

Margit Gabriella Hüber

TRAINERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE MOST IMPORTANT SOFT SKILLS FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Abstract

The rapid transformation of labour market expectations driven by globalization, digitalization, and technological change has increased the importance of soft skills in both educational and workplace contexts. This study examines soft skills training programs designed specifically for Hungarian high school students and explores which competencies are considered the most important for development by professionals working in the field. The research was based on the assumption that labour market expectations and educational needs increasingly require the systematic development of non-cognitive competencies. A qualitative research design was applied. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 18 trainers who actively deliver soft skills training programs for secondary school students in Hungary. The interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis supported by MAXQDA software. The findings indicate that communication skills represent the highest priority area for development, followed by self-awareness, cooperation, time management, stress management, and emotional intelligence. Participants emphasized that communication and self-awareness form the foundation of several other competencies and significantly influence academic performance, career decision-making, motivation, and workplace success. The results also highlight the growing importance of resilience and creative thinking in response to rapidly changing social and labour market conditions. From a theoretical perspective, the research contributes to the understanding of soft skills development among adolescents. Practically, the findings support the expansion of training-based and interactive educational approaches that foster competencies essential for successful transition into higher education and the labour market.

Keywords: soft skills; secondary school students; training programs

The Rationale and Relevance of the Topic

The social, economic, and technological developments of the twenty-first century are fundamentally transforming the world of work. As a result of increasing globalization, the expansion of digitalization, and demographic changes, employers are required to ask for a broader range of competencies from employees. These developments necessitate that education systems also adapt to the changing circumstances and align their educational content and teaching methods with the expectations of the labour market.

There is broad consensus in the academic literature that the systems of education, the economy, and employment are mutually interrelated and influence one another. Schultz's (1983) human capital theory highlights that the quality of education is a determining factor in economic development, as it significantly influences the success rate of young

individuals on the labour market. The effectiveness of educational institutions plays therefore a crucial role in determining the extent to which students are able to meet the expectations of the world of work.

There has been a significant increase in research studies analysing the role of soft skills and opportunities for their development in recent years. Although various definitions of soft skills can be found in the academic literature, the present study adopts the interpretation proposed by Sunarto (2015). Based on this definition, soft skills comprise a set of behavioural, attitudinal, cognitive, and personal characteristics that facilitate individuals' effective functioning, self-management, and collaboration with others. Soft skills can be divided into two main categories: intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies. Intrapersonal competencies are associated with self-management and include, for example, time management, stress management, and creative thinking, whereas interpersonal competencies support the effective management of human relationships, including communication, motivation, and negotiation skills (Galla, 2021, citing Sunarto, 2015).

Numerous studies have also highlighted that, in certain occupations, the importance of soft skills may even surpass that of professional or technical knowledge (Csehné, 2013). The structure of competencies required in the workplace has undergone significant changes in recent decades. Skills associated with routine and repetitive tasks have become less important, while abilities such as problem-solving, critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability have gained increasing prominence. Feedback from both economic and industrial stakeholders emphasizes that one of the most important responsibilities of education is to foster the development of soft skills that are indispensable for the workforce of the future (Molnár, 2017; Bihari, 2023).

Developing soft skills is not confined to training sessions explicitly designed for this purpose, such as communication or presentation skills training. Educational approaches based on cooperative structures, collaborative teaching and learning techniques, continuous interaction, and reflection also contribute significantly to the development of soft skills, thereby preparing students for their future roles in the workplace. Numerous studies have demonstrated that students who regularly participate in learning activities organized within cooperative learning frameworks enter the labour market with a competitive advantage and are better prepared for the challenges they encounter there (Igel & Urquhart, 2012). Furthermore, the fundamental principles of cooperative structures are explicitly embedded in many interactive educational methods, including the training methodology explored in the present study. This methodology is discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

Today, a wide range of interactive and reflective educational tools and techniques are available, and their relevance is strongly supported by the considerations outlined above. The selection of the research topic was motivated, in part, by more than twelve years of professional experience gained across three sectors of the Hungarian educational system: public education, higher education, and talent development. During this period, I worked as a teacher, lecturer, trainer, and training coordinator. In my role as a training coordinator, I organized interactive and reflective sessions specifically designed for high

school students, with the aim of developing practical skills and competencies that are not always explicitly addressed within formal education, such as effective time management, conflict resolution, communication and presentation skills, and cooperation. Over the past several years, I have organized approximately 200 such sessions for high school students and delivered nearly 100 training programs as a trainer. My professional experience suggests that students perceived these programs as filling an important gap in their education and reported that they helped them prepare for future labour market challenges.

In recent years, the number of trainers who focus not only on organizational and corporate audiences but also on high school students, and in some cases even younger age groups, has increased considerably. These professionals offer programs for skill development and training-methodology-based activities designed to foster competencies that are increasingly valued both in education and in the labour market.

In my view, and based on my professional experience many educational activities are labelled as interactive and reflective. In practice however, these characteristics are often limited to the inclusion of a few questions within an otherwise lecture-based format. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that many educators working within the Hungarian public education system already make meaningful use of cooperative structures and collaboration-based teaching and learning techniques. However, institutional constraints and limited instructional time continue to hinder the wider adoption of these methodologies.

My considerations influenced the decision to focus on high school students as the target group of the present research is threefold. First, both international and Hungarian studies consistently suggest that young people entering the labour market often lack adequately developed soft skills, while higher education does not always provide sufficient opportunities to acquire them. Fazekas (2017) draws attention to several studies (Borghans et al., 2008; Bowles et al., 2001; Knudsen et al., 2006) emphasizing the importance of parenting, family environment, and early childhood development in lifelong learning processes. These studies demonstrate that non-cognitive skills developed during childhood have far-reaching consequences extending beyond the individual to society and the economy as a whole. Such competencies influence educational attainment in adulthood, the prevalence of teenage pregnancy, and even rates of smoking and criminal behaviour. Consequently, the development of these skills should begin as early as possible and at the earliest stages of education. Although numerous studies support the effectiveness of early intervention, such initiatives are often absent in educational practice.

Second, my professional experience indicates that high school students have become an increasingly important target group for trainers in response to current educational trends. Third, my long-standing involvement in this field facilitated access to relevant participants and made data collection feasible.

The choice of research topic was also influenced by the extent to which the field has been explored, its novelty, and the potential applicability of the findings. During the past decade, Hungarian educational researchers have published numerous studies examining

interactive and reflective teaching methods across a variety of educational settings and from different methodological perspectives. A review of the relevant literature led to the conclusion that the expansion of training methodologies specifically targeting high school students still offers considerable untapped potential. At the same time, rapidly changing labour market expectations make further research on soft skills development increasingly necessary and timely.

This study presents the partial results of a research project based on qualitative content analysis, focusing on the content and contextual examination of soft skills training programs organized for high school students in Hungary. The first part of the study presents the rationale for and relevance of the chosen topic, followed by an overview of the research objectives and methodological framework. This is followed by a presentation of the results of the empirical research and concludes with a summary of the main findings.

Empirical Research and Findings

As noted earlier, this study presents a subset of findings from a broader research project. The overall aim of the research was to examine soft skills training programs specifically designed and advertised for Hungarian high school students (Grades 9–12), whose primary objective is the intentional development of one or more soft skills. The study included only those training programs that explicitly referred to the development of a particular soft skill in their title or official description. These included, among others, training programs focusing on communication, cooperation and teamwork, self-awareness, problem-solving, resilience and adaptability, creativity, time management, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, leadership competencies, and conflict management. The concept of soft skills was applied in accordance with the interpretive framework outlined above. The research did not include activities or sessions that may indirectly contribute to the development of soft skills but were not advertised as training programs.

The study employed a qualitative research approach. Data were collected through semi-structured expert interviews with Hungarian trainers actively involved in the field under investigation.

The findings presented in this study focus on identifying those soft skills that, according to the students participating in the research, are considered as the most important areas for further development.

Semi-Structured Interviews with Trainers

Sampling Procedure and Participant Characteristics

In the interview-based research, the selection of participants plays a crucial role. In the present study, participants were recruited through purposive sampling. Based on the predefined research objectives and research questions, it was necessary to establish clear theoretical selection criteria and determine who would be eligible for inclusion in the sample. I sought individuals who specifically conduct training programs for high school

students and whose advertised programs explicitly identify a particular soft skill in their title or description (e.g., communication training, time-management training, etc.).

This clarification was also necessary from the perspective of the study's limitations, as a wide range of educational and developmental activities may contribute to the development of soft skills, including literary therapy programs or drama-based educational workshops. Consequently, the term soft skills training would have been overly broad and potentially misleading without a more precise definition.

From a practical perspective, particularly regarding participant accessibility, I was in a favourable position, as my previous and current professional roles provided access to a substantial network of individuals relevant to the research topic. During the sampling process, convenience sampling was supplemented by snowball sampling. Trainers already known to me recommended additional potential participants, thereby expanding the sample.

When designing the sample, careful consideration was given to the desired level of homogeneity and heterogeneity within the participant group. Initially, I considered it important to ensure internal diversity in order to enhance the breadth and transferability of the findings. Particular attention was therefore paid to achieve a relatively balanced representation of trainers working in Budapest and those working in other regions of Hungary.

With regard to gender distribution, it should be noted that women appear to be overrepresented in this professional field, according to both my personal experience and the recommendations received during recruitment. This tendency was also reflected in the final sample. Although I aimed to achieve diversity in terms of age, trainers in their thirties and forties constituted the majority of participants. This is mostly due to the fact that many professionals enter the training field only after completing their initial degree, most commonly in education, and gaining several years of professional experience.

A total of 18 interviews were conducted with trainers, including 3 men and 15 women. In terms of geographical distribution, five trainers worked nationwide, three primarily in Budapest and its surrounding area, four exclusively in Budapest, and five in rural regions of Hungary. During the analysis, no substantial differences were observed with respect to gender, geographical location, or age group. Consequently, these variables were not included as analytical categories in the final analysis.

Preparations and Data Collection Method

Prior to the interviews, I developed the semi-structured interview guide in line with the research objectives and research questions. Due to geographical distance, the interviews were conducted in three different formats: by telephone, via video call, and in person. Of the 18 interviews, four were conducted in person, two via video call, and twelve by telephone in the spring of 2025. No differences were observed in the analysis of the responses in relation to the mode of data collection.

Before conducting the interviews, participants were informed, in accordance with legal requirements, about the method of data processing. They were told that the conversations would be recorded for the purpose of further analysis and that only I would have access

to the recordings. During the analysis, the complete anonymity of all participants was ensured. Participants were also informed that the recordings would not be shared with any third party and that, by taking part in the interview, they acknowledged and consented to the processing of the data and responses shared during the conversation for the purposes of the research. The interviews were recorded using audio-recording software.

In qualitative interview analysis, data extraction refers to the process through which interpretable and systematizable information is derived from raw interview material. Several methods can be used for this purpose, depending on the analytical strategy applied. Before the analysis begins, the recorded interviews must be transcribed. Transcription may be verbatim, when every word and mode of expression is considered relevant, or selective, when only the key parts of the interview are recorded in written form. In this research, I chose verbatim transcription, for which I used the Alrite software.

Alrite is an advanced AI-based speech recognition tool that enables the quick and simple transcription of audio and video files. The system also supports real-time dictation, allowing users to convert speech into text immediately; however, I only became aware of this function later and therefore did not use it in the present research. The software supports the upload and transcription of audio and video files in various formats, such as MP3, MP4, and WAV. A further advantage is that, due to its deep learning technology, it recognizes speech with a high degree of accuracy. After recording the interviews, I uploaded the MP3 audio files to the Alrite system, which converted them into written transcripts. The transcripts were approximately 90% accurate; however, in some cases, certain words were transcribed incorrectly, and typographical errors also occurred in the material. Although speech recognition algorithms are becoming increasingly sophisticated, subtler communicative cues, such as nuances of tone, sighs, gestures, or irony, cannot be reproduced with complete accuracy in written form. Therefore, reviewing and, where necessary, refining the transcribed text was essential in order to ensure that the content reflected the original conversations not only at the textual level but also in terms of meaning.

Data Structuring and Extraction

Several methods can be used for data extraction. In this research, coding was carried out within the framework of qualitative content analysis, with the aim of identifying recurring themes, concepts, and patterns. The analysis was supported by the previously mentioned MAXQDA software. A combined logic was applied in developing the coding categories. At the beginning of the coding process, I used a deductive approach, meaning that the data identified in the texts were organized under predefined main codes. These main codes were developed on the basis of the thematic areas of the interview questions. Subsequently, an inductive approach was also applied, during which additional main codes and subcodes were created on the basis of the data.

One of the most important functions of MAXQDA is coding itself, which makes it possible to assign labels and categories to individual words, sentences, or even single characters within the text. After uploading the interview transcripts into the software, I

first created the main codes developed deductively, then manually selected the relevant text segments and assigned the appropriate main codes to them. The software does not limit the number of codes; it allows for hierarchical organization, and the coding system can be expanded to a depth of up to ten levels.

After the main codes had been established, further codes were created inductively on the basis of recurring themes and patterns in the trainers' responses. The codes were also visually distinguished using different colours. This facilitated the analysis, as the use of colours made it easier to identify thematic relationships and layers of meaning within the text segments. During coding, it is also possible to assign weighting to text segments, which allows the researcher to determine how relevant a given coded element is from a particular analytical perspective. This makes it possible to highlight those relationships that are of particular significance in relation to the analysed text and the assigned code (Sántha, 2020).

Results

As the third part of the soft skills topic, I examined which soft skills trainers, based on their own professional experience, considered the highest priority for development in training settings. Among the results, the narrative emphasizing the development of communication skills emerged most prominently, suggesting that this is the area most needed among this age group. Most participants agreed that, especially when students enter higher education, it quickly becomes apparent that many of them are unable to communicate effectively. They often experience fear when they are required to present professional material, provide feedback, or formulate an independent opinion. "Communication skills are also very important. If I may add my own field of expertise, presentation skills development is particularly important, because I have often seen at the university that students arrive at the age of 20 or 22 and are unable to speak for five minutes about a topic they are familiar with. We also see this during final examinations." (Trainer 16, capital city)

In addition, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic also emerged, as communication had largely been limited to online platforms during that period. "Communication and cooperation can be extremely valuable, especially for this current group, who really struggled during COVID, including with online functioning." (Trainer 14, capital city and rural areas)

Within the broader topic of communication, the relationship between emotions and communication also appeared, particularly the question of how individuals are able to communicate their emotions. The need to develop assertive communication was strongly emphasized in the responses. "I am not sure I would phrase it as assertiveness, but rather as self-advocacy. And this is a very important issue: where is the middle ground where I'm not throwing it in someone's face and saying it no matter what, that is more of a rebellious attitude, and where is the point where you can actually allow yourself not to let others do anything they want to you." (Trainer 11, rural area)

Nonviolent communication also appeared among the narratives related to communication alongside the assertive approach, the significance however, was less

prominent. According to the interviewees, after communication skills, self-awareness is the next most important area for development. “It always has to start with self-awareness work. I believe that young people should encounter the concept of self-awareness, and the word itself, as early as possible, because I think they hear it, but that is about it. And if there is no teacher in such an environment who deals with this, and let us forget simple homeroom classes, then the later this point is postponed, the harder it becomes, or in my opinion, the less chance they have to start working on themselves as early as possible.” (Trainer 3, nationwide)

One interviewee traced the order of importance back from communication situations to the level of self-awareness. This opinion also makes it clear that, in order to be able to express something assertively, one must possess an adequate level of self-awareness. “So I would not necessarily first teach them how to express themselves assertively; rather, I would teach them to look inward in terms of self-awareness and examine what intention they bring into a communication situation. And that again points back to self-awareness.” (Trainer 15, capital city and rural areas)

The previously mentioned connection between career guidance and self-awareness also emerged. Trainers attributed particular importance to mapping strengths and areas for development, defining this, together with self-awareness, as one of the prerequisites for career choice. “I think the development of self-awareness is a very important part of this. We come from a career guidance perspective, but we do not specifically deal with career knowledge; rather, we usually talk about career-building skills. So this kind of approach, career-building competencies, often enters our self-awareness training sessions. On what basis do you make decisions? How well do you know your own values, skills, interests, and needs?” (Trainer 14, capital city and rural areas)

Another opinion also emphasized that a general foundation of self-awareness is extremely useful from the perspective of career choice. However, it is particularly important that students do not experience this as a deficiency, but rather as an area in which they can develop. If they are able to accept themselves together with these aspects, this not only supports decision-making but also makes them more confident about their future. Self-awareness is therefore not merely an additional factor in career guidance, but a fundamental tool that supports conscious and realistic decision-making.

The narrative of self-awareness is followed by cooperation: the development of social skills, connection, relationship-building, and the role of mutual acceptance were also mentioned. “Anything that educates you for social cooperation, anything that helps connection. I consider that the most important. Accepting one another, building relationships with others, that is the circle.” (Trainer 9, rural area)

The next most important soft skill was time management, followed by stress management. These were followed, less prominently, by conflict management, resilience, creative thinking, emotional intelligence, and nonviolent communication. Regarding time management, a broader narrative also emerged, which one trainer defined under of personal effectiveness. “What I see in them is time management in a much broader context. I would not only include specifically how I allocate my time or how I prioritize, but also how they can manage the kind of stress and information overload that surrounds

them. I have seen this summarized in several places under the label personal effectiveness, and that is exactly why I also structure my own training sessions in this way, so that it becomes clear that this applies to private life and to work, and in their case, work means learning. So, in order to feel good in my private life, I need many things, such as being able to allocate time to the private part of my life as well. Can I determine whether this is important to me right now or not? Should I answer the phone or not? Should I reply or not? Do I want to watch another YouTube channel, subscribe to it? Do I need TikTok as well? Do I have to chat with Pisti for an hour every evening? So these are the kinds of skills they need to have.” (Trainer 15, capital city and rural areas)

Within the topic of emotional intelligence, participants discussed the importance of becoming aware of basic emotions and helping students learn to recognize them. Those who mentioned the role of emotional intelligence believed that there is a great need for its development and that it has a clearly positive impact. In their view, it can influence academic performance in such a way that even in the case of lower-performing students, it may lead to unexpected and significant results that cannot be achieved through traditional methods alone.

One of the trainers, who also works as a learning methodology consultant, reported that introducing various learning techniques is ineffective if the student lacks motivation. Based on this trainer’s experience, motivation can best be strengthened through self-awareness and skills development. In their view, if students are supported, for example, in developing their communication skills so that they can act more confidently in certain situations, this may ultimately lead them to begin learning from intrinsic motivation. According to this experience, the development of soft skills also has a direct impact on academic achievement. Students with higher emotional intelligence and well-developed skills are more successful in their studies, as they do not rely solely on learning techniques, but are more self-aware, manage challenges more effectively, and act from intrinsic motivation.

Finally, resilience and creative thinking also emerged as important areas. According to one interviewee, the development of resilience is a particularly high-priority area. Although they do not yet perceive it as widespread, the abundance of new stimuli, stress factors, and rapid changes makes the development of this skill necessary from the high school years onward.

Conclusions

The findings of the present study highlight the importance of soft skills training programs for high school students in preparing them for the labor market and societal challenges of the twenty-first century. Based on the interviews conducted with trainers, the development of communication skills emerged as the highest priority. According to the participants, a considerable proportion of young people experience difficulties in expressing their opinions, providing feedback, speaking in public, and asserting themselves, which may subsequently create challenges both in higher education and in the workplace.

Alongside communication, self-awareness emerged as the second most important area for development. The interviewees emphasized that self-awareness is not only the foundation of personal development but is also closely linked to informed career decision-making, the maintenance of motivation, and effective interpersonal communication. The findings suggest that the development of self-awareness may be regarded as a prerequisite for the development of several other soft skills.

The study also highlighted the importance of fostering cooperation and teamwork skills, time management, stress management, and emotional intelligence. According to the trainers' experiences, these competencies not only improve the quality of interpersonal relationships but may also have a direct impact on academic performance, the development of intrinsic motivation, and long-term personal success. Particular attention should be paid to the finding that time management is increasingly interpreted within the broader framework of personal effectiveness, encompassing the ability to cope with information overload, navigate the digital environment, and manage everyday stress.

The interview findings further indicate that the development of resilience, creative thinking, and emotional intelligence remains less prominent in current educational practice. Nevertheless, the importance of these competencies is expected to increase as societies and labour markets continue to undergo rapid change. The experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic have also reinforced the necessity of developing communication and collaboration skills among young people.

Overall, the competencies identified by the trainers as the most important areas for development largely correspond with those highlighted by the international literature and by labour market stakeholders. The findings therefore support the argument that soft skills training programs for high school students should play an increasingly prominent role in educational practice and that the systematic development of these competencies deserves greater attention within both formal and non-formal educational settings.

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