



## A Systematic Literature Review of Teaching Employability: A focus on soft skills

Pauldy C. J. Otermans<sup>1,2</sup>, Urmi Nagada<sup>2</sup>, Dev Aditya<sup>2,3</sup> and Monica Pereira<sup>3</sup>

Corresponding author: Pauldy C. J. Otermans ([pauldy.otermans@brunel.ac.uk](mailto:pauldy.otermans@brunel.ac.uk))

<sup>1</sup> Division of Psychology, Department of Life Sciences, Brunel University London, Uxbridge, United Kingdom

<sup>2</sup> Otermans Institute, London, United Kingdom

<sup>3</sup> Department of Computer Science, Brunel University London, Uxbridge, United Kingdom

### Abstract

Employability skills are important to be successful in any job in the job market. Colleges and universities should focus on teaching these skills to students to prepare them for the world of work. There are an abundance of studies that have highlighted the skills gap. This paper aims to bring together the literature to review how these skills are best taught to students. Five Databases - SocIndex, Education Resources Information Centre, British Education Index, Education Abstracts, and Education Research Complete - were thoroughly reviewed. Papers on teaching, training or learning of soft, transferable, employability, life, leadership or management skills from the years 2015-2023 were gathered. Results showed that certain classroom activities and games can be used to teach certain skills to the students. Part-time or full-time employment, internships and volunteer work also lead to development of skills such as leadership, communication, and social skills. Higher educational institutions can hence employ the pedagogical methods and approaches mentioned in these studies to teach employability skills to students.

### Keywords

Transferable skills, employability skills, teamwork, communication skills, social skills

### Introduction

Soft skills are more critical than ever as organisations struggle to find meaningful ways to remain competitive and be productive. In this paper, we define soft skills as a set of personal attributes which equip a person to interact with others. There have been calls for UK universities to incorporate more focus on employability skills (McCowan, 2015; Yorke, 2010). This focus would improve economic activity within the UK. Enhancing employability can also make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations (Yorke, 2006). Currently, employability skills are essential in the UK job market as it is quite competitive for graduates (Miller et al., 2013). Employability skills are the skills that render an individual employable. These skills exclude the technical understanding and subject knowledge that outline a job description for a specific job role.

Some skills that make an individual employable are communication skills, team work, self-management, willingness to learn, resilience, thinking skills, positive attitude and professionalism. All of these skills are a means of marketing oneself in the competitive job market. Research has found that employers value skills like presentation, interpersonal, teamwork, time management, etc. (Kemp et al., 2009). Furthermore, there is evidence that personal traits like adaptability, optimism, leadership, accountability, self-esteem, respect for diversity, open-mindedness, empathy, are significantly related to getting a job after graduation (Lucktong & Pandey, 2020). While there are some transferable skills that a student develops as part of their degree, these are not always formally assessed. Formal assessment would allow the academic to provide constructive feedback to students to improve key employability skills.

Research has shown that there is a clear skills gap between what employers expect graduates in the UK to have and the skills that UK graduates gain throughout their degree. A few skills noted as high in demand but UK graduates lack include communication, critical thinking and adaptability skills (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2021). This was also highlighted as lacking in a recent survey that was published (Otermans et al., 2023). Additionally, another study suggests that graduates lack social skills, and have lack of motivation and drive (Kemp et al., 2009). It is unclear as to why students lack these skills. This skills gap, coupled with enhanced economic activity suggests that the responsibility lies with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK to focus more on teaching employability-related skills. Interestingly this skills gap is also emphasised by students themselves who perceive a lack of communication, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills (Pereira et al., 2019). While there is a slow increase of focusing on teaching employability, this is limited to hard skills required to undertake a job. These hard skills often cover the technical knowledge and tools needed for the job (Subedi, 2018). It is not clear why higher education institutions focus more on teaching hard skills. Laker & Powell (2011) argue that the transfer of knowledge on soft skills is more challenging, leading to a potential waste of resources. However, Balcar (2016) challenges this by suggesting that soft skills are equally productive and enhance the value of hard skills. Considering the competitive nature of the global job market, there is a need for soft or transferable skills development in students to various degrees.

The aim of this review is to explore the literature on the most appropriate methods for teaching soft skills in Higher Education (HE). All disciplines are explored for a number of reasons: 1) It is common for teaching methodologies to be utilised across disciplines and 2) some methods that are commonly used in one discipline can be advantageous for another discipline. This review was driven by the following research question: ‘How to train and teach soft skills in HE?’ Theoretical and conceptual framework.

## Method

The approach was a systematic review to establish a reliable evidence base for recommendations to practitioners and educators in HE for teaching soft skills. A systematic review can be described as a process that allows for the transparency and replicability resulting in a robust literature synthesis (Dixon-Woods, 2011, p.332). Five commonly used and comprehensive digital databases were searched to ensure that all relevant literature and journals were covered: SocIndex, Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), British Education Index, Education Abstracts, and Education Research Complete. The databases that are incorporated include studies that go beyond Western domains that challenge Eurocentric models. Inclusion criteria were: Linked to full text, peer reviewed, academic journal, abstract and 2015–2023. The researchers conducted the literature search using the following search terms:

(soft OR transferable OR employability OR life OR leadership OR management) AND skill\* AND  
(Education OR teach\* OR train\* OR learn\*)

## Analysis

A total of 188 articles and the research question were shared with an independent researcher. Titles and articles were read and reviewed by the researchers to ensure that the included articles were relevant and related to the research question. The researchers discussed and came to a final decision about the papers after having considered following points:

- Does the paper talk about a soft skill?
- Has the effectiveness of a pedagogical approach/training method been studied in this paper?
- Is it an exploratory study, where the factors that affect the development of said soft skill are studied?
- Does the paper provide a theoretical framework to guide the development of a pedagogical method to teach soft skills?

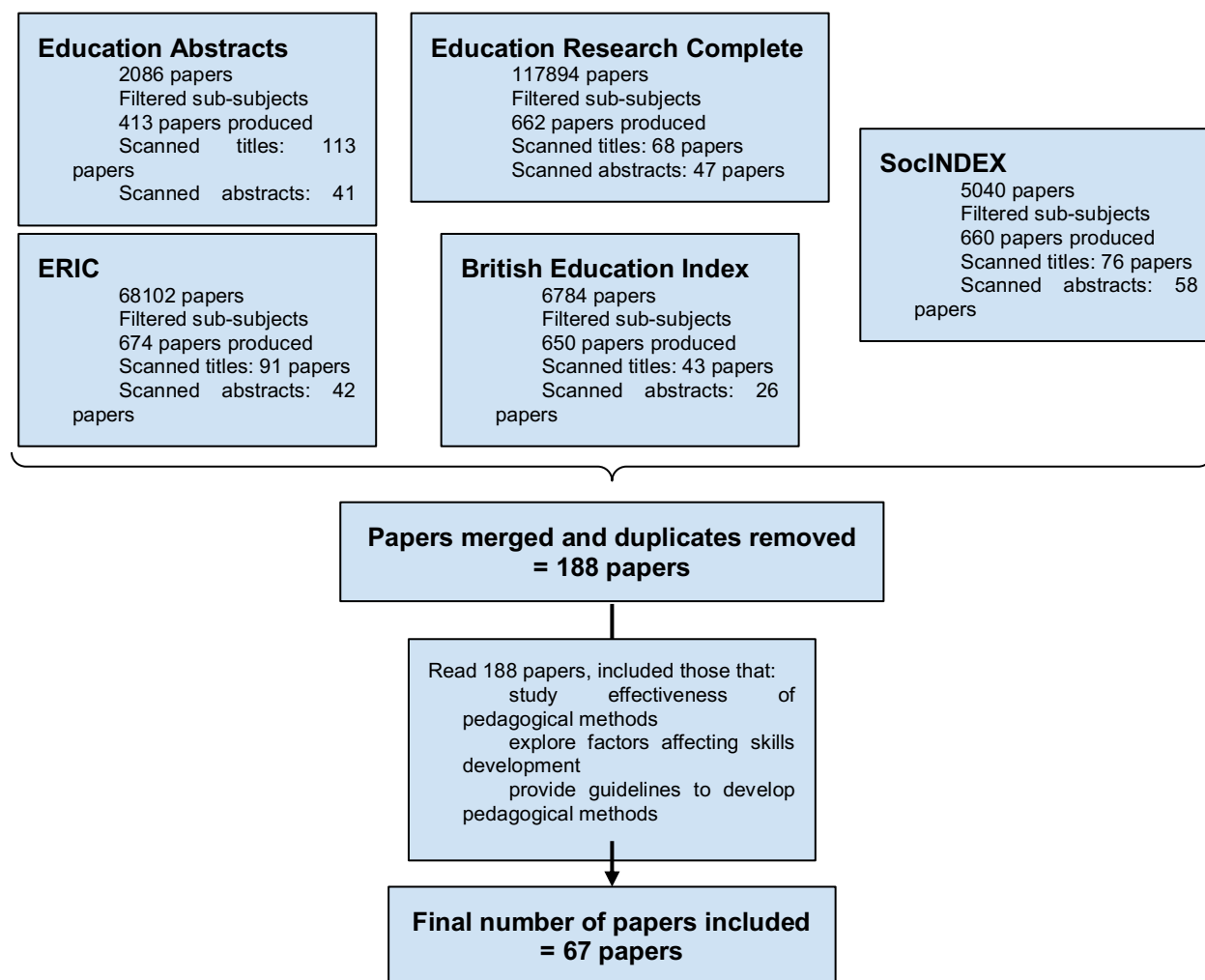
It was agreed that all papers included were relevant (see Figure 1). Each paper was read and summarised. Following this, summaries were carefully read and skills that each of these papers studied were noted down (Appendix 1). These skills were grouped together under a major skill and accordingly five themes were generated:

1. Teamwork skills
2. Communication skills
3. Interpersonal skills
4. Individual skills and
5. Cognitive skills

Each of these skills are inter-connected to each other, and hence it was important to define these themes and make a list of skills included in each theme to avoid confusion.

1. Teamwork skills: This theme consists of all skills that help an individual work in a team effectively. Skills included under this theme are teamwork, leadership, collaboration, participation.
2. Communication skills: Communication is a give-and-take of information between two or more people that can take place through verbal or non-verbal language. Communication skills enable an individual to convey or express thoughts and ideas effectively to others. This broad theme includes skills like verbal and nonverbal communication skills, presentation skills, public speaking, oratory skills, storytelling, intercultural communication skills.
3. Interpersonal skills: Skills included under this theme are deemed to be important to develop relationships with others and function in a society. These skills are social skills, empathy, social responsibility, respect for others, intercultural knowledge, community building, relationship building, civically minded and global citizenship.
4. Individual skills: Individual skills include skills like professionalism, time-management skills, organisational skills, motivation, confidence, adaptation and proactiveness.
5. Cognitive skills: Cognitive skills encompass a range of mental skills crucial for acquiring and processing information, problem-solving, and effective decision-making. These include skills like learning, problem-solving skills, critical thinking, creativity, and decision-making skills.

## RESULTS



**Figure 1: Flow Diagram of the Total Number of Papers Extracted from Databases and Included in the Systematic Review.**

## Analysis and discussion

The aim of this literature review was to explore literature concerning employability skills, and identify most effective pedagogical methods for teaching these skills to students. A comprehensive search across 5 databases yielded 67 papers. The analysis revealed 5 themes, each comprising a cluster of specific soft skills studied with the collected papers. The following 5 themes were identified: Teamwork, Communication skills, Social skills, Individual skills, and Cognitive skills. Under these themes, we have summarised the findings, shedding light on diverse pedagogical approaches employed to teach these skills. Recommendations that educators can implement in their own teaching and learning on pedagogical methods approaches to teach employability skills to students are also provided.

### Teamwork

Teamwork is an important skill that is valued by most employers. This section discusses various ways research has shown how teamwork can be effectively embedded within the teaching and learning provision. As teamwork and leadership skills are often mentioned together, this section also includes points on teaching leadership skills to students. In a workplace, leadership and teamwork skills are

considered to be highly important. Ahonen & Kinnunen (2015) asked students questions like 'Five years from now, which skills do you think you'll need?' and found that collaboration is a highly ranked skill among students. In another study, researchers, through surveys and focus groups, found that students reported that teamwork will help them succeed in the workspace (Tucker & Abbasi, 2016). Another study found that teamwork plays an important role in producing high quality work (Menekse et al., 2017). In their study, teams were judged on collaboration quality i.e., their ability to elaborate on or question each other's ideas, build on those ideas and come to a decision. Menekse et al. (2017) found that collaboration quality was a good predictor of team performance. In essence, findings from these studies highlight the importance of teamwork and collaborative skills in the workplace, underlining their role in achieving high-quality outcomes.

Various activities like service learning (Blithe, 2016, Culcasi et al., 2022) and escape rooms (Wu et al., 2018) have proved effective in cultivating teamwork and leadership skills. According to Wu et al. (2018), activities like escape rooms, where students are required to work in teams to solve problems, allow students to reflect on what teamwork or leadership properties were effective for the team. While service learning does lead to the development of leadership skills among students, Culcasi et al. (2022) found that students, who participated in an e-service learning programme, reported a significant improvement in their leadership skills post programme. Classroom activities like a Communications day (i.e., a career opportunity event organised by students) can also support students with the development of leadership skills (Ozley et al., 2017). Students also need to resolve crises and conflicts occurring during the planning process. This helps them develop conflict management skills (Ozley et al., 2017). These diverse activities nurture leadership skills as well as relationship building among students, thus pointing out the role of experiential and interactive learning in honing essential soft skills.

Introducing courses like online group communication courses (Messersmith, 2015) and a leadership minor course (Sorensen et al., 2016) has proven to be beneficial to students, contributing significantly to skill development. Messersmith (2015) found that students working in virtual teams, using various collaboration applications like DropBox, Mural.ly, etc. reported improved rapport and participation due to communication and active participation. Sorensen et al. (2016), on the other hand, introduced a leadership course to undergraduate students. They found that throughout the course, students' leadership identity changed. Students reported that they had developed leadership skills and these skills would help them in their current and future endeavours. Universities can introduce such courses in their curriculum, as they facilitate skills development and prepare students for future challenges.

Practical frameworks like Scrum (Opt & Sims, 2015) teach teamwork by emphasizing on communication and adaptability. Scrum Approach is used by corporate teams to act collaboratively on projects using tools and quickly adapt or reprioritise tasks based on changing needs of the project (Baird & Riggins, 2012). Although students found this approach difficult initially, eventually transparency allowed students to work together collaboratively. They also saw an increase in team communication, organisation and reflexivity, and reduction in conflict within the group. Though Scrum is mainly used in companies as a project management framework, findings from this study suggest that teaching students about Scrum approach in universities can help them acquire important teamwork skills.

Reflective practices are another avenue for leadership development. Torrez & Rocco (2015) highlight the benefits of self-reflection in leadership skills development. Simulation-based training is an educational tool widely used in emergency and critical care contexts with teams who deal with trauma or cardiac arrest. The aim is to teach medical students technical skills as well as non-technical skills like teamwork or decision making (Weile et al., 2021). A study on simulation-based team learning (SBTL) has found that SBTL helps team experience and improves team reflexivity, collaboration and adaptability (Schmutz et al., 2018). In another study, Wallin et al. (2015) got a surgical team of

specialist nursing students and residents in an actual operative room and trained them in safe teamwork skills for three days. They found that students who received this training showed more willingness to work in a team than those who did not. These studies offer empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of Simulation-Based learning in fostering the development of teamwork skills.

Integrative Pedagogy is based on the principle that the four components of expertise namely, theoretical, practical, self-regulative and socio-cultural knowledge interact with each other. Tynjälä et al., (2016) developed integrative pedagogy-based courses to teach social competence. By the end of the course, students were asked to assess their learning outcomes with respect to 43 skills. Students reported that they had learned collaboration skills. While this course was primarily designed to teach social competence to students, findings suggest that such a course can lead to development of collaborative skills as well.

Use of mobile phones in schools for teaching is frowned upon by a lot of educators; however, Busulwa & Bbuye (2017) found that use of phones and internet enhanced learning and teamwork in students. They conducted an observational study, where students' and teachers' behaviour or attitude towards mobile learning and teaching was observed. After a year, discussions were conducted with teachers and students to share their feedback on the study. Researchers observed that the phones promoted teamwork among students, and they were seen sharing their information through social media.

In team-based learning (TBL) focus is on group exercises and self-study rather than lectures. The aim of this kind of learning is that students learn theoretical concepts and how to apply them (Baines, et al., 2023). Zgheib et al. (2016) introduced a new curriculum that consisted of lectures as well as non-didactic sessions like case discussions, TBL sessions, panel discussions and laboratories. Researchers used the team performance scale at different time points during the study. They found there was an increase in teamwork over time. This finding is supported by another study conducted by Betta (2016). Findings from the survey conducted at the end of the course indicated that TBL taught students to work in groups to increase and share their knowledge. Hence, students learned to be productive team members (Betta, 2016). In another study, Arsenis et al. (2022) introduced a new assessment method where students were divided into groups and asked to create a 3-minute video. They collected data on students' perception of this assessment, and whether it led to any skills development. Majority students found this group assessment helpful in teaching them teamwork skills. These studies showcase how TBLs focus on collaborative exercises and interactive sessions effectively cultivates students' abilities to collaborate, share knowledge, and engage productively within team settings, supporting the notion that TBL significantly nurtures teamwork skills among students.

Problem-based Learning (PBL) offers another approach to teamwork. Carvalho (2016) introduced PBL in a final year course. The class was divided into groups of 4-8 students and students worked together to solve problems. At the end, students completed a questionnaire measuring students' perception of development of transferable skills. Carvalho (2016) found that PBL helps with development of teamwork, conflict management, presentation skills, information searching and applying knowledge. AlGhamdi et al. (2023) found similar findings when they introduced the PBL approach and randomly assigned students to groups. Random assignments helped students learn about relationship building and working with strangers. They even understood the importance of collaborative working. Along with TBL, PBL can also equip students with collaborative skills. However, it's essential to contextualise the findings from these studies within the framework that involves students working collaboratively in groups to tackle problem-solving tasks.

Sports participation has also been linked to the development of teamwork and leadership skills. In their study, Quinaud et al., (2023) interviewed 10 female athletes. One of the participants pointed out that in a sports team, every player gets a chance to be a leader at some point. This suggests that those who participate in sports find it easy to take up leadership roles. In a team, you also learn to deal with

the players you don't get along with well, just to help the team. This teaches them to be a good team player. These findings shed light on the importance of sports in promoting teamwork skills.

Beyond the classroom, off-campus employment and volunteer work are also beneficial for leadership development. Preston (2019) pointed out that students should be encouraged to work off-campus as this would help them develop their leadership skills. He further went on to recommend that off-campus employment should be paired with writing learning outcomes, guided reflection and evaluating skills to ensure leadership development in students. Lewis (2019) also supports the idea that off-campus employment helps students develop leadership skills. Volunteer work also leads to development of leadership skills and teamwork (Collins-Nelson et al., 2022). Results from these studies suggest that students should be encouraged to take up jobs when in university or do volunteer work, as these experiences can help them develop teamwork and leadership skills.

In summary, diverse educational approaches like, experiential learning, classroom activities, specialised courses, simulation-based learning, team-based learning and problem-based learning, have all proven instrumental in cultivating, collaborative and leadership skills among students. Furthermore, off-campus employment, volunteer work as well as sports can also hone these skills, offering valuable opportunities for skill development outside classrooms.

### **Communication skills**

One may say that communication skills are the most important skill a person can have. This section covers different ways communication skills can be embedded implicitly or explicitly within teaching sessions and assessment design. Research highlights how paid or volunteer work not only enhances teamwork but also significantly develops communication skills in students (Fede et al., 2017; Collins-Nelsen et al., 2022). Fede et al. (2017) found that students in placements reported high levels of communication and other transferable skills and their importance for employment success. Collins-Nelsen et al. (2022) found that students who participated in a volunteer program reported that through this they have developed communication skills. Findings from these studies suggest that meaningful experience in university jobs can lead to development of transferable skills.

Classroom-based approaches also contribute to communication skill development. For instance, Hatfield (2017) found that narrative podcasts can help with development of interpersonal communication skills. Hatfield (2017) used various narrative podcasts to teach students interpersonal communication. Every lecture students would listen to a narrative podcast related to the topic followed by discussing the podcast or even writing an essay on the topic. According to Hatfield (2017), narrative podcasts bring course concepts to life and make it easier for students to understand these concepts and remember them. Also, showing students mini conversation clips helps students develop their conversational skills (Jones, 2017). Such auditory exercises aid students in comprehending the concepts of communication, enhancing their communication skills.

Apart from teamwork, TBL also is effective in improving students' communication skills (Zgheib et al., 2016). Zgheib et al. (2016), in their study, introduced TBL sessions in the new curriculum. Through peer evaluation, it was found that communication increased amongst the team over time. PBL can also be used in communication courses to teach students written and oral communication skills (AlGhamdi et al., 2023). Written tasks given to students in technical communication courses helped them develop writing skills. Furthermore, feedback from their professors also helped them improve their writing. Hence, PBL and TBL can be used to teach communication skills both written and oral.

With globalisation, a lot of importance is given to intercultural communication. This means that when working in a diversified team, one should be sensitive to the various cultural norms and blend them into their communication patterns. Encouraging students to participate in service-learning activities can improve their intercultural communication (Blithe, 2016). In this context, service-learning activity

includes activities wherein people work towards fulfilling the needs of their community and society. According to Blithe (2016), this activity gives students the chance to engage and communicate with people and organisations from different social groups and allows them to review their cultural bases and perceive unequal social structures. However, HEI should also be aware that incorporating this activity can be difficult as it might not be compatible with students' schedule & difficult to form partnerships with organisations. By simply talking about race and diversity openly in a classroom, students become more aware of how their biases affect their interaction with people (Turner et al., 2019).

Students find their classroom learning inadequate in teaching them how to speak in public and with clients or co-workers (Jackson, 2015). Studies suggest that innovative classroom activities like nursery rhymes, fairy tales, competition and analysis of speech videos can lead to development of oratory skills, public speaking, and presentation skills. (Gan, 2015; Gatchet et al., 2018; Girardelli, 2017; Hahn, 2016; Hayward, 2017; Herakova, 2016a; Jones, 2015; Plant & Slippers, 2015; Salazar, 2015). A study found that nursery rhymes help students prepare for impromptu speech (Gan, 2015). In another study, Herakova (2016a) found that including fairy tales in the classroom, helps students develop their public speaking skills. Competition, that follows the format of popular shows such as American Idol where teams compete to create the overall best story which focuses on the typical fight between two archenemies, increases students' competition in giving a short speech (Girardelli, 2017). Hahn (2016), in their study, introduced speech competition in the classroom. This competition led to an increase in students' performance and participation and also improved the quality of their speeches. Salazar (2015) made use of invitational rhetoric exercises to teach public speaking skills. This activity proved to be effective as it connected with the three main conditions of the invitational speaking environment - equality, value and self-determination.

Studies have also shown that showing students speech videos of influential personalities (Gatchet et al., 2018; Jones, 2015) or TedTalks (Hayward, 2017) can also help students develop their oratory or public speaking skills. Expectancy Violations Theory is a framework through which one can predict and explain the consequences of unexpected behaviour (Burgoon, 2009). In a social setting, there is always some expectation with respect to how one should behave. If the actual behaviour is not the same as expected behaviour there is a violation and the consequence of this violation is either positive or negative. Researchers encourage the use of EVT in public speaking courses as it helps students understand the challenges one can face while giving an impromptu speech. While students use this framework to critically analyse speech, they consider important elements of public speaking like speech structure, signposts and transitions, non-verbal delivery and audience analysis. Another study found that analysis of a presidential victory speech can also be helpful to students to improve their public speaking skills (Jones, 2015). These studies advocate implementation of diverse classroom activities to teach students about speech structures, non-verbal delivery, and audience analysis.

To conclude, a varied array of pedagogical approaches has demonstrated effectiveness in teaching communication skills to students. While there is evidence that placements and internships help students hone their communication skills, implementation of structured classroom activities like podcast analysis and speech competitions, and frameworks like EVT provide additional support for skill development. However, there's a need to emphasise 'learning for understanding' rather than 'learning for grades' to ensure that any pedagogical methods introduced in the classroom effectively lead to skills development.

### **Social skills**

The third theme focuses on social skills which are an important aspect of human development and behaviour. These are also the skills that enable successful interaction and communication (Soto-Icaza et al., 2015). This section covers aspects of the importance of social skills in education and how to embed them into the curriculum. Most of these studies have focused on increasing students'



awareness of different cultures, their own stereotypes and tolerance towards different perspectives. For instance, Blithe (2016) found that service learning helps students to review their cultural biases and perceive unequal social structures. Volunteering also helps students learn social skills through their interaction in social context (Khasanzyanova, 2017).

Talking about stereotypes, Anderson-Lain (2017) found that students who engaged in a Cultural Identity Forum opened up about their personal misconceptions and stereotypes about other cultures. Root (2018) made use of play in their study to prompt students to reflect on marginalised identities and their own perspectives, deepening their understanding of diverse experience. Another classroom activity made use of Goofman's essay 'On Face-Work' and Brent Staples' essay 'Just Walk on By' (Herakova, 2016b). Students were first asked to read 'On Face-work', which talks about line, face, face-work, and principles of self-respect and considerateness. 'Just Walk on By' was then introduced to them and was used to guide classroom discussion on face-work and identity. This activity gave students an opportunity to explore topics like identity and discrimination, fostering a deep awareness of social issues. These studies collectively highlight the efficacy of classroom activities and discussions in broadening students' perspectives, challenging stereotypes, and fostering tolerance and cultural understanding.

Linville and Pyle (2017) introduced a three-step activity consisting of (i) developing an understanding of civil discourse, (ii) discussing various issues of social importance, and (iii) writing an op-ed. This activity helped students appreciate civil discourse and respect for opposing views while also being aware that their opinion mattered. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a learning approach used to teach intercultural competence to students. O'Dowd (2018) found that integrating virtual exchanges into CLIL, where students from different countries collaborate on projects, significantly enhances intercultural understanding and global collaboration. The integration of activities like civil discourse discussions and virtual exchanges within educational frameworks can nurture students' appreciation for diverse perspectives and enhance their intercultural competence.

Critical Communication Pedagogy (CCP) has emerged as a powerful approach to developing both social skills and social awareness. According to Kahl (2015), the neoliberal education system focuses only on the development of skills, however, it makes students insensitive to social issues related to power, marginalisation, etc. Hence, he suggests the adoption of Critical Communication Pedagogy (CCP). This approach to learning focuses on the communication of power in the classroom. Through this pedagogical approach, not only do students learn the skills, but they also become responsible citizens who take actions against the injustice happening in their society. Young and Potter (2017) further found evidence for this in their study, where they introduced CCP in a public speaking class but also encouraged students to write their speeches keeping in mind their audience believes that the speaker has the power to bring changes to the community. Critical Communication Pedagogy not only empowers students with communication abilities but also nurtures their awareness and activism towards social injustices.

Teachers also play a pivotal role in fostering social skills. Väyrynen et al. (2016) found that teachers who favoured informal positions in the classroom tend to develop social skills in their students by building on emotions and attitudes that emanate from actual situations. By providing feedback to the students and expressing their feelings and behaviours, they support the development of self-regulation, executive functioning and self-esteem. Whereas, those who favoured a more formal position, provided instrumental support for learners' social situations. Finally, one study found that Social Skills Training Program increased children's motivation level, implying that schools and higher education institutions should include Social Skills Training Program in their course (Özbeý and Köyceğiz, 2019). This training program consists of several activities that focus on behaviours like cooperation, empathy, sharing, social interaction, management of feelings and social maladaptation.

To sum up, findings from these studies provide empirical evidence that classroom activities and discussions foster a better understanding of cultural diversity and stereotypes. Methods such as civil discourse exercises, and adoption of CLIL and Critical Communication Pedagogy frameworks are particularly effective in fostering cultural understanding and social activism. There's also evidence that social skills can also be taught through training programs.

### **Individual skills**

The fourth theme discusses individual skills which can also be described as interpersonal skills. This section describes research showing how individual skills can be incorporated in the curriculum. Tholen et al. (2016) collected survey and interview data from British residential sales estate agents. They found that a lot of employers and employees did not consider university degrees as important. For them motivational soft skills like enthusiasm, positive work attitude, commitment, dependability, willingness to learn are more important than a degree when recruiting graduates. One surprising finding of their study is that Higher Education Institutions were not seen as the main source of development of these skills; instead they were commonly acquired in family settings, schools, colleges and workplaces.

One approach to fostering individual skills within the curriculum is through Problem-Based Learning (PBL) activities. Chounta et al. (2017) introduced Dev Camps - a PBL activity, that helped participants plan their resources and actions. Zgheib et al. (2016), in their study, found that TBL led to an increase in professionalism amongst students over a period of time as indicated by peer evaluation. The findings suggest that both PBL and TBL are effective pedagogical strategies for cultivating critical individual skills such as organisation, planning and professionalism.

Volunteer work has also been found to be effective avenue for developing individual skills. Khasanzyanova (2017) surveyed and interviewed students who have been volunteering at French associations to understand how volunteering has helped them acquire certain skills. Students developed important individual skills like solidarity, patience. While in another study, students who participated in a volunteer program reported development of adaptability and organisational skill (Collins-Nelsen et al., 2022).

Quinaud et al., (2023) have talked about how sports can help increase one's dedication and commitment to be the best at their job. Due to the nature of any sport and the need to win, athletes try hard to give their best. Hence, encouraging students to join sports clubs, and teams, will help them learn individual skills like commitment and dedication, that are deemed to be extremely important to employers. Not a lot of studies have been conducted on individual skills.

In conclusion, studies have found that learning styles like PBL and TBL facilitate in developing individual skills like organisational, planning and professionalism. Furthermore, volunteer work fosters skills like solidarity and adaptability, while sports participation enhances dedication and commitment, These findings emphasise the importance of extracurricular activities in honing crucial attributes for professional competence.

### **Cognitive skills**

The final theme is about cognitive skills which includes a variety of skills such as problem solving skills and critical thinking, and discusses how these skills can be taught to students. A lot of studies have talked about the benefits of internships in developing transferable skills, like communication skills, teamwork skills in students (Fede et al., 2017; Miller et al. 2017; Lewis, 2019). A study has also shown that internships/placements helped students develop their problem-solving skills (Fede et al., 2017). With increasing technological advancements, problem solving in Technology Rich Environment (TRE) has become an important skill to have. Nygren et al. (2019) found that the majority of 16–64-year-old

adults do not have sufficient problem-solving skills in TRE. After investigating the link between formal, informal and non-formal learning and problem-solving skills in TRE, they found that informal learning is highly associated with sufficient problem-solving skills. Informal learning takes place through daily activities, in relation to work, family and leisure activities. Amongst all the daily activities, ICT skills were seen as more influential with development of PSS.

Teaching problem-solving in educational settings has also been explored through different pedagogical frameworks. Nisa and Murwaningsih (2020) found that the Value Clarification Technique (VCT) model is more effective than PBL in teaching social problem-solving skills. Value Clarification Technique (VCT) is a teaching framework used to help students identify good values by analysing values instilled in them and important choices being made (Witteaman et al., 2016). Critical thinking is another crucial cognitive skills, and research shows that various methods can help students develop this ability. Zgheib et al., (2016) introduced a new curriculum that consisted of lectures, case discussions, TBL sessions, panel discussions and laboratories. Students feedback for most of the TBL sessions was positive and they reported that these sessions helped them develop critical thinking. Another study found that simulation-based exercises can help improve students' critical thinking skills (Samaras et al., 2022). Simulations allow students to learn from the consequences of their decisions and make adjustments to their subsequent decisions. Hence, according to Samaras et al., (2022), simulations result in recursive learning, which leads to the development of critical thinking skills. These studies suggest that diverse approaches like TBL and simulations can foster the development of critical thinking skills.

Creativity, another cognitive skill, can be nurtured through innovative activities (Hamilton, 2017; Colbran & Gilding, 2019). Hamilton (2017) found that scavenger hunt inspired creativity. This activity forces students to make connections between found and listed objects, and hence improve their critical thinking as well. Another study found that visualisation improves students' creativity and visual skills (Colbran & Gilding, 2019). In their study undergraduate law students were asked to develop a visual scenario i.e., comic strip, animation, film, etc that depicted an ethical issue. Majority of students commented that the creative aspect of visual activity helped them understand the legal scenarios. Engaging in activities such as scavenger hunts enhances creativity as it requires students to find creative solutions to hunt hints, yet activities like prompting students to craft visual scenarios portraying theoretical concepts can also effectively bolster their creative abilities.

Visualisation also helps with learning and understanding (Linvill & Kendall, 2015). Linvill and Kendall (2015) found that Venn diagram increased student engagement in a classroom and hence promoted understanding of core concepts. It is to be noted that Venn Diagrams cannot be used to teach complex frameworks. Dodds et al., (2018) found that stimulation-based education can bridge a gap between academic and social work education as it synthesises knowledge and professional practice skills. They suggested that more stimulation education should be developed as it improves students' skills and knowledge and subsequently makes them more prepared for future practice. Linabary et al. (2016) found that any classroom activity that promotes hands-on learning can help students learn and understand concepts easily and apply those concepts with great confidence. The diverse findings from studies emphasise the role of interactive techniques, from visual aids to simulation-based learning, in enhancing students' engagement and understanding of theoretical concepts.

Findings from these studies highlight the significance of various educational approaches that can be used to teach important cognitive skills like, problem solving, critical thinking, creativity and learning. These include PBL, Value Clarification Technique, and TBL. Outdoor activities like scavenger hunt have been shown to stimulate creativity. Along with these, studies also support the adoption of interactive activities like visual scenario development, visual aids, etc. that provide a more hands-on experience to students and hence, promote better understanding of complex concepts.

## General discussion

The analysis highlights a diverse range of pedagogical approaches that foster the development of transferrable skills. Classroom activities like service learning, escape rooms, organising events wherein students are required to work in teams to solve problems and work towards a common goal help students develop skills like teamwork, leadership, building relationships with team members, communication and conflict management skills. In fact, having students work in groups for their coursework can also help them get better at teamwork, collaboration and rapport building. Leadership skills and teamwork skills can also be taught to students through formal course modules and training. Though Scrum is widely used in companies to manage big projects, teaching students Scrum approach not only makes them realise the importance of teamwork and collaboration in the workplace but also proves to be beneficial in teaching them collaborative working, team communication, and conflict management.

Off-campus employment in the form of placement or paid internships can also help students develop teamwork, problem-solving and communication skills. These real-world experiences provide students with an opportunity to apply their learning, enhancing their readiness for professional environment. Classroom-based activities like TBL, PBL and simulation-based learning offer valuable ways to teach teamwork, communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills. These methods, when integrated into academic programs, promote active participation, and collaborative problem-solving, which are crucial in today's workplace.

Cultural competence and communication skills are increasingly important in a globalised world. Study on service learning has found that through this activity students learn about race, racial stereotypes and biases which helps them develop intercultural communication skills (Blithe, 2016). It also helps students learn about their cultural biases, and inequalities that prevail in the society. Students who engage in volunteer work also develop social skills through interaction with others. Any kind of classroom activities that require students to openly talk about their cultural identities or talk about other identities, reflecting on personal experiences and stories, also help them gain deeper insight into other cultures and different perspectives and better communicate with people from different races and cultures. A content and language integrated learning when used in a virtual exchange program can also lead to a development of intercultural competence amongst students.

Communication skills, in particular, can be cultivated through various classroom strategies. For instance, incorporating narrative podcasts, conversational clips in lectures can also teach communication skills. Activities like speech competitions and the study of presidential speeches can improve public speaking skills, while assignments such as essay writing and presentations enhance writing and presentation abilities. These strategies suggest that educators should consider moving away from traditional exams in favour of more interactive and skill-focused assessments. Finally, classroom discussions are also a way in which students learn to express their opinions clearly. Breslow (2015) specifically talks about factors that influence students' participation in classroom discussions. According to him, if participating in classroom discussion contributes to students' grades positively, they are more likely to engage in classroom discussion. Along with this, if instructors focus more on learning to understand than on learning for grades also increases participation. He also talks about using technology like Open EdX and Massive Open Online Courses – or MOOC - as students openly discuss and talk about their opinions on these platforms.

The development of social skills is another area where educators can make a significant impact. Critical Communication Pedagogy has particularly proven to make students more socially responsible (Kahl, 2015; Young and Potter, 2017). This pedagogical approach helps students identify injustice that happens around them and raise a voice and take steps against this. Teachers play a key, and those who adopt either a formal or an informal approach to social skill development can influence their

students' growth in this area. Furthermore, Individual skills like enthusiasm, positive work attitude, commitment, dependability, willingness to work are considered more important than the degree itself. Volunteering helps students develop skills like solidarity and patience, while TBL and PBL foster professionalism and time management in students. Sports also help in the development of skills like dedication and commitment. Cognitive skills, particularly problem-solving and critical thinking, are also essential for employability. Methods such as PBL, Value Clarification Technique (VCT), and activities like scavenger hunts and visual scenario creation that provide hands-on learning experience have been proven effective in teaching these skills.

## Conclusion

Findings from these studies underscore the importance of integrating practical, hands-on learning experiences in higher education to develop transferable skills. Hence, colleges and universities should encourage students to work while they are studying or go on a placement or internship as part of their studies. Additionally, students should also be motivated to participate in sports, university clubs, societies and other team-based activities, as these experiences also foster development of collaboration and leadership skills. At classroom level, educators can enhance their lectures and assignments by introduce classroom activities and games that have proven to be helpful in the development of these skills. Researchers have provided a foundational framework of activities, and lecturers can use this as a guideline to develop their own activity that will suit their students and the needs of the job market in their country. There is enough evidence on how team-based learning, problem-based learning and simulation-based team learning lead to the development of skills like teamwork, problem solving, interpersonal and communication skills. Lecturers should try to integrate these learning methods in their courses and modules. As part of coursework, lecturers should get students to work in groups, which can teach them teamwork and communication skills. Replacing traditional exams with more dynamic assignments like presentation, essays, and visual scenario creation will also help students refine their communication skills. Given the increasing importance of intercultural competence in workplace, universities should also incorporate discussions and activities that address diversity, cultural awareness, and social responsibility.

Future studies should focus on other pedagogical methods that can be used to teach transferable skills to students. More studies are needed on skills like proactiveness, time management skills, organisational skills, and attention to detail, as these are highly demanded by employers. It is evident that companies give a lot of importance to transferable skills more than a university degree itself. It, thus, becomes essential for HEI to focus on the development of skills like leadership, teamwork, communication, interpersonal, problem solving, critical thinking as well individual skills. Existing skill gap suggests that educational institutions are not taking steps to teach employability skills to their students. While traditional methods like having workshops that focus on development of skills can be used to teach skills to students, lecturers can also experiment with different pedagogical methods and make use of various innovative classroom activities in their lectures.

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## Appendix 1

### Key findings of the reviewed papers

<http://doi.org/10.17633/rd.brunel.27315252>