BEST PRACTICES FOR SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AT THE UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL: A EUROPEAN PROJECT

Fondazione Rui / Euca (ITALY / BELGIUM)

Abstract

According to many documents issued by the European Union soft skills are closely connected with employability, particularly with regard to the transition of young people into the labour market. Nevertheless the programmes of most European universities are still focused on teaching traditional scientific skills rather than paying attention to soft and complementary skills. This article illustrates the results of the ModES project, carried out between 2009 and 2012 with the aim to integrate a common European programme on soft skills in the academic curricula. As a result a new curriculum has been developed to enrich the students’ profile with new employment-oriented competencies. In order to achieve these goals, the ModEs project relied upon interaction between the three main sectors involved in research: universities, halls of residence and companies.

Keywords: Soft skills, Higher Education, Teaching and learning methodologies

1 BACKGROUND

Skill development is one of the four main areas of the flagship initiative An agenda for new skills and new jobs [1], and the focus of the more recent Rethinking education strategy. Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes [2]. According to those documents, companies need a more skilled workforce and opportunities should be given to young people to develop those soft skills, such as entrepreneurial skills, coping skills (i.e. the capacity to deal with a problem in a creative way) learning to learn and other skills that will help university students to make a successful transition from full-time education to entering the labour market. Many studies, in Italy ([3], [4], [5]) and abroad ([6], [7]) reported a skill mismatch depending on the educational mismatch. They claim that Higher education must not focus only on the acquisition of abstract knowledge (notions and theoretical models), but also and mostly on the development of know-how. Thus, a crucial question is how to create an effective connection between the entry into the labour market and the performance of the education system.

From 1999 to 2010, the Bologna Process members aimed at creating the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), that became reality with the Budapest-Vienna Declaration of March, 2010. The next decade will be aimed at consolidating the EHEA, so that universities may become motors of change and innovation. One strategic action is the curricular reform to tailor higher education institutions to the requests coming from the labour market.

Mismatches between skills and jobs, such as skill gaps in the workplace, shortage of adequately skilled figures for certain positions or the abundance of candidates in sectors where there are not enough suitable vacancies need to be corrected. Effectively anticipating which skills will be required by companies in years to come is crucial in order to equip future workers with the ‘right’ competencies.

Since 2001 Dublin Descriptors have been adopted as the cycle descriptors for the framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. They offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with awards that represent the end of each Bologna cycle: knowledge and understanding, applying knowledge and understanding, and the ‘soft’ skills; making judgements, communication skills, learning skills. The Member States have gradually integrated the descriptors within their Higher Education systems. In Italy, for example, in 2010, the Ministry of Education published the Qualifications Framework for Higher Education, which summarises the main features of the Italian Higher Education Degree System, describing each course in terms of credits and general learning outcomes. In spite of this general trend, the focus of the programmes offered at most EU universities is still based on teaching traditional scientific skills rather than on soft and complementary skills.
2 THE PROJECT

2.1 Goals and structure

The ModEs project, financed by the EU programme 'Lifelong Learning Erasmus', involved 15 partners from 10 countries in a three-year programme (2009-12). The main aim was to integrate a common European programme on soft skills in the academic curricula. As result a new curriculum has been developed to enrich the students’ profile with new employment-oriented.

The ModEs project succeeded in building a ‘think tank’ composed of universities, collegiate halls of residence, and companies, in order to monitor the needs of the labour market and to improve the programmes offered at Higher Education institutions. Among the partners, 9 universities and/or Higher Education institutions, 3 Associations of Halls of residence (one of them, EUCA, the European University College Association, represents more than 30,000 students in 10 European countries), 3 companies operating in different fields.

As it comes out quite clearly, students were the main target group of this project; they were expected to be the final users of the outcomes of the project. Using the new curriculum, they will be formed in view of companies' needs, though a broader set of aptitudes that will facilitate better access to the labour market. Greater mobility of students and young professionals will also be possible through accreditation and mutual recognition of the module on soft skills.

Besides students, the project had its main impact on the institutions involved: Universities have been called to objectively judge their educational offers in terms of soft skills; Collegiate Halls of residence have been recognized as one of the entities that have a great impact on the education of youth; Companies have been called to give their opinion on the soft skills most required by the labour market. The impact of ModEs project on the labour market will be surely seen in the mid-long term, as companies will progressively benefit of more skilled personnel in the future.

The project consisted of 10 work packages and different research activities. The two main outputs of the ModEs project were: a Handbook in 4 languages (Italian, English, Spanish and Polish) containing set of guidelines and a unified teaching and accreditation methodology to teach soft skills at the undergraduate level; a prototype of a serious game in 4 languages (Italian, English, Spanish and Polish) to assist in developing some of the soft skills identified.

These outputs were the results of a three-year process, including different work packages and research activities. Among them: defining the term “soft skills”, in order to get to an unambiguous definition; mapping the best practices for soft skill development at the undergraduate level; consultation with enterprises/job market/stakeholders; surveying the soft skills most required by companies; grouping soft skills in clusters and ranking them for importance; identifying learning outcomes, teaching and assessment tools for soft skill development; definition of the curriculum.

The different activities required different methodologies: literature review to define soft skills and identify learning outcomes; surveys both for the identification of the soft skills most required by the job market and for the collection of best practices; qualitative research to investigate on tools, methods, teaching and assessment techniques; mind mapping for soft skill clustering and ranking.

It is out of the scope of this publication to describe in details all the work packages of the project, but we will focus specifically on some research activities concerning the identification, clustering and ranking of soft skills, and the collection of best practices for soft skills teaching and learning. An extensive and detailed description of these activities is presented in [9].

2.2 Methodology for soft skills identification and clustering

According to the definition chosen for the final Handbook [8], “soft skills represent a dynamic combination of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills and ethical values. Soft Skills help people to adapt and behave positively so that they can deal effectively with the challenges of their professional and everyday life.”

In order to identify and group the soft skills required in the professional field, the experts in professional skills from the different partner organisations involved in the ModEs project developed a list of skills and their definitions from a literature review and their professional experience This list was validated and reviewed within the project consortium, prior to validation by business. Thus, the list and the definitions of the soft skills have been subject to an internal validation which provided: validity,
what refers to whether the meaning of the skill is in line with the reality to be defined; *importance*: the
relevance of the skills in the business environment; *proposals inclusion*: both observations and
modifications to the soft skills included in the preliminary list, as well as the possibility to add, delete or
merge skills.

To complement the information we have counted on the cooperation of people working in the area of
human resources of companies, and persons responsible for staff professional development from
different sectors, operating in Spain, Italy, Slovenia, Latvia and Malta. This stage has been developed
through the design and provision to the companies of an on-line questionnaire. For this survey a
Likert-type scale has been selected. A total of 500 companies operating in different sectors of activity
(from Spain, Italy, Slovenia, Latvia and Malta) assessed the importance of the skills included in the on-
line questionnaire.

Additionally, a total of 35 experts coming from different European countries – with academic or
consultancy background - determined the relative importance of the skills required and their grouping,
according to the affinity of the actions that can be undertaken to contribute to their development. For
this exercise, the experts were provided with the information on the results from the on-line questionnaires to the companies. For the skills clustering activity, the Concept Mapping methodology
was used: this method transforms qualitative data into quantitative information to be treated with
statistical techniques. As part of the process, data are structured, quantified and analysed using
statistical methods including Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) and Hierarchical Cluster Analysis.

As a result, we got 22 skills divided into three main groups: *Personal skills*, i.e. Learning skills,
Tolerance to stress, Professional ethics, Self-awareness, Commitment, Life balance, Creativity/Innovation;
*Social skills*, i.e. Communication, Teamwork, Contact network, Negotiation, Conflict Management, Leadership, Culture Adaptability; *Content-reliant/Methodological skills*, i.e.
Customer/User orientation, Continuous improvement, Adaptability to change, Results orientation, Analytical skills, Decision making, Management skills, Research and info management.

### 3 MAPPING THE BEST PRACTICES

#### 3.1 Goals and methodology

A further step of the project consisted in mapping the best practices and methodologies applied for the
development of soft skills through the analysis and comparison of the scenarios in four countries (Italy,
Spain, great Britain and Poland).

Beside this, plenty of information concerning colleges and halls of residence was collected with the
aim to understand how the soft skills theme is approached in different institutions. We developed the
research in two phases. In the first phase we designed a questionnaire, which was administered in 93
institutions in 4 countries.

After gathering quantitative data through the survey, a further phase of qualitative research was
necessary in order to map the best practices and analyse teaching, learning and assessment methods
concerning the development of soft skills in halls of residence. This second phase was carried out
through focus groups and interviews with directors of halls of residence and an ethnographic study, i.

e. ‘a portrait’ of the halls of residence, based on information collected through observation on the field.

Thyus, after constructing an initial framework, giving us a general overview of the nature of soft skill
learning and teaching in halls of residence, we carried out further enquiries to gain a more thorough
understanding of the practice, gathering evidence about formal, non-formal and informal activities
carried out in halls of residence for soft skill development (Fig. 1).
3.2 Some results from a survey

From the analysis of the answers collected in the survey (93 institutions in 4 countries), the development of soft skills emerges as a popular theme, especially in Italy, but only half of the halls of residence that completed the survey have a programme for the development of soft skills, and a structured assessment model.

Skills mapping models only exist in Italy and Spain. Their descriptions articulate different circumstances, in line with the colleges’ declared goals: intellectual and cultural growth (29.2%); ethical, spiritual and human growth (52.4%); personal growth (22.2%); professional and academic excellence (32.8%). As far as the concrete skills are concerned, there are some differences. On the one hand, Italian halls of residence focus on managerial capabilities, while in Spain, personal skills (for example, creativity and innovation, tolerance to stress etc.) receive more attention. in general, the two countries place a lot of importance on relational skills, intellectual abilities and learning skills.

In different countries halls of residence have adopted different policies in regard of students’ development. In Italy courses are mandatory and prescribed according to the colleges’ rules in the most part of institutions. In Spain the colleges encourage students to take part in courses but they are not mandatory. In all the English halls participation in soft skill development activities is purely voluntary. In Poland soft skills training is part of non-obligatory studies and training sessions are organised by the students themselves through the Career Office.

Soft skill development is also fostered also through international exchanges and the promotion of a intercultural environment. International exchanges are available for students at all the English colleges, in most of the Italian colleges (86.2%) and in the 64.7% of the Spanish ones. Poland does not offer any opportunity in this respect. this data are also in line with the answer collected about students’ nationality: the majority (97.5%) of them comes from Poland. By contrast, the results obtained from the English colleges show a very high percentage of non-English students (79.5%).

Traditional lessons are offered in particular in Italian colleges, while they represent just the 25% of the whole training activities in Spain. The other activities may be clustered into two main groups: ‘connection with external professionals and companies’ and ‘internal practical activities’. the percentages of these two categories are similar, even if internal activities reach a higher percentage and this because they are easier to organise and manage.

Connections with universities are present in all the countries in a high percentage, except of Poland. not all the colleges completed this section of the questionnaires and the answers provided were in the most part unspecific. As far as Italy and Spain are concerned, this connection can take the form of: course recognition through credit acknowledgement (13% in Italy and 25% in Spain); jointly course and projects organisation (8.7% in Italy and 16.7% in Spain); agreement about grants and hospitality (39.2% in Italy); collaboration (unspecified) and promotion (26.1% in Italy and 58.3 in Spain).
3.3 Qualitative results

This part of the research was performed in different phases. After sending a template for best practices, we asked to interview the directors of the colleges (or the people working at educational and cultural activities in the colleges) and gathered raw data which were collated with the information available on the websites of the halls of residence, annual reports, or internal journals. The product of this qualitative research was used both to inform the Handbook of the ModEs project with best practices drawn from the experiences of the colleges, and to gain a deeper understanding of soft skill development in halls of residence. This is often based on very informal practices, and difficult to standardise and formally acknowledge. only the very effective ‘best practices’ were selected for the Handbook. The information was organised in such a way to allow us to fill in the best practices templates provided by the authors of the Handbook. in some cases, the templates were sent back to the interviewees for a double check. All the other activities, mainly the informal ones that were not suitable for inclusion in the ‘best practice template’, were analysed and included in this publication.

This second step of the research was also useful to investigate the pedagogy of soft skills, i.e. innovative teaching and learning methodologies and assessment tools for soft skill development in halls of residence. In this paragraph, a general overview of the results obtained from the qualitative research is presented.

3.3.1 Formal, Non Formal and Informal activities

In the halls of residence, soft skills are developed through formal, non-formal, and informal activities, that can be divided into four main typologies: 1. recognised (i.e. accredited according to the European transfer Credit System) soft skills courses organised by universities or at universities by halls of residence’s teachers and tutors; 2. recognised soft skills courses organised in halls of residence and colleges – attended by residential and non-residential students; 3. non-recognised soft skills courses organised in halls of residence; 4. soft skills in action, i.e. experiential learning through practical activities.

In the first two groups only formal activities are included because, they are accredited both if they are carried out at universities and in halls of residence. Consequently, we can have academic, recognised activities and non-academic, recognised activities. The third group is composed of activities that are non-academic and non-recognised, although the structure of the courses is similar to the previous ones. Non-academic, non-accredited and informal activities belong to the fourth group since they do not have the structure of a course but mainly consist in tasks and forms of ‘social learning’. Generally soft skill development can be performed under different forms and with various tools: mini-curricula; programmes, workshops and labs; training sessions (sometimes with outdoor activities); projects (internal project works, external cooperation projects etc.): internal and external competitions; cycles of seminars (face to face lessons) and/or colloquia (guest speakers); company visits, journeys (study tours), internship and on the job training; individual or group tasks / learning based on practical activities.

Formal Activities

Regarding the first group of activities, it is necessary to emphasise that they include teaching activities organised by teachers, and tutors working in the halls of residence and at colleges. This group of activities can be integrated in regular courses or carried out in independent courses. There are even examples of mini-curricula, i.e. of activities that can refer to more than one course and that are recognised by universities with ECTS credits. In Italy, the halls of residence belonging to CCU (Conferenza dei collegi universitari di merito legalmente riconosciuti) receive a funding from the Ministry of Education. This takes place on the basis of the ECTS credits gathered in a year through the organisation of courses at university and in halls of residence and recognised by university with ECTS credits. these halls of residence have specific agreements with universities for this purpose.

Non-Formal Activities

There are many non-formal activities organised by halls of residence to enhance the development of students’ soft skills. Some best practices are identified through mini-curricula or programmes, with different durations (one semester, one year, three years), comprised of different modules and involving the development of different soft skills. Furthermore, there are many types of courses: University courses, workshops and labs; training sessions (sometimes with outdoor activities); projects (internal project works, external cooperation projects etc.); internal and external competitions; cycles of seminars (face to face lessons) and/or colloquia (guest speakers); company visits, journeys (study tours), internship and on the job training, etc.
Among the explicit aims of the majority of course descriptions features the offer of the soft skills that are required on the job market. Some courses are conceived jointly by universities and companies, or by halls of residence and universities and/or by halls of residence and companies.

Of course, learning outcomes of the mini-curricula refer to different soft skills areas. For example, the mini-curriculum JUMP (Job University Matching Project), organised by Fondazione Rui, aims at developing the following soft skills areas: leadership and self-empowerment, communication, teamwork (including conflict management, negotiation, management skills), creativity/innovation, critical thinking, problem solving. The International undergraduate soft skill programme of CCM is targeted at developing teamwork, leadership, continuous improvement, management skills. The WUT (Warsaw University of Technology) soft skill training sessions are addressed to the development of leadership, communication, cultural adaptability, analytical skills and management skills. One noteworthy example is the course Sustainable innovation, management and soft skills development, run by the Colegios Mayores of Spain in collaboration with the universidad de Mondragón (Basque Country), the Engineering School of Bidart and the regional government. It is a three-day journey, aimed at soft-skills training in a specific organisational environment, among company staff or within a social group. For students such courses represent an ‘immersive’ experience and the opportunity to enhance/develop the soft skills connected to different areas: creativity/innovation, adaptability to change, management skills, analytical skills etc.

### Informal Activities

Formal and non-formal activities are supplemented by various learning opportunities outside the classroom, ranging from casual conversations to formal dinners and talks where students actively engage with distinguished visitors and interesting speakers. Furthermore, halls of residence place greater emphasis on student development through active involvement: students are often required to find a balance between studying and contributing to the life of the residence by initiating events and activities, thus promoting a collegial culture or ethos.

Soft skill development is pursued through various cultural activities (round tables, events, conferences, books presentations, meetings with professionals), art and creativity labs, charity work and social activities, peer tutoring and internal cooperation, international exchanges, attribution of tasks and responsibilities.

Halls of residence offer students an integrated living and learning experience where the line between formal and informal learning is blurred. The idea that learning involves a thorough process of participation in a ‘community of practice’ [10] has gained significant ground in recent years.

#### 3.3.2 Pedagogical Background and Environmental Conditions

Although never mentioned explicitly (neither in the programmes nor in the interviews with the directors), some pedagogical background elements can be identified in the different kinds of activities examined. In line with the pedagogical framework of the ModEs Handbook [8], we can say that halls of residence are ‘communities of practice’ [10] since “… people are involved in joint activities and discussions, help each other share information” [8, p. 92]; learning in halls of residence is ‘situated’ [11] and “… attention is paid to the contextualisation of values, feelings and thoughts …” [8, p. 94]; learning in halls of residence is student-centred, i.e. ‘...climate can be characterized where persons are able to mature, improve, develop’ [8, p. 10].

According to Carl Rogers [12], the founder of this approach in psychotherapy, the person-centred approach is based on the three attitudes or core conditions, that are basic to relationships in which persons can unfold, develop. They are: genuineness or realness in the facilitators of learning; prizing, acceptance, trust; empathic understanding. These three conditions are always present in halls of residence. They are contexts in which ‘prizing, acceptance and trust’ are the core conditions for talent development and management, places where the many skills and competencies required by 21st century organisations can be developed and nurtured.

Also constructivism and the adult learning theory provide an opportune pedagogical framework for soft skills development in halls of residence. In a constructivist setting, the instructor becomes a coach helping learners by forming a learning environment where they can gain insights themselves and by applying teaching methods that facilitate individual knowledge acquisition [8, p. 92]. Andragogy, the theory of adult learning [13], stresses the importance to assist adults to learn in a way that enhances their capability to function as self-directed learners [14].
Adult learning is about the promotion of active learning grounded in the previous experience of the learner and in the application of the knowledge at a personal level. Following previous studies ([15], [16]) different adult learning indicators have been identified: problem solving; experiential learning; empowered self-direction; self-correction; progressive mastery; active seeking of meaning; critical reflection; reciprocal learning; interaction with teachers and other learners; and identifying own learning goals within the context of community goal and needs.

Furthermore, as far as soft skills development is concerned, specific learning indicators can be identified taking into account three principal axes: (x) personal and environmental conditions (i.e. the relational axis); (y) decision making/management factors (i.e. the productivity/goal achievement axis); (z) learning indicators (i.e. the learning outcomes axis).

![Three axes of soft skills development](image)

The following table provides an overview of environmental conditions that promote soft skills development, decisions the educator and the learner need to make to engage successfully in learning and the characteristic behaviours of effective adult learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environmental conditions</th>
<th>Decision making/management factors</th>
<th>Learning indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Shared goals</td>
<td>Problem solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuality</td>
<td>Shared management</td>
<td>Interaction with tutors and other learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on abilities/experiences</td>
<td>Mutual decision making/planning</td>
<td>Active participation in learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-centred learning</td>
<td>Shared resource acquisition</td>
<td>Self-correction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource-rich environment</td>
<td>Learner involvement in learning needs</td>
<td>Interdependence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual respect/trust</td>
<td>diagnosis and evaluation</td>
<td>Critical reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher support/facilitation</td>
<td>Learner direction in posing questions/seeking answers</td>
<td>Progressive mastery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning via experience relevant to the learner</td>
<td>Effective communication</td>
<td>Active seeking of meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praxis – integrating reflection, theory, practice, experience</td>
<td>Choice in participation</td>
<td>Individual pacing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction between learners</td>
<td>Collaborative facilitation</td>
<td>Empowered self-direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective/appropriate group dynamics</td>
<td>On-going review by tutors</td>
<td>Internal drive/motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security/support</td>
<td>Learner identification of community goals and needs as part of own learning contexts</td>
<td>Reciprocal learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learner acceptance of responsibility</td>
<td>Experiential learning</td>
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</table>

**3.3.3 Soft Skills Programming, Teaching, Learning and Assessment Tools**

Normally, the programming of formal and non-formal activities consists of five phases: assessment of needs, formulation of the idea, programme planning, programme implementation, evaluation.

As far as external communication is concerned, presentation of the courses at universities is the preferred tool of communication outside the organisation: it allows reaching a larger number of students and is normally based on a presentation of the main features of the hall and of its soft skills model. Generally, direct forms of interaction with external stakeholders, such as meetings with companies, invitations of experts and students and presentation of colleges at universities, are preferred in comparison to magazine and newspapers advertising. Another important form of external
communication are students’ informal links, such as their networks and contacts, which are the only channel of communication that escape the direct control of colleges.

With the qualitative research on the best practices, it was possible to identify different kind of teaching strategies used for the development of soft skills, that can be divided into three groups: expository, guided and active (see Tab. 2) strategies. These strategies include both university teaching methods and Company training techniques, with a preference for guided and active methods.

Table 2 Teaching methods in halls of residence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expository</th>
<th>Guided</th>
<th>Active</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lecture</td>
<td>Discussion, Debate</td>
<td>Brainstorming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar</td>
<td>Workshop</td>
<td>Role play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference</td>
<td>Case study</td>
<td>Business game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstration</td>
<td>Project Assignment</td>
<td>Visits, Journeys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video education</td>
<td>Simulation</td>
<td>Outdoor training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Except for a few, smaller residences, in the majority of colleges it is possible to apply for a tutor or a supervisor. Coaching is very rare and when the service is offered, the activity is carried out mainly by the Director. The tutorship by a senior student for soft skills development is not practiced very often. In many cases, senior students play a role in tutoring younger students in a specific curricular area, for a specific subject, but not for soft skill development. This would surely help young students’ growth, but maybe it is a too heavy responsibility for senior students, who are still focused on their own development process.

Soft skill training in halls of residence takes normally place through ‘face-to-face’ activities, but it is also possible to use other types of settings. Many activities aimed at soft skill development can be performed outdoor, with specific activities and experiences for the development of the ‘whole person’. In outdoor education, the emphasis for the subject of learning is placed on relationships: relationships concerning human and natural resources. Soft skills are also developed through other experiential methods of learning by doing, such as the on-the-job training (for example, stages in companies) and the on-the-field-activities (for example work camps in developing countries). Blended learning, i.e. combining traditional face-to-face classroom methods with computer-mediated activities, is very rare.

It is important to stress that in halls of residence students are set in a collaborative/competitive environment and they learn from each other and through the exposure to authentic, complex and real-life problems. Furthermore, the learning that occurs in halls of residence is ‘meaningful’, since it is a wilful, intentional, active, conscious, constructive, and socially mediated practice that includes reciprocal intention - action - reflection activities.

Various forms of assessment are used in halls of residence to evaluate students’ improvements. The majority of colleges assess students’ skills at the beginning and at the end of the training course but sometimes, assessment models are not structured. occasionally, only an evaluation form (measuring students’ satisfaction of the courses) is provided. Very rarely assessment is ‘formal’ and quantitative, through written or oral tests. This kind of assessment is normally used for academic courses. Generally, assessment of soft skill courses is based on teachers’ or tutors’ observations of individuals working in groups or on their own. This observation can be unstructured and based on teachers’ or tutors’ free descriptions; sometimes an assessment grid or a checklist can be provided. another tool is self-assessment, which is probably the most popular method in halls of residence to evaluate students also during courses; nonetheless, also in this case there is a lack of structured tools.

Self-assessment and interviews are widely used to examine students entering in colleges; only some Italian residence have adopted assessment centres. Assessing students’ capabilities is a fundamental step to define their training paths, focusing on the areas to improve and determining the selection of courses to attend; ignoring this phase will strongly influence learning and personal education goals. Assessment at the end of the process (at the end of a course, of a year or of a whole period in the hall of residence) is important to verify the fulfilment level of the set goals. At the same time, it is also true that accurately summarizing learning - especially the breadth and depth of learning that occurs across different years in collegiate halls of residence - in a few simple quantitative parameters is a difficult
task. Not only do tests of this type tend to measure merely factual knowledge (as compared to understanding, reasoning, or creative ability), but they do so in a manner that lacks meaning to the student. As a matter of fact, halls of residence are shifting the focus of assessment from quantitative to qualitative assessment but the problem is that very often this kind of assessment is not systematic or structured.

Some halls of residence in Italy are providing a university coaching services for their students. With the help of a coach, each student is required to set personal goals for continuous improvement. through this process the student is able to explore his/her own areas of development, set SMART (i.e. Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-bound) goals as well as identifying the best tools to achieve these goals. at regular intervals students - together with their coaches - monitor their progress through assessments. At the end of the individual coaching process, the coach could issue a coaching report, which is composed of the following parts: analytical description of the skills that the coachee (student) has chosen to develop; analytical description of set goals and intended outcomes; synthetic assessment of the results, comparing the initial and the final self-assessment of soft skills mapping.

4 CONCLUSION

Before the ModEs project there had already been some European projects on soft skills, both under the SSH (Social Sciences and Humanities) theme and ICT theme of 7th Framework programme. Nevertheless, none of these projects were aimed at proposing a structured curriculum on soft skills and at modernising higher education.

Existing best practices - in European and non-European countries - have also been explored in order to identify strengths and weaknesses. At present, European countries have different methodologies and approaches to the teaching and recognition of skills for employability. This has led to a mismatch between academic education and skills required in the open job market. The presence of such discrepancies - in particular in certain areas of study - requires that cooperation is strengthened among the different stakeholders to find common solutions and educational models that provide a common set of skills matching the demand from the job market.

Starting from the existing analyses of the different needs emerged with regard to the various educational contexts and skills, the aim of the ModEs project was to create a standardised methodology for the recognition of soft skills to facilitate recruitment at EU level. Existing best practices were the starting point of the discussion. The existing models for teaching soft skills in some countries were analysed and integrated into a common accredited curriculum, which represents added value for European higher education. A unified methodology for teaching soft skills, recognised throughout European higher education institutions will surely make international exchanges easier for students all over Europe. These institutions will surely benefit not only from job-specific skills, but also from those skills required to behave effectively in a working environment, and to lead an active life in society, thus also contributing to develop an active citizenship attitude.

In order to achieve the goals set, the ModEs project could count on the interaction between the three main sectors involved in the research: Universities, Colleges (Collegiate Halls of residence) and companies. Each one of them brought a significant contribution to the project, in a process that has been company oriented but driven by Academia with the help of Colleges. This active and profitable dialogue between Academia, Colleges and labour market aims, in the final analysis, to the modernization of the European higher education system, in so addressing one of the core objectives of the Bologna process. To this end, the ModEs project considers crucial to match demand and offer of soft skills as a mean to dramatically improve the quality of the education for students and, at the same time, provide newly graduates that are already aligned with the requirements of the labour market to companies.

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