Developing Soft Skills among Potential Employees: A Theoretical Review on Best International Practices

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Abstract: The present paper addresses the issue of determining the best international practices for developing soft skills among students of different specialties through carrying out a theoretical review. Basing on literature on present-day theory the authors make an attempt to explain soft skills dichotomies, summarize existing approaches to classifying soft skills, consolidate and document best international practices for soft skills development among potential employees of different specialties including bachelor students, master students, doctoral and postdoctoral students. The data obtained in the theoretical analysis reveal that the possible ambiguities in the interpretation of the concept of “soft skills” are caused, on the one hand, by the dichotomic perception of their nature by present-day researchers and educators and, on the other hand, by the absence of the common language which makes it difficult to provide a more unified definition most satisfactory to all concerned. The authors are convinced that soft skills have a cross-cutting nature and regard them as personal and interpersonal meta-qualities and meta-abilities that are vital to any potential employee who is going to make positive contributions not only to his/her professional development but to the development of a company he/she is going to work for. The results of the conducted theoretical review clearly indicate that the absence of the unified understanding of the concept of “soft skills” is reflected in the existence of different approaches to classifying soft skills, let alone, the selection of didactic tools for developing soft skills among potential employees.

Keywords: *soft skills, potential employees, didactic tools, higher education institutions, industrial training, problem-based learning, active learning.*

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1. Introduction

Globalization, migration and informatisation processes considerably influence all aspects of life in the postmodern society causing rapid changes in the global labour market. These changes lead to the emergency of new patterns of behaviours between employers and employees, the appearance of new professions and the disappearance of outdated ones, which, in turn, place new demands on potential employees' competitive knowledge, skills and expertise. It means that in such circumstances potential employees become the most vulnerable to the impacts of all the transformations happening at the global labour market in general and national labour markets in particular. It happens because taking a job novice employees have to learn to deal with a new working environment, on the one hand, and, on the other, to show a broad range of expert knowledge and skills acquired during their training at higher education institutions. And it turns out that one of the greatest challenges university graduates regarded in our paper as potential employees face is their inability to manifest their interpersonal skills or so-called "soft-skills" which in most cases leads to the loss of employment.

The problem of enhancing potential employees' soft skills (bachelor students, master students, doctoral and postdoctoral students) has been of genuine interest to scholars and practitioners working in education for a long period of time. And nowadays changing lifestyles and developments in the global and national labor markets make this problem more and more relevant since the profound subject-matter knowledge and skills do not guarantee decent employment opportunities for potential employees. In today's world the personal and professional development does not depend only on special qualifications required to do a particular job but in most cases on employees' soft skills which augmenting their avenues of employability enable them to be more competitive at the labor market. Numerous researchers and practitioners claim that employment problems are usually connected with the potential employees' inability to demonstrate a sufficient level of skills in the areas of social interaction, networking, time management, self-organization and self-improvement etc (Andrews, & Higson, 2010; Balcar, 2016; Balcar, Šimek, & Filipová, 2018; Md-Ali, Shaffie, & Yusof, 2016; Ritter et al., 2018). Moreover, they admit that despite the growing awareness of the need to develop soft skills among potential employees, higher education institutions do not use their real opportunities to prepare potential employees in every possible way for a successful professional performance (Arat, 2014; Balachandar, Jayam, & Jawaharrani,

2016; Cimatti, 2016; Caruana, Ramaseshan, & Ewing, 1998; Gautam, 2016; Fernández-Sanz et al., 2017; Gruzdev et al., 2018; Kakalejčík, & Pal'ová, 2019; Keep, & Mayhew, 1996; Kangune, 2019; Nathan, & Rajamanoharane, 2016; Patacsil, Lourrine, & Tablatin, 2017; Robles, 2012; Schulz, 2008; Shuayto, 2012; Tsalikova, & Pakhotina, 2019; Yan, 2019). Under postmodern conditions society's economic interests always take priority over other interests and become crucial in the relationship between the labour market and education. This means that in order to keep pace with the evolving needs of the economy higher education institutions should equip potential employees with a broad range of professional knowledge, expertise and interpersonal skills which enables them to respond readily to rapidly changing demands of the global and national labour markets. In real conditions higher education institutions aimed at providing formal learning imply equipping students with a set of so-called hard skills which is not enough for their further lifelong learning and career progression. And the greatest obstacle to the development of soft skills among students is that higher education institutions do not channel their efforts into overcoming this pressing problem. However, university training focused on the development of potential employees' hard and soft skills can make an important contribution towards enhancing skilled-focused education and towards training of highly qualified employees ready and able to interact effectively with others, to prioritise, to think analytically and make sound decisions etc.

Therefore, while noting the existence of theoretical framework fragmented across a wide array of resources concerning understanding of the concept of "soft skills", identifying present-day approaches to soft skills classifications, strategies, methods and techniques for their development, there is still a strong need for further discussion on the subject aimed at finding best international practices for the enhancement of soft skills among potential employees.

2. Problem Statement and Research Methodology

The multifaceted objective of the research under investigation is to undertake a theoretical review of scientific literature related to developing soft skills among potential employees of all professions. The aim involves the following specific tasks: to clarify the concept of "soft skills"; to identify soft skills classifications found in the literature study and to consolidate best international practices in enhancing soft skills among potential employees.

Therefore, the present paper focuses on answering the following questions:

How are soft skills perceived by contemporary scholars and practitioners?

What ways do present-day scholars and practitioners classify soft skills?

What teaching and learning strategies, techniques and methods of enhancing soft skills among potential employees most present-day scientists refer to in their papers?

To conduct the theoretical review we undertook the search for the scientific literature concerning the use of effective teaching and learning strategies, methods and techniques in enhancing soft skills among potential employees. We chose two databases, namely: (i) Google Scholar; and (ii) ResearchGate. Being freely accessible web search engines these databases provide a wide range of peer-reviewed papers, abstracts, monographs, conference proceedings on the topic under study. What is more, these databases also contain peer-review articles that are indexed in Web of Science or Scopus. The basic inclusion criterion for database search was journal articles written in English reflecting on theoretical framework and methodological aspects of enhancing soft skills among potential employees of all professions. The corpus included 58 items of scientific literature concerning the following topic areas: soft skills development among potential employees including bachelor, master, doctoral and postdoctoral students; soft skills classifications; strategies, methods and techniques for developing soft skills among students of various specialties.

To achieve the objective of the study we used the following methods: formal concept analysis, summarization and discursive reflection.

3. Soft Skills: Clarification of the concept

To launch a successful career in any sphere of human activity, a potential employee should acquire not only hard skills but also soft skills since they augment his/her avenues for employability (Arat, 2014; Guerra-Báez, 2019; Heckman, & Kautz, 2012; Laker, & Powell, 2011; Schulz, 2008). Schulz (2008) mentions: *Good hard skills alone are not necessarily enough anymore to be a first choice when it comes to promotion* (p.151). Investigating the problem of developing soft skills among students, Schulz (2008) claims that university time is the most effective for enhancing both hard and soft skills and such enhancements should take place simultaneously.

The theoretical analysis clearly shows that many contemporary scholars who investigate the problem of developing soft skills among

students of different specialties support the idea about the existence of an inextricable link between soft and hard skills development, on the one hand, and about the efficiency of soft and hard skills joint development while studying at higher education institutions on the other (Arat, 2014; Balachandar, Jayam, & Jawaharrani, 2016; Beard, Schwieger, and Surendran, 2008; Cimatti, 2016; Gruzdev et al., 2018; Kaushik, & Bansal, 2015; Kautz, 2014; Majid et al., 2012; Robles, 2012; Md-Ali, Shaffie, & Yusof, 2016; Nealy, 2005; Shakir, 2009; Shek, Leung, & Merrick, 2017; Wats & Wats, 2009).

Most scholars are united in stating that teachers play an irreplaceable role in shaping student's personal and professional qualities. In this regard we find Robles's point of view very sound (2012). The scholar puts forward the idea that educators should take a proactive role in promoting soft skills in their curricula and this way improve the employability of potential employees (Robles, 2012). But, at the same time, despite such progressive ideas most scholars realize with bitterness that even if the quality of training at higher education institutions is very high, it is mostly oriented at equipping students with hard skills only and after graduating from higher education institutions students cannot rely on decent employment since they lack soft skills (Schulz, 2008). And this problem is *no way restricted to developing countries* (Schulz, 2008, p.146), it is a major challenge for the world's leading industrial countries as well.

Basing on the review of the existing literature on the subject we can state that there is no scientific consensus on the definition of the concept of "soft skills" in pedagogical theory despite its widespread use. Soft skills are regarded as traits (Khanna, 2015), behavioral or interpersonal skills (Nathan, & Rajamanoharane, 2016), non-technical competencies (Stewart, Wall, & Marciniac, 2016), interpersonal qualities (Robles, 2012), non-technical or non-domain skills (Kaushik, & Bansal, 2015), nontechnical traits and behaviours (Klaus, Rohman, & Hamaker, 2007), a habit (Khanna, 2015), personal characteristics (Gruzdev and et al., 2018) or personal attributes (Robles, 2012; Sousa, & Rocha, 2017), an ability to work in different working environments (Labzina et al., 2019) etc.

Trying to explain the existence of different approaches to understanding soft skills, Schulz (2008) focuses his attention on the dichotomic nature of soft skills and believes that any of them can be either an absolute necessity for some graduates or something which is useful to have. Cinque (2016) who conducted a thorough study aimed at enhancing understanding of soft skills concludes that there are different reasons which make it difficult to provide a universal definition and classification of soft

skills. The first reason is the different countries have their own *methodologies and approaches to the teaching and recognition of skills for employability* (Cinque, 2016, p.423). The second one and the most influential is the absence of a common language. This we think is the most important reason for some differences which arise on the issue under investigation.

Having analyzed the paper by John (2009), we have come to the conclusion that its author also supports the idea that to become successful in this highly competitive era *today's professionals need to possess a high soft skills quotient* (p.19). Reflecting on what softs skills are, John (2009) writes:

Soft skills are perceived as those capabilities that are inherent in an individual. These competencies exist in every individual to a particular level. But if these skills are not used or if the individual who adorns these skills is unaware of it then that individual will never be able to utilize his / her inherent skills (p.20).

Aiming at investigating the influence of soft skills training programme on enhancing management students' soft skills, John's study holds a substantial practical interest (2009). It becomes a tangible proof that the implementation of a well-designed and targeted training programme enables to enhance management students' soft skills and therefore their employability.

Labzina et al. (2019) consider soft skills as *a person's ability to work in different working environments alone or with other* (p.343).

Klaus, Rohman, and Hamaker (2007) define soft skills as *the nontechnical traits and behaviors needed for successful career navigation* (p.1). Explaining the difference between hard skills and soft skills the scholars report:

While hard skills refer to the technical ability and the factual knowledge needed to do the job, soft skills allow you to more effectively use your technical abilities and knowledge (Klaus et al., 2007, p.2).

Robles (2012) claims that soft skills are intangible, nontechnical and personality-specific and are more related to personal attributes and interpersonal qualities than to technical aptitude or knowledge.

Kaushik, and Bansal (2015) propose the similar idea in defining soft skills. The scholars believe that soft skills as *essentially non-technical or non domain skills which are intangible but reflect in the effectiveness of a person at the workplace as personality specific traits & attitudes, social grace & interpersonal behaviour, communication skills & emotional maturity (intelligence) etc* (Kaushik, & Bansal, 2015, p.150).

Arat (2014) defines soft skills as *the skills that can be learned through training and make a better employee and person in terms of communication, adaptability and problem solving* (p.47).

Claiming that employers often expect some leadership and decision-making skills from their employees, Majid et al. (2012) strongly believe that nowadays professional and technical skills are no more sufficient to help achieve important organizational goals. The scholars add that apart from playing a crucial role for career growth, soft skills are the ones that are essential to harmonious social interactions in society. In their paper scholars emphasize that soft skills are usually referred to *personalities, attributes, qualities and personal behaviour of individuals* (Majid et al., 2012, p.1036).

Khanna (2015) regards soft skills as *the positive traits expected in a good and sincere person* (p.33) and adds that they should be considered as a habit.

According to Stewart, Wall, and Marciniec (2016), soft skills are *non-technical competencies associated with one's personality, attitude, and ability to interact effectively with others* (p.276).

Sousa, and Rocha (2017) consider soft skills as *personal attributes that enhance an individual's interactions, career prospects and job performance* (p.938).

One more scientific paper entitled "University Graduates' Soft Skills: The Employers' Opinion" (Gruzdev et al., 2018) is of interest to us as it contains the results of empirical research concerning the employers' point of view on the importance of soft skills for university graduates (bachelors and masters). According to its authors, soft skills are *a set of such personal characteristics that would facilitate effective interaction and cooperation between people involved in the business process* (Gruzdev et al., 2018, p.696). Researchers comment that *soft skills somehow determine the ability to manage one's own professional activity and development, take responsibility, solve communicative tasks related to interaction, etc.* (Gruzdev et al., 2018, p.696). Moreover, the researchers explain the need to enhance soft skills among university graduates by the fact that most of universities *are still focused primarily on the formation of future professional (hard) competences, despite the fact that the leading role in individual and corporate professional achievements in the modern postindustrial society is provided by "superstructural" (soft) skills* (Gruzdev et al., 2018, p.696).

Thus, taking into consideration definitions mentioned above we can conclude that having a cross-cutting nature soft skills are personal and interpersonal meta-qualities and meta-abilities that are vital to any potential employee who is going to make positive contributions not only to his/her professional development but to the development of a company he/she is going to work for.

4. Approaches to Classifying Soft Skills

Analysis shows that most present-day scholars are not united in classifying soft skills necessary to potential employees and provide different classifications based on their perceptions of what soft skills are. Let us consider some of them more closely. Thus, for instance, Schulz (2008) categorizes three types of skills that students have to acquire during their training, namely personal qualities, interpersonal qualities and additional skills. But differentiating between revealed soft skills categories, the scholar insists that potential employees shouldn't readily recognize additional skills as soft skills since they can acquire them by undergoing some formal training and therefore he increases his attention to such categories as personal and interpersonal qualities. We should note that although Schulz (2008) gives his own classification of soft skills, it is quite unclear what soft skills fall into enumerated categories. In his paper Schulz (2008) lists a number of soft skills which he thinks are of utmost importance to graduates of tertiary education institutions. They include, notably, communication skills, social skills, language skills, critical and structured thinking, moderating discussions, conflict management, analytical skills, creativity. Thus, emphasizing the need to have well-developed communication skills, Schulz (2008) explains that *adequate communication skills are a prerequisite for a range of other soft skills like moderating discussions or conflict management* (p.149). The same idea is accepted and supported by many other researchers (Malykhin et al., 2019; Sharma, 2017). Creativity is also very important as it enables potential employees to *find innovative approaches to problem solving* (Schulz, 2008, p.149) leaving aside *given conventional rules and restrictions* (Schulz, 2008, p.149).

According to Klaus, Rohman, and Hamaker (2007), soft skills fall into four categories that reflect employees' personal, social, communication and self-management behaviors. Among soft skills the scholars distinguish the following: *being self-aware, trustworthiness, conscientiousness, adaptability, critical thinking, attitude, initiative, empathy, confidence, integrity, self-control, organizational awareness, likability, influence, risk taking, problem solving, leadership, time management* (Klaus, Rohman, & Hamaker, 2007, p.2).

John (2009) provides an extensive list of soft skills which management students require in order to get wider career opportunities. This list includes communication skills (oral/spoken), written communication skills, honesty, teamwork, self-motivation (initiative), work ethic (dependability), critical thinking, risk taking skills, flexibility (adaptability), leadership skills, interpersonal skills, working under pressure, questioning skills, creativity, influencing skills, research skills, organization

skills, problem solving skills, multicultural skills, computer skills, academic skills, detail orientation, quantitative skills, teaching (training skills), time management skills (John, 2009).

Investigating the issues concerning enhancing teamwork and soft skills which are most valued by scientists and recruiters, Gibert, Tozer, and Westoby (2017) provide their own list of soft skills important for research collaboration. This list includes the following soft skills, namely networking, cultural and diversity awareness, emotional intelligence, inspiring moral trust, inspiring competence-based trust, strategic thinking, eliciting emotional engagement, empowering talents of others, initiative, decision-making, conflict resolution, persuasion, resilience, flexibility (Gibert, Tozer, & Westoby, 2017).

Robles (2012) expresses another point of view. Trying to determine the most important soft skills that employers want to see in their employees, the scholar reveals the following ten soft skills, namely: integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic (Robles, 2012).

Khanna (2015) considers that although soft skills are rather intangible they play a key role in brightening potential employees' career prospects and in helping them to become successful at work. Perceiving soft skills as *the keystones to success* (Khanna, 2015, p.39), the scholar classifies them into professional excellence and self management skills. Thus, the most important professional excellence skills include meaningful communication skills, decision making skills, commitment towards work, flexibility in actions, time management skills, leadership skills, the ability to work in a team, the ability to accept and undertake responsibility, the ability to work under pressure, computer and technical literacy, interpersonal skills, project-management skills, problem-solving skills, strong work ethic, emotional intelligence, the ability to bring your skills notices and networking skills. At the same time self-management skills encompass *Growth mindset, Self-awareness, Emotion regulation, Self-Confidence, Stress management, Resilience, Skills to forgive and forget, Persistence and Perseverance, Patience and Perceptiveness* (Khanna, 2015, p.37).

Kaushik, and Bansal (2015) are convinced that soft skills fall into following categories, namely: communication, presentation & language skills; deportment skills; inter personal & behavioral skills; emotional regulation skills & intelligence; assertion, persuasion & negotiation skills; influencing skills & leadership; critical thinking skills; self management skills.

Nathan, and Rajamanoharane (2016) strongly believe that college days are the most favourable for acquiring employability skills and add that

all employability skills include aptitude skills, job skills, soft skills and technical skills. According to researchers, employability skills contain all the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes that *make graduates more likely to be successful in their chosen occupations* (Nathan, & Rajamanoharane, 2016, p.27). Aptitude skills concern analytical, critical and lateral thinking. Job skills include the ability to adapt to working conditions. Behavioral and interpersonal skills belong to soft skills, while subject knowledge and core area belong to technical skills.

The study conducted by Balachandar, Jayam, and Jawaharrani (2016) enables them to find out the most important soft skills that have to be imbibed by nursing students. Thus, the scholars have discovered that for day-to-day activities nursing staff requires communication skills including English communication skills, interactive listening skills, enthusiasm and positive attitude, team building skills. According to Balachandar, Jayam, and Jawaharrani (2016), the choice of the abovementioned skills is explained by the fact that nursing staff is usually involved in interactions with numerous patients and formation of trusting relationships is of paramount importance.

Sousa, and Rocha (2017) are convinced that the most important soft skills potential employees require to operate successfully at work include leadership and team management skills, and the ability to manage time.

While stressing the importance of training soft skills, Shakir (2009) strongly believes that soft skills *are not easily taught although they are very much needed in the working life* (p.309). Shakir (2009) divides soft skills into three categories such as personal attributes, interpersonal skills, problem solving and decision making skills. These categories include the following soft skills that are essential for potential employees: *communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, team work, lifelong learning and information management skills, entrepreneurship skills, ethics, and professional moral and leadership skills* (Shakir, 2009, p.309).

One more paper that was of concern to us for understanding what soft skills are praised in contemporary society was “Importance of Soft Skills for Education and Career Success” by Majid et al. (2012). In this paper scholars focus their efforts on finding out business management students’ perceptions towards soft skills vital for their education and employability. Literature review enabled scholars to reveal 14 soft skills necessary, from their point of view, for job success. Among these skills scholars distinguish communication skills, leadership skills, persuasion skills, negotiation skills, conflict management and time management skills, problem solving and creative problem solving skills, teamwork spirit, personal effectiveness, strategic thinking, positive work attitude, willingness to learn and passion

towards work (Majid et al., 2012). The investigation conducted gives scholars rather interesting results. One of them is that although the majority of respondents do not refer all the skills mentioned above to soft ones, they understand the importance of soft skills for career advancement. Another interesting fact revealed is that most students believe that levels of various soft skills have to depend more on activities employees perform at work. If employees are more involved in communicating and interacting with a large number of people, they should demonstrate the higher levels of soft skills.

We should also note that the authors of the journal paper entitled “‘University Graduates’ Soft Skills: The Employers’ Opinion” (Gruzdev et al., 2018) identify eight categories of soft skills, namely: systems and critical thinking; development and implementation of projects; teamwork and leadership; communication; intercultural interaction; self-organization and self-education; health care; health and safety.

Thus, investigating the problem of boosting soft skills among potential employees, we come to the conclusion that scholarly opinion concerning soft skills classifications is also not unanimous. We believe that scholars’ views vary since a unified classification of soft skills recognized by all concerned does not exist and different scholars regard different qualities and abilities as soft skills.

5. Best International Practices for Developing Soft Skills among Potential Employees

Perceiving and classifying soft skills differently, scholars also make various suggestions with respect to teaching and learning strategies, techniques and methods which might be useful in their development. One viewpoint expressed in the scientific literature is that the most important role in this process belongs to active learning including game-based, project-based and competition-based learning (Abushakra et al., 2019; Aristova, 2017; Balachandar, Jayam, & Jawaharrani, 2016; Bartel, 2018; Beard, Schwieger, & Surendran, 2008; Cimatti, 2016; Diamond, Koernig, & Iqbal, 2008; Gautam, 2016; Gibert, Tozer, & Westoby, 2017; Goltz et al., 2008; Kakalejčik, & Pal’ová, 2019; Latif, 2018; Malykhin, & Bondarevskaya, 2018; Nealy, 2005; Ross, Staples, & Udall, 2011; Russell, Russell, & Tastle, 2005; Schulz, 2008; Sharma, 2017; Sousa, & Rocha, 2017; Viviers, Fouché, & Reitsma, 2016; Vogler et al., 2018; Wats, & Wats, 2009; Zhang, 2012). Some scholars insist on combining formal, non-formal and informal learning in developing students’ soft skills including context learning, training and enculturation, on-site training, collaboration between education institutions

and enterprises (Arat, 2014; Cimatti, 2016; Kaushik, & Bansal, 2015; Majid et al., 2012; Shakir, 2009, Talavera, & Perez-Gonzalez, 2007; Wats, & Wats, 2009). There are some other interesting ideas concerning soft skills' development among students, namely: self-development (Khanna, 2015), personality type (Dewiyani S, 2015); technology-based learning (Balachandar, Jayam, & Jawaharrani, 2016; Cimatti, 2016; Nathan, & Rajamanoharane, 2016), etc. Let us discuss them in more detail.

In the paper "Integrating soft skills through active learning in the management classroom" (Nealy, 2005), the scientist presents the findings of the empirical research aimed at proving the idea that some management simulations are very effective in enhancing students' soft skills in the management classroom. Three management simulations proposed in the paper cover the following areas such as communication and technology, human relations and information (Nealy, 2005). The application of the management simulation which relates to communication and technology area is focused on developing team communication skills. Concerning the area of human relations, the second management simulation enables to develop students' listening skills as well as skills necessary for successful cultural communication and for working with people having different cultural backgrounds. Nealy (2005) also explains that to take right ethical decisions and to avoid any ethical problems at work, management students require such soft skills that enable them to deal effectively with various ethical challenges. That's why the main aim of the third management simulation relating to the area of records and information management is to develop management students' ethical awareness. The results of the research conducted by Nealy (2005) demonstrate that the use of active learning activities provides the development of soft skills management students will need at work.

Trying to figure out if it is possible to enhance soft skills among students, Schulz (2008) comes to the conclusion that a necessary prerequisite for their development is *a person's ability to recognize and acknowledge certain behavioral shortfalls or plain bad habits* (p.150). Among the most effective means of developing soft skills, Schulz (2008) distinguishes mind-mapping, brainstorming and self-imposed training.

According to Beard, Schwieger, and Surendran (2008), there are various tools and activities whose usage can influence the development of soft skills let alone knowledge and other skills, namely: *comprehensive exit examinations or exit interviews; class projects; portfolios, surveys of students, alumni, and employers; pre-test/posttests; pass rates on professional certification examinations and other nationally-normed, standardized tests; scores on locally-developed achievement tests;*

and career placement rates (p.234). But, particularly valuable in this context, in scholars' opinion, is game-based learning including various role-plays. Scholars believe that participation in role-playing contributes greatly to the development of students' soft skills since it requires students to show at least one of them.

Investigating the problem of building soft skills among Malaysian undergraduates, Shakir (2009) comes to the conclusion that the lack of these skills *is largely attributed to the education system in Malaysia that focuses on rote learning* (p.314). In the paper entitled "Soft skills at the Malaysian institutes of higher learning", Shakir (2009) presents the model for enhancing soft skills based on the recommendations offered at the ministerial level. The model presented in the paper is aimed at providing three ways of soft skills development among students, namely: development of soft skills based on support programmes, development of soft skills based on formal teaching and learning and development of soft skills based on campus life. Taking into account the fact that higher education institutions can make some changes in the recommended model, Shakir believes that the developing students' soft skills takes place through stand-alone subjects, through embedding soft skills development in existing courses, through support programmes, through activities based on campus life, through formal and informal activities at faculty levels, through a formal *soft finishing school* (Shakir, 2009, p.313) and through practical or industrial training. Thus, the development of soft skills through stand-alone subjects encompasses various elective courses which students can take up in any semester. The development of soft skills through embedding them in existing courses includes problem-based learning, case study, presentations, group work etc. Thus, development of soft skills based on support programmes provides students with various co-curricular and extra-curricular activities which they can choose in accordance with their interests. According to Shakir (2009), development of soft skills based on campus life may encompass *debates, drama competition, sports carnival which includes tally match, charity bazaar, and singing competitions...*(p.313). The development of soft skills based on formal and informal activities at faculty levels implies organizing seminars, workshops, and conferences as well as shelter homes visits and games between departments. We cannot fail to mention the use of *soft finishing school* (Shakir, 2009, p.313) courses for those who lack soft skills. In scholar's opinion (Shakir, 2009), it is a very effective means of enhancing students' soft skills although time-consuming and costly. The development of soft skills through practical or industrial training includes gaining practical experience as well as realizing the importance of possessing soft skills.

Emphasizing the fact that soft skills can always be learned, Kaushik, and Bansal (2015) believe that their development is achieved first of all through training and enculturation. At the same time the scholar does not deny the importance of the family, societal and college influences in the improvement of soft skills.

Arat (2014) expresses the idea that while studying at university students are provided with some trainings aimed at developing their soft skills. But the main problem is that these trainings are usually short-term and require a so-called group setting. The scholar thinks the most efficient way for acquiring soft skills is context learning since it enables students to learn interpersonal communications skills, teamwork and problem solving skills in the real context. The following activities, according to Arat (2014), contribute greatly to the development of students' soft skills, namely: long term apprenticeship, participation in sports, voluntary works and projects, elaboration of art and design projects, involvement in long term workshops and classes, travels throughout the country and abroad, learning to play a music instrument. However, in order to be efficient the use of these activities requires taking into account several conditions among which the scholar distinguishes a commitment, relationship, taking personal responsibility, following special rules and dress code, using a professional material, time restrictions and contextual learning. What is more, the minimum amount of time for applying these activities in equipping students with necessary soft skills should take more than three months.

Along with incorporating soft skills development activities into professional training courses, Majid et al. (2012) suggest that education institutions have to organize specialized training workshops to help students improve their soft skills. Scholars also add that self-directed readings and participation in development programs and activities play a significant role in enhancing students' soft skills.

Examining the perceptions of accounting students on the benefits obtained from doing an industrial training course, Maelah et al. (2012) reveal that it provides students with numerous opportunities and enables them to acquire such soft skills as communication skills, leadership and team working skills, self-management skills. The scholars state that industrial training has its greatest positive impact on the enhancement of self-management skills. Furthermore, the scholars claim that the use of industrial training course helps students get the real life experience before they graduate and *develop behaviour that was in accordance with ethics and social responsibilities, performed collaborative work in groups and with management and demonstrated a commitment towards life-long learning and professional development* (Maelah et al., 2012, p.547).

Taking into account that soft skills are action-oriented, Sharma (2017) believes that they have *to be practiced more outside the four walls of classrooms* (p.38). The scholar recommends to use a wide range of teaching methods and techniques for improving students' soft skills, namely: *simulation games, role-plays, outbound games, brain-storming sessions, ice-breakers and warm-ups, discussions, case study, handouts, presentations* (Sharma, 2017, p.38). Each of the above-mentioned methods and techniques have their own advantages but their comprehensive use in the classroom, in scholar's point of view, promotes effective development of students' soft skills, let alone their English language competence (Sharma, 2017).

Connecting soft skills with employees' behaviours and characteristics, Wats, and Wats's (2009) point out that being demonstrated unconsciously they enable employees to express their positive or negative attitude towards challenges at work or in everyday life. The scholars come to the conclusion that although most education institutions understand their role in developing students' soft skills, all they can do is to provide students with some projects and programmes. But the major problem is that most of suggested programmes are *unstructured, short term, non-credited based and ill linked with the discipline of individual's study* (Wats, & Wats, 2009, p.9). What is more, many teachers are not aware of neither their role in enhancing students' soft skills nor of effective didactic tools whose implementation into the education process will lead to the simultaneous development of both hard and soft skills. Such a situation, in Wats, and Wats's (2009) opinion, eventually results in decline in students' eagerness and motivation to study. The results of the research conducted enable the scholars to state that communication skills, problem-solving skills, leadership skills, teamwork skills, IT skills and learning to learn skills are regarded as the most needed nowadays. The most effective learning methods for developing soft skills among students include experiential learning, role-playing and demonstration, team working methods, case studies and extracurricular activities (Wats, & Wats, 2009). Scholars consider that one of the most important step to develop soft skills at education institutions is to involve industry *in defining skill set, designing interlinked curriculum, implementing curriculum through various learning experiences ...* (Wats, & Wats, 2009, p.9).

Reflecting on the effective means of soft skills building, Khanna (2015) concludes that any person is able to acquire them without outside help. But before a person starts developing them, the researcher advises to find some deeper understanding of the self. Khanna (2015) is convinced that the ways to enhance soft skills are very simple. And one and the most important of them is that a person has to learn to prioritise everything

he/she should do, has to become more observant and aware of everything that surrounds him/her, to gain new knowledge throughout life and always be intentional.

Another point of view is expressed by Nathan, and Rajamanoharane (2016). The scholars make a suggestion that in the era of rapid technological change it is technology-based learning that promotes the development of employability skills including soft ones among college students. The scholars argue that the possibility to use the Internet and different devices such as tablets, laptops etc. makes communication between all participants of educational process either in the classroom or outside easier. But what they found after implementing e-learning into college students' training was that it greatly influenced the enhancement of students' technical and job skills. With respect to the development of aptitude skills and soft skills through e-learning the results were not so convincing.

Expressing the similar point of view, Balachandar, Jayam, and Jawaharrani (2016) state that e-learning a very important role for developing students' soft skills. For enhancing nursing students' English communication skills, the scholars offer to apply special e-learning platforms. They also emphasize the need to use smart interactive boards and various information and communication technologies while training nursing students. Moreover, Balachandar, Jayam, and Jawaharrani (2016) are convinced that incorporation of special modules into the syllabus plan for training nursing students may positively influence the development of their soft skills. The training methodology developed and described by scholars implies the use of *role plays, modeling, question based discussions, customized case studies, simulations & group activities* (Balachandar, Jayam, & Jawaharrani, 2016, p.1366).

As for teaching and learning strategies, methods and techniques applied for enhancing soft skills among postgraduates and postdocs, Gibert, Tozer, and Westoby (2017) believe that even though these skills vary intrinsically between individuals, short courses built around role-play interviews as well as group work including discussion and reflection can have a profound impact on their development.

Considering that soft skills are essential for both work and everyday life, Cimatti (2016) insists that their development should start within the family. Moreover, the scholar expresses the idea that soft skills enhancement should be ongoing and should continue all lifelong. When it comes to students, Cimatti (2016) believes that under the conditions of uncertainty caused by global economic outlook it is a direct responsibility of education institutions to equip them with soft skills they will be able to use in any circumstance. We support scholar's opinion that it is impossible to develop

all soft skills in education institutions only, some of them require gaining a definite working experience. In this regard collaboration between education institutions and various enterprises seems to be logical and workable. Collaboration mentioned above envisages such activities as *visits, internships, joined programs, laboratories and projects* (Cimatti, 2016, p.125-126). On the other hand, higher education institutions have all the necessary capacity and the ability to provide students with didactic support efficient for developing their soft skills, namely: project work, simulations, case study, learning games, seminars, workshops and application of new technologies including digital ones.

Stewart, Wall, and Marciniak (2016) express the similar idea and point out that it is hardly possible to equip students with all the necessary soft skills *in the classroom setting or by reading a book* (p.277). According to scholars, the best way to develop soft skills among students is by practicing them.

6. Conclusions

Having analyzed scientific literature we have come to the conclusion that possible ambiguities in the interpretation of the concept of “soft skills” are caused by the dichotomic perception of their nature, on the one hand, and by the absence of the common language, on the other. We believe the soft-skills have a cross-cutting nature and regard them as some personal and interpersonal meta-qualities and meta-abilities that vital to any potential employee who is going to make positive contributions not only to his/her professional development but to society as well. Perceiving and classifying soft skills differently, scholars also make various suggestions with respect to teaching and learning strategies, techniques and methods which might be useful in their development. The results of the analysis show that scientific literature contains different viewpoint on efficient strategies, methods and techniques of soft skills development, namely: active learning including game-based, project-based and competition-based learning; combination of formal, non-formal and informal learning; self-development practices, technology-based learning etc. Each of the above-mentioned didactic tools has their own supporters.

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