills (Otermans, et al., 2025) in their academic and professional development. In this sense, the project *Skills@Uni: Developing soft skills through experiential learning at university*, which is presented in this book, aims to do this by delivering training focused on developing soft skills in a multicultural and international environment highlighting interpersonal, socio-emotional, and behavioral components in an innovative learning approach within the context of higher education that offers a hands-on experience in soft skills development.

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