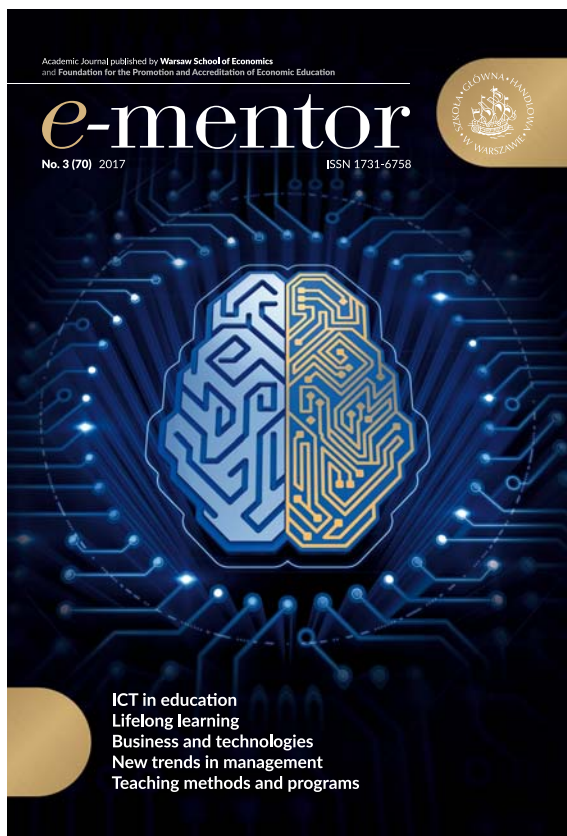


e-mentor

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Development of soft skills in higher education – case study

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In her article, the author discusses the problem of skills of higher education graduates being inadequate to the expectations of employers, particularly in terms of soft skills, and the necessity to introduce changes in the curricula, resulting from this inadequacy. The purpose of this publication is to present theoretical assumptions of the “Soft skills in the centre of attention” project carried out at Łazarski University from the academic year 2013/2014 and practical ways of implementing it together with the analysis of applied solutions from the point of view of assumed objectives. The article is based on the observations of the author who has been a course tutor since academic year 2014/2015.

There are many definitions of the term “soft skills” and the very concept of “competencies”. The classic definition is based on the origin of this term, which comes from the expression *competentia* that means having knowledge and powers to make judgements or specific decisions on legal matters. To place this statement in contemporary perspective, as W. Armstrong says, a competence is a broadly defined human development potential – the ability to solve new problems, to innovate, to behave entrepreneurially and to adapt to changes (Stabryła, 2010, p. 330). This potential consists of both hard (professional) skills and soft skills, i.e. social, behavioural skills (Tomczak, 2015, pp. 27–34).

Nowadays companies operate in a very volatile environment; new technologies and global competition force the fast pace of changes. As a result, the most valuable employees are those who are able to generate those changes, understand them and adapt their behaviours to the new reality (Kocór & Strzebońska, 2011, pp. 10–11, pp. 58–63). Employers search for employees with a high level of soft skills and they are not satisfied with the way the graduates are prepared in this area (Pieniążek, Przybył, Pacuska, Chojecki, Huras, Pałka, Ratajczak, & Rudolf, 2014, p. 170).

Publicly funded projects, financed under OP KED programme, that enhance competencies of students

are carried out at universities¹. However, as in the case of Human Capital Operational Programme they allow universities to train students in the last semester of their studies (Rules of Competition no. 2/PRK/POWER/3.1/2016 in Competence Development Programme of training course within the framework of enhancing skills of persons participating in higher education, corresponding to the needs of the economy, labour market and society), which, according to the author, is not an optimal solution. In literature, it is particularly stressed that, in the case of trainings the effect of which is supposed to be the change of attitude, the results may be measured only after several months of practicing newly acquired skills (Kunasz, 2008, pp. 129–141).

Another significant issue is the importance of students’ soft skills for the quality of educational process. If we take a look at the list of skills indicated by employers as the most desirable, we will find:

- effective communication,
- openness to learning and continuous development,
- being active and getting engaged (*Kompetencje i kwalifikacje poszukiwane przez pracodawców wśród absolwentów szkół wyższych wchodzących na rynek pracy*, 2012).

Employers also underline the lack of teamwork skills as well as project-related skills. It can be observed that skills required by employers are at the same time skills that are vital for effective learning and teaching (The Recommendations of the European Parliament and the Council of 18 December 2006, 2006/962/EC).

Many lecturers express their concern regarding the inability to communicate with students, their low active participation in classes and group projects and students’ lack of interest to acquire knowledge (Wieczorkowska, Wierzbiniński, & Michałowicz, 2012, pp. 63–78). Nonetheless, according to the author, real and systematic action to improve the situation is rarely taken. Changes forced by the creation of the

¹ Particularly regarding priority axis: „Increasing competencies of persons participating in education at higher level, responding to the needs of economy, labour market and society”, OP KED, www.ncbr.gov.pl (12.09.2017).

National Qualifications Framework² consisting in the obligation of describing the results of teaching of every course, including social skills, are often useful only to make a record in the syllabus. Most of the courses are still oriented towards the transmission of the knowledge and the lecturers underestimate the added value which could arise if they felt responsible also for, even a small improvement of soft skills (Frankowicz, 2017).

Another reason for introducing soft skills training in the first year of studies is to make students aware of the discrepancy between their own assessment of their level of skills possessed by them and the assessment of the lecturers and employers. The study conducted by the Polish Educational Research Institute called "Demand for skills and qualifications and their supply - study results" showed that secondary school students and higher education students consider their level of soft skills as high, which differs from the assessment of those skills by employers (Chłoń-Domińczak, Kamieniecka, Trawińska-Konador, Pawłowski, & Rynko, 2015, pp. 48-50). The problem of students' excessively high self-assessment and the resulting lack of motivation to improve overall skills in terms of soft skills may constitute a serious obstacle for teaching. The notion of competence ladder presented by L. Rae presupposes the existence of four levels of competences, i.e.:

- unconscious incompetence,
- conscious incompetence,
- conscious competence,
- unconscious competence (Rae, 2006, p. 86).

Young people, unaware of their deficiencies, do not find motivation to improve their soft skills and do not engage in classes, which results in the lack of development (Taradejna, 2014, pp. 22–26).

Universities have little influence on the level of soft skills of admitted students. The current university admission system, based on the results of secondary school final exam, allows for the assessment of knowledge, but in no way does it reflect the level of soft skills that the candidates have. However, according to the author, higher education institutions should actively influence the level of those skills among those who leave the university, particularly in terms of the changes of academic assessment system proposed by the ministry³. The emphasis on teaching soft skills from the very beginning of the university studies will not only allow to provide the training itself, but it will also give time to practice the acquired skills and to change one's attitude (Sienkiewicz, 2013, p. 71).

Teaching soft skills at Łazarski University – the beginning of the project

The idea of including soft skills in the curriculum appeared at Łazarski University in the academic year 2012/2013 as a result of a series of modern techniques and methods of teaching trainings. The trainings brought together a group of dozen educators with different lengths of service, who shared their experiences and opinions concerning the quality of students' work during the training. Most opinions focused on the fact that students are not properly prepared to study in the sense of improving their knowledge under the guidance of a professional. They lack independence, the ability to search for sources, to make arguments and often also the courage to publicly present their opinions. Sharing educational experiences coupled with reading of the report indicating competency deficiencies of the university's graduates (Dzierzgowski, Fenrich, & Stempień, 2012, pp. 1–104) led to the introduction of changes in the curriculum that adjusted it to the requirements of the labour market. The newly introduced course is obligatory for all students of the first year of undergraduate education or long-cycle studies, regardless of the faculty and the field of study⁴. Students pass the course on the basis of grades and ECTS credits.

The first stage of the project was to define its main objectives from the point of view of the university. After a discussion, the educators involved in the project⁵ selected several basic skills the teaching of which was to be the main part of the course. These were:

- use of sources,
- formation of arguments,
- debating and making short statements based on scientific facts and
- self-organization of work.

The students learnt the above mentioned skills, preparing during the whole semester, under the guidance of professors, an Oxford-style debate on a chosen topic.

From the very beginning the integration aspect of the new course was also very important for the university. Student groups were formed in such a way that students had to meet with students of other fields of study and work in interdisciplinary groups.

At the end of the semester, after the debate and the summary of the students' work, it turned out that the course in this form did not meet the expectations. Most students did not engage in classes more than it was required to pass the course. A discussion with the lecturers that taught the class and with selected students

² Since September 2016 University provisions concerning Polish Qualification Framework have been in place.

³ National Polish Monitoring System of Economic Fates of Graduates of Universities (ELA) creates university rankings based on data representing graduates' salaries. Considering the importance that employers attach to soft skills, it seems reasonable that the level of soft skills affects the salary. Por. J. Balcar, 2014, pp. 3–15.

⁴ There are two faculties with six fields of study at Łazarski University – the Faculty of Law and Administration and the Faculty of Economics and Management.

⁵ During the work on the main principles of the project and during the first years of its implementation, dr Grażyna Czetwertyńska from the Faculty of Artes Liberales of the University of Warsaw was the course assistant and offered support for the teacher staff of Łazarski University.

revealed that the tasks turned out to be too difficult for many students, remaining beyond their capabilities, especially in terms of self-organization and teamwork. Foreign students faced particular difficulties as, despite their knowledge of Polish on a level not lower than B2, they often were not able to form utterances at a level that was satisfactory for them, which led to frustration and giving up on work. Students experienced problems also with such tasks as: formal email communication, writing longer texts, using basic computer programs, preparing public speeches and using online resources to search for information.

Teaching soft skills – the present state

The main objectives of the project remained unchanged, but the course itself was completely modified. A differentiated approach to students was adapted in order to give the poorest students the opportunity to fill their individual skill gaps and to give the best students the opportunity of further development under the guidance of individual tutors. A much bigger emphasis is now placed on explaining the purpose of the course to the students and helping them understand the point of engaging oneself in acquiring new skills.

In the academic year 2016/2017, the course included two semesters of classes in the first year of studies, regardless of the field of study and the course of study, and both semesters differed from each other in terms of the classes.

An important formal change that was introduced after first experiences was to hire a course assistant – a person responsible for maintaining the consistency of the rules, the assessment of the classes, the selection of teaching staff and the duties related to the formal aspect of the course.

Especially the last part of the course assistant job is particularly important as the course is constructed differently than the rest of the courses in the studies programme. Classes are held in groups of different numbers, depending on individual needs of the lecturers and the nature of the classes. Classes within one group are taught by different lecturers, some classes are held one after another, others are not obligatory. Due to different levels of competences possessed by students and big differences between full-time students and part-time students or students of different years, the course is characterized by great flexibility, which causes many formal difficulties.

The first semester is mainly aimed at integration of students, teamwork and improving language skills of foreign students. Considering the business nature of the university, it was decided that students would work on their own ideas for business or social or charity events in small interdisciplinary groups. It also motivates them to gain knowledge and hard skills in terms of entrepreneurship and allows the university to add another objective into the course, often requested by employers, - shaping the entrepreneurial mind set (Pieniżek et al., 2014, p. 173), but not limited only to educating students as future business owners, but

including also, if not primarily, educating employees who show entrepreneurial skills in their workplace.

The classes begin with a joint lecture, during which the assessment principles for the course, the rules of cooperation in class groups and project groups and the rules of communication with the lecturers are presented. Students also meet the lecturers and the course assistant.

The formation of project groups is very important for achieving the assumed objectives. The groups are selected randomly. Students from several subgroups are included in each project group – foreigners and students from each field of study are selected separately. The purpose of such practice is to form interdisciplinary groups and to avoid a situation in which foreign students constitute the majority of a group, which is important for improving their language skills.

The lack of discretion in the choice of groups results in dissatisfaction among students – every year, the week after the drawing occurs, deanship and the class' supervisor note a significant increase of the number of requests for transfer to different class or individual course passing mode. However, thanks to school authorities' understanding of the course's aims the transfers may be limited to a minimum.

In the subsequent weeks students create their own business models on the basis of A. Osterwalder and Y. Pigneur method (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2012). The results of the works are subjected to a discussion within the class groups and assessment by the lecturer, often times by the guests invited to the class who have business experience. This allows to shape the ability of making a meaningful assessment of others' work and of shaping the responses and protecting one's own ideas.

The significant element of the weekly work's presentations is the rule stating that every class member has to do a presentation – it results in the impossibility of excluding the weakest or unprepared students from presenting their works. It encourages Polish language students to help students from abroad in preparing the statements in Polish language because a good speech of each group member provides a better group grade which ultimately influences each student's final grade.

The semester ends with discussing the reports in which every student assesses his/her and other students' work and involvement, as well as with classes summarizing students' experiences from group work. Students formulate conclusions relevant to group members' attributes and attitudes that enhance their effectiveness on flipcharts, stating which behaviors cause the non-productiveness and sharing with each other the ways of dealing with unwanted behaviors.

The best projects are assessed during the annual gala by a number of judges that are not from the school. Also students' answers to questions from experts are assessed. The gala takes place outside the school and is of more ceremonial nature than an average lecture which increases students' motivation. The gala that took place during the 2016/2017 academic year at the National Stadium was attended by families, workmates

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and participants' supervisors. Each participant receives a souvenir from the sponsors and the winner team has a possibility to develop their idea during accelerative workshops organized by the sponsor.

The second semester begins with the continuation of the group work's subject area. It is a complement of a training cycle in accordance with Kolb's cycle – during the first semester students gain the experience and discuss their reflections on working in groups, while in the second semester they get to know the theory and are encouraged to use their gained knowledge in practice during the following group activities (Kolb, 1984).

The other class modules include the shaping of competences that are considered by group of lecturers as crucial for further studying and for students' adjustment to the labour market. The students learn how to effectively search for various information on the Internet; they get to know the rules governing the use of the libraries, databases, and discover how to distinguish between scientific and popular sources. The subsequent modules are devoted to creating personal brand in social media, building up one's portfolio of achievements and describing it in CV, as well as proper behavior during job interview. The students also get to know the methods of taking notes, creating mind maps, effective learning and memorizing.

The semester is created in a modular way – the students have lectures and practical classes from various modules, they realize both group and individual tasks that together comprise their final grade. The innovation targeted at enhancing students' motivation to work within the framework of individual modules is the way of accessing that applies the elements of competition. Interestingly, the students during the evaluative assessment of the class indicated that the elements of competition had no influence on their motivation, but the analysis of passing individual modules indicates a significant improvement of the timely submitted tasks in relation to the previous year when the method was not used.

The issues and results of the project

The issues that the team of lecturers face are mostly relevant to didactic work with project groups and with the necessity to solve crises in groups. For the majority of students this is usually the first group project in their lives that lasts more than two weeks. The group projects that were realized in school consisted in doing the work during the lesson or for the subsequent lesson; very few students have an experience of working in any group that was fulfilling the tasks for a longer period of time. Apparently, the teachers did not devote sufficient time to analyzing the quality of group work and the involvement of particular people in obtaining the final result, which caused the ambitious students' perpetuation that it was better to do the whole job alone, and the less ambitious students' perpetuation that they do not have to do anything in order to get a good grade because the others would still do the job for them.

In a situation in which the project lasts longer and the way of assessing makes the abovementioned behaviors

difficult, a conflict in a group is likely to appear. Already after the first edition of the subject in this formula it turned out that the lecturers of the particular practical groups have to know the tenor of a group process and be able to show students the ways of facing difficult situations. The leaders of the project groups, who are responsible for the work of the whole group and often face the problems related to enforcing the work upon others, require close attention and assistance. The practical verification of students' perception of their own managing skills makes them seek knowledge of the ways of effective team management, and tools that might be helpful in it. Enhancing management competencies, although it was not originally a project objective, constitutes an important added value, especially for students studying Management.

The amount of work and time devoted to a subject by the lecturers is significantly bigger than the one in case of traditional academic subjects. On the other hand, based on conversations with the lecturers, it is precisely the subject which gives an unbelievable satisfaction, countervails work routine and induces enhancing one's didactic, coaching and tutoring skills. It appeared to be extremely helpful to have people with psychological experience, people with professional coaching background and manager-practitioners in the team of lecturers. As is turned out, they constitute the necessary substantive and expert support.

Another positive aspect of the subject is the improvement of the level of soft skills among students – in the evaluation survey conducted in 2016/2017 academic year over 96% of students declared improvement from the level at which they started the subject and 90% found the classes useful on the labour market and enhancing their professional development. The fact that students add their projects and trainings completed within the subject to CVs and that they believe that they are an important information for potential employers may be the proof of appreciating experiences and skills gained by students.

Due to only three-year period of project execution, it has not yet been possible to carry out the studies among graduate students, thus it is not possible to answer the question whether the scope of soft skills is assessed by the employers in a better way than it was assessed in case of previous past graduate students. However, it can beyond any doubt be stated that the subject met with great approval and attracted interest from the school's business partners, who appreciate its innovativeness in the field of soft skills teaching.

Throughout the duration of the subject the lecturers cooperate with students closely, getting to know both their talents and development potential very well. The best students (to be understood as not only ones with best grades but primarily considering their level of involvement) receive an offer of participating in Honorable Program – an individual tutoring programme which enables students not only to develop themselves scientifically but also to follow their passions and organize various projects and ventures under the watchful eye of experienced tutors.

Summary

In the 2013/2014 academic year a group of didactics at the Łazarski University, in cooperation with the authorities of the university initiated the project „Soft skills in the center of attention” targeted at improving the level of soft skills among students and better adjusting the skills of graduate students to the labour market. The project originally included one semester of classes during which the students prepared for Oxford debate. However, such a formula of a project prevented realization of the assumed objectives, which is why during the following years many changes were introduced which enabled its better adjustment to students’ potentials and an increase of awareness of the importance of soft skills among academic staff and students.

The project characteristics presented in this study and the description of the difficulties that the team of realizers faced may serve as a collection of clues for other universities that wish to introduce similar solutions.

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According to many reports, skills of higher education graduates are inadequate to the needs of employers, especially in the area of soft skills. At the same time many lecturers observe problems in communication with students, their low participation in classes and projects and as a result low quality of teaching. In the article author presents a project “Soft skills in the centre of attention” which was an attempt to adjust the curriculum to the requirements of the labour market. The project was carried out at Łazarski University from the academic year 2013/2014 and it has been changed a lot during this time. The changes enabled better adjustment of the formula to students’ potentials and an increase of awareness of the importance of soft skills among academic staff and students. In the academic year 2016/2017 project course included two semesters of classes in the first year of studies, regardless of the field of study. The first semester is mainly aimed at integration of students, teamwork and improving language skills of foreign students and the second at creating the personal brand and building up one’s portfolio of achievements and describing it in CV. Students also learn how to search databases, make notes, create mind maps and discover the methods of effective learning and memorizing. The projects characteristics presented in this article may serve as a collection of clues for other universities that are looking for similar solutions.

The author is a PhD in Economics in the scope of management. She works at the Łazarski University at the position of Vice-dean on Didactics and Quality of Teaching. For the past several years she has been the tutor of subject targeted at teaching soft skills, having gained many years’ experience in tutoring students.