



# DEVELOPMENT OF SOFT SKILLS OF FUTURE SPECIALISTS IN PROJECT ACTIVITIES: INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

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## Abstract

*The relevance of the study* is due to the need to develop the soft skills of future professionals through project-based activities in higher education institutions in the international dimension.

*Objective:* To describe and substantiate the positive practices of developing soft skills of future specialists through project-based activities in higher education institutions in the People's Republic of China in order to utilise the positive experience of this country in reforming Ukrainian education.

*Methods:* Theoretical analysis of scientific sources, websites of educational institutions, educational and professional programmes of higher education institutions to determine the key features of the development of soft skills of future specialists through project-based activities in higher education institutions of the People's Republic of China.

*Findings:* The concepts of soft skills and project-based activities were formulated and clarified, the inhibiting factors of development were identified, and the issue of soft skills development in future specialists in current research on higher education in the People's Republic of China was analysed. The paper describes measures to improve the level of development of soft skills of future specialists in the People's Republic of China and formulates proposals for solving the issue of developing soft skills of future specialists through project-based activities in higher education institutions of Ukraine.

*Conclusions:* It was found that the development of soft skills of future specialists through project-based activities is more effective. It was established that the organisation of collective scientific projects and the holding of contests and competitions using practice-oriented tasks for students are effective means of improving the level of soft skills of future specialists in higher education institutions. Reforming curricula and funding and establishing cooperation with industry by the Ministry of Education and Science; professional development of teachers in universities, organisation of additional extracurricular activities using projects; formulating clear goals for project-based learning by teachers, establishing effective cooperation with students, and organising feedback and assessment can be useful in improving the level of soft skills of future specialists in higher education institutions in Ukraine.

**Keywords:** *soft skills, project-based activities, the People's Republic of China, higher education, future specialists*

**Introduction.** Twenty-first-century skills make it possible to operate effectively in our new and ever-changing world. These are the parameters based on which modern companies are already recruiting personnel and relating not only to knowledge and technical skills, but also determining success in the social and professional environment. Skills such as communication, leadership, creative thinking, and emotional intelligence are called soft skills.

Although China is entering the global arena as a major player, there is still a significant gap in the development of soft skills among the country's specialists. That is why it is important to study the issue of soft skills development in China and its connection with the future development of soft skills of specialists through project-based activities in higher education institutions of the People's Republic of China.

**Sources.** Soft skills are the subject matter of research conducted by many scientists around the world. M. Carter's (2012) study shows how the concept of "soft skills" is interpreted in different industries and scientific disciplines depending on the context. In his study (2018), B. Motze analyses the theoretical approach to the term "soft skills" and explains how these skills can be formed and developed. E. Harris and K. Leonard (2013) identified which skills are classified as soft skills and how they affect job success. In particular, the study showed that emotional intelligence, leadership, and communication skills have a direct impact on career success.

The project-based activity was the subject matter of research conducted by such Ukrainian and foreign scholars as O. Halytska (2017), O. Ivanova, L. Petrova (2016), B. Sobolevskyi, V. Lorinc (2014), and others. We also analysed the studies of Chinese scholars on the use of project-based technologies for the development and formation of soft skills of specialists in higher education institutions of the People's Republic of China, including the works of L. Li and X. Li (2019), J. Li and M. Zheng (2019), F. Wang, Z. Yang and Y. Kong (2020).

**The purpose** of the paper is to describe and substantiate the positive practices of developing soft skills of future specialists through project-based activities in higher education institutions of the People's Republic of China in order to utilise the positive experience of this country in reforming Ukrainian education.

**Methods.** The paper includes a theoretical analysis of scientific sources, websites of educational institutions, educational and professional pro-

grammes of higher education institutions to determine the key features of the development of soft skills of future specialists through project-based activities in higher education institutions of the People's Republic of China.

**Findings and Discussion.** In the scientific literature, there are many papers that discuss the concept of soft skills, providing different definitions and interpretations of this term. For example, G. Smith and I. Johnson (2018) define soft skills as socio-emotional skills that allow a person to communicate effectively, work in a team, solve problems, and adapt to change. The authors emphasise that soft skills are just as important as technical skills and are required to achieve success in today's business environment. M. Thomson and J. Jones (2019) consider soft skills as the ability to communicate effectively, work in a team, and empower oneself to achieve a goal through one's own potential and other means. The authors suggest that the development of soft skills contributes to improving the quality of life and ensuring personal development. I. Smith and S. Williams (2020) consider "soft skills" as a set of personal qualities and skills, such as communication, leadership, self-management, emotional intelligence, etc. The authors argue that soft skills influence professional success and ensure a person's ability to interact effectively with others.

Based on the analysis of this term in the scientific literature, we can trace a general trend that soft skills are socio-emotional skills that contribute to effective communication, teamwork, and personal and professional success.

One of the most effective ways to develop soft skills of future specialists in higher education institutions around the world is through project-based activities. This concept is widely used in various scientific disciplines, such as management, pedagogy, psychology, etc. Research and analysis of various scientific papers show that the term "project-based activity" has different shades of meaning, and its definition depends on the context of its application. For example, in management, project-based activity often refers to a management system in which projects are created to achieve specific purposes and results. V. Lorinc and B. Sobolevsky (2014) believe that project-based activities are characterised by temporality, uniqueness and targeted nature, and can be used in various industries, such as construction, information technology, marketing, and many others. In psychology, project-based activities are used as a means to support and

develop cognitive and social skills. L. Petrova and O. Ivanova (2016) studied the impact of project-based activities on the development of creative thinking and emphasised that project-based activities contribute to the development of problematic thinking, the ability to search for and analyse information, and the formulation of creative solutions. In pedagogy, project-based activities are aimed at developing and supporting creative and active approaches to learning. Ukrainian researcher O. Halytska (2017) argues that project-based activities in the educational process stimulate students' independence, critical thinking, ability to cooperate and communicate. She also emphasises the importance of developing students' creative imagination and innovative skills through project-based activities.

Based on an analysis of the literature, a general definition of this term can be formulated as follows: a project-based activity is a management system involving the implementation of temporary and unique projects based on the creativity and activity of its actors in order to achieve specific purposes and results.

Different countries have been considering different means of enhancing soft skills development among the specialists of various fields who will help to develop society and economics. The People's Republic of China is not an exception. China's meteoric rise as an economic powerhouse has been primarily attributed to its manufacturing prowess and technical expertise. However, the country's focus on technical education has come at the expense of nurturing soft skills. According to a recent survey conducted by McKinsey (2018), only 20% of Chinese employers consider graduates to be adequately prepared with the necessary soft skills for the workplace. This deficiency in soft skills, such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving, poses a hindrance to the country's ambitions of becoming a global leader in innovation and entrepreneurship.

Foreign scientists think that several factors contribute to the limited development of soft skills in China. Firstly, the emphasis on rote learning and exam-oriented education system devalues experiential learning and critical thinking, which are essential components of soft skills development. The heavy workload and intense competition within the education system result in a lack of time and resources allocated to cultivating the 21st century skills. (Chen, & Starosta, 2015).

Moreover, cultural factors also play a significant

role in impeding soft skills development in China. The scientists L. Wang and J. D. Moss (2017) think that the Confucian tradition, deeply ingrained in Chinese society, prioritizes hierarchy and obedience over individuality and critical thinking. This hierarchical structure discourages open communication and inhibits the development of skills such as negotiation and conflict resolution.

Recognizing the urgent need to bridge the gap in soft skills development, Chinese higher education institutions have started incorporating project-based activities into their curricula. Project-based activities encourage students to collaborate, think critically, and communicate effectively. These activities are designed to simulate real workplace scenarios, allowing students to develop problem-solving abilities, adaptability, and leadership skills. By engaging in project-based learning, students are exposed to practical situations requiring them to be innovative, creative, and resilient, i.e. the qualities that are highly valued in the job market.

The integration of project-based activities into higher education curricula has yielded promising results. A study conducted by Li and Zheng (2019) found that students who engaged in project-based activities demonstrated improved teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills. Additionally, students reported increased self-confidence and a better understanding of their career goals through their participation in such activities.

A study by L. Li and X. Li (2019) explored the impact of project-based learning on developing teamwork skills among engineering students. The findings indicated that students who engaged in project-based learning showed significant improvement in teamwork abilities compared to those who did not. This suggests that project-based learning enhances technical knowledge and helps develop emotional intelligence, which is essential for effective leadership and interpersonal relationships.

These findings highlight the effectiveness of project-based activities in nurturing much-needed soft skills among future specialists. Based on the analysis of Chinese experience conducted in this paper let us explore various measures that can be employed in Ukrainian higher education to enhance students' soft skills through project-based activities. We will delve into recommendations for the Ministry of Education, universities, and teachers as key stakeholders in shaping a comprehensive approach towards soft skill development.

**Recommendations for the MOE.** The MOE can play a pivotal role in fostering an environment

conducive to soft skill development in Ukrainian higher education. The following recommendations can be adopted:

1. *Curriculum Reform*: The MOE can introduce and implement a well-rounded curriculum that integrates project-based activities into different disciplines. This approach would enable students to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world scenarios, fostering problem-solving, teamwork, and communication skills.

2. *Funding and Incentives*: To encourage universities to adopt innovative teaching methodologies, the MOE can allocate funds and provide incentives for integrating project-based activities into the educational process. This could include grants, scholarships, or tax benefits for institutions that actively promote soft skill development.

3. *Collaboration with Industry*: The MOE can establish partnerships between universities and industry professionals to design project-based activities that align with current market demands. This collaborative effort would enable students to acquire industry-specific skills and enhance their overall employability.

**Recommendations for universities.** Universities are recommended to take proactive measures to create an environment that nurtures the growth of students' soft skills. The following recommendations are crucial in this regard:

1. *Faculty Training and Development*: Universities can organize regular training programs for faculty members, focusing on project-based teaching methodologies and soft skill cultivation. This training should equip teachers with the necessary tools and techniques to effectively facilitate student collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity.

2. *Co-curricular Activities*: Universities can promote and support extracurricular activities that foster the development of soft skills. Student clubs, societies, and entrepreneurial initiatives can serve as platforms for students to apply their learning outside the classroom, fostering teamwork, leadership, and communication skills.

**Recommendations for teachers.** Teachers are at the forefront of implementing project-based activities to enhance students' soft skills. The following recommendations can help them create a conducive learning environment:

1. *Clear Learning Objectives*: Teachers should clearly outline the soft skills that students will develop through project-based activities, emphasizing the practical application of these skills in real-world scenarios. This will enable students to under-

stand the relevance and importance of the tasks assigned to them.

2. *Strong Collaboration*: Teachers should promote effective collaboration within project teams, encouraging participation from all members and guiding them in developing their teamwork and communication skills. Facilitating regular reflection and debriefing sessions will help students identify areas for improvement and enhance their self-awareness.

3. *Feedback and Assessment*: Regular constructive feedback should be provided to students throughout the project-based activities. Teachers should focus on evaluating both the content and process, providing feedback on students' soft skills development. This will motivate students to continually improve their abilities and reinforce the importance of soft skills.

**Conclusions.** In today's rapidly evolving global economy, the importance of soft skills cannot be overstated. Soft skills, which encompass a range of interpersonal and communication abilities, are increasingly viewed as vital for success in the workplace in any field. The limited development of soft skills in China poses a significant challenge to the country's ambitions of becoming a global leader in innovation and entrepreneurship. However, Chinese higher education institutions have recognized this issue and are actively incorporating project-based activities into their curricula to address the deficit. These activities have proven effective in developing soft skills, as evidenced by increased teamwork, communication, and problem-solving abilities among participating students.

On the basis of the positive experience of China in the development of soft skills, the recommendations for Ukrainian higher education institutions to prioritize the development of soft skills among future specialists through project-based activities have been formulated. The MOE can facilitate curriculum reform, provide funding, and encourage collaborations for a holistic approach. Universities can ensure continuous faculty development and promote co-curricular activities. It is equally vital that teachers can design clear learning objectives, foster collaboration among students, and provide timely feedback. By collectively embracing these recommendations, Ukrainian higher education will empower future specialists with the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills to thrive in an ever-changing global economics while making a meaningful contribution to the society.

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# РОЗВИТОК М'ЯКИХ НАВИЧОК МАЙБУТНІХ ФАХІВЦІВ У ПРОЄКТНІЙ ДІЯЛЬНОСТІ: МІЖНАРОДНИЙ ДОСВІД

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## Реферат

*Актуальність* дослідження зумовлена потребою у розвитку м'яких навичок майбутніх фахівців за допомогою проєктної діяльності в закладах вищої освіти у міжнародному вимірі.

*Мета:* описати та обґрунтувати позитивні практики розвитку м'яких навичок майбутніх фахівців у проєктній діяльності в закладах вищої освіти у Китайській Народній Республіці (далі КНР) для використання позитивного досвіду цієї країни в реформуванні української освіти.

*Методи:* теоретичний аналіз наукових джерел, веб-сайтів освітніх установ, освітньо-професійних програм закладів вищої освіти – для визначення провідних особливостей розвитку м'яких навичок майбутніх фахівців за КНР.

*Результати:* сформульовано та уточнено поняття м'яких навичок та проєктної діяльності, визначено гальмівні фактори розвитку та проаналізовано проблему сформованості м'яких навичок у майбутніх фахівців в актуальних дослідженнях вищої освіти КНР. Охарактеризовано заходи щодо підвищення рівня розвитку м'яких навичок майбутніх фахівців в КНР та сформульовано пропозиції у вирішенні проблеми розвитку м'яких навичок майбутніх фахівців за допомогою проєктної діяльності у закладах вищої освіти України.

*Висновки:* встановлено, що розвиток м'яких навичок майбутніх фахівців є більш ефективним у проєктній діяльності. Визначено, що, організація наукових колективних проєктів, проведення конкурсів, олімпіад, змагань з використанням практико-орієнтованих завдань для студентів є ефективними засобами підвищення рівня м'яких навичок майбутніх фахівців у закладах вищої освіти. Реформування Міністерством освіти і науки навчальних планів, фінансування та налагодження співпраці з промисловістю; підвищення університетами кваліфікації викладачів, організація додаткових позааудиторних заходів з використанням проєктів; формулювання викладачами чітких цілей проєктного навчання, налагодження ефективної співпраці зі студентами, організація зворотного зв'язку та оцінювання може стати у нагоді в процесі підвищення рівня м'яких навичок майбутніх фахівців у закладах вищої освіти України.

**Ключові слова:** м'які навички, проєктна діяльність, Китайська Народна Республіка, вища освіта, майбутні фахівці

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