

*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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***Skills@Uni: developing soft skills
through experiential learning at
university.
An international pedagogical
experience***

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The BIP coordinators

Soraia Garcês and Ana Rodrigues

Contents

Part I

Skills@Uni BIP: Context and Theoretical Foundations

Chapter 1.....p.14

Blended Intensive Programmes: Definition, Structure, and Educational Value

Giulia Conti, and Soraia Garcês

Chapter 2.....p.22

Soft Skills in Higher Education: A Pedagogic Conceptualization.

José Alberto Ribeiro-Gonçalves, Nuno Rodrigues, and Soraia Garcês

Chapter 3.....p.32

Soft Skills in Action: Play, Collaboration and Experiential Learning.

Giulia Conti

Chapter 4.....p.40

BIPs as an Opportunity to Develop Soft Skills. The Role of Self-Efficacy.

Ricardo Fueyo-Díaz

Chapter 5.....p.46

The MathIA Project and the Development of Students' Skills.

Ana Pereira Antunes

Chapter 6.....p.52

Gamification and Soft Skills: Contributions to Inclusive Physical Education

Ana Rodrigues, Bebiana Sabino, Hélio Antunes, and Hélder Lopes

Chapter 7	p.58
------------------------	------

AI-Enabled Teamwork: Not a Tech Skill – a Human One

Francesco Zanichelli

Chapter 8	p.63
------------------------	------

From Interaction to Performance: Social and Emotional Learning in Short Blended Mobility for University Soft Skills

Miroslav Jurčík

Chapter 9	p.71
------------------------	------

Lessons Learned from Organising Blended Intensive Programmes

Giulia Conti

Chapter 10	p.77
-------------------------	------

From an Idea to the Skills@Uni Blended Intensive Programme

Soraia Garcês, Giulia Conti, and Ana Rodrigues

Part II

Skills@Uni BIP: from Design to Development

Chapter 11	p.83
-------------------------	------

Overall Structure and Pedagogical Design of the Skills@Uni BIP

Chapter 12	p.93
-------------------------	------

The Online Component of the Skills@Uni BIP

Chapter 13	p.113
-------------------------	-------

The Onsite Week: Experiential Learning in Madeira

Chapter 14	p.121
-------------------------	-------

Assessment and Evaluation in the Skills@Uni BIP

Part III

Skills@Uni BIP: Reflections, Lessons and Future Directions

Chapter 15.....p.129

Students' Reflections on the Skills@Uni BIP

Soraia Garcês, Giulia Conti, José Alberto Gonçalves, and Ana Rodrigues

Chapter 16.....p.135

Final Reflections and Recommendations for Future Blended Intensive Programmes

Soraia Garcês, Giulia Conti, José Alberto Gonçalves, Ana Antunes, Hélder Lopes, and Ana Rodrigues

Introduction

Universities are increasingly called upon to extend their mission beyond only the transmission of knowledge. Now more than ever they need to prepare students for lives and careers that are or will be shaped by continuous change, intercultural interaction, and digital transformation. Within this evolving landscape, short, intensive, and international learning experiences have gained particular relevance in university settings. These programmes create opportunities for students to move beyond familiar academic contexts, engage with diverse peers, and participate in innovative forms of learning within a concentrated timeframe. The present book is grounded in one such initiative namely, a Blended Intensive Programme (BIP), funded by the Erasmus+ Programme.

This work provides a structured and practice-oriented exploration of how a BIP can foster the development of skills through the presentation of the Skills@Uni BIP. Developed within the Erasmus+ framework, as mentioned before, Skills@Uni responds to key pedagogical challenges, including the integration of soft skills into curricula, the design of meaningful student-centred learning experiences, and the articulation between online and face-to-face learning environments.

The book is organised into three main parts, reflecting a progression from conceptual framing to pedagogical design and reflective practice, always anchored in the Skills@Uni experience. Consequently, part I situates the programme within the broader context of European internationalisation and the evolving labour market, with a focus on the educational relevance of soft skills. It clarifies these concepts and discusses their implications for teaching and learning in contemporary higher education and gives insights to the theoretical foundations that gave background to the

Skills@Uni BIP. Part II presents the design and implementation of the Skills@Uni BIP as a concrete pedagogical learning experience. It outlines the development of the programme from the definition of its objectives and structure to the integration of the virtual preparation and the onsite experience. The chapters in this section provide practical examples, design principles, and adaptable strategies to support educators in creating similar learning experiences. Part III offers a reflective perspective on the facilitation of blended intensive programmes, drawing on the Skills@Uni experience. Based on these reflections, the book proposes a set of recommendations to support the design of blended learning experiences that we believe are coherent, engaging, and responsive to student learning needs in a changing world.

In this sense, Skills@Uni is presented not merely as a case study, but as a pedagogical example of how a blended intensive programme can be implemented. It also hopes to demonstrate how thoughtfully designed learning environments can promote active engagement, collaboration, and personal development within an international and multicultural learning experience. This book thus aims to contribute to the ongoing improvement of teaching and learning in higher education, offering both inspiration and practical guidance for the creation of meaningful and transformative educational and international learning experiences.

Part I

Skills@Uni BIP: Context and Theoretical Foundations

Introduction

Part I of the present pedagogical book positions the Skills@Uni BIP within a broader educational and societal context, outlining the emergence of blended intensive programmes and the growing relevance of soft skills in higher education and the professional world. It brings together the conceptual and pedagogical foundations that supported the programme, clarifying key definitions and frameworks while highlighting why skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and creativity have become central to contemporary university education, stressing also the importance of emotional and social skills. In doing so, it also dialogues with insights derived from the concrete implementation of the Skills@Uni BIP, offering a theoretical lens through which to interpret and deepen the reflections presented later in this book.

Chapter 1

Blended Intensive Programmes: Definition, Structure, and Educational Value

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Introduction

International mobility has long occupied a central position in European higher education. Within the Erasmus framework, studying abroad has been associated with linguistic development, intercultural learning, academic openness, and the construction of a shared European educational space. Yet traditional long-term mobility has also revealed structural limitations. A semester or full year abroad requires financial resources, time availability, family support, linguistic confidence, and the capacity to reorganise one's academic and personal life for an extended period. For this reason, international mobility cannot be treated as an equally accessible opportunity for all students. Participation is often shaped by socioeconomic background, institutional support, previous international experience, and the degree of flexibility allowed by curricula and personal circumstances (Souto-Otero et al., 2013; European Commission, 2024).

The disruption produced by the COVID-19 pandemic made these issues more visible. Physical mobility was interrupted, postponed, or radically reconfigured, while universities were forced to experiment with online teaching, digital collaboration, and hybrid academic formats. This period did not replace the value of face-to-face

international experience, but it contributed to a broader reconsideration of what internationalisation could mean when physical displacement is limited, unequal, expensive, or environmentally demanding. In the post-pandemic phase, European higher education has increasingly moved toward more flexible models that combine mobility, digital cooperation, inclusion, sustainability, and institutional partnership (European Commission, 2020; European Parliament & Council, 2021; European Commission, 2025).

Short Blended Mobility

Blended Intensive Programmes, usually referred to as BIPs, are one of the most significant instruments introduced within the Erasmus+ 2021–2027 framework. A BIP is a short, intensive and transnational educational programme jointly designed by higher education institutions from different countries (at least three). Its defining feature is the combination of a virtual component with a short period of physical mobility. Students work together online before, during, or around an intensive in-person period, usually organised over a few days. To be eligible for Erasmus+ organisational support, a BIP must involve at least 10 Erasmus+ mobile learners. The format is therefore based on blended mobility: it preserves the educational value of physical co-presence while reducing some of the barriers associated with longer mobility schemes (European Commission, 2022; European Commission, 2025). This structure gives BIPs a distinctive pedagogical profile. They are not simply shorter Erasmus experiences, nor are they ordinary online courses supplemented by a final meeting. Their educational value depends on the integration between the digital and physical phases. The virtual component can introduce the topic, prepare students for collaborative work, support intercultural familiarisation, and allow partner institutions to share materials, tasks, and expectations. The in-person phase then concentrates interaction, experimentation, discussion, and collective production into a limited but intensive period. When the two

components are coherently connected, the BIP becomes a structured learning trajectory rather than a sequence of disconnected activities (O'Dowd & Werner, 2024; de Prada et al., 2025).

For universities, BIPs offer a flexible way to internationalise curricula. They allow institutions to develop joint teaching activities with international partners without requiring students to commit to long-term mobility. They also make it possible to involve teachers from different countries in shared educational design, to test innovative formats, and to create interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary learning environments. In this sense, BIPs are aligned with broader European priorities concerning inclusion, digital transformation, cooperation, and sustainability. They can extend access to international learning opportunities to students who would otherwise be excluded from conventional mobility because of economic constraints, work responsibilities, care obligations, health conditions, or curricular rigidity (European Commission, 2024; European Commission, 2025; Frank & Hogendoorn-Schweighofer, 2026).

Design and Competences

The short duration of BIPs is both a strength and a challenge. On the one hand, it lowers the threshold for participation and makes international experience more feasible for a wider student population. On the other hand, it compresses the time available for group formation, intercultural adjustment, and collaborative production. Students from different countries, universities, disciplines, and linguistic backgrounds are required to work together quickly. For this reason, a BIP needs careful pedagogical design. Learning outcomes must be explicit, tasks must be realistic, and the sequence of activities must help students move from initial contact to meaningful collaboration. The online phase cannot be treated as a merely administrative preparation, and the in-person phase cannot be reduced to a dense schedule of lectures. The format works

best when students are actively involved in producing, discussing, designing, comparing, solving problems, and reflecting together (Tsvetkova, 2023; O'Dowd & Werner, 2024; Tritter et al., 2026). Recent studies on BIPs confirm this potential across different disciplinary contexts. For instance, research on dental education, nursing, social work, clinical pharmacy, management education, multilingualism, and cross-cultural collaboration suggests that BIPs can support student engagement, intercultural learning, professional awareness, and reflective participation when they are organised around active learning and collaborative tasks (Duś-Ilnicka et al., 2024; Sletnes et al., 2025; Frampton et al., 2025; Ryan et al., 2026; Frank & Hogendoorn-Schweighofer, 2026). These findings are relevant because they show that the format is not limited to a single field of study. Rather, it can be adapted to different academic objectives, provided that the blended structure is used intentionally. A central dimension of BIPs concerns the development of transversal competences. Short-term international programmes place students in situations that require communication, negotiation, adaptability, teamwork, leadership, and intercultural sensitivity. These competences are increasingly important in European higher education and in labour-market-oriented discussions, where graduates are expected to combine disciplinary knowledge with the capacity to collaborate across social, cultural, institutional, and professional differences (European Commission, 2018; Council of Europe, 2018; UNESCO, 2013). A BIP can make these competences visible because students encounter them in practice. They do not merely discuss collaboration as an abstract value; they experience its difficulties through shared tasks, time pressure, linguistic asymmetries, divergent expectations, and the need to reach common decisions.

However, the development of transversal competences cannot be assumed as an automatic outcome of international contact. The presence of students from different countries does not in itself guarantee intercultural learning, just as the use of digital tools does not in itself produce meaningful blended education. The educational

effectiveness of a BIP depends on facilitation, debriefing, reflective activities, and the quality of the tasks through which students interact. Studies on BIP implementation underline the importance of organisational coordination, shared methodological planning, communication among partner institutions, and coherent alignment between objectives, activities, and assessment (de Prada et al., 2025; O'Dowd & Werner, 2024). In this respect, the BIP format requires a substantial design effort from teaching teams and administrative staff.

BIPs can therefore be understood as compact educational laboratories. Their limited duration intensifies the social, cognitive, and organisational processes that usually unfold over longer periods. Students must enter a new academic environment, negotiate roles, understand expectations, and cooperate with unfamiliar peers within a short timeframe. Teachers must create the conditions for productive interaction while managing linguistic diversity, different academic cultures, and uneven levels of prior knowledge. Partner institutions must coordinate calendars, credits, selection procedures, digital platforms, mobility logistics, and recognition mechanisms. The apparent simplicity of the format conceals a complex architecture of pedagogical and institutional work.

Within this broader framework, a BIP devoted to play, collaboration, and soft skills represents a particularly relevant case. Play-based activities are well suited to short intensive programmes because they can accelerate group formation, make interaction observable, and create situations in which participants must communicate, decide, adapt, and cooperate. Games and playful tasks can provide low-risk environments where students test strategies, experience failure, negotiate rules, and reflect on their own role within a group. When connected to explicit theoretical and reflective framing, play can therefore support the educational aims of a BIP by linking socialisation, experiential learning, and competence development.

The BIP format responds to a crucial question for contemporary higher education: how can universities make international learning more accessible without emptying it of pedagogical intensity? Its answer lies in a careful balance between virtual preparation and physical encounter, flexibility and structure, inclusion and academic rigour. BIPs do not replace longer forms of mobility, but they expand the repertoire of internationalisation. They offer students a shorter and more accessible experience of transnational learning, while providing universities with a platform for collaborative teaching innovation. Their value depends less on the mere combination of online and in-person modalities than on the quality of the educational design that connects them. When this design is intentional, BIPs can become meaningful spaces for intercultural exchange, collaborative learning, and the development of transversal competences.

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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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Chapter 3

Soft Skills in Action: Play, Collaboration and Experiential Learning

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Introduction

Game-based learning is often associated with engagement, motivation, and enjoyment, yet its pedagogical value in higher education lies above all in its capacity to create structured situations in which students are required to act, decide, cooperate, and reflect. Games can be understood as learning environments shaped by rules, goals, feedback, constraints, and forms of interaction (Gee, 2003; Plass et al., 2015). When these elements are aligned with educational objectives, game-based and serious game approaches may support learning, skill development, engagement, and the acquisition of complex competences (Connolly et al., 2012; Wouters et al., 2013). This is particularly relevant for soft skills, since competences such as communication, teamwork, leadership, creativity, adaptability, and problem-solving cannot be fully developed through frontal explanation alone. Students may understand the value of cooperation in abstract terms and still struggle to cooperate when they face time pressure, uncertainty, disagreement, or the need to produce a shared outcome. Research on game-based learning and twenty-first-century skills has shown its relevance for precisely these dimensions, including collaboration, communication, problem-solving, creativity, and critical thinking (Qian & Clark, 2016).

In the context of an international BIP, this function becomes especially important. Students come from different countries, disciplinary backgrounds, academic

habits, and communicative styles. Since the onsite week is short and intensive, there is little time for groups to form gradually. A game placed at the beginning of the learning process can therefore operate as a pedagogical bridge between socialisation and project work. It helps students get to know each other through a shared task and, at the same time, introduces the basic conditions of teamwork that will shape the final project: coordination, negotiation, distributed leadership, time management, and iterative problem-solving. The value of this kind of activity also depends on its reflective framing. Dewey (1938) stresses the educational role of experience when it becomes a basis for inquiry, while Kolb (1984) describes learning as a cycle connecting concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. A classroom game can activate this cycle in a compressed form: students first act, then observe what happened, discuss the process, conceptualize the dynamics that emerged, and transfer these insights to future collaborative tasks. The debriefing phase is therefore essential. It allows students to reconstruct how the group worked, who proposed ideas, who listened, who coordinated, who tested, how the group reacted to failure, and what could be changed in the next task.

In this perspective, game-based learning becomes a methodological framework that prepares students for the central pedagogical demand of the BIP: learning how to work with others in conditions of uncertainty, diversity, limited time, and shared responsibility. The game anticipates, in a short and visible form, the same dynamics that students will later encounter in the project lab.

The Marshmallow Challenge

The activity used for this purpose was the Marshmallow Challenge, a simple collaborative game widely adopted in educational, organisational, and design-thinking contexts. Students are divided into small groups and receive a limited set of materials, usually spaghetti, tape, string, and one marshmallow. Their task is to build the tallest

possible freestanding structure, with the marshmallow placed on top, within a short and fixed amount of time, usually 18 minutes. The rules are immediately understandable, the materials are familiar, and the objective appears simple. This apparent simplicity is precisely what makes the activity pedagogically effective. Previous accounts of the Marshmallow Challenge have emphasized its value for observing team dynamics, prototyping behaviours, communication patterns, and experiential learning processes (Daoudy & Verstraeten, 2013; Khan, 2024; Meamber, 2018; Reeping & Reid, 2013; Uehara, 2016).

In the BIP context, the Marshmallow Challenge served a double purpose. First, it worked as an ice-breaking activity. Students who had only recently met were required to interact, make decisions, and produce something together. The game therefore created a fast and concrete form of socialisation. Instead of asking students to introduce themselves only through words, it invited them to become visible through action: proposing, building, testing, laughing, hesitating, correcting, negotiating. This helped reduce the initial distance between participants and created a shared experience that could be recalled during the following days.

Second, the activity was designed as a preparatory exercise for the final project work. The challenge reproduces, in miniature, many of the conditions that characterize collaborative projects: a common goal, limited resources, time pressure, uncertain outcomes, material constraints, and the need to transform an idea into a visible result. Students must move rapidly from discussion to action, from individual intuition to collective strategy, from planning to prototyping. In doing so, they begin to practice the very competences that will later be required in the project lab.

One of the most important dimensions of the Marshmallow Challenge concerns the relationship between planning and testing. Many groups tend to spend the first part of the activity discussing the ideal structure. They imagine a coherent solution, divide tasks, and begin building. The difficulty often appears only at the end, when the

marshmallow is placed on top and the tower collapses. The group then discovers that it has postponed the decisive test until it is too late. This dynamic is highly instructive for project work. It shows that ideas should be tested early, even in rough or provisional form. Wujec (2010), who popularized the activity in organisational and educational contexts, identifies this as one of the core lessons of the exercise: successful groups tend to prototype early, test repeatedly, and revise their structure before the final moment. The marshmallow becomes the central pedagogical object of the exercise. Although it appears small and almost irrelevant, it is the element that determines whether the structure can stand. Groups often underestimate it, treating it as a final decoration rather than as the core constraint around which the structure should be designed. This produces a useful metaphor for collaborative academic work. In many projects, the most important constraint emerges late because the group has worked on assumptions that were never tested. The marshmallow materializes this problem. It forces students to confront the difference between an idea that seems convincing in conversation and a solution that works in practice.

The game also makes leadership and participation visible. Some groups immediately identify a leader; others distribute decisions more informally. In some cases, one student dominates the discussion. In others, quieter members contribute through practical problem-solving, observation, or repair. Leadership therefore appears as a situated and relational competence, rather than as a fixed personal trait. The activity allows students to see that effective teamwork may depend on different forms of contribution: speaking, listening, coordinating, testing, mediating, encouraging, or noticing when a strategy is failing. Time pressure intensifies these dynamics. The group must decide how long to discuss, when to start building, when to test, and whether to change strategy. Excessive planning can produce paralysis; excessive improvisation can produce disorder. The most effective groups are usually those that move iteratively between thinking and doing. They build, test, fail, adjust, and test again. This iterative

rhythm is one of the most valuable lessons of the activity, because it prepares students for the logic of the final project: a good outcome rarely emerges from a perfect initial idea; it is produced through cycles of experimentation, feedback, and revision. The debriefing phase allowed the game to become a reflective learning experience. After the activity, students were invited to discuss the process rather than focus only on the height of the tower. The relevant questions concerned the organization of the group: How did the team begin? Who proposed the first idea? Was the marshmallow tested early or late? How did the group respond to collapse? Did all members participate? Were disagreements productive? What would the group change in a second attempt? Through these questions, the activity was connected to the broader soft skills targeted by the BIP: communication, cooperation, adaptability, leadership, creativity, and problem-solving.

The Marshmallow Challenge was particularly suitable for the beginning of the onsite component. It helped students get to know each other by doing something together; it made collaboration observable; it introduced the importance of prototyping; and it created a shared vocabulary for the project work that followed. The game staged, in a compressed and playful form, the basic conditions of collective production. It showed students that teamwork is a situated practice made of decisions, constraints, failures, adjustments, and shared responsibility.



Figure 1. Some groups proudly show their creations.

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Chapter 4

BIPs as an Opportunity to Develop Soft Skills. The Role of Self-Efficacy

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Introduction

It is April 2026, and we have just returned from successfully completing the on-site component of *Skills@Uni*, a Blended Intensive Programme (BIP) within the Erasmus+ framework, held in Funchal, Portugal.

Skills@Uni is a five-day blended BIP, designed by the University of Madeira, aimed at developing participants' soft skills, including communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and creativity. The programme brought together 29 participants from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds and from four different countries, using practical, interactive learning experiences as the main pedagogical approach.

But what exactly are soft skills?

From a historical perspective, the distinction between soft skills and hard skills originated in the field of American military training, particularly within the U.S. Army/CONARC in the late 1960s and early 1970s. One of the earliest systematic contributions to this concept was made by Paul G. Whitmore, who presented the report *What are soft skills?* at the CONARC Soft Skills Conference in 1972 (Whitmore, P. G. & Fry, J. P., 1974). In that context, soft skills referred to abilities such as communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and creativity, which did not require the same kind of technical knowledge associated with operating machines, instruments, or other equipment – that is, what would typically be considered hard skills.

This emphasis on competencies later became particularly relevant in European higher education. In 2000, the *Tuning Educational Structures* in Europe project emerged as a university-led European initiative designed to translate the policy objectives of the Bologna Process into comparable academic frameworks based on competencies, learning outcomes, ECTS credits, and educational profiles. Within this framework, *Tuning* distinguished between instrumental, interpersonal, and systemic competencies, thereby helping to introduce into university education the importance of developing what are now commonly referred to as soft skills.

The expectation of self-efficacy and the development of soft skills

The concept of self-efficacy is well established in psychology (Bandura, 1997). The first explicit formulation of self-efficacy expectations was proposed by Bandura in the article *Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change*, where he defined self-efficacy as “the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes” (Bandura, 1977).

From the outset, Bandura distinguished between outcome expectations and self-efficacy expectations. He argued that these two constructs are different because individuals may believe that a given course of action will lead to certain outcomes, while still doubting their own ability to perform the behaviours required to achieve those outcomes (Bandura, 1977). In other words, a person may be motivated to develop a particular skill, but may lack the confidence needed to put it into practice.

This distinction makes self-efficacy expectations an essential determinant of whether skills are actually implemented. In the context of soft skills, instruction that does not foster adequate self-efficacy may remain a mere transmission of knowledge, without necessarily leading to the development and effective use of those skills.

High levels of general self-efficacy have been associated with positive affect, higher achievement, greater life satisfaction, and a tendency to perceive potentially stressful

situations as challenges rather than threats, which may facilitate coping (Bandura, 1986). Therefore, self-efficacy is connected with a wide range of psychological constructs and has implications across several domains of human functioning (Luszczynska et al., 2005).

How can we increase student self-efficacy for the development of soft-skills during a BIP?

According to Bandura (Bandura, 1997), self-efficacy is shaped by four main sources, which differ in their relative strength: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and the interpretation of one's own physiological and emotional states during task performance. Any attempt to influence self-efficacy expectations operates through one or more of these sources.

Mastery experiences

According to Bandura, mastery experiences are the most powerful source of self-efficacy because they provide direct evidence that a person is capable of successfully performing a given task. In general, successful experiences strengthen perceived self-efficacy, whereas repeated failures tend to undermine it.

In the development of self-efficacy for different soft skills, students need to build specific self-efficacy beliefs for each skill. For example, self-efficacy for public speaking is not necessarily the same as self-efficacy for teamwork. However, the mechanisms through which these beliefs are developed are based on the same four sources described here.

Vicarious experience

People learn not only through direct experience, but also through observation and imitation. Therefore, self-efficacy expectations can also be modified by exposure

to models who perform a given task, either successfully or unsuccessfully. The more similar the model is to the observer, the stronger the potential impact on the observer's self-efficacy. Conversely, when the model is perceived as very different, the effect on self-efficacy is likely to be weaker, because the comparison becomes less personally relevant.

Similarity in characteristics such as age, sex, background, or experience may increase the influence of the model. Moreover, models who initially face doubts and difficulties but eventually manage them successfully may be more effective than models who perform the task flawlessly and without apparent effort.

Verbal persuasion

Verbal persuasion is a third source of self-efficacy. Through encouragement, feedback, or credible reassurance, a person may come to believe that they are capable of successfully performing a task involving a given soft skill, such as working effectively in a team.

It is generally easier to maintain a sense of self-efficacy when significant others express confidence in one's abilities. However, the effects of verbal persuasion are usually more limited than those of mastery experiences, particularly when the goal is to create high and long-lasting levels of self-efficacy. Verbal persuasion can nevertheless be effective when it remains realistic and is accompanied by opportunities for successful performance.

According to Bandura, it is more difficult to strengthen self-efficacy through verbal persuasion than to weaken it through negative feedback or discouragement. The effectiveness of this source depends largely on the credibility of the persuader, their relationship with the person being persuaded, and the perceived sincerity and intentions behind the message.

Physiological and emotional states

The interpretation of one's own physiological and emotional states constitutes the fourth source of self-efficacy. When people evaluate their abilities, they may also take into account bodily sensations and emotional reactions experienced during task performance. For example, anxiety, tension, fatigue, or stress may be interpreted as signs of insufficient competence, whereas calmness or emotional control may reinforce perceived efficacy.

People differ in the extent to which they attend to their own internal sensations. When individuals are highly focused on their physiological reactions, especially in demanding situations, they may be more likely to interpret those reactions as evidence of difficulty or lack of ability. This, in turn, can reduce perceived self-efficacy. Conversely, learning to interpret activation or nervousness as a normal and manageable response may help preserve or enhance self-efficacy.

BIPs as an opportunity for the development of soft skills through self-efficacy

BIPs combine an online component with an on-site component. Together, these two dimensions can be effectively integrated to foster the development of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and creativity. However, this development does not occur through the mere transmission of content. Rather, through carefully designed activities, participants are given opportunities to put these skills into practice, transforming potential competence into actual performance. As noted above, the effective performance of activities involving soft skills requires not only competence and motivation to carry out the task – that is, positive outcome expectations – but also a specific sense of self-efficacy regarding one's ability to perform it successfully. Within the BIP, the successful completion of the proposed activities, supported by appropriate guidance and scaffolding, may strengthen participants' self-efficacy through mastery experiences. In addition, exposure to similar

peers acting as models can further enhance self-efficacy through vicarious experience. Therefore, the BIP format provides an ideal methodological framework for the development of soft skills, as it enables participants not only to acquire knowledge about these skills, but also to practise them, observe peers performing them, receive feedback, and strengthen their self-efficacy through successful experiences.

For each participant, however, the challenge remains to generalise these skills beyond the BIP context and transfer them to other academic, professional, and everyday situations.

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Chapter 5

The MathIA Project and the Development of Students' Skills

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The MathIA project is a European project funded by the Erasmus+ program and is framed within the European priorities in the field of school education, with a particular focus on promoting STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) areas and the STEAM approach ((Science, Technology, Engineering, Artes and Mathematics). Classified as a KA220-SCH - Cooperation Partnership in School Education, the project focuses centrally on the development of key student skills, particularly in mathematics, through the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and experiential learning strategies.

The conceptual starting point of MathIA is aligned with the Skills@Uni framework, which emphasizes the development of soft skills in higher education through meaningful experiential learning. Although the project is mainly focused on school education, this framework allows bridges to be built between different levels of education and reinforces the relevance of competencies such as critical thinking, digital literacy, autonomy, and adaptability in rapidly evolving technological contexts. Specifically, the project was developed based on the need to improve students' mathematical skills, a common need in the countries involved in the project. This assumption is supported by PISA results (OECD, 2019; 2023) and by some studies in the field (e.g. Aguilar et al., 2015). Furthermore, there is a need to train and update

teachers in the application of new technologies and artificial intelligence in the teaching and learning process (Durak et al., 2024; Forero-Corba et al., 2024).

The MathIA project, considering that mathematics is a core subject in the students' academic path (Taylor, 2018), also aims to contribute to creating opportunities for students to further develop their skills and reduce differences between groups of students in their academic progress (OECD, 2025). In fact, mathematics is not only important for academic performance but also predicts many aspects of other achievements in an individual's life (Looi et al., 2016). In addition, technologies are emerging as important tools for intervention (Looi et al., 2016), and it is also important to address cultural stereotypes (Chestnut et al., 2018) and gender differences and self-efficacy theories (Todor, 2014). Moreover, artificial intelligence is emerging in the literature as a tool not only in mathematics education (e.g. Aulida et al., 2024) but across education more broadly (e.g. Forero-Corba et al., 2024). So, artificial Intelligence appears in this framework as both an object of curiosity and concern. Its increasing presence across multiple sectors of society, including education, raises ethical, pedagogical, and organizational questions, while also creating opportunities for personalized learning and support for students with diverse profiles and needs. The MathIA project builds on this context to explicitly question current educational practices and promote critical reflection on the use of AI by teachers and students.

The MathIA consortium brings together partners from three European countries, including universities and primary and secondary education institutions, enabling a multicultural and comparative approach that enriches activity design and outcome analysis. Concretely, the project involves nine partner institutions from Italy, Spain, and Portugal: four universities (University of Murcia, University of La Laguna, University of Madeira, and University of Pavia), three schools (Colegio Concertado Vicente Medina, Mayco School of English, and Istituto Comprensivo di Via Angelini), and the company COMENIUS IDI/AVENTURINNA iDi center (Center for Pedagogy and Educational

Psychology). To run the project, the leading institution is the Spanish University of Murcia.

A distinctive feature of the project is its central objective, namely the design of an artificial intelligence model aimed at improving adolescents' mathematical skills by considering individual profiles, difficulties, and talents. In parallel, the project foresees the creation of a resource bank designed to support teachers in programming education and the integration of digital technologies into teaching practices. Consequently, the expected results reflect this strategic orientation. Firstly, the project aims to develop personalized learning systems adapted to different contexts and educational needs, capable of considering students' individual characteristics. Secondly, improvements in mathematics performance among students from participating institutions are anticipated. Finally, MathIA seeks to contribute to improved school coexistence by promoting equality, diversity, and innovation in educational planning and classroom practices. To achieve these results the main project activities are organized around three core strands: teacher training courses, development of the resource bank, and the design of the artificial intelligence model. At present, teacher training courses are already implemented, while the other components are under development (the project spans 36 months, from October 2023 to October 2026).

As described, teacher training is a central pillar of the MathIA project. Three online training courses, each with a total workload of 15 hours, are offered, targeting different profiles. The first course, Digitization and Artificial Intelligence, is aimed at school teachers and university professors and includes modules on the introduction to digitization, AI fundamentals, practical applications in education, ethical and legal challenges, project development, and assessment. The second course, Digitalization and Artificial Intelligence, is directed at school teachers and focuses on the integration of AI into mathematics education, the creation of educational videos, the use of podcasts for self-paced learning, and an introduction to neural network programming.

The third course, Artificial Intelligence and the Teaching and Learning of Mathematics, targets university professors and addresses AI as a paradigm shift in education, exploring strategies for integrating AI into mathematics teaching and learning, as well as classroom planning and management supported by AI. Course evaluation is conducted through online questionnaires administered at the end of each course and each module. These instruments include items related to content relevance, clarity, professional applicability, adequacy of duration and online format, overall satisfaction, and willingness to continue training. They also include multiple-choice questions focusing on knowledge acquisition.

In addition to the training component, a research study (Antunes et al., 2026), associated with an ongoing master's thesis, was conducted. The data collected through questionnaires administered between November 2024 and January 2025 showed relevant trends. Most university students and school teachers reported having already used AI in their academic or professional activities and recognized clear advantages of AI for teaching and learning. However, across all three groups, most participants indicated they had never received formal training in AI applied to education, while clearly expressing the need for such training. Participants also reported perceiving both advantages and disadvantages in the use of AI and demonstrated limited awareness of existing national and international legislation regulating AI in education. Notably, many respondents indicated that teachers rarely explicitly encouraged students to use AI, suggesting a gap between personal use of such tools and their deliberate, pedagogically planned integration in classroom contexts.

In conclusion, the MathIA project represents a structured and innovative initiative in the field of mathematics education, combining teacher training, resource development, and AI. By integrating attention to diversity, critical use of artificial intelligence, and the development of key skills, the project contributes to an in-depth

reflection on the challenges and opportunities related to AI integration in education, with potential impact on both pedagogical practices and future educational policies.

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Chapter 6

Gamification and Soft Skills: Contributions to Inclusive Physical Education

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The growing focus on transversal skills, such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, leadership, emotional management and adaptability, has coincided with the adoption of gamification as a pedagogical approach in higher education and vocational training. This involves transferring the principles and dynamics of games to formal teaching and training contexts, and it has emerged as a prominent strategy in this regard (Deterding et al., 2011; Kapp, 2012).

Deterding et al. (2011) popularized the term 'gamification', defining it as the application of game-like elements in non-game contexts. Accordingly Landers (2014) defined gamification as the use of game-like elements in contexts other than games with the intention of influencing behaviors and attitudes that are relevant to learning. But it is Deterding et al. (2011) that remains the most frequently cited definition in the current literature, distinguishing gamification from other playful approaches such as serious gaming or game-based learning. The latter focuses on using isolated components, such as points, badges, levels, leaderboards, narratives, and immediate feedback, to promote engagement, motivation and learning (Hamari et al., 2014; Kapp, 2012).

The growing popularity of gamification in education is supported by theories of motivation and learning. For example, Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sailer et al., 2017) suggests that intrinsic motivation increases when the environment fulfils three fundamental psychological requirements: autonomy, competence, and social connections. Through an experimental study, the authors discovered that various game elements (e.g. leaderboards and performance graphs) positively impact the fulfilment of these needs.

At the same time, the Gamified Learning Theory (Landers, 2014) frames gamification as a set of game attributes that present two effects: (i) a direct mediating effect, whereby game elements modify students behaviours and attitudes, thereby influencing learning; and (ii) a moderating effect, whereby gamification enhances the relationship between the quality of instruction and the results obtained.

Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory, which is characterized by high involvement and a balance between the proposed challenge and the performer's competence, is also frequently referenced in the literature on educational gamification as an explanatory mechanism for student engagement in gamified environments (Hamari et al., 2014; Kapp, 2012).

Gamification has established itself as a promising pedagogical approach for developing soft skills in educational contexts, particularly in higher education. Several studies have shown that the intentional integration of game dynamics increases student involvement, motivation and active participation, thereby creating an environment conducive to developing socio-emotional skills such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking and problem solving (Ducatti et al., 2025). A recent systematic review by Ducatti et al. (2025) analyzed empirical studies using gamification in higher education. Despite methodological heterogeneity, the review concluded that there is consistent evidence of a positive impact on soft skill acquisition and development. However, it also highlighted the need for more robust experimental

designs to consolidate the magnitude of these effects in different courses and training areas.

In terms of specific pedagogical strategies, the literature identifies a set of recurring elements used in gamification. For example, Hamari et al. (2014) found that scoring, distinctions, and leaderboards were the most implemented components, though not necessarily the most effective. Dichev and Dicheva (2017) also identified task levels, missions, narratives, immediate feedback, avatars, and challenges with progressively increasing difficulty.

Through the development of a meta-analysis, Bai et al. (2020) warn that the design of the pedagogical intervention has a significant influence on academic performance, rather than the gamification strategies adopted or the number of strategies. Gamification has been implemented at all levels of education, with a particular focus on higher education and vocational training (Dichev & Dicheva, 2017; Koivisto & Hamari, 2019). Literature has shown that gamification enhances engagement and learning attitudes, particularly in subjects traditionally perceived as difficult, such as mathematics and science (Manzano-León et al., 2021). It is also becoming increasingly relevant in virtual and hybrid contexts involving online platforms and/or mobile devices (Koivisto & Hamari, 2019).

Regarding the effects on motivational and cognitive variables, the empirical evidence consistently indicates positive impacts of gamification, albeit of small to moderate magnitude (Bai et al., 2020; Dichev & Dicheva, 2017; Koivisto & Hamari, 2019; Manzano-León et al., 2021). However, these impacts are context sensitive.

The main strengths of gamification are: (i) stimulating enthusiasm; (ii) providing feedback on performance; (iii) satisfying the need for recognition; and (iv) promoting the setting of clear objectives (Baie et al., 2020).

However, despite these results, the literature unanimously highlights several limitations, as summarised by Dichev and Dicheva (2017): (i) insufficient evidence of

long-term benefits, (ii) advancement of pedagogical practice beyond scientific understanding of the mechanisms involved and (iii) limited knowledge of how to adapt gamified design to specific educational contexts. These difficulties are accentuated by the heterogeneity of research designs, short intervention durations, and scarcity of longitudinal studies (Bai et al., 2020; Koivisto & Hamari, 2019). In this context, there is a need for more studies to investigate the effects of gamification.

Therefore, while overall, empirical evidence suggests positive effects of gamification, albeit with small to moderate magnitudes it is highly dependent on pedagogical design, intervention duration, and participant characteristics (Bai et al., 2020; Koivisto & Hamari, 2019; Manzano-León et al., 2021). Careful combination of elements such as narratives, immediate feedback, badges, and progressive challenges seems more decisive than the absolute number of components used.

From a pedagogical point of view, the integration of gamification should be guided by clear learning objectives based on robust theories of motivation and learning, and its effects should be continuously evaluated. Although often undervalued in research, teacher training emerges as a critical factor for the effective implementation of these strategies in real contexts.

Future research should involve longitudinal studies with large, diverse samples; experimental or quasi-experimental designs with a control group; and systematic exploration of moderating variables, such as level of education, subject area, student motivational profile and sociocultural context. Particular attention should be paid to inclusive education, adapted physical education, and other areas in which gamification could promote equity and participation. In short, gamification is a promising pedagogical tool whose effectiveness ultimately depends on the quality of the instructional design.

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Chapter 7

AI-Enabled Teamwork: Not a Tech Skill – a Human One

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The conversation we keep avoiding

Walk into any university group project today and you will find generative AI somewhere in the room. It might be open in a browser tab, whispered about over coffee, or quietly producing the first draft of a section that will end up signed by four students. What you will rarely find is the conversation about it. The team uses AI, but the team does not talk about AI. This silence is the starting point of the lecture summarised in this chapter, and it is a more interesting phenomenon than the use itself.

Universities have spent the last three years debating whether students should be allowed to use AI. The debate is mostly settled in practice: they already do. The interesting question now is not whether, but how – and more specifically, how together. Because while individual prompting skills have received significant attention, the collective practice of working with AI in a team has been almost entirely overlooked. We have trained students to ask the machine. We have not trained them to ask each other about the machine.

From prompting to orchestrating

The lecture proposes a small but consequential reframing. Working effectively with AI in a team is not a question of better prompts. It is a question of orchestration. The metaphor is deliberate: an orchestra conductor does not play any instrument. They

set the tempo, coordinate the parts, decide what stays and what goes. Without the conductor, even a great orchestra produces noise.

Applied to a student team, orchestration means that the group, as a group, decides what to delegate to AI and what to keep for humans; what voice the output should have; what counts as good enough. None of this can be answered by the person typing the prompt. It must be negotiated by the people whose names will appear on the final deliverable. This is why the talk insists that AI-enabled teamwork is not a technical skill at all. It is a deeply human one – conversational, deliberative, and slightly uncomfortable, in the way that most genuinely collective work tends to be.

There is a small but telling difference between using a tool and coordinating an agent. A hammer has no opinions. AI does: it makes suggestions, frames problems in particular ways, and produces text that carries an implicit voice. A team that does not actively shape that voice will end up adopting it by default, and will then be surprised when the final output sounds nothing like the team itself. Recent field research, notably the large-scale experiment at Procter & Gamble by Dell'Acqua and colleagues (2025), shows that AI does indeed function as a “cybernetic teammate” – a partner that influences team performance, expertise sharing, and even the emotional tone of the work. Orchestration is, at its core, the work of refusing to be a passive recipient of someone else’s rhetoric – in this case, the rhetoric of a model trained on the open web.

The 3C model

To make orchestration practical rather than aspirational, the lecture introduces a simple three-step framework: Clarify, Create, Critique. The three Cs are not a linear sequence but an iterative cycle, and each step requires the team to talk.

Clarify comes first and is the phase most teams skip. Before opening any AI tool, the team writes the goal in a single sentence everyone nods to. This sounds trivial; it is not. The principle is straightforward: if you do not know what you are looking for, no

prompt will find it for you. AI magnifies clarity and confusion equally, and a vague goal entering a powerful model usually produces a confident-sounding but misaligned answer.

Create is the phase where the AI actually contributes. The discipline here is intentionality. Every prompt is a choice of direction; the team picks the direction, the AI accelerates the journey. The trap to avoid is what one might call the seduction of the first output: the response looks polished, so the team accepts it. Polish is not correctness, and polish is not fit. A useful habit is to ask, before accepting any output, what the team is *not* asking for.

Critique is the most neglected phase, and the one that determines whether the team ends up signing something it does not actually understand. Critique is not distrust – it is method. Two questions structure it: what is missing, and what is wrong. Missing things are omissions, silences, perspectives that did not make it into the answer. Wrong things include factual errors, fabricated citations, and the confident hallucinations for which contemporary models are notorious; Walters and Wilder (2023) found that a substantial proportion of bibliographic citations generated by ChatGPT do not correspond to real scholarly works. A practical rule helps: at least one team member should not watch the output as it is generated, so that they can enter the room with fresh eyes and play the role of skeptic.

Why this is a teamwork question, not a tech question

It would be easy to mistake the 3C model for a checklist about AI hygiene. It is not. Each step is built around an explicit conversation, and the conversation is the point. Clarify forces the team to surface disagreement before the AI papers over it. Create requires the team to articulate what it actually wants. Critique demands that someone, with authority delegated by the group, push back on what came out. Remove the conversation and you do not have a slower version of the framework – you have nothing

at all. You have one person typing in silence while the others nod. Empirical work in this direction (Han et al., 2024) suggests that, even within AI-assisted teams, the quality of human-to-human collaboration in framing prompts and interpreting outputs remains a critical determinant of the result.

This is also why the lecture closes on responsibility. AI can propose, suggest, and accelerate; it cannot sign, take blame, or answer to a stakeholder. The signature on a piece of work – a report, a presentation, a piece of code – remains human. If the team cannot explain why an output is correct, it has not earned the right to use it. In an academic context, this connects directly to authorship and integrity; in a professional one, it connects to accountability.

From talk to practice

The companion exercise in the BIP turns this framework into something the participants can feel rather than just hear. Groups of three or four are given a single, deliberately under-specified task – design one idea to improve student life – and a strict timebox. They must apply the three Cs explicitly: Clarify without AI, Create with AI, Critique at the end. Walking between the tables, one watches who speaks and who types, and the patterns are remarkably consistent. The teams that take Clarify seriously produce sharper outputs. The teams that delegate the keyboard to one person and stop talking produce output that looks fine until you read it carefully.

That gap between looking fine and being fine is the entire point. AI will not replace the students. But, if the students let it, it can quietly replace the way they think together – and that is the loss the lecture asks them to refuse. As Doshi and Hauser (2024) have shown experimentally, generative AI can enhance individual creativity while simultaneously reducing the collective diversity of what a group produces; and as Woolley (2025) argues, AI deployed without attention to collective intelligence can fragment workflows even as it accelerates them. The pedagogical wager is that, with

deliberate practice, students can resist this drift and use AI as a coordination technology rather than as a substitute for thinking together.

It is not a tech skill – it is a human one.

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Chapter 8

From Interaction to Performance: Social and Emotional Learning in Short Blended Mobility for University Soft Skills

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Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) provides a competence language for soft skills that are otherwise described in broad, underspecified terms. A widely used reference point is the CASEL framework, which articulates SEL as five core competency areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. In university contexts, 'teamwork, communication, and leadership' can be treated as composite outcomes that draw heavily on relationship skills (listening, cooperation, conflict negotiation, help-seeking), social awareness (perspective-taking, sensitivity to difference), self-management (stress regulation, impulse control), and responsible decision-making (ethical, accountable choices under constraints).

The pedagogical relevance of SEL becomes especially clear in blended short mobility formats such as Erasmus+ BIPs, where students interact online before (or after) an intensive on-site period and are expected to collaborate across institutional and national boundaries. BIPs are characterized by a mandatory virtual component intended to facilitate collaborative online exchange and a short physical mobility period. This design creates a sequence of social learning environments: first, sustained mediated interaction (often asynchronous) that shapes communication norms; then, a

short, high-density co-located period where teams must coordinate quickly and perform publicly (e.g., via project presentations). Interpreted through SEL, the blended design is not merely a delivery mode but a structured pathway from interaction practice to performance under pressure, making the development of soft skills both visible and assessable.

In this BIP context addressed in this chapter, the virtual phase consisted of cohort-wide contributions and feedback without stable groups, followed by a five-day on-site phase where multinational teams were formed to develop projects and present final outcomes. The absence of fixed teams online is often perceived as a limitation for teamwork preparation; however, from an SEL perspective it can be leveraged as an intentional 'communication and feedback laboratory.' Research on online intercultural communication and collaboration in virtual exchange contexts suggests that participants are not automatically prepared to interact effectively and can benefit from structured scaffolding and mentoring to develop successful synchronous and asynchronous strategies. A month of cross-participant feedback can therefore be framed as deliberate practice in relationship skills and social awareness—provided that feedback is structured, criteria-referenced, and linked to brief reflection.

The primary SEL benefit of a cohort-wide feedback phase is the repeated enactment of micro-behaviors that underlie later teamwork: paraphrasing others' ideas accurately, distinguishing disagreement from disrespect, asking clarifying questions before judging, and offering suggestions that are specific enough to be actionable. These interaction moves can reduce misinterpretations that arise from differences in communication style and implicit norms, which are prominent concerns in intercultural online interaction. They also cultivate self-awareness and self-management when participants are prompted to notice how they respond to critique, uncertainty, or time pressure (for example, whether they become defensive, withdraw, or dominate the exchange). The online component, in other words, can function as SEL preparation not

by simulating full teamwork but by establishing a shared discourse culture—clarify, justify, revise—that becomes a transferable baseline when teams are formed later.

The transition to the on-site phase introduces a qualitatively different challenge profile: short time horizons, high coordination demands, and intensified social cues. Higher-education guidance on group projects emphasizes that groups face coordination costs (aligning schedules, integrating contributions, making decisions collectively) and that these costs increase with heterogeneity, including language and cultural differences; it also highlights the importance of teaching process skills and assessing process alongside product. In multinational student teams, empirical work has identified recurring perceived challenges such as free-riding, insufficient English language skills, and poor communication as especially salient, and it reports variation in how students from different cultural backgrounds perceive the importance of these challenges. These issues become amplified in a five-day project sprint because there is limited time to recover from early misalignment or to re-negotiate norms once work is underway.

One of the most consequential on-site challenges is language-related participation asymmetry. Research on language and communication in international student adaptation highlights the role of second-language proficiency and interactional conditions in shaping students' experiences. Student perspectives on English proficiency in multicultural teamwork suggest that proficiency differences can negatively affect team communication and that perceived proficiency may correlate with perceived trust and power, creating informal hierarchies that are not based on task competence. In short intensive settings, this can lead to a predictable dynamic: fluent speakers become default decision-makers and public presenters, while less fluent participants contribute less visibly and may be misinterpreted as disengaged. The SEL implication is that 'communication skill' cannot be reduced to eloquence; it must include inclusive turn-taking, clarification practices, and role design that makes

contributions possible through multiple channels (summaries, visuals, structured rounds, written drafts).

A second on-site challenge concerns differences in working styles and expectations. Students often perceive multinational teamwork as simultaneously valuable and demanding due to differences in cultures, language proficiency, and working styles; successful collaboration strategies include clarifying expectations and ensuring participation from everyone, integrating feedback, and deliberately using communication channels. These strategies align closely with CASEL social awareness and relationship skills. In practice, the problem is rarely cultural difference per se; it is the absence of explicit negotiation about what counts as 'good work,' how directly critique should be expressed, how quickly messages should be answered, and who has authority to decide. When such norms remain implicit, teams may oscillate between politeness and frustration, or produce parallel work streams that collide only at the end.

A third challenge is conflict avoidance followed by late escalation. In intercultural contexts, learners may be uncertain about acceptable disagreement norms, especially in English as a lingua franca, and may avoid raising concerns until integration becomes unavoidable. In five-day projects, late escalation is costly because the remaining time is insufficient for repair. The SEL-relevant response is to treat disagreement as a decision-making problem: to name the issue, generate options, evaluate impacts, decide using a transparent rule, and document the rationale. This operationalizes responsible decision-making and reduces the personalization of conflict by anchoring it in task criteria.

A fourth challenge is fragmentation of outputs caused by 'divide-and-conquer' task splitting without integration. University guidance on teamwork notes that disorganized final products often result when members treat subtasks as individual assignments and do not allocate enough time to bring the pieces into a cohesive whole; poor communication and unclear collaboration routines are typical contributors. This

is not merely a project-management problem; it is also an SEL issue because integration requires perspective-taking ('what does the team mean as a whole?'), relationship skills (negotiating trade-offs), and self-management (persisting through iterative revision rather than defending one's section).

Within these constraints, SEL can be embedded in the on-site phase through a small number of high-leverage practices that make teamwork, communication, and leadership observable. First, teams benefit from rapid explicit norm-setting at the moment of formation. A brief charter-like agreement (decision rule, communication rhythm, response expectations, integration plan, conflict escalation path) reduces ambiguity and supports responsible decision-making by establishing shared accountability. Second, leadership can be treated as distributed function rather than fixed status. Rotating facilitation, synthesis, critical questioning, and process monitoring roles operationalizes leadership as a set of behaviors that support collective performance, counteracting language-driven dominance patterns and increasing equitable participation. Third, maintaining a lightweight decision log (decision, options, rationale, next step) reduces hidden hierarchies and helps teams integrate diverse perspectives into traceable choices, reinforcing responsible decision-making and communication clarity.

The culminating presentations create an authentic performance context where SEL is particularly visible. Presenting to peers under time constraints introduces pressure that tests self-management (stress regulation, impulse control), relationship skills (coordinated turn-taking, listening to questions, responding constructively), and social awareness (adapting to audience perspective). For multinational teams, presentation time can also reproduce language-based inequities unless speaking roles are intentionally distributed and rehearsed. Because proficiency differences shape participation and perceived credibility, a structured rehearsal with role-based Q&A and

explicit turn-taking can function as an SEL intervention rather than merely a rhetorical polish.

A persistent difficulty in this BIP is that outcomes remain rhetorical unless evidenced. OECD's Survey on Social and Emotional Skills demonstrates an international effort to conceptualize and assess such skills systematically, supporting their legitimacy as educational outcomes rather than informal add-ons. In short blended mobility, evaluation must be lightweight. The most feasible approach is triangulation: (1) product evidence (quality and coherence of the project and presentation), (2) process evidence (observable behaviors such as participation equity, feedback uptake, conflict handling, decision clarity), and (3) reflection evidence mapped to SEL categories (brief prompts that capture changes in self-awareness, self-management, and relationship skills). This aligns with higher-education guidance that group work should not be evaluated solely by product and that instructors should anticipate and support process skills.

In sum, the connection between SEL and blended short mobility lies in the way the format structures social learning over time. The virtual phase—especially when organized around cross-participant feedback rather than fixed teams—can build foundational interaction routines and perspective-taking habits that prepare students for later teamwork. The on-site phase then concentrates the characteristic challenges of multinational teamwork—language asymmetries, working-style differences, coordination costs, free-riding risk, and integration under time pressure—into an environment where competencies must be enacted, not merely discussed. Treating teamwork, communication, and leadership as SEL outcomes anchored in an explicit competence map supports intentional design and feasible evidence collection, while preserving the authentic complexity that makes short international intensive formats valuable for soft-skill development.

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Chapter 9

Lessons Learned from Organising Blended Intensive Programmes

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Since 2024, I have been involved in the organisation of around fifteen Blended Intensive Programmes. This experience has shown that BIPs are among the most flexible and promising instruments of the Erasmus+ framework, while also requiring a considerable degree of pedagogical and organisational precision. The format is compact: it combines a compulsory virtual component with a short period of physical mobility and receives organisational support for a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 20 funded Erasmus+ mobile learners (European Commission, 2025). This apparent compactness should not be confused with simplicity. A BIP brings together student mobility, international cooperation, teaching design, group work, logistics, institutional procedures and intercultural mediation within a compressed timeframe. Its success depends on the capacity to transform a short transnational encounter into a coherent learning environment.

The first lesson concerns planning around real numbers. Since organisational support is calculated within a limited range of funded mobile participants, the programme must be designed from the beginning with a realistic sense of scale. A group of 10, 15 or 20 students produces different pedagogical and logistical conditions: the size of the classroom, the number of tutors needed, the composition of working groups, the intensity of interaction, the accommodation arrangements and the

feasibility of social activities all change accordingly. In addition, a margin of withdrawal should always be expected. In my experience, approximately 10 per cent of selected participants may withdraw, sometimes very late, because of illness, exam pressure, personal circumstances, travel difficulties or financial concerns. Reserve lists and flexible group structures are therefore part of responsible design rather than secondary administrative precautions.

The second lesson concerns selection. A motivational letter is particularly useful because it makes visible the relationship between students' desire for mobility and their understanding of the educational aims of the programme. Wanting to travel is legitimate and belongs to the broader culture of international mobility. The risk, however, is a misalignment between the attraction of the destination and the academic nature of the BIP. The programme is a short intensive course with learning outcomes, attendance obligations, collaborative tasks and responsibility toward peers and partner institutions. Selection should therefore consider interest in the theme, readiness to work in groups, openness to intercultural exchange and willingness to participate actively. The aim is to identify students who understand the BIP as a learning community rather than as a brief stay abroad with an academic label.

The third lesson concerns the online phase. The virtual component is compulsory in the Erasmus+ architecture of BIPs, but its pedagogical value depends on how it is used (European Commission, 2025). It should take place before the physical mobility whenever possible, because it prepares students intellectually, practically and emotionally. A preliminary online phase can introduce the topic, clarify the schedule, present the final assignment, explain the expected outputs and reduce the uncertainty that often accompanies international mobility. It also gives students an initial sense of the group before arrival. The most effective online components are those that produce a small preparatory output: a short reflection, a shared document, a visual prompt, a

question, a draft idea or a brief self-presentation. In this way, the in-person week begins from an already activated learning process.

The fourth lesson is the importance of pre-departure communication. Students need to be accompanied through a sequence of clear, progressive and reassuring messages. These communications should include practical information about venues, timetables, transport, accommodation, meals, emergency contacts, required documents, weather, clothing, digital platforms and expected forms of participation. Their function is also affective. Many students experience anxiety before departure, especially if they are travelling abroad for the first time or entering a multilingual learning environment. Good communication reduces avoidable uncertainty and allows the programme to begin with less confusion. In this respect, pre-departure messages are part of the educational infrastructure of the BIP.

The fifth lesson concerns group composition. Internationality does not automatically generate intercultural learning. Students can remain close to peers from the same country, university, age group or disciplinary background if interaction is not intentionally structured. Working groups should therefore be composed with balance. Provenance, competences, age, language confidence, disciplinary background and previous experience should all be considered. The aim is to diversify with reason. Excessive homogeneity weakens the intercultural potential of the BIP; purely random heterogeneity can create avoidable imbalance. Group composition is therefore a pedagogical act. It shapes the conditions under which students communicate, negotiate roles, distribute tasks and produce collective work.

The sixth lesson concerns the opening of the in-person week. Ice-breaking activities are necessary, but they should be thematically aligned with the programme. A generic ice-breaker may reduce embarrassment; a well-designed one can also introduce the intellectual and methodological logic of the BIP. In a programme on games and soft skills, the first activity should already involve communication, cooperation,

negotiation or leadership. In a programme on urban observation, it should activate attention, description and interpretation. The first collective task establishes expectations: it tells students that they are expected to participate, experiment and work with others from the start.

The seventh lesson is that sociality is part of the curriculum. Shared meals, coffee breaks, walks, informal conversations and evening activities should not be treated as marginal additions to the real teaching programme. In short-term mobility, these moments support group cohesion and make collaboration easier in the classroom. They allow students to speak with less pressure, to build trust and to translate formal internationality into lived intercultural contact. For this reason, it is useful to plan at least one convivial moment at the beginning and one at the end of the BIP. The first helps the group open; the second gives symbolic closure to the shared experience. BIPs are temporary learning communities, and such communities need rituals of entry and conclusion.

The eighth lesson concerns teaching format. A BIP should avoid reproducing the conventional lecture-based course in compressed form. Lectures can provide necessary theoretical orientation, but the specific value of the physical week lies in co-presence. This should be used for workshops, field activities, games, group projects, peer discussion, prototyping, collective analysis, presentations and debriefing. Students should be asked to do something together. Practical activities make communication, leadership, problem-solving and adaptability visible in action. This is consistent with the wider literature on BIPs, which emphasises active learning, collaborative work and purposeful integration between virtual and physical phases as central to the format's educational value (O'Dowd & Werner, 2024; de Prada et al., 2025).

The ninth lesson is that planning must assume disruption. Something will almost certainly go wrong: a speaker may cancel, the weather may make an outdoor activity impossible, a room may become unavailable, a train may be delayed, a student

may become ill, or a digital platform may fail. This does not indicate poor organisation; it reflects the complexity of intensive international programmes. A strong BIP schedule therefore includes margins, transitions and alternative routes. Overly saturated planning may look efficient, but it leaves no room for adaptation. Flexibility is not the opposite of rigour. It is one of the conditions that allows rigour to survive contact with reality.

The tenth lesson follows from this: every BIP should include a buffer activity. This can be a guided discussion, a reflective writing task, a peer-feedback session, a project clinic, an indoor alternative to an outdoor activity, or a collective debriefing. The activity should be ready before the programme begins and should remain coherent with the learning objectives. A buffer activity is not a filler. It is a hidden part of the design, prepared for moments when the planned sequence needs to be adjusted.

Across these lessons, one broader conclusion emerges. A BIP is not a short Erasmus stay with an online meeting attached to it. It is a designed encounter. Its educational value depends on the connection between selection, online preparation, pre-departure communication, group composition, thematic opening activities, social life, practical work and contingency planning. Its brevity makes each of these elements more visible and more consequential. When these elements are weak, the BIP risks becoming a pleasant international event with limited pedagogical depth. When they are carefully aligned, the format can offer students an intense experience of internationalisation, collaborative learning and shared responsibility.

The success of a BIP should therefore be measured through both participation and quality. Numbers matter, especially because BIPs can widen access to mobility for students who cannot spend a semester abroad. Yet the deeper value of the format lies in the kind of learning environment it creates. A well-designed BIP teaches students that mobility is more than physical displacement. It is the capacity to work, think and

produce with others in a temporary, demanding and carefully constructed transnational space.

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Chapter 10

From an Idea to the Skills@Uni Blended Intensive Programme

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The Skills@Uni Blended Intensive Programme did not begin with a formal call or a detailed proposal, but with a simple conversation between colleagues, almost two years before the actual BIP happened. This first initial conversation occurred in a moment when Blended Intensive Programmes were only starting to appear as a new possibility within the Erasmus framework. At that time, the outlines of BIPs were still relatively new and with many interrogations surrounding how BIPs actually worked. Thus, this conversation took more of an exploratory idea that was driven by a shared question of how we could make such an experience for our students that could be academic relevant but also meaningful for their lives. Almost two years after this initial conversation the Skills@Uni BIP took (finally) place.

The possibility of a BIP centred on soft skills appeared, therefore, as a natural extension of our work as professors and also shared research interests. Equally important was our common commitment and belief of the importance of experiential learning and gamified activities to promote enjoyment and motivation in learning environments.

We believe that learning is most powerful when students are invited to act, decide, negotiate, and reflect in concrete situations rather than only engage with concepts in abstract form. At the same time, games and playful activities had already proved, in our teaching and research practice, to be effective and motivating ways of making learning more effective and enjoyable for students. From this perspective, the format of a BIP seemed particularly promising by merging our interests. Its intensive, time-limited nature and its emphasis on collaboration made it a suitable environment for constructing learning paths in which games, and field-based activities could be systematically linked to reflection on soft skills, which is also a much-needed topic in today's academic and professional environments.

In the time space between first talking about a BIP and actually being able to start preparing it, the BIP idea and programme matured, and this time also allowed us to be more aware of what was needed for its effective implementation. This meant that we now had a stronger sense of which learning outcomes might be realistic in a short programme, which types of activities could effectively support students, and how a blended structure could be used to prepare, sustain, and extend students' engagement with this learning experience.

Additionally, from the very beginning, interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary were seen as essential characteristics for this programme. Soft skills are inherently transversal, and we wanted the BIP to reflect that reality by involving different disciplinary perspectives and professional cultures. This intention was not only about diversifying content or the mandatory number of partners needed within the Erasmus+ framework. It was also about creating a learning environment where students would experience collaboration across fields, approaches, and roles. Such an environment was expected to make the development of soft skills more authentic, because students would need to negotiate meaning and expectations with peers and staff who did not necessarily share the same disciplinary or cultural background.

Thus, the team was built around a diversity of backgrounds from Psychology to Sports and Physical Education, to Communication and Technology and Education Teaching, where colleagues from different countries and universities became a decisive element to bring this BIP to fruition. The staff contributions helped to build the programme and at the same time, they strengthened the conceptual coherence of the BIP by reinforcing the link between experiential learning, embodied action, and the development of interpersonal skills.

The partnership around Skills@Uni did not emerge in isolation. It was built progressively through professional encounters that had taken place over the years in different contexts. Staff mobilities, conferences and collaborative projects, created a network of colleagues that was now coming all together for the first time. When we started to think seriously about this BIP, we drew on this network and invitations were made. The resulting group was therefore both cohesive and heterogeneous, combining shared pedagogical values with varied experiences and areas of expertise.

Once the idea had been revisited, the interdisciplinary orientation clarified, and the core partners identified, the project moved into a practical building stage, secure funding. The allocation of Erasmus support was a turning point. It signalled institutional recognition of the project and provided the practical means to bring it into existence. Funding did not resolve all questions, but it created a framework within which detailed planning could proceed with confidence.

The planning phase of the BIP was demanding, and, between many other tasks, it involved deciding how the online and onsite components would complement each other, designing activities that could make soft skills visible and discussable, and ensuring that games and experiential tasks were meaningfully integrated rather than simply added as isolated moments of novelty. It also required attention to institutional and logistical details, such as calendars, credit recognition, selection of students, communication strategies, and mechanisms for evaluation.

Throughout this process, the initial conversation that spark this BIP remained a reference point and also our belief that experiential learning and games can provide powerful and motivating contexts for skills development. Also, a belief of the value of interdisciplinary and international collaboration, and a recognition that BIPs, as an emerging format, offer a unique opportunity to bring these elements together in a structured and intensive way, but also an amazing experience to our students and staff.

In retrospective, the path from that first exploratory dialogue to the fully designed Skills@Uni programme, that will be presented next, reveals that new initiatives often begin in informal exchanges. They draw strength from earlier pedagogical work and from networks of colleagues built over time. They become feasible when institutional frameworks, such as Erasmus, open a space in which existing ideas can be developed into concrete programmes. And they gain educational depth when interdisciplinary collaboration and experiential methods are used to create learning environments where students can practise, observe, and reflect on the abilities that universities seek to foster.

Skills@Uni hopes to be only one small example of this trajectory, in showing how a conversation about collaborating together, can eventually become an international blended programme grounded in shared pedagogical commitments and supported by a diverse partnership. The following chapters describe how this programme was structured, implemented, and evaluated.

Part II

Skills@Uni BIP: from Design to Development

Introduction

Part II of this book focuses on the actual design and implementation of the Skills@Uni BIP. It details the programme's objectives, structure, and activities and how all translated into an integrated and cohesive blended learning experience. It also presents the virtual component and the onsite component in detail in the hope of showing how specific tasks, tools, and collaborative dynamics were used to foster soft skills development in practice. In this sense, it aims to offer a structured example of a real BIP, providing the background that supported all its development and implementation.

Chapter 11

Overall Structure and Pedagogical Design of the Skills@Uni BIP

This chapter presents the overall structure and pedagogical design of the Skills@Uni BIP, offering a practical framework for educators who wish to understand, implement, or adapt similar initiatives in higher education.

Rather than describing the programme only at a conceptual level, this chapter translates its design into concrete, transferable elements. It outlines how the BIP was organised, the rationale behind its blended format, and the pedagogical principles that guided the selection of methods, activities, and learning outcomes. Particular attention is given to how soft skills development can be intentionally embedded into learning experiences through experiential, collaborative, and reflective approaches.

Title and General Orientation

Designing the Skills@Uni BIP began with two fundamental steps: defining a clear, meaningful title and establishing the overall orientation of the programme (BOX 1). These elements were not merely formalities. They set the tone, communicate the purpose, and guided all subsequent pedagogical and organisational decisions.

The title should be concise but informative, signalling both the thematic focus and the learning approach. In the case of *Skills@Uni: Developing soft skills through experiential learning at university*, the title tried to make it explicit what participants would learn (soft skills), how they would learn (experiential learning), and in which context (higher education). A well-crafted title can help attract the right participants and aligns expectations from the outset, which was one of our initial intentions.

Equally important was the programme's overall orientation. At this stage, it was important to clarify key questions: what was the main purpose of the BIP? who was it for? And what type of learning experience would it offer?

In Skills@Uni BIP, the orientation tried to be practice-driven and learner-centred. The programme was designed to move beyond traditional teaching, focusing instead on active engagement, real-world application, and intercultural collaboration. Establishing this orientation early on ensured coherence across all components of the BIP, from the choice of methods and activities to the structure of the whole programme.

BOX 1: Skills@Uni overall orientation.

Title: Skills@Uni: Developing soft skills through experiential learning at university

The Skills@Uni BIP is a five-day blended intensive programme hosted by the University of Madeira, designed to foster essential soft skills in higher education students and staff through experiential, gamified, and collaborative learning. It combines a preparatory virtual component with an immersive face-to-face week in Madeira Island, framed by a clear pedagogical progression from awareness and reflection to application and co-creation.

Target group: Staff and students from different fields and levels of study (Bachelor, Master, PhD), as well as instructors and other higher education professionals.

Field(s) of education: Psychology, Education, Communication, Business, Tourism, Sports, Motor Sciences.

Language of instruction: English (no formal certification required; B2 level recommended).

Investing time in defining the title and orientation provided a solid foundation for the entire programme, making later design decisions more consistent, purposeful, and aligned.

Priorities and Pedagogical Focus

After defining the title and overall orientation of the BIP, the next step was to clarify its priorities and pedagogical focus (BOX 2). This stage was essential for ensuring that the programme was not only coherent in its design but also aligned with broader educational goals and European priorities.

In this sense, it is important to begin the design of a BIP by identifying which thematic and strategic priorities the programme intends to address. Making these priorities explicit helps position the BIP within current higher education programmes and contributes to aligned priorities within the European Union agenda.

At the same time, it was important to define the pedagogical focus that would guide the learning experience. This involved deciding how participants would engage with content and with each other. Would the programme prioritise active learning? experiential approaches? collaborative or problem-based learning? how would reflection and critical thinking be integrated? These were some of the important questions we needed to address.

In the case of Skills@Uni, the pedagogical focus was strongly centred on experiential, interactive, gamified and learner-centred approaches. Soft skills should not be treated as abstract concepts, but as competencies developed through participation in meaningful tasks, group challenges, and reflective processes, and that was our focus.

BOX 2: European and institutional priorities of the Skills@Uni BIP.

The BIP was designed to respond to several European and institutional priorities, including:

- Education, inclusion, and diversity
- Effective communication and interpersonal skills
- Intercultural and interdisciplinary learning
- Critical thinking and creativity
- Innovative teaching and learning methods, including experiential and game-based learning.

In this sense, clearly articulating both priorities and pedagogical focus provided a bridge between high-level goals and practical implementation. It ensured that all activities, methods, and assessments were aligned with what the programme ultimately aimed to achieve.

Objectives of the Programme

Once the priorities and pedagogical focus were clearly defined, the next step was to translate them into concrete programme objectives. Objectives play a central role in guiding the design of a BIP, as they specify what participants are expected to develop, experience, and achieve throughout the programme.

At this stage, it is important to move from general intentions to effective goals. Well-defined objectives help ensure alignment between learning activities, teaching methods, and assessment strategies. They also make the programme more transparent for participants, allowing them to understand its purpose and what is expected from their engagement.

When designing the BIP, it was useful to consider multiple dimensions of development. Hence, objectives can address not only the acquisition of specific skills, but also personal growth, intercultural competence, and opportunities for collaboration

and networking. Importantly, these objectives should be interconnected and embedded across the programme, rather than treated as separate or isolated outcomes.

In Skills@Uni BIP, the objectives (BOX 3) aimed to reflect a balance between skill development and broader educational goals. They guided the creation of learning experiences that were interactive, reflective, and socially grounded, ensuring that participants could both practice and make sense of what they learned.

BOX 3: Objectives of the Skills@Uni BIP.

The Skills@Uni BIP has four main objectives:

- 1. Soft skills development**
 - Develop communication, teamwork, leadership, problem solving, and creativity through practical and interactive learning experiences.
- 2. Personal and professional growth**
 - Support participants' personal and professional development, especially those coming from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds.
- 3. Intercultural and interdisciplinary collaboration**
 - Promote collaboration across countries, disciplines, and roles (students and staff), enhancing inclusion, mutual respect, and the ability to work in diverse teams.
- 4. Networking and institutional collaboration**
 - Develop new partnerships and international networks between participants and higher education institutions (HEIs).

Therefore, clearly articulated objectives function as a roadmap for the entire programme, supporting coherent design and facilitating meaningful learning experiences.

Structure and Workload

After defining objectives, it became essential to organise the programme in a way that supported their achievement. The structure and workload of a BIP (BOX 4) imply not only logistical considerations, but also key pedagogical decisions that shape how participants will engage with the learning experience over time.

At this stage, it was important to determine how the programme would be distributed across virtual and physical components, how much time participants were expected to invest, and how learning activities were sequenced. In our opinion, a well-designed structure should create a clear progression, allowing participants to move from initial orientation and conceptual understanding to more active, applied, and collaborative forms of learning.

Workload should also be carefully balanced. It needs to be realistic, transparent, and aligned with the number of ECTS that will be awarded, ensuring that participants can engage meaningfully without being overwhelmed. Balancing synchronous and asynchronous activities, as well as individual and group tasks, was particularly important in our vision.

In the case of Skills@Uni, the combination of an almost “preparatory” online phase and an intensive onsite week allowed for both flexibility and depth. The virtual component supported initial engagement and shared understanding, while the face-to-face phase enabled immersive, experience-based learning.

Thinking deliberately about structure and workload helped ensure that the programme was both pedagogically coherent and practically feasible, enhancing participant engagement and overall effectiveness.

BOX 4: Overall structure and Workload of the Skills@Uni BIP.

The BIP adopts a blended structure combining an online phase and an onsite intensive week:

- Total ECTS awarded: 4
- **Virtual component:** Conducted before the mobility (March 19th to April 16th, 2026), focused on orientation, conceptual grounding, and online collaboration.
- **Physical component:** Five days in Madeira Island (April 20th to 24th, 2026), centred on experiential learning in natural and academic contexts.

In this perspective the blended format allowed participants to build a shared conceptual and relational base online before engaging in more intensive, experiential, and embodied activities that came after with the onsite component.

Methods and Learning Activities

Once the structure of the programme was defined, attention turned to the selection of methods and learning activities that would bring the pedagogical vision to life. This is where the programme became more concrete, since the objectives and priorities were translated into specific learning experiences.

At this stage, it was relevant to consider how participants would actively engage with the content, with each other, and with the learning environment. The choice of methods should be closely aligned with the programme's pedagogical focus, ensuring consistency between what was intended and what was experienced. In practice, this often meant prioritising active and participatory approaches over passive forms of teaching.

For us, a key principle in designing and selecting methods and activities was variety. Combining different formats, such as group work, experiential tasks, discussions, and short theoretical lectures, helped maintain engagement and addressed diverse learning preferences. Equally important was the intentional integration of reflection, allowing participants to make sense of their experiences and connect them to broader concepts and contexts.

In Skills@Uni, methods were strongly grounded in experiential learning and gamification, encouraging participants to learn by doing, interacting, and reflecting (BOX 5). Activities were designed not only to engage but also to challenge participants, prompting them to apply soft skills in dynamic and often unpredictable situations. This design followed key principles of experiential learning such as concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. In

practice, participants were invited to experience, reflect, conceptualise, and apply soft skills in varied contexts during the programme.

BOX 5: Methods and learning activities of the Skills@Uni BIP.

The programme's methodology relies mainly on experiential learning and gamified approaches, integrating:

- Group dynamics and ice breaker activities
- Game based learning sessions
- Experiential tasks in natural and cultural environments
- Field visits to local organisations and cultural sites
- Workshops and short lectures
- Group discussions and guided reflections.

Therefore, careful selection and sequencing of methods and activities was crucial. It ensured that learning was not only engaging but also meaningful, supporting the development and transfer of skills beyond the immediate context of the programme.

Expected Learning Outcomes

Following the design of methods and learning activities, it was important to clearly define the expected learning outcomes of the programme. These outcomes specify what participants should know, be able to do, and reflect upon by the end of the BIP, providing a concrete reference point for both students and professors.

At this stage, it was important to ensure that learning outcomes were directly aligned with the programme's objectives, pedagogical focus, and activities. Well-formulated outcomes make the learning process more transparent, helping participants understand the purpose of each activity and how it contributes to their development. They also play a key role in guiding assessment and evaluation strategies.

In Skills@Uni BIP, the expected learning outcomes (BOX 6) reflected both individual and collective development. They capture not only the acquisition of specific

skills but also the ability to apply them in real-life situations and to continue developing them beyond the programme.

BOX 6: Expected Learning Outcomes of the Skills@Uni BIP.

By the end of the BIP, participants are expected to:

- Demonstrate enhanced soft skills relevant for academic and professional success, especially communication, teamwork, leadership, problem solving, and creativity.
- Show increased intercultural awareness and the ability to collaborate in international and multidisciplinary teams.
- Build new international networks and partnerships with peers and staff from different HEIs.
- Recognise their own strengths and challenges regarding soft skills, and identify strategies for further development.

So, clearly defined learning outcomes provided a shared framework that connected objectives, activities, and assessment, ensuring coherence and support to the development of meaningful learning experiences.

Institutional and Partnership Framework

The final step in designing the BIP was to establish its institutional and partnership framework. While often seen as an organisational aspect, this component can have strong pedagogical implications, as it directly shapes the diversity, scope, and richness of the learning experience.

At this stage, it was important to identify partner institutions, define roles and responsibilities, and consider how collaboration would be integrated into both the design and implementation of the programme. Strong partnerships contribute to interdisciplinary perspectives, intercultural exchange, and the creation of meaningful learning environments that extend beyond a single institution.

In this sense, it was also important to consider internal collaboration within the host institution. Involving different departments or areas of expertise can enhance the programme's quality and better support its objectives, particularly in initiatives focused on transversal skills such as communication, teamwork, and creativity, and that was one of our key components.

In Skills@Uni, the partnership framework brought together multiple European universities (BOX 7), enabling a diverse and international group of participants and different departments within the host institution (Psychology and Sports and Physical Education), reflecting the programme's interdisciplinary nature.

This structure not only supported mobility and cooperation but also enriched the pedagogical experience by exposing participants to different academic cultures and perspectives.

BOX 7: Partnership of the Skills@Uni BIP.

The Skills@Uni BIP is organised by the University of Madeira, in collaboration with:

- University of Parma (Italy)
- Masaryk University (Czech Republic)
- University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (Italy)
- University of Zaragoza (Spain)

Therefore, a well-defined institutional and partnership framework ensures that the BIP is both feasible and impactful, strengthening its educational value while fostering long-term collaboration and network building.

Chapter 12

The Online Component of the Skills@Uni BIP

The online component of a BIP plays a crucial role in setting the foundation for the entire learning experience. It can be considered a preliminary or almost “secondary” phase, but in fact it should be designed as an integral part of the pedagogical process, preparing participants both cognitively and socially for the intensive onsite week, or if after the physical component as a consolidation process.

This chapter presents the structure and learning path of the virtual component of the Skills@Uni BIP, offering an example that educators can adapt to their own contexts. It hopes to illustrate how an online phase can be used not only to introduce key concepts, but also to foster engagement, build a sense of community, and encourage early reflection on core learning themes.

The design follows a structured progression organised into thematic topics, each combining guided tasks, interactive forums, and study materials. This approach helped participants gradually deepen their understanding while actively contributing to the learning environment.

Therefore, this chapter provides a practical example of how to design an online learning journey that, we believe, is coherent, interactive, and aligned with the overall objectives of a BIP. It highlights how to balance synchronous and asynchronous elements, how to use digital platforms effectively, and how to create continuity between the virtual and onsite components.

Aims, Tools and overall structure of the Virtual Component

Designing the virtual component of a BIP begins with clearly defining its aims and selecting the tools that will support them. This step is essential to ensure that the online phase is purposeful, engaging, and fully integrated into the overall learning experience.

From a pedagogical perspective and in our opinion, the online component should fulfil several key functions. It should introduce core concepts, stimulate early reflection, and create structured opportunities for interaction among participants. Equally important, it should support the development of a learning community, helping participants feel comfortable, visible, and connected before the onsite phase begins.

In parallel, it is important to make intentional choices about the digital tools and platforms to be used. These should be accessible, easy to navigate, and capable of supporting different types of engagement, including discussion, collaboration, and content sharing. A combination of synchronous and asynchronous tools was particularly effective, as it allowed flexibility while maintaining moments of real-time connection.

In the case of the Skills@Uni BIP, the virtual component was structured over a four-week period (from March 19th to April 16th, 2026) and organised into four thematic topics. Each topic followed a consistent structure that included introductory guidance, interactive forums, and study materials such as videos, readings, and self-assessment tools. Participants engaged primarily through Microsoft Teams, complemented by synchronous sessions (via Teams) at key moments, such as the kick-off meeting and final recap.

This structured yet flexible design supported a gradual learning progression. Participants move from initial orientation and self-awareness (Topic 1) to deeper exploration of key soft skills (Topics 2 and 3), and finally to integration and preparation for the onsite experience (Topic 4). Next the virtual component topics of the Skills@Uni

BIP are presented. For each topic there was a set of prepared introductory material, interactive forums, and study materials, each presented below.

Topic 1: Orientation and Introduction to Soft Skills

The first topic of the virtual component served as the entry point into the programme, focusing on orientation, community building, and initial engagement with the concept of soft skills (BOX 8). At this stage, the main goal was not depth, but connection and awareness, helping participants become familiar with the learning environment, the group, and the central themes of the BIP.

BOX 8: Introduction to topic 1.

During this topic, the activities are designed to help you get oriented in the course and begin reflecting on your own soft skills profile. You will work individually and with your peers and start discussing these skills and their importance in your educational and professional life. So, in here, you'll get started in the course by introducing yourself, exploring your soft skills, and reflecting on their importance in your studies and future career. You'll complete a short self-assessment, take part in a few discussion forums and review some materials.

Take this opportunity to learn more about yourself and begin building connections with your classmates, it is the first step in this shared learning journey!

Thus, topic 1 was designed to introduce participants to the programme, the group, and the concept of soft skills. To support this initial stage, it brought together a set of complementary activities that promoted orientation, interaction, self-awareness, and early conceptual reflection. Together, these components helped create a supportive online environment and established the foundations for later learning.

In this line of thought, the topic began with a live synchronous session that marked the official opening of the programme. This moment was used to welcome participants, present the structure and objectives of the BIP, and clarify expectations.

Pedagogically, it helped reduce uncertainty and created an initial sense of belonging, setting a positive and interactive tone for the learning experience.

Forum 1 – “Meet the team”

This activity (BOX 9) focused on building social presence in the online environment. By sharing personal and academic information and interacting with peers, participants began to recognise each other as members of a learning community. This was an important first step in fostering trust, visibility, and openness within the group.

BOX 9: Task description for Forum 1.

Use this forum to briefly introduce yourself to your colleagues and start building our learning community.

- Please share your name, country, university, one hobby, and one thing about you that the team should know so that we can know you better or be “different” make a video introduction and post the link so we can see it!
- Do not forget also to say “hi” to your other colleagues!

Forum 2 – “My soft skills strengths and challenges”

This activity (BOX 10) invited participants to engage in individual reflection through self-assessment. By identifying one strength and one area for improvement, they began to develop self-awareness regarding their own soft skills profile. The task also introduced a metacognitive dimension that would continue throughout the programme.

BOX 10: Task description for Forum 2.

This forum invites you to reflect on your own soft skills and to begin an open conversation with your colleagues.

- So, first, complete the self-assessment available at: <https://www.vetgps.eu/questionnaire-open/>
- This self-assessment will give you an overview of your soft skills which will help you to identify areas to improve (or not) that you may not have considered before.
- After completing this self-assessment share one soft skill that is a strength of your profile and one soft skill that you face some challenges with. Do you agree with this self-assessment score? Or not? And what surprised you the most in this assessment?
- Do not forget to interact with your colleagues!

Study materials for topic 1

The study materials (BOX 11) provided the first shared conceptual grounding of the topic. Through selected videos and readings, participants were introduced to the meaning and relevance of soft skills in contemporary academic and professional contexts. These resources helped broaden understanding and challenge the tendency to view such skills as secondary or vague.

BOX 11: Task description for topic 1 study materials.

In here you will find a set of materials that will help you to deepen your understanding of what soft or human skills are, and why they are increasingly important in today's digital and rapidly changing world.

Video (s):

- "Stop saying SOFT Skills" by Simon Sinek
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vPUC-H7UzI>

Reading (s):

- Article: Kravchenko, A., Babina, S., Krasilnikova, O., Krokhmal, N., & Horpynych, O. (2025). Soft skills in the digital age. *Sociología y Tecnociencia*, 15(2), 25–47.

Forum 3 – “Topic 1 study materials recap”

This forum (BOX 12) offered a space to consolidate and share key ideas from Topic 1 on soft skills. It invited participants to briefly revisit the study materials, reflect on what they found most relevant or thought-provoking, and connect these ideas with their own academic or professional experiences.

BOX 12: Task description for Forum 3.

This forum invites you to critically reflect on Simon Sinek’s statement that there is “nothing soft” about soft skills.

After watching the video, share whether you agree or disagree with this idea and explain why, using clear arguments. Then describe at least one concrete situation where you used “human skills” and that you can share with your colleagues.

- After sharing your view give feedback to at least two different colleagues.
- When you respond to your colleagues, focus on building on their ideas in a respectful way.

Overall, in topic 1, through the combination of a welcoming live session, community-building forums, guided self-assessment, and targeted study materials, students were able to situate themselves in the programme, begin to articulate their own soft skills profile, and recognise the centrality of these competencies in academic and professional contexts. By the end of this first topic, participants were not only more familiar with the virtual environment and the group but had also taken their first steps in critically reflecting on the so-called “soft” or human skills and relating them to concrete experiences in their own lives. In this sense, Topic 1 established the relational, reflective, and conceptual foundations upon which the subsequent topics could build more in-depth exploration and practice.

Topic 2: Communication, Teamwork, and Leadership

The second topic of the virtual component (BOX 13) deepened participants' understanding of three interconnected soft skills: communication, teamwork, and leadership. At this stage, the goal was to move beyond awareness and begin exploring how these skills operate in practice, both in academic settings and in everyday life. The topic invited participants to connect theoretical concepts with their own experiences and to develop a more critical and reflective perspective on collaborative work.

BOX 13: Introduction to Topic 2.

Welcome to Topic 2 of our Blended Intensive Programme! This topic's focus is on three key soft skills, namely communication, teamwork, and leadership. Over the course of this topic, you will follow a self-paced learning giving you freedom to learn completely at your own pace and explore how clear communication builds trust, teamwork enhances collective success, and leadership inspires collaboration.

Through short activities and reflections, you'll connect theory with practice and discover how these skills can strengthen both your personal and professional relationships. Get ready to engage, reflect, and grow together!

Thus, topic 2 was designed to support participants in exploring communication, teamwork, and leadership not as isolated competencies, but as interdependent skills that shape how people work together. To achieve this, the topic brought together a set of activities that encouraged norm-building, critical reflection on group dynamics, engagement with study materials, and application to realistic scenarios. Together, these components aimed to help participants deepen their understanding and begin developing practical strategies for more effective collaboration.

Forum 4 – "BIP team rules"

This activity (BOX 14) focused on co-creating shared norms for respectful and effective collaboration. By inviting each participant to propose one concrete team rule,

the forum supported collective responsibility and helped establish a culture of mutual respect within the group. This is particularly important in diverse and international teams, where expectations around communication and collaboration may vary.

BOX 14: Task description for Forum 4.

In this forum, each of you is invited to propose one clear, concrete “Team Rule” that you believe will help our group work respectfully, efficiently, and inclusively.

Think of guidelines such as how we listen to each other, how we give feedback, how we use digital tools, or how we manage conflict.

After proposing one team rule give feedback to at least two colleagues from a different organization than yours!

Forum 5 – “Communicate, collaborate and lead!”

This activity (BOX 15) used a short video as a catalyst for reflection on group dynamics and individual responses. Participants were encouraged to think about their own patterns of behaviour in teams, including how they communicate, share responsibility, and respond when workload is not evenly distributed. The forum also introduced the concept of leadership as a response to group challenges, rather than a fixed role.

BOX 15: Task description for Forum 5.

In this activity, you are invited to watch a short video.

The images and metaphors in the video will serve as a starting point to reflect on how you usually communicate, collaborate and assume responsibility in teams, and on what you may want to change in your future.

- So, start this activity by watching this short video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6fbE52YDEjU>
- In many teams, some members work more and others less. After watching the video, think about what happens in your own groups (at university, work, or other contexts) and answer: when you notice that some members are working much more and others much less, what do you feel about that situation? What you usually tend to do (or not do) when you see this work imbalance? If you were a team leader in this situation, how could you respond in an efficient and respectful manner?

Study materials for Topic 2

The study materials (BOX 16) provided conceptual grounding on communication, leadership, and teamwork through carefully selected videos and academic readings. These resources introduce key ideas, such as the role of body language in communication, the importance of teaching communication skills, and what makes teams effective and served as a shared reference for further discussion and reflection.

BOX 16: Task description for topic 2 study materials.

This topic study materials focus on how people communicate, how they lead, and how they work in teams. Together, these materials will help you think about what makes relationships and group work more effective.

Video (s):

- "Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are - Amy Cuddy"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ks-Mh1QhMc>
- "Let's talk! The importance of teaching communication skills"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7gV-JhvOGO>

Reading (s):

- Article: Wojtaszek, H., Wójcik-Czerniawska, A., Mastalerz, M., & Stępień, P. (2024). The role of consistency in verbal and nonverbal communication: Enhancing trust and team effectiveness in management. *European Research Studies Journal*, 27(3), 621–636.
- Article: Aquino, J. M. D., & San Luis, C. P. (2025). The role of student leadership in academic achievement: A pathway to framework development. *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education*, 14(5), 3675–3685.
<https://doi.org/10.11591/ijere.v14i5.34569>
- Article: Zhang, W., Sjoerds, Z., & Hommel, B. (2020). Metacontrol of human creativity: The neurocognitive mechanisms of convergent and divergent thinking. *NeuroImage*, 210, 116572. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2020.116572>

Forum 6 – "Topic 2 study materials reflection"

This activity (BOX 17) invited participants to apply what they have learned to a realistic and relatable scenario: a shared-apartment conflict among university students. By analysing the fictional case study, participants practiced identifying communication breakdowns, recognising leadership challenges, and proposing concrete strategies for collaboration. This supported the transition from conceptual understanding to practical problem-solving.

BOX 17: Task description for Forum 6.

After studying the materials read the following fictional case study and reflect upon the situation:

Fictional Case Study

"Four flatmates, all university students, share an apartment near campus: Alex (very organized, values planning), Maya (easy going, hates conflict), Lena (often stressed, juggling work and study), and Daniel (social, frequently invites friends over). At the beginning of the semester, they agreed informally that "everyone cleans up after themselves" and "we split costs fairly," but they never wrote any rules or created a clear system. Over time, problems start to appear. Dishes are often left in the sink "for later," rubbish sometimes overflows, and basic items (toilet paper, coffee, cleaning products) run out without anyone taking responsibility to replace them. Alex becomes increasingly frustrated because he feels he is the only one who regularly cleans the kitchen and bathroom. He starts leaving passive aggressive notes on the fridge ("Please wash your dishes TODAY" or "This is not a hotel"). He also keeps a mental record of who is "failing," especially Daniel, who often cooks late at night with his friends and leaves dirty pans for the next morning. Maya notices the tension but avoids talking about it. When Alex complains, she usually says, "Relax, it's not such a big deal, we'll sort it out." She sometimes does a big cleaning session to calm things down, but she does not want to "take sides." Lena feels guilty because she knows she sometimes leaves a mess when she comes home exhausted from work. At the same time, she feels irritated by Alex's notes and by the feeling that she is being judged. She thinks, "I'm doing my best; I don't need more pressure at home." Daniel, for his part, does not fully understand why Alex is so upset. He believes that "a student apartment is always a bit messy" and that as long as things are roughly okay, it's fine. When he sees the notes, he jokes about them with Maya and Lena, saying things like, "The cleaning police were here again." He often promises to clean "later" but then forgets or postpones it. One evening, Alex comes home to find the kitchen particularly dirty after one of Daniel's dinners. He has an important exam the next day and had planned to study at the kitchen table. Instead, he spends an hour cleaning while feeling angry and disrespected. When Daniel comes back, Alex confronts him in front of Maya and Lena, speaking quickly and in a raised voice: "I'm tired of cleaning after you! You never respect our home!" Daniel reacts defensively: "That's not true, and you're exaggerating. You act like you're our boss." The discussion becomes heated. Each person brings up old examples: who paid for what, who cleaned when, who was noisy at night. People interrupt each other, and no one really listens. After this argument, they start avoiding each other. They still share the apartment, but common spaces are used less, and the atmosphere feels tense and uncomfortable. A few days later, the university counselling service offers a workshop on "Communication, Teamwork, and Leadership in Daily Life." Lena suggests they use this as a chance to rethink how they are managing the shared apartment. They agree to sit down together after the workshop and try to talk about the situation in a different way, but they are unsure how to start the conversation and how to avoid another fight."

- After reading this shared apartment case, how would you analyse the way the four flatmates communicate and share responsibilities, and what practical examples of more effective communication, leadership, and collaboration would you recommend to help them resolve the conflict and improve their daily life together?
- After sharing your response, give feedback to at least two different colleagues!

Overall, Topic 2 was built on the foundation established in Topic 1 by encouraging participants to move from self-awareness to interpersonal awareness, and from individual reflection to collaborative analysis. This structure supported deeper engagement with soft skills in relational and applied contexts, preparing participants for the experiential and team-based activities of the onsite phase.

Topic 3: Problem-Solving and Creativity

The third topic (BOX 18) of the virtual component invited participants to explore problem-solving and creativity as essential soft skills for academic and professional success. At this stage, the focus shifted toward experimentation, imagination, and divergent thinking. Participants were encouraged to look at challenges from new perspectives, engage with creative tasks, and connect these experiences with their own learning and development.

BOX 18: Introduction to Topic 3.

This topic is an invitation for you to explore how you think, imagine, and solve problems—both in your studies and in everyday life. You'll be encouraged to experiment with different ways of looking at challenges, share your ideas with classmates, and see how creativity and problem-solving are major assets for your academic and professional development.

Hence, topic 3 was designed to support participants in understanding creativity and problem-solving not as innate talents, but as skills that can be developed through practice, reflection, and openness to new approaches. To achieve this, the topic combined playful and creative tasks with more conceptual engagement, encouraging participants to both experience and analyse creativity in action. Together, these components helped participants develop a more expansive view of how creative thinking can support learning and innovation.

Forum 7 – "What do you see?"

This activity (BOX 19) focused on fostering divergent thinking and creative transformation. Inspired by the book *What Do You See?*, participants were invited to reinterpret a photograph of Madeira's rocky beaches ("calhaus") and transform it into something entirely new. This open-ended task encouraged experimentation, risk-taking, and the freedom to think beyond conventional boundaries.

BOX 19: Task description for Forum 7.

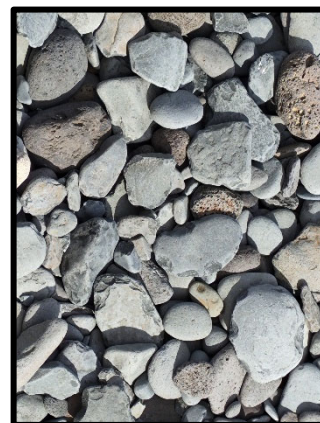
For this activity, you are invited to look at the world with "creative lenses." Inspired by the book "What Do You See?" by Barney Saltzberg and Jamie Lee Curtis.

Below (*on the side*) you have a photo from Madeira rocky beaches which is known in portuguese as "calhaus".

Your challenge is to use this photo as a starting point to create something new and unexpected.

Transform this original picture into a different idea, story, or object and think as far outside the box as you can. You might draw on top of the image, remix it digitally, build something inspired by it or turn it into a short story, poem, meme, or mini video.

When you're done, upload your creation to the forum (as a photo, a link to a video, or another format that fits your idea) and briefly explain what you "saw" in the image and how it inspired your work.



Forum 8 – "Do not fade, please!"

This activity (BOX 20) used the short film *Alike* as a catalyst for personal reflection on creativity, routine, and resilience. Participants were invited to recall moments when their own "colour" faded due to pressure or monotony, and to reflect on how they regained it. This supported emotional connection to the topic and encouraged participants to think about the conditions that supported or hinder creative thinking in their own lives.

BOX 20: Task description for Forum 8.

Start this activity by watching the short film “Alike” using this link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDHlyrfMJ_U

- After watching it think of a moment in your life when your “color” started to fade because everything felt too routine, too demanding, or too focused on results. Then remember another moment when that color came back a little or a lot. How did you bring your “color” back?
- Talk about this experience and how did you regain your creativity back or how you think other people or colleagues can do it too!
- You can answer in writing, through filming, collages, etc. “The sky is the limit!” so use your imagination.

Study materials for Topic 3

The study materials (BOX 21) introduced participants to research and perspectives on creativity and problem-solving in educational and professional contexts. Through videos and academic readings, participants explored questions such as whether schools support or limit creativity, how play relates to learning, and how creative ideas emerge. These materials provided a conceptual foundation that complemented the experiential activities.

BOX 21: Task description for topic 3 study materials.

This topic's study materials invite you to explore problem solving and creativity as key soft skills for succeeding not only at university, but also in your future professional life. Among the resources, you will watch a classic yet still very relevant TED Talk by Sir Ken Robinson and as you go through the videos and readings, pay special attention to how these ideas connect to your own soft skills development: when you feel free to experiment, when you feel pushed to "play safe," and how creative thinking could help you face real challenges in your studies or future work.

Video (s):

- "Do schools kill creativity" a Ted talk by Sir Ken Robinson
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG9CE55wbtY>
- "What if PLAY is actually better than practice" by John Spencer
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XddCzIP7Sgo>
- "Where good ideas come from?" by Steven Johnson
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NugRZGDbPFU>

Reading (s):

- Article: Li, S., & Yu, S. (2025). Transforming higher education: for the knowledge economy: Enhancing creative thinking and problem-solving skills through collaborative learning. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 57, Article 101853.
- Article: Kapoor, H., Patston, T., Cropley, D. H., Rezaei, S., & Kaufman, J. C. (2025). Creativity predicts standardized educational outcomes beyond GPA and personality. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 56, Article 101751.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2024.101751>
- Article: Zhang, W., Sjoerds, Z., & Hommel, B. (2020). Metacontrol of human creativity: The neurocognitive mechanisms of convergent and divergent thinking. *NeuroImage*, 210, 116572. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2020.116572>

Forum 9 – "Topic 3 study materials recap"

This activity (BOX 22) encouraged participants to connect the study materials with their own learning journey. Rather than summarizing content, participants were asked to identify what resonated with them personally and to consider how these ideas might apply to their academic or professional development. This supported meaning-making and the integration of new perspectives into participants' existing understanding.

BOX 22: Task description for Forum 9.

Choose one of topic 4 study materials.

- In your own words, what is the main idea that stayed with you the most, and why do you think it resonated with you? How can you apply it to your own academic or professional path?
- After writing your answer reply to at least two colleagues by commenting on something you found interesting in their post.

Overall, Topic 3 encouraged participants to engage with creativity and problem-solving in both playful and analytical ways. By combining creative production, personal reflection, and conceptual engagement, the topic supported a deeper and more embodied understanding of these skills, preparing participants for the experiential and collaborative challenges of the onsite phase.

Topic 4 – Virtual Learning Recap

The fourth and final topic of the virtual component (BOX 23) served as a moment of consolidation, integration, and transition. At this stage, participants were invited to review and reflect on their online learning journey, to bring together key insights from the previous topics, and to prepare for the intensive onsite phase in Madeira. This topic also included a synchronous session that provided closure to the virtual component and created a bridge to the face-to-face experience.

BOX 23: Introduction to Topic 4.

Welcome to the final topic of the virtual learning!

- As we reach the last stage of our online component, this topic is dedicated to reviewing and consolidating all the main topics explored throughout the virtual learning journey. You will revisit key materials and engage in brief activities that will help to summarize and reflect on your learning journey so far.
- We will also meet for our synchronous live session on April 16th via Zoom/Teams, accessible through Moodle, to wrap up the virtual phase and look ahead to our time together in Madeira.
- Take this topic as an opportunity to consolidate knowledge, share insights, and get ready for what's next!

Therefore, topic 4 was designed to support participants in making sense of their online experience and in transitioning from virtual to physical engagement. Rather than introducing new content, the topic focused on reflection, synthesis, and preparation. It combined individual reflective tasks with peer-led content sharing and a final synchronous session that addressed both learning consolidation and logistical preparation for the onsite week.

The live final session marked the closure of the online phase and served multiple functions. It provided an opportunity to review key learning from the virtual component, and to address practical questions related to travel, schedules, and materials. Pedagogically, it helped create continuity between the online and face-to-face phases and reinforced the sense of group cohesion before participants met in person.

Forum 10 – "My 'Aha' Moment!"

This activity (BOX 24) invited participants to identify and articulate the most meaningful moment of their online learning experience. Rather than summarizing content, participants were asked to focus on personal relevance and connection, explaining how a particular material influenced their thinking or practice. This supported reflective learning and helped participants recognize their own development.

BOX 24: Task description for Forum 10.

In this topic, the goal is to actively look back at what you have learned so far and to bring it to the present and the future.

- Thus, choose one course material that stood out to you the most. It might be something that inspired you, challenged your beliefs, or made you see soft skills in a new way.
- After choosing it write here why that particular video or reading catch your attention? What idea or moment stayed with you, and why? How did it influence the way you think about or use your soft skills in real life (for example, in communication, teamwork, leadership, problem solving, or creativity)?
- The goal here is not to summarise the content, but to show how these materials connected with you and may help you in the present and your future development.

Forum 11 – "Soft skills in Madeira"

This activity (BOX 25) shifted the focus from reflection to anticipation. Participants were invited to express their expectations, feelings, or thoughts about the upcoming onsite experience in a creative way. This open-ended task helped maintain engagement, supported emotional preparation, and allowed participants to share their mood and readiness with the group.

BOX 25: Task description for Forum 11.

Your task in this forum is to create one post that expresses your "Madeira soft skills mood" in a creative way.

You can choose any format you prefer (e.g. short text, photo, drawing, meme, or video). Do not forget to add a brief subtitle (one or two sentences) to explain how it represents your feelings or experiences related to practising your soft skills in Madeira.

Study materials for topic 4

Unlike previous topics, the study materials in Topic 4 were proposed by the students themselves in Forum 12. This shift in responsibility supported learner autonomy and peer learning, while also creating a shared resource that reflected the

group's diverse interests and perspectives. Participants took on the role of content knowledge providers.

Forum 12 – “My study recommendations

Thus, in Forum 12 students become “professors” by being them to actual research, choose and share key materials that they believed would be learning resources on soft skills for their peers (BOX 26).

Box 26: Task description for Forum 12.

So, it's your turn to recommend!

- Share at least one video, reading, or other material about soft skills that you found insightful or thought provoking and that were not shared before in this learning programme.
- Post your recommendation in the forum with a short note explaining why you chose it.

Then, explore at least two of your colleagues' suggestions and share your feedback or reflections on what you learned from their choices.

The topic concluded with a reflective writing task, an essay (BOX 27), that asked participants to look back on their learning journey and articulate what they knew, discovered, and found surprising.

BOX 27: Reflective essay on the virtual component.

To wrap up the virtual component, this reflection is your chance to hit “pause” and make sense of what you’ve done and learned so far. In a short essay from 1000 to 1500 words please reflect on: one thing you already knew about soft skills before starting this programme; one thing you discovered or learned about soft skills during the online phase and one thing that surprised you or made you see soft skills differently after completing the virtual component.

Be as honest as you feel comfortable: you can write about doubts, difficulties, moments when things did not go as planned, or small “aha” moments when something finally clicked. This is not about giving the “right” answer, but about capturing your own learning journey in your own words.

Overall, Topic 4 brought the virtual component to a meaningful close by consolidating learning, encouraging personal reflection, and preparing participants for the transition to the onsite phase. This structure not only supported cognitive closure but also strengthened emotional readiness and group connection, setting the stage for deeper and more collaborative engagement in Madeira.

Chapter 13

The Onsite Week: Experiential Learning in Madeira

The onsite component of the BIP represented the transition from virtual preparation to an immersive and an experiential learning onsite. This chapter presents the structure and pedagogical design of the five-day intensive week in Madeira (Portugal), illustrating how experiential learning can be intentionally organised to support soft skills development through real-world contexts, cultural engagement, and collaborative challenges.

Unlike the online phase, which focused on building conceptual understanding and initial connections, the onsite week prioritised action, interaction, and reflection in place-based and socially rich environments. Participants moved through a carefully designed sequence of activities that combined short lectures, workshops, field visits, and project-based learning, all set within the cultural and natural context of Madeira Island in Portugal.

Thus, this chapter offers both a descriptive account of the Skills@Uni onsite programme and a practical template for designing similar intensive experiences. It highlights how each day can be structured around a specific pedagogical focus, how different types of activities can be combined to maintain engagement and support learning, and how the physical environment itself becomes an active part of the educational process.

The onsite week was not simply a series of scheduled activities. It was a deliberate learning journey that progressed from connection and orientation, through active collaboration and discovery, to synthesis, presentation, and reflection. This

progression supported participants in experiencing soft skills in action, rather than only discussing them conceptually.

Aims and Structure of the Onsite Component

Designing the onsite component of the BIP required careful consideration of how physical presence, shared activities, and real-world contexts could enhance learning in ways that online formats could not. The aims of the onsite phase went beyond content delivery, in fact they focus on creating conditions for experiential learning, intercultural exchange, and the application of skills in dynamic and often unpredictable situations.

We believe that from a pedagogical perspective, the onsite week should support several key functions. It should provide opportunities for participants to actively practice soft skills in collaborative and authentic contexts. It should create moments for cultural learning and connection to the place, recognising that learning happens not only in classrooms but also in gardens, museums, restaurants, and streets. It should foster deeper interpersonal relationships, building on the connections established online and strengthening the learning community through shared experiences.

At the same time, there was a need to structure the week in a way that we believed balanced intensity with reflection, activity with rest, and structure with flexibility. A well-designed onsite component, in our opinion, included varied formats, such as lectures, workshops, field visits, and independent work, and allowed time for both guided activities and autonomous group development.

In the Skills@Uni BIP, the onsite week took place over five days in Madeira Island (from April 20th–24th, 2026). Each day was organised around a specific pedagogical focus and combined different types of learning activities. The structure moved progressively from initial connection and team-building (Day 1), through active skill

practice and cultural discovery (Days 2 and 3), to project presentation and evaluation (Day 4), and finally to reflection and future application (Day 5).

The main learning formats included short lectures that introduced key concepts or frameworks, workshops that supported project development and collaborative work, cultural and field visits that connected learning with local contexts, and a Project Lab that run throughout the week, allowing teams to co-create outputs that demonstrated their learning.

Defining clear aims and having a structure of the onsite week ensured that the programme was both pedagogically coherent and practically manageable. It also helped participants understand the purpose of each activity and how the different components fit together to support their overall development.

Day-by-Day Programme

The onsite week was organised into five days, each with a clear thematic focus and a combination of activities designed to support experiential learning, collaboration, and reflection. Below is the detailed structure of each day, presented in a way that can serve both as a programme for participants and as a template for educators.

Day 1 – Connecting, Collaborating, and Teaming Up

The first day of the onsite week (BOX 28) focused on establishing connection, building trust, and introducing the Project Lab that would run throughout the week. Participants transition from the online environment to physical presence, met face-to-face for the first time, and began working together in teams. The day combined formal academic input with guided cultural exploration, using the city of Funchal as a learning space.

BOX 28: Day 1 onsite programme.

Morning

- 09:00–09:30 – Registration and welcoming the team
Meeting point: Colégio dos Jesuítas, Rua dos Ferreiros, Funchal.
- 09:30–10:00 – Opening session: welcoming participants (Room Pátio I).
- 10:00–10:30 – Lecture: "The role of self-efficacy for educational success" (Professor Ricardo Fueyo Díaz, University of Zaragoza).
- 10:30–11:00 – Coffee break.
- 11:00–12:30 – Workshop 1 – Project Lab "Kick-off" (Room Pátio I).
- 12:30 – Welcoming lunch at Restaurant "A Tipografia" (Castanheiro Boutique Hotel).

Afternoon

- 14:30–16:30 – Guided and gamified cultural/social visit to Funchal city (meeting point: Colégio dos Jesuítas).
- 16:30–18:00 – Independent and autonomous group work (Project Lab).

Thus, day 1 created the foundation for the rest of the week by helping participants feel welcomed, oriented, and ready to collaborate. The combination of academic input, structured teamwork, and playful cultural discovery supported both cognitive and social engagement.

Day 2 – Soft Skills in Action: Learning by Doing.

The second day (BOX 29) shifted the focus toward active practice and experiential learning. Participants engaged with contemporary perspectives on teamwork, continued developing their projects, and experienced learning in a natural and cultural environment.

BOX 29: Day 2 onsite programme.

Morning

- 09:00–09:30 – Registration and morning check-in (Colégio dos Jesuítas).
- 10:00–10:30 – Lecture: "AI-enabled teamworking" (Professor Francesco Zanichelli, University of Parma, Room Pátio II).
- 10:30–11:00 – Coffee break.
- 11:00–12:30 – Workshop 2 – Project Lab "Developing team projects" (Room Pátio II).

Afternoon

- 14:30–16:30 – Workshop 3 – Experiential learning in action, Monte Palace Garden. Meeting point at 14:00: Madeira Cable Car launch platform (Funchal city centre).
 - Guided visit at Monte Palace Garden at 14:30.
- 16:30–18:00 – Independent and autonomous group work.

Hence, day 2 strengthened participants' ability to collaborate in teams while integrating digital perspectives on teamwork with real experiences in a rich natural and cultural setting.

Day 3 – Discovering, Cooperating, and Co-Creating

The third day (BOX 30) took participants beyond the city and into the broader landscape and communities of Madeira. Through a full day of cultural and social visit to the west side of the island, participants engaged in cooperative activities, discovered local culture, and practiced soft skills in unfamiliar and dynamic contexts. This day highlighted the importance of adaptability, teamwork, and place-based learning.

BOX 30: Day 3 onsite programme.

Morning and Afternoon

- 08:30–09:00 – Registration and morning check-in (meeting point to be confirmed).
- 09:00–17:00 – Cultural and social visit to the west side of Madeira: cooperative and social activities.
 - Departure from Funchal at 9:00, arrival at 17:00 (expected).
 - Lunch at Restaurant "Polo Norte" in Porto Moniz.
- 17:00–18:00 – Independent and autonomous group work.

Therefore, day 3 invited participants to step outside their comfort zones and experience collaboration in real-world, place-based contexts. The extended field visit supported deeper interpersonal connection and provided rich material for later reflection and project development.

Day 4 – Project Showcase

The fourth day (BOX 31) centred on making learning visible. Teams finalised their Project Lab outputs, prepared presentations, and shared their work with the group. This day emphasised synthesis, communication, and peer feedback, while also celebrating the collaborative achievements of the week. The farewell dinner provided a moment of social connection and closure before the final day.

BOX 31: Day 4 onsite programme.

Morning

- 09:00–09:30 – Registration and morning check-in (Colégio dos Jesuítas).
- 09:30–11:30 – Workshop 4 – Project Lab "Final touches" (Room Pátio II).
- 10:30–11:00 – Coffee break.
- 11:00–12:30 – Workshop 5 – Project presentation Lab "Designing the story" (Room Pátio II).

Afternoon

- 14:30–16:30 – Skills@Uni project showcase: team presentations (Room Pátio II).
- 16:30–18:00 – Feedback and evaluation session.

Evening

- 19:00 – Farewell dinner at Restaurant "O Lagar" (traditional Madeiran food, Câmara de Lobos).
 - Meeting point at 18:15.

Thus, day 4 provided a structured space for participants to demonstrate their learning, receive constructive feedback, and celebrate their collective efforts. The project showcase was both a learning activity and a moment of evaluation and a sense of "mission accomplished".

Day 5 – Looking Back, Looking Forward

The final day of the onsite week (BOX 32) focused on reflection, integration, and planning for the future. Participants revisited key experiences, shared insights, and considered how they could apply what they have learned in their own academic and professional contexts. The day concluded with a final workshop and networking opportunity, supporting continued connection beyond the programme.

BOX 32: Day 5 onsite programme.

Morning

- 09:30–10:00 – Registration and morning check-in (Colégio dos Jesuítas).
- 10:00–10:30 – Final lecture: "MathIA project and the development of students' skills" (Professor Ana Antunes, University of Madeira, Room Pátio II).
- 10:30–11:00 – Coffee break.
- 11:00–13:00 – Closing dialogue session: key takeaways and shared feedback (Room Pátio II).
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Afternoon

- 15:00–18:00 – Workshop 6: "Soft skills in practice" (Blandy's Wine Lodge, Funchal city centre), followed by a final networking hour.

Therefore, day 5 provided a structured space for collective reflection, integration of experiences, and planning for future applications of soft skills and international collaboration. It closed the onsite week with a sense of completion while opening pathways for continued development and collaboration.

Overall, the onsite week in Madeira was designed as a step-by-step learning journey that tried to move participants from connection and orientation, through active experimentation and collaboration, to presentation, reflection, and future planning. Each day built on the previous one, and each activity was intentionally chosen to support the development of soft skills through real-world, and socially rich experiences.

For educators, this structure offers a practical and adaptable example for designing blended intensive programmes.

Chapter 14

Assessment and Evaluation in the Skills@Uni BIP

Assessment in a BIP with students as a target group serves multiple purposes. It provides feedback to participants on their learning progress, supports reflection and integration of experiences, and ensures accountability and recognition through formal grading. Thus, assessment should align with the pedagogical approach, valuing not only final products but also process, participation, and personal growth.

This chapter presents the assessment structure of the Skills@Uni BIP, offering a detailed explanation of each evaluation component and the criteria used to assess participants work. It also illustrates how different forms of assessment can be combined to capture the multidimensional nature of learning in a blended, international and experiential programme.

Therefore, this chapter provides both a practical model and a conceptual framework for designing assessment in BIPs. It highlights the importance of transparency, coherence between learning outcomes and evaluation methods, and the use of multiple assessment formats to support diverse forms of learning and expression.

The Skills@Uni BIP uses a comprehensive assessment system that combines individual and collaborative work, online and onsite activities, and written and oral formats. This approach aimed to ensure that participants were evaluated not only on their ability to produce final outputs, but also on their engagement, critical reflection, and capacity to apply concepts in practical contexts.

Overview of the Assessment Structure

The assessment in the Skills@Uni BIP was designed to reflect the programme's emphasis on active participation, critical reflection, and collaborative learning. Participants were evaluated across four main components, each contributing to the final grade in a specific way. The final grade was expressed on the Portuguese 0–20 scale, where a grade of 10 or above represented approval.

The four assessment components were: a) forum participation (25% of final grade), b) reflective essay (25% of final grade), c) project lab written assignment (20% of final grade) and d) project Lab oral presentation (30% of final grade). Together, these components supported a balanced evaluation that valued ongoing engagement, individual reflection, collaborative work, and communication skills. The final grade was calculated using the following formula: $FG = (0.25 \times F) + (0.25 \times E) + (0.20 \times WL) + (0.30 \times P)$, where: a) F = Forum participation grade (0–20); E = Essay grade (0–20); WL = Project Written Lab grade (0–20); and P = Project Presentation grade (0–20)

The final grade was rounded to the nearest whole number (e.g., 15.6 rounds to 16; 15.4 rounds to 15).

This structure illustrates how different types of learning activities can be weighted according to their pedagogical importance and how formative and summative assessment can be integrated throughout a BIP.

Forum Participation

Forum participation was evaluated as a single grade that reflected participants' ongoing engagement throughout the twelve forums of the virtual component. This assessment recognised that learning in online environments is not only about individual contributions, but also about building community, interacting with peers, and contributing to collective knowledge.

In this sense, forum participation was evaluated based on three main dimensions:

- Relevance and depth: students posts directly addressed topics with insightful analysis, going beyond superficial or generic responses.
- Active participation: Consistent contributions across all forums, demonstrating sustained engagement.
- Interaction: Meaningful responses to peers that fostered community learning and dialogue.

Reflective Essay

The reflective essay was submitted at the end of the virtual component and served as a moment of consolidation and personal meaning-making (BOX 33). Rather than testing factual knowledge, the essay invited participants to integrate their learning experiences, articulate their development, and reflect critically on what they have discovered about soft skills.

BOX 33: Essay task description.

Participants should write a 1000–1500 word essay reflecting on:

- One thing they already knew about soft skills before starting the programme
- One thing they discovered or learned about soft skills during the online phase
- One thing that surprised them or made them see soft skills differently

The essay is graded on a 0–20 scale and counts as 25% of the final grade.

The essay was evaluated based on three main dimensions:

- Content and critical/creative thinking: Students demonstrated deep understanding, integrated materials effectively, and showed original reflections.
- Structure and organization: Students presented a logical flow with clear introduction, body, and conclusion.
- Writing quality: Students used clear language, proper grammar, and adhered to the word count.

Project Lab Written Assignment

The Project Lab written assignment (BOX 34) was a collaborative task that asked teams to design a realistic soft skills intervention for a specific context. This component assessed participants' ability to translate theory into practice, plan coherently, and apply concepts learned throughout the programme to a concrete setting.

BOX 34: Project lab written task description.

Teams produce a written project proposal of 1000–1500 words (excluding references, annexes, and tables), following APA 7th style. The assignment must include:

- Project title and team details
- Target group and context
- Goals (which soft skills are targeted and what participants should learn or achieve)
- Step-by-step description of activities or sessions
- References (articles, videos, tools, or frameworks used)

The written assignment is graded on a 0–20 scale and counts as 20% of the final grade.

The written assignment was evaluated based on three main dimensions:

- Application of concepts: students demonstrate ability to translate ideas into concrete plans or products.
- Planning and execution: students present a clear methodology and realistic execution plan.
- Coherence and organization: students showed logical flow and realistic application to the target group and context.

Project Lab Oral Presentation

The oral presentation was the culminating moment of the Project Lab (BOX 35), allowing teams to share their work with peers and staff during the onsite week. This component assessed not only the quality of the project, but also participants' ability to

communicate clearly, engage an audience, and reflect on their collaborative learning process.

BOX 35: Project lab oral presentation task description.

Teams deliver a 15-minute presentation (using slides, posters, video, or other creative formats) that includes:

- Introduction of the team and project
- Target group and context
- Goals and expected learning outcomes
- Step-by-step description of key activities
- Reflection on what the team discovered through the Project Lab, challenges faced, and how they were addressed

The presentation is graded on a 0–20 scale and counts as 30% of the final grade.

The oral presentation was evaluated based on three main dimensions:

- Clarity and structure: Well-organized with logical progression and clear communication.
- Mastery of topic: students demonstrate deep understanding and use effective argumentation.
- Communication quality: Engaging presentation style and effective interaction with the audience.

Interpreting Grades

To support transparency and help participants understand their results, the qualitatively interpretation of the numerical grades on the 0–20 scale was explained since it pertained to the Portuguese school system (BOX 36).

BOX 36: Portuguese grading information.

- 18–20 (Excellent): Work clearly exceeds expectations, showing strong mastery, autonomy, and originality.
- 16–17 (Very Good): Performance is clearly above average, with very good understanding and execution, and only minor limitations.
- 14–15 (Good): Work meets objectives, reveals solid grasp of key ideas, though some errors or gaps may be present.
- 10–13 (Sufficient): Essential objectives are achieved and main content is understood, but there are evident limitations in depth, consistency, or structure. Represents the minimum level required for approval.
- 0–9 (Insufficient): Work does not reach the minimum standard; important objectives are not achieved, and there are serious difficulties in understanding or execution, leading to failure.

Providing this interpretive framework helped participants contextualise their grades and supported a shared understanding of quality standards across different institutional and cultural contexts.

Overall, the assessment structure of the Skills@Uni BIP was designed to be comprehensive, transparent, and aligned with the programme's pedagogical goals. By combining reflective writing, participatory engagement, collaborative project work, and oral communication, the evaluation tried to capture the multidimensional nature of soft skills development and supported both individual growth and collective learning.

Part III

Skills@Uni BIP: Reflections, Lessons and Future Directions

Introduction

Part III offers a reflective and forward-looking perspective on the Skills@Uni BIP, drawing on participant experiences and the lessons learned throughout the programme. It examines how participants made sense of the blended intensive format, the development of soft skills, and the challenges and opportunities encountered along this programme. Building on these reflections, it proposes recommendations and future directions for designing and implementing, future blended intensive programmes that are pedagogically robust, inclusive, and responsive to emerging higher education contexts and students' needs to offer them a learning and meaningful experience.

Chapter 15

Students' Reflections on the Skills@Uni BIP

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Blended intensive programmes (BIPs) are designed to combine the flexibility of online learning with the depth and face-to-face experiences from the onsite component. In case of the Skills@Uni BIP the learning journey started before students travel to Madeira Island (Portugal), continued through a week long of activities and it is our hope that it extends beyond it through new networks, perspectives, and skills.

In this context, this chapter focuses more specifically on the feedback obtained from how students experienced this BIP, the online and onsite parts and also in how they perceived the programme as a single, integrated learning experience. In this sense, it is relevant to mention that most students had not previously participated in international mobility programmes, although a minority reported extensive Erasmus experience in several European countries. Motivations for enrolling in this particular BIP included seeking a new international experience, improving English communication skills, testing oneself in a new context, gaining additional ECTS credits, and exploring the specific topic of soft skills and employability in an international environment.

The virtual component

Students generally agreed that they acquired new subject-related knowledge during the online phase, and that the online materials were clear, relevant and well designed. Several participants particularly appreciated the use of a forum-like environment, which allowed them to read peers' contributions and respond at their own pace.

One positive aspect mentioned was the virtual component flexibility. The self-study structure enabled students to organize their work around existing academic and professional commitments, but at the same time it created an initial familiarity with names and topics, facilitating the social and academic integration during the onsite week.

Some of the students comments highlighted that the virtual materials were "well-chosen and not exhausting" and that the asynchronous structure allowed students to "do it on our own in our time limits." Others noted that the online activities helped them arrive at the physical mobility feeling that "some initial interaction had already taken place," creating a more comfortable atmosphere once in Madeira.

Nevertheless, despite the overall positive view, students identified some challenges related to the virtual component. The most frequent aspect for improvement was the management of online discussion, which was also highlight during the final reflection on the onsite week. Some students found it difficult to follow threads in the forums because "there were too many replies at the same time," with ideas "lost in dozens of messages.". In this sense, participants recommended organizing discussions in smaller groups (e.g., subgroups of four to five students) to facilitate deeper interaction and to avoid that more active participants dominate large discussion spaces. Additionally, others suggested an "English only" policy in group work to prevent the exclusion of non-native members when local language is used within subgroups.

During this reflection another topic that emerged was concerned with timing and workload in the virtual component. Working students in particular reported difficulties in keeping up with deadlines and catching up with discussion posts. Some proposed extending the online component by one or two weeks or starting it earlier, to distribute activities more evenly and reduce the need to concentrate tasks in the final week. Technical access issues (e.g., repeated log-in problems to the platform) were also mentioned as a minor but frustrating barrier for some participants.

The onsite component

Evaluation of the onsite component was overall positive, with most students strongly agreeing that they acquired new subject-related knowledge, engaged regularly in the activities, and participated in learning experiences not available in their regular courses. Students widely appreciated the balance between academic work, cultural visits, social activities, and independent time.

Some of the comments repeatedly referred to the onsite week as “one of the best experiences of my life” or “one of the most beautiful experiences I’ve ever had.” Participants valued the opportunity to step out of their comfort zone, collaborate in international teams, and experience Madeira’s culture in an integrated way.

Furthermore, group projects and small-team work were perceived as central learning mechanisms, fostering both soft skills (communication, collaboration, problem solving) and deeper understanding of the programme’s thematic content. Students emphasized that the onsite activities reminded them “of the importance of trying new things and stepping out of my comfort zone,” and motivated them to participate in future international or blended programmes.

Overall, students described the onsite component as very well structured, with clear instructions, well-chosen activities, and careful logistical planning (transport, meals,

and schedule). The selection of local restaurants and the farewell dinner were explicitly appreciated as part of the cultural learning experience.

Nonetheless, the main suggestions for improvement related to the time allocated for certain tasks, especially the final group project (and essay on the virtual part). Some groups reported that the time available felt tight and that one or two extra days would have allowed deeper development of outputs without compromising the quality of the work and the engagement with the activities. A few participants also mentioned the need for fully functioning computers at the start of group work, as technical issues initially slowed some teams.

In general, several students indicated that they would have liked the onsite phase to last longer, either to explore more parts of the island culture or to engage more intensively with the academic content. Minor suggestions included the possibility of including an additional hike or extended thematic sessions to deepen specific topics.

The online and onsite components as a whole

When considering both components together, students mostly agreed that the overall sequence of online and onsite activities supported their learning and that the total workload was manageable alongside other academic responsibilities. Many explicitly stated that the two components complemented each other. The virtual component provided an introduction to content and peers, while the onsite part consolidated relationships and learning in a more intense and embodied way.

At the same time, there was a clear pattern in perceived “weight” of both components. Students tended to find the onsite part more engaging and less challenging than the virtual one, often describing the virtual workload as more demanding relative to their daily routines. As a result, several recommendations converged on maintaining the blended model but slightly rebalancing it, for instance by extending the onsite days and adjusting or spreading the online tasks.

Overall students' evaluation

The evaluation showed that the levels of satisfaction with the programme were very high. Students agreed or strongly agreed that the BIP met their expectations, was worth the time and effort invested, and that they would recommend it to other students. Overall satisfaction with the blended intensive programme as a whole and willingness to recommend it reached the top of the scale for most respondents.

Participants also reported that the BIP increased their interest in future international or blended learning opportunities, such as additional BIPs or Erasmus+ mobilities. Beyond academic benefits, many comments emphasized personal growth, like improved English communication skills, increased confidence in working in international teams, and a broader understanding of other cultures and educational systems.

Comments such as "It was the best experience I have ever done," "I would be happy to participate again," and "I would have stayed longer" also demonstrate the emotional and motivational impact of the programme. Several students also explicitly thanked the organising team and teaching staff by name, acknowledging their support, care, and professionalism throughout the experience.

Key lessons for future BIPs from students' perspectives

Taken together, the students evaluation suggests that the current BIP design was highly successful in delivering meaningful academic, social, and cultural experiences in a relatively short time frame. The following lessons or key components emerged as particularly relevant for future BIPs, namely:

- Preserve the blended structure, as the combination of online and onsite activities was perceived as coherent and pedagogically effective.

- Maintain the strong emphasis on small-group work, project-based learning, and rich cultural immersion during the onsite component.
- Re-organize online discussions into smaller, moderated subgroups to enhance interaction quality and reduce work overload.
- Consider extending the duration or redistributing the workload of the virtual component, especially to better accommodate students who work alongside their studies.
- Explore the possibility of extending the onsite component by one or two days, particularly to allow more time for final project development and deeper exploration of the host community.
- Implement clear language policies (e.g., English as the working language in mixed groups) to ensure inclusive participation for all students.

By incorporating these suggestions, future BIPs can perhaps further strengthen student engagement and learning in this unique learning environment, since as the students' reflections suggest that carefully designed blended intensive programmes can create transformative learning experiences that extend far beyond traditional classroom settings, which is ultimately one of the biggest goals of BIP programme.

Chapter 16

Final Reflections and Recommendations for Future Blended Intensive Programmes

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The Skills@Uni Blended Intensive Programme, explored throughout this volume, aimed to offer a concrete example of how a short international learning experience can be designed to promote soft skills through experiential, collaborative, and in a blended format. From the beginning, this book presents Skills@Uni not merely as an isolated case, but as a pedagogical example through which broader questions about higher education, internationalisation, and student development may be examined. In this sense, this final chapter aims not to repeat the previous ones, but to somehow integrate their main insights and to draw from them a set of reflections that may inform the future design of Blended Intensive Programmes in higher education.

Therefore, one of the central ideas emerging from this book is that the educational value of a BIP does not exist simply in its short duration or in the fact that it combines virtual and face-to-face components. Rather, its value depends on the coherence of the pedagogical design that connects objectives, activities, facilitation, and assessment into a meaningful whole. As shown across the chapters on the overall

structure of Skills@Uni, the online component, the onsite week, and the assessment strategy, learning becomes more consolidated and meaningful when students are guided through a structured progression rather than exposed to a set of disconnected tasks.

Hence, a first major lesson from the Skills@Uni BIP is the need to consider soft skills as explicit educational goals. Throughout the BIP, communication, teamwork, leadership, creativity, and problem-solving were approached as skills that must be intentionally practised and reflected upon. This is particularly important in higher education, where soft skills are often valued theoretically but still remain “outside” of many curricular designs and implementation. The Skills@Uni experience suggests that when these skills are clearly focused, students are better able to recognise them, work on them, and connect them to their academic and professional development.

A second insight is related to the importance of experiential learning. The chapters in this volume repeatedly highlight that students engage more deeply with soft skills when they encounter them in action, through tasks that require interaction, negotiation, creativity, and shared responsibility. In such contexts, soft skills become visible not as abstract concepts, but as lived processes that shape how students communicate, decide, adapt, and collaborate. Experiential learning is therefore not simply a matter of making activities more dynamic or enjoyable, it is a mean of creating pedagogical conditions in which complex skills can be observed, discussed and trained.

At the same time, the Skills@Uni BIP makes clear that experiential learning should not be confused with spontaneity or lack of structure. The programme described in this book was not based on carelessly connected activities, but on a carefully sequenced path that moved from orientation and self-awareness to interaction, collaboration, application, and reflection. The virtual component prepared participants conceptually and socially, while the onsite component intensified group work and in-person interaction and collaboration. This progression mattered because meaningful

short-term learning depends on the quality of the support provided before, during, and, sometimes, after the programme.

Beyond all what was already mentioned before, the role of the blended format deserves particular attention. In many educational settings, blending online and in-person modalities can be seen as difficult to combine or manage, and while that has some truth to it, the Skills@Uni experience showed that while it can be logistically and pedagogically demanding it can also be a meaningful and complete learning experience for students. The online component can create conditions for preparation, early group connection, reflective engagement, and conceptual grounding, while the face-to-face part can amplify cooperation, emotional involvement, and consolidation. When these two dimensions are intentionally articulated, the blended structure becomes an educational advantage rather than a logistical compromise.

Another lesson emerging from this BIP concerns the importance of group dynamics. Because BIPs are short and intensive, participants are required to form relationships, negotiate expectations, and work across linguistic, cultural, and educational differences in a short timeframe. This creates powerful opportunities for learning, but also demands careful facilitation. Activities that support trust-building, norm-setting, constructive feedback, and reflective dialogue should therefore be understood as core pedagogical elements rather than complementary social moments.

Another important aspect of the Skills@Uni BIP is the emphasis put on reflection moments, which were thought to be important elements for transforming experience into learning. The virtual forums and reflective essay, and in some measure all other activities, all contributed to help participants make sense of their own development. Reflection allowed students to interpret what happened, identify the skills involved, recognised their own patterns of behaviour, and consider how what they experienced may be transferred to future contexts.

This same logic applies to assessment. The multidimensional approach was thought to be appropriate in a BIP focused on soft skills, because it recognised that such skills are not adequately captured through conventional testing alone. Assessment, in this sense, became not only a mechanism of certification, but also a pedagogical tool that gave value to the process, engagement, application, and critical and cultural awareness. However, it is worth mentioning that at the same assessing multiple elements within such a short timeframe placed considerable pressure on the teaching team to have final grades delivered on time and to simultaneously maintain the level of academic rigor of higher education assessments.

Likewise, the Skills@Uni experience also highlights the fact that a successful BIP depends on much more than student participation. Behind the visible educational experience lies a substantial amount of institutional and relational work involving planning, coordination, communication, administrative support, and staff collaboration. Hence, their apparent simplicity often conceals a considerable amount of effort required to align calendars, expectations, digital environments, assessment practices, and mobility logistics.

While many may think that this organisational dimension is secondary to pedagogy, it is not. In fact, it is one of the most important conditions for a successful implementation of a BIP. When communication between partners is weak, when roles are unclear, or when logistical planning is insufficient, the educational quality of the programme will be easily compromised. On the other hand, when staff collaboration is strong and the pedagogical vision is shared, the BIP can become not only a student experience, but also a platform for professional learning, pedagogical innovation, and future academic cooperation.

For that reason, one of the broader contributions of the Skills@Uni BIP lies in showing that BIPs may generate value beyond the duration of the programme itself. They can strengthen international partnerships, encourage curriculum innovation,

support new teaching practices, and give rise to further projects, publications, and collaborative initiatives. This book is in fact evidence of that! The impact of a BIP should therefore be understood not only in terms of immediate student outcomes, but also in terms of the networks, practices, and possibilities that it helps to build.

Some recommendation for future BIPs

Drawing on the reflections developed throughout this book some recommendations can be proposed for future Blended Intensive Programmes, from our own experience with Skills@Uni. Therefore, it is important to:

- Define clear and limited learning outcomes, from the very beginning.
- Ensure that the virtual and face-to-face components are pedagogically interconnected and not treated as separate from each other.
- Use early online activities to build social presence, intercultural openness, and shared expectations before the onsite component begins.
- Design experiential tasks that require students to practise in real situations rather than only discuss them conceptually.
- Include moments of reflection so that students can interpret and transfer what they have experienced and share with other participants.
- Align assessment methods with the pedagogical learning outcomes but being realistic of timeframes for deliverables.
- Prepare for organizational and logistics workload and unexpected issues that may arise.
- Consider the BIP as part of a wider environment of international collaboration and innovation rather than as a one-time event.

- Gathering feedback from participants during both the online and in-person phases allows for timely adjustments and contributes to the continuous improvement of future editions.

These recommendations are just that recommendations and reflections and are not supposed to be rigid. In fact, one of the strengths of the BIP format is precisely its adaptability to different disciplines, institutional cultures, and pedagogical purposes. Yet the Skills@Uni experience suggests that some principles remain consistently important across contexts, such as coherence, intentionality, reflection, collaboration, and the alignment of design with learning goals. When these principles are respected, short-blended mobility can become a genuinely meaningful educational experience.

International learning should not be measured only by duration abroad or by the formal existence of mobility, but by the quality of the pedagogical and learning experiences it provides. In this respect, BIPs offer a particularly promising format because they combine accessibility with intensity, flexibility with collaboration, and digital preparation with face-to-face interaction. They open new possibilities for institutions seeking to create inclusive and pedagogically rich international experiences for students who may not participate in longer forms of mobility, thus opening a new door of opportunity for many students and staff.

Ultimately, in our opinion, the value of Skills@Uni lies not in presenting a universal formula, but in showing what becomes possible when universities take seriously the challenge of creating learning environments that are at once rigorous, collaborative, reflective, and human. A Blended Intensive Programme, when thoughtfully designed, can do more than compress mobility into a shorter timeframe. It can become a space where students learn with others, through others, and about themselves, where professors experiment with new forms of teaching; and where international partnership is translated into a shared educational practice. In that sense,

the journey documented in this book is not only the story of one programme, but a contribution to the broader future of higher education.



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