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MODEL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL GUIDANCE FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Abstract: In the context of dynamic changes in the economy and rapid technological progress, the process of developing soft skills is becoming an integral condition for the professional success of graduates of education institutions. This study aimed to create and substantiate from a scientific point of view a model of psychological and pedagogical guidance that promotes the development and strengthening of soft skills in university students. The study employed a comprehensive methodological approach, including a theoretical analysis of scientific and methodological sources, systematization of data, empirical study through a sociological survey of employers and HR specialists in the Pavlodar region (75 respondents), and modeling aimed at developing a scientifically based model of psychological and pedagogical guidance for soft skills development in university students. Particular attention is given to skills such as teamwork, creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence. The developed model is an integrated structure that includes target, methodological, diagnostic, content, organizational, and result-oriented components. Each of these components is aimed at creating a favorable educational environment that helps strengthen the professional competitiveness of students and develop their personal stability and ability to successfully adapt to a dynamically changing labor market. The model presents programs focused on the systematic and effective development of soft skills, providing a comprehensive approach to this process through the integration of innovative methods, various forms of training and modern educational resources. Thus, the model focuses on creating an educational space that stimulates the development of soft skills and assumes active participation of all subjects in the educational process.

Key words: soft skills, psychological and pedagogical guidance, university students, model, educational process, labor market

Introduction

In the modern era of rapid social transformation and global digitalization, the ability to quickly adapt and possess versatile skills is becoming a fundamental factors for personal and professional success. In addition to traditional academic knowledge, employers are increasingly focusing on skills that ensure personal stability, successful social adaptation, and competitiveness in the labor market. Soft skills represent the ability to apply knowledge and utilize practical skills to complete tasks and solve problems (Eleje et al., 2024). These skills cover a wide range of competencies, including communication, adaptability, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence, making them indispensable in today's environment. In this regard, soft skills, which form the basis for graduates' professional and personal success, are becoming especially relevant (Cimatti, 2016). Soft skills are rightfully referred to as skills of the future, as they allow young professionals to adapt more quickly, integrate into work processes, actively participate in organizational activities, and unlock their potential (Workforce Development Center, 2023).

An analysis of the current trends in the labor market demonstrates that employers attach particular importance to the development of soft skills among their employees. The results of research conducted by LinkedIn confirm this fact: 85% of respondents believe that soft skills are as important for professional success as academic knowledge and specialized skills (Tongia & Jain, 2024). Despite the evident importance of soft skills, research indicates that the level of their development among university graduates often does not meet employers' expectations. Many young professionals face difficulties adapting to the workplace because of insufficient preparation in communication competence, critical thinking, teamwork skills, adaptability, and well-developed emotional intelligence (Cheng et al., 2022). As a result, employers are forced to conduct additional training and educational programs for new employees, which increases company costs and slows down the professional integration of graduates.

Educational practices demonstrates that the development of soft skills requires an integrated approach that includes both traditional and innovative teaching methods. The integration of active learning methods, digital technologies, social partnerships, and the incorporation of soft skills into academic disciplines have shown positive results in preparing specialists who can meet the modern labor market requirements. However, to date, there is a unified, scientifically based approach that ensures the systematic development of soft skills within the educational environment (Marin-Zapata et al., 2022).

Based on the above, the purpose of this study was defined as the development and scientific justification of a model of psychological and pedagogical guidance for soft skills development in university students.

To achieve this research goal, it is necessary to solve a number of objectives, including:

- A comprehensive study of the theoretical foundations and modern scientific approaches that reveal the essence and significance of the soft skills development process.
- Analysis of existing educational programs and methods that contribute to the effective development of these skills.
- Conducting a sociological survey among representatives of employers and HR specialists of the Pavlodar region to identify the most in-demand soft skills in the conditions of the modern labor market, followed by an interpretation of the obtained results for their further use in model design.
- Identifying key factors that influence the successful development of these skills in the educational environment.
- Designing a model of psychological and pedagogical guidance that ensures the targeted development of soft skills in students.

Implementation of the proposed objectives will ensure a well-founded approach to the development of soft skills in the university educational environment, which, in turn, will improve students' professional readiness, competitiveness, and adaptability to the requirements of the modern professional landscape.

Literature review

Educational institutions worldwide are implementing innovative approaches aimed at developing soft skills among students and recognizing their key role in the professional development of specialists. Abraham et al. (2021) emphasized the significance of in-person communication in soft skills development. According to the authors, reducing dependence on technology and focusing on personal meetings are currently key aspects for the effective development of these skills.

Simultaneously, findings from other studies highlight the need to combine traditional and digital learning to achieve positive dynamics in soft skills development. According to Coelho and Martins (2022), successful professional training programs are based on hybrid methods that integrate face-to-face interactions with online learning, fostering both communication and

analytical skills among students. Several educational programs have already demonstrated their effectiveness in this regard. For instance, the study by Garcia et al. (2020) describes the implementation of virtual simulations in specialist training, which made it possible to increase the level of interaction, adaptability and emotional intelligence in students. The use of interactive technologies, in combination with group discussions and role-playing games, contributed to the development of essential soft skills and facilitated their seamless integration into the professional community.

An essential aspect of soft skills development is extracurricular activities, which enable students not only to acquire theoretical knowledge during the learning process, but also to apply it in practical settings. Participation in student clubs, volunteer programs, sports sections, and professional competitions contributes to the development of skills such as teamwork, leadership, communication skills, time management, and emotional intelligence (Fakhretdinova et al., 2021). Additionally, a crucial direction in soft skills development is the expansion of social partnerships, integrating educational processes with real-world professional experiences. As noted by Uvarina et al. (2021), the effective cultivation of soft skills among young people requires active cooperation between educational institutions, employers, and public organizations. Social partnerships serve as a mechanism for engaging students in project-based activities, internships, and mentoring programs, thereby creating conditions for developing communication, adaptability, and leadership qualities in an authentic professional environments.

Another promising direction in soft skills development is the implementation of an interdisciplinary approach that enables the integration of these skills into various academic disciplines (Caeiro-Rodríguez et al., 2021). Current research indicates that incorporating soft skills into the curricula of technical, natural sciences, and humanities programs contributes to the formation of complex competencies in students (Sirbu A., & Georgescu M., 2023). In particular, project-based and problem-oriented learning, where students solve real-world cases from professional practice, not only improves their level of professional training but also develops teamwork, critical thinking, communication, and leadership skills (Glazunova et al., 2022). Such integration contributes to the creation of an educational environment in which soft skills are developed not separately, but in close connection with professional knowledge, increasing their relevance for graduates' future employment.

To effectively develop soft skills among university students, it is also important to equip teaching staff with modern methods and technologies for their development (Maren et al., 2021). Educators enhance soft skills and deepen their knowledge of their development through additional education systems based on personalized advanced training programs and individual professional growth trajectories. Self-education, mentoring, and practical pedagogical activities play important roles in this process. Special attention has been given to modern teaching methods, such as case technologies, information, and communication technologies, as well as active and interactive approaches: such as project-based and problem-oriented learning, blended models, and other innovative methodologies (Caeiro-Rodríguez et al., 2021). This approach allows not only to increase the professional competence of teachers in soft skills but also to create favorable conditions for the effective implementation of modern methods and technologies for their development in the educational process. Thus, advanced training of the teaching staff has become an important element of the strategy for preparing students for professional activities (Rozhnova et al., 2024).

The findings of previous studies demonstrates that the effective development of soft skills requires a comprehensive and multi-component approach. Scientific studies confirm the necessity of integrating various strategies, including formal education, digital technologies, extracurricular activities, social partnerships, and professional development of university faculty (Sancho-Cantus et al, 2023; Lamri J. & Lubart T., 2023). These conclusions serve as

the basis for designing a model of psychological and pedagogical guidance for soft skills development in university students.

Methods and organization of the research

A comprehensive methodological approach, consisting of several sequential stages, was employed in the study.

At the first stage, a theoretical analysis of scientific and methodological literature is conducted, as well as current research on the development of soft skills in the educational environment. The study of scientific works allowed for the identification of key concepts, approaches, and methods used in the practice of developing soft skills among university students.

At the second stage, the collected information was synthesized and systematized to identify main the factors and patterns influencing the development of soft skills. The most significant theoretical and practical aspects were determined, which subsequently formed the basis of this study.

At the third stage, an empirical analysis was conducted through a sociological survey aimed at identifying the most in-demand soft skills in the modern labor market and assessing their significance in the candidate selection process. To conduct the survey, a sample of 75 respondents was formed, including company executives, HR specialists, and employers from various industries of the Pavlodar region.

The survey was conducted using an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, which allowed us to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data. The main focus was on the following questions:

• What role do you think soft skills play in the selection of candidates for vacant positions in your organization?

• What soft skills do you consider the most valuable for the successful professional performance of employees?

• In your experience, which soft skills are most commonly underdeveloped among candidates?

The respondent selection process accounted for sectoral differences in soft skills requirements. The study included professionals from diverse fields, such as education (universities and colleges), industry, information technology, agriculture, trade, and the public sector. This comprehensive approach enables a nuanced analysis of the demand for soft skills across different economic sectors, facilitating the identification of the most essential skills required for professional success in the modern labor market.

Statistical data processing involved analyzing the distribution of the significance of soft skills across industries, conducting comparative assessments, and ranking skills based on their importance. Descriptive statistical methods were employed to identify the most in-demand soft skills, both within specific economic sectors and across the broader labor market. This methodology not only clarified industry-specific skill expectations, but also helped formulate a consolidated list of the most critical for ensuring successful employment and career advancement among university graduates.

At the fourth stage, based on the results of the analysis of theoretical and empirical data, a psychological and pedagogical guidance model was designed for the development of soft skills among university students. The modeling process was based on the integration of modern pedagogical approaches, such as activity-based, systemic, and personality-oriented approaches, while also incorporating best practices for embedding soft skills into the educational process.

Thus, the presented methodology provides a logical and sequential organization of the study, facilitating the development of a scientifically grounded model of psychological and pedagogical guidance for the development of soft skills in the university environment.

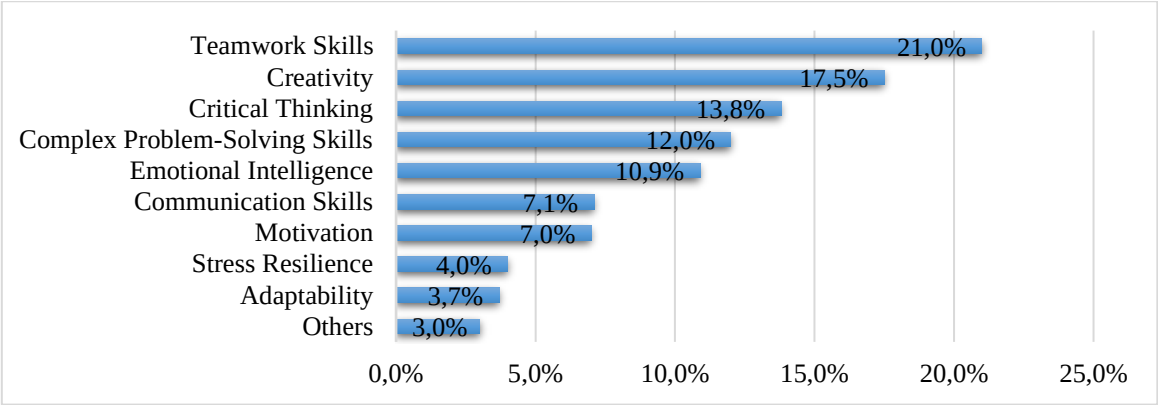
Research results and discussion

Based on a survey conducted among employers and HR specialists in the Pavlodar region, the key soft skills most in demand in the current labor market were identified. An analysis of the respondents' answers revealed that soft skills play a decisive role in selecting employees for vacant positions. More than 87% of respondents indicated that the presence and development of these skills is at least as important as professional knowledge and technical competencies. Employers emphasized that even highly qualified specialists may experience difficulties in adapting to the work process and advancing in their careers.

The survey identified the most essential soft skills that, according to respondents, modern specialists should possess. Among them, teamwork skills, creativity, critical thinking, problem -solving abilities, and emotional intelligence were highlighted as the key qualities (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Soft Skills Identified as Most In-Demand in the Modern Labor Market



Employers also pointed out the most problematic soft skills, insufficient development of which becomes a barrier to employment for graduates. Among the problem areas, respondents noted the inability of employees to work efficiently and productively in a team, a low level of critical thinking and poorly developed emotional intelligence.

Moreover, the comparative analysis conducted in this study reveals that the prioritization of specific soft skills varies across industries. In the field of information technology, employers value critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and creativity, as these competencies are essential for operating in a rapidly evolving environment that demands innovative approaches and unconventional solutions. By contrast, teamwork skills and emotional intelligence are of primary importance in the industrial and agricultural sectors, where effective collaboration and adaptation to industry-specific working conditions are crucial.

In the trade sector, communication skills and problem-solving abilities are the sought-after, as success in these fields relies heavily on customer orientation and the ability to respond swiftly to emerging challenges. In education and the public sector, creativity, problem-solving skills, and emotional intelligence are regarded as key competencies, as these qualities enhance pedagogical effectiveness and facilitate decision-making in high-responsibility contexts.

Considering the identified trends, this study developed a universal model of psychological and pedagogical guidance aimed at fostering the most in-demand soft skills among university students. This model integrates general labor market requirements with industry-specific characteristics, ensuring a systematic approach to the development of key competencies such as teamwork skills, critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, creativity, and emotional intelligence. Its implementation will facilitate the creation of a flexible educational environment that prepares specialists capable of effectively adapting to

professional challenges, working across various sectors, and successfully integrating into modern socioeconomic conditions.

The proposed model comprises several key components that encompass the main aspects of psychological and pedagogical guidance, considering modern educational requirements: the target, methodological, diagnostic, content, organizational, and result-oriented components (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Model of Psychological and Pedagogical Guidance for Soft Skills Development in University Students

TARGET COMPONENT

Goal:
to develop key soft skills in university students through systematic psychological and pedagogical guidance aimed at enhancing their professional competitiveness, personal resilience, and social adaptation in the context of rapidly changing labor market.

Objectives:
- diagnosis and analysis of the level of soft skills development among university students;
- creation and implementation of psychological and pedagogical guidance programs;
- development of key soft skills;
- assessment and adjustment of the dynamics of soft skills development.

METHODOLOGICAL COMPONENT

Principles: *systematicity and consistency, collaboration, personalization.*
Approaches: *personal-oriented, systematic, activity-based.*

DIAGNOSTIC COMPONENT

Soft skills Components				
Teamwork	**Creativity**	**Critical Thinking**	**Complex Problem-Solving**	**Emotional Intelligence**
Diagnostic Tools				
Group Project Method	Torrance Test of Creative Thinking, adapted by E. E. Tunik	Critical Thinking Test by Starkey, adapted by E. L. Lutsenko	Case Method	Emotional Intelligence Test by N. Hall, adapted by E. I. Ilyin

CONTENT COMPONENT

Professional Development Course for University Stuff aimed at equipping them with the necessary knowledge and tools for the successful development of soft skills in university students.	Comprehensive Program For the Development of Soft Skills in University Students aimed at enhancing their competitiveness and successful adaptation in the labor market.

ORGANIZATIONAL COMPONENT

Psychological and Pedagogical Conditions: the creation of a supportive educational environment that fosters the development of soft skills through regular feedback and motivation for self-development; conducting trainings and consultations aimed at developing emotional resilience, communication skills, and self-organization abilities; the use of reflective practices and situational tasks to develop critical thinking and confidence in decision-making.

Forms:	Methods:	Tools:
- individual and group consultations; - training sessions; - psychological workshops; - seminars and master classes; - reflective sessions; - discussion clubs; - extracurricular activities.	- case study method; - reflective method; - project-based method; - role-playing method; - training method; - coaching; - mentoring; - active and interactive learning methods.	- diagnostic tools; - educational platforms and digital tools; - presentation materials, video content; - visualization tools (diagrams, maps, tables); - interactive whiteboards, flip charts, handouts; - reflection and personal development journals.

RESULT–ORIENTED COMPONENT

Teamwork: effectively interacts, distributes tasks, motivates, and supports colleagues.
Creativity: ability to generate original ideas, find unconventional approaches to problem-solving, demonstrate flexible thinking, and combine various concepts and methods to create innovative solutions.
Critical Thinking: ability to analyze information, identify logical connections, and make well-reasoned decisions. Capable of detecting contradictions, assessing the reliability of sources, and determining the strengths and weaknesses of proposed solutions.
Complex Problem Solving: identifies key issues, generates possible solutions, and selects the most optimal ones. Applies a systematic approach to analysis and problem-solving, considering risks and potential consequences.
Emotional Intelligence: recognizes and manages emotions, understands the feelings of others, and creates a positive atmosphere.

The target component defines strategic priorities and key objectives for the development of soft skills among university students. It establishes the conceptual foundation of the model, ensuring a structured approach for integrating soft skills into the educational process. The primary goal is to develop students' essential soft skills through a systematic psychological and pedagogical guidance framework, enhancing their professional competitiveness, personal resilience, and social adaptability in a rapidly evolving labor market.

To achieve this goal, the model includes the following key objectives:

- diagnostic assessment of students current soft skills proficiency;
- design and implementation of psychological and pedagogical programs for targeted skills development;
- creation of an engaging learning environment that encourages active student participation in skill-building activities;
- continuous evaluation and adaptation of educational practices.

The methodological component establishes the principles and approaches that ensure a structured, effective, and holistic process for developing soft skills among university students. This is based on the following three fundamental principles:

- systematicity and consistency – a step-by-step approach that begins with diagnosing students' initial skill levels, followed by targeted interventions, and concluding with performance evaluation;
- collaboration – emphasizing interaction among students, faculty, and other stakeholders to foster teamwork, communication, and self-management abilities;
- personalization – adapting the learning process to students' individual characteristics, motives, and competencies, thereby maximizing their personal and professional potential.

Three methodological approaches were integrated to ensure a scientifically grounded and practically applicable model:

- personality-oriented approach focuses on individualized learning trajectories, catering to students' abilities and motivation to enhance soft skills development;

- systematic approach embeds soft skills within both formal curricula and extracurricular activities, ensuring a cohesive educational framework that combines theoretical and practical learning;

- the activity-based approach prioritizes hands-on learning through active methodologies such as project-based work, case studies, and role-playing exercises. This approach immerses students in real-world problem-solving, improving adaptability, decision-making, and innovative thinking.

The diagnostic component. To ensure an evidence-based approach, the model included a robust diagnostic system designed to assess students' soft skills development over time. This system uses diverse assessment tools to provide comprehensive evaluations:

- Teamwork skills were assessed using the Group Project Method, which evaluates collaboration, role distribution, and communication efficiency.
- Creativity was measured using the Torrance Creative Thinking Test (adapted by E. E. Tunik), which assesses originality, flexibility, and problem-solving creativity.
- Critical thinking was evaluated using the Starkey Critical Thinking Test (adapted by E. L. Lutsenko), which assesses analytical reasoning and logical consistency.
- Complex problem-solving skills are analyzed using the Case Method, which involves real-world scenarios requiring strategic decision-making.
- Emotional intelligence was assessed using the N. Hall Emotional Intelligence Test (adapted by E. I. Ilyin), which measures self-awareness, emotion regulation, and empathy (Uaikhanova et al., 2024).

The content component. The model includes two integrated development programs:

1. A professional development program for university staff, equipping educators with innovative methodologies to foster soft skills in students.
2. A student soft skills development program integrating targeted skills training into the academic curriculum.

Table 1 outlines the structure of these programs.

Table 1

Structural and Content Characteristics of Soft Skills Development Programs for University Faculty and Students

No.	Aspect	Professional Development Program for University Stuff	A Student Soft Skills Development Program
1	Target Audience	University Faculty Members	University Students
2	Program Goal	Training teachers in effective methods for fostering soft skills among students	Enhancing students' key soft skills for professional success
3	Main Modules	- Innovative strategies for soft skills development - Active learning methodologies (case studies, project-based learning, role-playing) - Tools for diagnosing and monitoring soft skills growth - Effective mentoring and coaching techniques	- Teamwork Skills - Creativity - Critical Thinking - Complex Problem-Solving - Emotional Intelligence
4	Expected Results	- Enhancing faculty competencies in soft skills education - A more supportive learning environment	- Strengthened soft skills in students - Increased adaptability to labor market demands - Enhanced career competitiveness

The organizational component. To facilitate a structured approach to soft skill development, the model includes various methods and tools:

- Teaching Forms – seminars, masterclasses, discussion clubs, reflective sessions, etc.
- Teaching Methods – case studies, coaching, project-based learning, role-playing, etc.
- Learning Tools – diagnostic instruments, digital platforms, interactive whiteboards, reflection journals, etc.

By combining these elements, the model fostered an educational environment conducive to the development of holistic soft skills.

The result-oriented component. The final component of the model focuses on measuring progress and refining educational strategies. Key indicators include:

- improvements in students' soft skills proficiency measured through longitudinal assessments;
- increased graduate employability, tracked via employer feedback and alumni career progression;
- sustained faculty engagement assessed through participation in soft skills training initiatives.

By ensuring a structured implementation and evaluation process, the model provides a scalable framework adaptable to diverse higher education settings. It supports universities in preparing graduates who are not only knowledgeable in their respective fields, but also equipped with the essential soft skills required for professional success.

Conclusions

The proposed model of psychological and pedagogical guidance for the development of soft skills in university students represents an integrated system that combines theoretical and practical methods aimed at the effective development of soft skills within the educational environment. The model emphasizes the importance of not only targeted work with students but also the professional development of university staff, creating favorable conditions for the development of sustainable skills in students.

The implementation of this model in the educational environment of universities contributes to the comprehensive development of key soft skills, such as the ability to work in a team, creativity, critical thinking, the ability to solve complex problems and emotional intelligence. The implementation of the model opens up prospects for increasing the competitiveness of graduates in the labor market, strengthening their professional competencies, and readiness to effectively cope with the challenges of the modern world.

In the future, the proposed model should be piloted within the educational process of universities to assess its effectiveness and identify potential areas for improvement. To ensure effective implementation and assessment of the proposed model, a step-by-step plan was developed, including the following key stages:

1. *Diagnostic Stage.* This stage involves determining the initial level of soft skills development among university students.

2. *Design and* Implementation of Psychological and Pedagogical Support Programs. At this stage, educational strategies are developed and introduced to foster the most in-demand soft skills. The main activities include the following:

- Preparing faculty members for the application of active and innovative teaching methods;
- Developing and integrating new educational modules into the curriculum;
- Creating conditions for active student engagement in the process of soft skills development.

These programs are designed considering modern pedagogical approaches and specific features of the university’s educational environment.

3. *Monitoring and Evaluation of Effectiveness.* A system of regular monitoring was established to assess the outcomes of model implementation. The key assessment tools include the following:

- Retesting students to track their progress;
- Analyzing the dynamics of changes in the development of key soft skills;
- Conducting surveys of students and faculty to collect feedback.

Based on the results, adjustments to the methods and educational programs were made as needed.

4. *Institutionalization of the Model in the Higher Education System.* In the final stage, the model was integrated into the university's educational process at the institutional level. This includes:

- Developing methodological recommendations for embedding soft skills into academic programs;
- Preparing training materials for faculty members;
- Organizing seminars and training sessions for university staff;
- Disseminating best practices among the academic community.

This stage ensured the sustainability of the developed model and its adaptation to long-term educational strategies.

The presented model of psychological and pedagogical guidance for the development of soft skills among university students represents an integrated system that combines theoretical and practical methods aimed at fostering these competencies in the educational environment. The model emphasizes not only targeted work with students but also the professional development of university faculty, creating favorable conditions for the sustainable formation of soft skills among students.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Author Contributions

Meruyert Uaikhanova: Software, Validation, Formal analysis, Supervision, Murat Pshembayev: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - Original Draft, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Anara Khaimuldina: Investigation, Visualization, Resources, Khanat Kassenov: Data curation, Writing - Review & Editing

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