

Enhancing students' soft skills via blended learning methods



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Abstract The peculiarities of developing students' soft skills in the context of blended learning format development are relevant in the modern educational sphere due to rapid digitalisation and changes in the labour market. The study focuses on analysing the effectiveness of blended learning as a method of developing critical skills. In this study, open qualitative data were collected on the experiences of students and teachers with online tools. These data helped reveal the perceptions and impact of blended learning methods on the development of students' soft skills, providing deeper insights into both the benefits and challenges of this approach. The study aims to identify the main areas and methods that contribute to improving students' soft skills by integrating online and offline learning components. The methodology includes the analysis of modern scientific sources, using content analysis of educational platforms, and evaluating statistical data on the success of blended learning. The study results show that blended learning significantly increases student engagement, promotes individualisation of the educational process and provides flexibility in learning materials. The study highlights the importance of continuously improving teaching methods to integrate digital technologies into the educational process effectively. The recommendations aim to optimise blended learning to develop soft skills that will help prepare students for the dynamic conditions of the modern labour market. The conclusions emphasise the importance of integrating European practices and innovative technologies into the educational process, improving education quality and preparing students for the current challenges of the globalised labour market. The main prospects for developing blended learning are described, and recommendations for its optimal use in educational institutions are proposed.

Keywords: cognitive abilities, interactive platforms, activity-based approach, interactive learning, generic competences, doctor of philosophy degree students

1. Introduction

Soft skills are an integral part of the professional training of modern students. They include the ability to communicate effectively, critical thinking, time management, emotional intelligence, and adapting to change. Hongsa (2023) believes that the development of soft skills differs from the development of technical or specialised skills in that it requires more attention to individual approach, self-reflection and practical application in real-life situations. Blended learning methods have proven to be effective in enhancing students' generic competences. These skills cannot be easily measured or standardised, requiring interactive and innovative teaching methods. They are essential for personal growth and professional success, as they ensure a person's ability to interact effectively with others, make decisions under uncertainty, and be flexible and adaptive in different contexts.

Given the growing demands of the modern labour market, developing soft skills has become integral to educational programmes and professional training. According to Murthi (2023), the need for these skills is growing in the context of globalisation, where team diversity, cultural differences and the speed of change require employees to have a high level of emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills and the ability to adapt quickly to new conditions. Various methods are used to develop soft skills, including project-based learning, group discussions, role-playing, case studies and interactive workshops. These methods promote practical skills acquisition through active participation of students, creating realistic scenarios and situations where they can apply theoretical knowledge in practice. Feedback and reflection play an important role, allowing students to analyse their experiences and improve their skills.

The current trend towards the digitalisation of education has led to an increase in the use of digital tools in the learning process, significantly impacting the development of soft skills. Tynjälä (2022) believes that using online platforms, video conferencing, virtual laboratories, and interactive learning materials allows for a flexible learning environment adapted to each student's needs. Digital tools provide access to many resources and promote student engagement through interactive and



gamified elements. Learning data analytics helps teachers and administrators understand students' needs better and adapt educational programmes to meet their capabilities and requirements. The importance of distance learning is growing as digital tools are becoming an integral part of modern education, increasing its accessibility, flexibility and efficiency.

2. Literature Review

The integration of blended learning methods in educational settings has been extensively studied, showcasing their effectiveness in enhancing students' soft skills. Alharbi et al. (2023) discuss the pivotal role of digital skills development in education, particularly during the pandemic, highlighting how these skills support self-regulation and adaptability—crucial components of soft skills. Amhar et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of intellectual engagement in improving critical thinking and writing abilities through teacher-student interactions in blended learning environments. Zulaiha and Triana (2023) explore the impact of open educational resources (OER) on enhancing writing skills, stressing that access to diverse resources cultivates creativity and problem-solving. Mononen et al. (2023) further highlight team teaching and flexible learning spaces as innovative blended learning strategies, fostering collaboration and interpersonal communication among student teachers. Similarly, Dilekçi and Karatay (2023) argue that curricula integrating 21st-century skills significantly enhance students' creative thinking, a cornerstone of effective soft skill development. Moreover, the adaptation of blended learning to professional contexts also underscores its potential in skill enhancement. Bilan et al. (2023) evaluate the readiness of civil servants for digital interactions, revealing parallels with educational needs for effective blended learning strategies that bridge technical and interpersonal competencies. Austin-Egole et al. (2023) link flexible learning arrangements with human capital development, demonstrating that adaptability in learning environments translates directly to better problem-solving and decision-making abilities. Sanjaya and Hidayat (2022) present innovative techniques for speaking skill assessments, indicating that targeted evaluations within blended frameworks improve communication skills and boost student confidence.

The number of studies on the feasibility and effectiveness of blended learning demonstrates the significant interest of the scientific community in this issue. Yoshida (2022) analyses the impact of blended learning on developing skills such as critical thinking, communication and adaptability, emphasising the importance of integrating online and offline elements to provide a comprehensive educational experience. Dilekçi (2023) points out that blended learning contributes to students' emotional intelligence development through the opportunity to work in groups, discuss diverse views and engage in virtual discussions. An article (Tachie-Donkor, 2023) confirms that online learning components contribute to developing self-organisation and time management skills, which are critical in today's fast-paced labour market. Tong (2021) highlights potential challenges associated with implementing blended learning, including the need for proper teacher training and adaptation of learning materials to different learning styles of students. Sancho-Cantus (2023) analyses the role of blended learning in developing intercultural competence. An analysis (Alharbi, 2023) showed that soft skills can be effectively developed by integrating project-based learning and online collaboration. The study (Elo, 2024) emphasises the importance of digital literacy as an integral part of the learning process in blended learning. The publication (Sanjaya, 2022) focuses on analysing the effectiveness of gamification and adaptive learning systems in blended learning, increasing student motivation and providing a personalised approach to learning. Zulaiha (2023) examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the development of blended learning, emphasising that this approach has become necessary under quarantine restrictions and has proven effective in developing soft skills. Bilan (2023) points out the importance of integrating European practices into the development of blended learning, particularly in using open educational resources and distance learning platforms. Austin-Egole (2023) highlights the importance of global cooperation and sharing best practices between countries to develop effectively soft skills through blended learning. Oroh (2023) emphasises the need to consider students' cultural and socio-economic characteristics when designing blended learning programmes. Sekano (2023) discusses the challenges related to cybersecurity and personal data protection due to the growing use of online platforms and specialised services. A study by McGuire (2023) found that updating teaching methods requires educational institutions to adapt their teaching staff to new technological trends quickly. Russo (2022) studies strategies for developing digital literacy among teachers, which is critical for successfully integrating IT into the educational process. Mononen (2023) considers the impact of open online courses on education differentiation by providing students worldwide with access to high-quality educational resources. Thus, scientific views emphasise the rapid development and impact of information technology on modern teaching methods, pointing to the importance of addressing the challenges associated with cybersecurity, maintaining the quality of education and developing digital literacy. The studies highlighted show the need to integrate the latest technologies into curricula, provide technical and methodological training for teachers, and create an adequate digital infrastructure to support modern educational processes.

The study aims to examine the impact of blended learning on the development of students' soft skills that arise in the educational process through the integration of digital technologies and platforms. The scope of the study includes identifying the positive and negative aspects of using blended learning in skills development. The study's primary objective includes collecting and analysing data on current trends in the use of blended learning, evaluating the effectiveness of these methods and developing recommendations for educational institutions. The direction of the study is driven by the need to adapt educational programmes to modern challenges associated with rapid changes in the labour market and the requirements for graduate competencies. The practical value of the study is to improve educational processes through the introduction of

effective methods of blended learning, the professional development of teachers, and the promotion of students' critical skills necessary for a successful career in modern society.

3. Methods

To study the development of students' soft skills through online platforms, the methodology consists of four stages. The sample consists of soft skill categories that cover a wide range of competences required for successful professional and personal fulfilment. During the collection of open qualitative data on the experiences of using online tools, 150 respondents were involved, including students from various fields of study and teachers who implemented elements of blended learning. The main criteria for selecting respondents were: prior experience with online tools, participation in blended learning courses, and willingness to share their experiences. Data were collected through online surveys and semi-structured interviews to gain a more detailed understanding of the participants' experiences. The first stage involves assessing the current state and development of online platforms that improve soft skills, such as communication, time management, teamwork, critical thinking, emotional intelligence and adaptability. The second stage involves researching the different categories of skills and the tools used to improve them, including video lectures, webinars, online courses, interactive assignments and group projects. The third stage aims to identify the most compelling interactive tools for developing soft skills, including analysing their effectiveness through feedback from students and teachers. The final fourth stage will involve drawing conclusions and recommendations based on the data obtained to improve existing educational programmes and teaching methods. Particular attention will be paid to analysing the integration of teaching methods to increase student engagement in the learning process. The methodology involves using open qualitative data on the experience of students and teachers regarding the perceived effectiveness of teaching aids. The study used content analysis methods to study the materials of online platforms and statistical methods to evaluate quantitative data reflecting the success of skills development. The applied methods will provide a holistic approach to assessing the effectiveness of online tools in developing students' soft skills. The study is critical because it will identify effective practices in the development of soft skills and will contribute to improving the quality of education in a rapidly changing digital environment.

4. Results and Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a catalyst for the rapid growth of digital technologies in the educational process, which has significantly accelerated the development of online learning. By integrating both online and face-to-face learning experiences, students can develop a more comprehensive set of generic competences. With many educational institutions forced to switch to a remote format, educational platforms and digital tools have become the primary means of ensuring the continuity of learning. These developments led to a change in approaches to developing soft skills, as students were forced to adapt to new conditions, use new technologies and develop independent learning skills. Online learning required students to be more self-disciplined, organised, and able to communicate in a digital environment, which contributed to developing time management, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and teamwork. As a result, the digitalisation of education has helped to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic and has become an essential step in developing modern educational infrastructure.

After 2019, there has been a significant increase in the practice of blended learning, as this approach helps to ensure the safety and quality of the educational process in an uncertain environment. Blended learning combines traditional classroom instruction with online components, providing students access to a rich set of resources and teaching methods that facilitate better learning and the development of critical skills. Online platforms allow students to plan their study schedule, which is especially important in changing quarantine restrictions. Classroom-based learning contributes to developing interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence through live communication with teachers and fellow students. Blended learning provides more opportunities for personalisation of education, allowing teachers to adapt learning materials and tasks to students' needs. Thus, this approach increases the effectiveness of learning and promotes the comprehensive development of students, preparing them for the challenges of the modern and ever-changing world. The trend towards distance learning has an advantage over the traditional format, as shown in Figure 1.

The growth dynamics of the online education platforms market confirm the significant impact of the pandemic on the education sector. The industry's revenues grew from \$21.06 billion in 2017 to \$57.42 billion in 2023, and the forecast for 2028 is for growth to \$70.1 billion. Financial indicators indicate a steady increase in investment and interest in online learning, driven by the need to adapt to new conditions and increase the availability of digital educational products. Revenue growth in 2020 was one of the most significant, emphasising the importance and necessity of online education in the context of global quarantine restrictions.

Blended learning methods have demonstrated significant effectiveness in enhancing students' soft skills by integrating traditional teaching with modern digital tools. For example, collaborative platforms like Microsoft Teams and Slack have been widely adopted to foster teamwork and communication, while tools like Miro enable students to develop problem-solving and

project management abilities through interactive activities. In addition, gamified learning platforms such as Kahoot have proven to enhance critical thinking and engagement, particularly in diverse and remote learning environments.

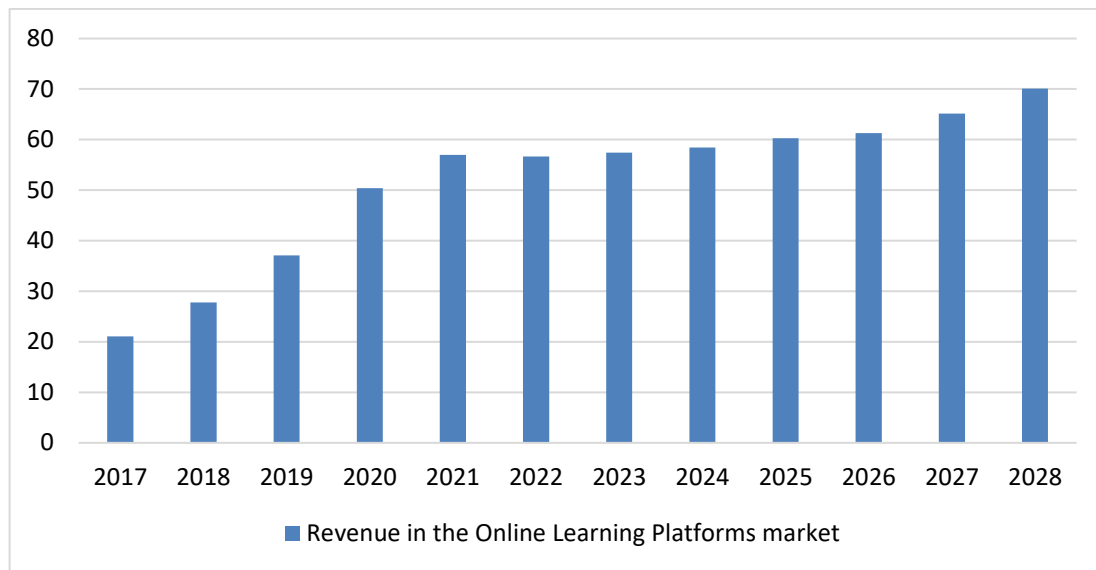


Figure 1 Online Learning Platforms – Worldwide. *Source:* Statista (2024).

Such changes in the educational space have increased the importance of digital skills and changed how they are developed. In online learning, students have more opportunities for independent study and participation in global training programmes and courses, contributing to developing intercultural competence. This approach ensures that learners are well-equipped for the demands of the modern workforce. Online platforms provide ample opportunities for interactive learning, including simulations, virtual laboratories and gamified approaches, making the learning process more effective. Digital tools allow teachers to track student progress better, provide personalised feedback and adapt learning materials to the individual needs of each student. Thus, introducing digital technologies contributes to developing critical skills necessary in the modern world.

Building soft skills is a multifaceted process that includes the development of interpersonal, communication, organisational and creative abilities. The critical aspects of this process are integrating practical experience with theoretical knowledge, developing emotional intelligence, critical thinking and problem-solving. An essential role in the development of soft skills is played by project-based learning methods, where students work on real projects, simulations and role-playing games that help them understand different perspectives and develop empathy and communication skills. Teachers can create situations by encouraging students to take initiative, take responsibility, and be creative. Evaluation and feedback are integral to the educational process, as they allow students to recognise their strengths and weaknesses and work to improve them. Typical means of developing soft skills according to their categories are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Developing students' soft skills through blended learning.

Category	Elements	Means of development
Communication skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Verbal and non-verbal communication - Active listening - Business correspondence - Presentation skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Webinars and online - Communication workshops - Group discussions in online forums - Video lessons on presentation skills
Time management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Planning and organisation - Prioritising tasks - Avoiding procrastination - Managing stress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Online courses in time management - Use online planning tools (e.g. Trello, Google Calendar)
Teamwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collaboration in the team - Distribution of roles and responsibilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Group projects using online platforms (e.g. Slack, Microsoft Teams) - Online games and simulations to develop team skills
Critical thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysing and evaluating information - Logical thinking - Decision-making - Problem solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Video lectures and online discussions with case studies - Practical tasks on simulation platforms
Emotional intelligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Awareness of your own emotions - Empathy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Online courses on emotional intelligence - Webinars and trainings on empathy development

	- Managing emotions - Social skills	- Practical exercises using role-playing games
Adaptability	- Flexibility in new situations - Change management - Creativity - Initiative	- Online courses for the development of creative thinking - Online tools for generating ideas (e.g. Miro)

Opportunities to improve soft skills include continuous self-development and training, seminars and workshops, and active participation in social life and volunteer projects. Improvement of the relevant skills is possible through modern technologies and online learning platforms that provide access to learning materials and self-development tools. Using interactive modules and social media helps engage students in active learning and develop self-management skills. Increased attention to mental health and well-being is essential, as it affects students' ability to adapt and learn effectively. Curricula must be flexible to adapt to students' different learning styles and needs, ensuring a personalised approach.

Applying European practices to developing soft skills can significantly improve the quality of education and training of students. In Europe, «Life-long learning» is widely used, focusing on the continuous improvement of skills and knowledge. European programmes include interdisciplinary courses that promote critical thinking and creativity. Doctor of Philosophy degree students can greatly benefit from blended learning methods to enhance their soft skills. These practices emphasise the importance of language learning and intercultural competence, critical skills in a globalised world. Exchange programmes, such as Erasmus+, promote the development of non-standard skills through interaction with different cultures and educational systems. Integrating these practices into the Ukrainian education system will help increase students' competitiveness in the international labour market and ensure their more complete and comprehensive education.

Introducing interactive technologies into the learning process is crucial in developing students' soft skills, as technology allows for a dynamic learning environment. Interactive tools allow students to participate actively in the learning process, which helps develop critical thinking. Simulating real-life situations allows students to practice decision-making skills under uncertainty, an essential element of critical thinking. Virtual laboratories provide the opportunity to conduct experiments that may be difficult or impossible in physical laboratories, which expands opportunities for creative approaches to solving scientific problems. Interactive technologies contribute to developing communication skills, as many involve group collaboration, discussion of results and presentation of ideas, which promotes team building, leadership skills and effective communication. The data on interactive technologies' effectiveness in improving learning quality is shown in Figure 2.

The growing popularity of digital technologies in education has become one of the most significant trends of the last decade. The trend is being reinforced by the rapid development of technologies to create adaptive curricula tailored to each student's needs. Digital platforms have already offered a wide range of courses and materials, from video lectures and textbooks to interactive tests and exercises, allowing students to choose the formats that best suit their learning styles and goals. The future of digital technologies in education involves further integrating augmented and virtual reality. Additionally, this approach helps PhD students to build strong networking skills, essential for academic and professional success. This opens new horizons for developing soft skills and effective communication in a digital environment. The development of analytical tools allows for collecting and analysing data on students' learning achievements, which helps increase training programmes' effectiveness and improve results (Kubitskyi et al., 2022).

Blended learning, which combines elements of traditional classroom learning with distance learning, is proving to be highly effective in developing soft skills. This approach allows for using the advantages of both formats, providing students access to various learning resources and experiences. On the one hand, traditional learning ensures live interaction between students and teachers, contributing to developing interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence. On the other hand, distance learning allows students to choose their own pace and place of study, which develops independent time management skills, discipline and self-organisation. Blended learning provides opportunities for integrating innovative technologies and adaptive learning systems to increase student motivation significantly. Thus, blended learning expands the opportunities for gaining knowledge and develops skills necessary for a successful career and life in the modern world.

The discourse surrounding the integration of blended learning in enhancing soft skills reveals diverse perspectives. Sekano, Laubscher, and Bailey (2023) emphasize the potential of technology-supported cooperative learning to foster collaboration and adaptability, highlighting its transformative impact on traditional educational models. In contrast, McGuire, McVicar, and Tariq (2023) point to skills audits as critical for identifying competency gaps but question the feasibility of standardized implementation within blended frameworks. Oluwagbohunmi and Alonge (2023) stress the interdisciplinary benefits of 21st-century skills in social studies, though they highlight challenges in translating theoretical constructs into practice. Murthi and Patten (2023) provide evidence that peer-mediated problem-solving enhances executive functions among autistic adolescents, demonstrating a tailored application of blended learning. Finally, Oroh et al. (2023) advocate for aligning blended models with industry needs but caution against the over-reliance on digital tools, arguing for the importance of face-to-face mentorship in vocational training. These varied positions illustrate both the strengths and limitations of blended learning as a vehicle for soft skill development, emphasizing the need for nuanced, context-sensitive approaches.

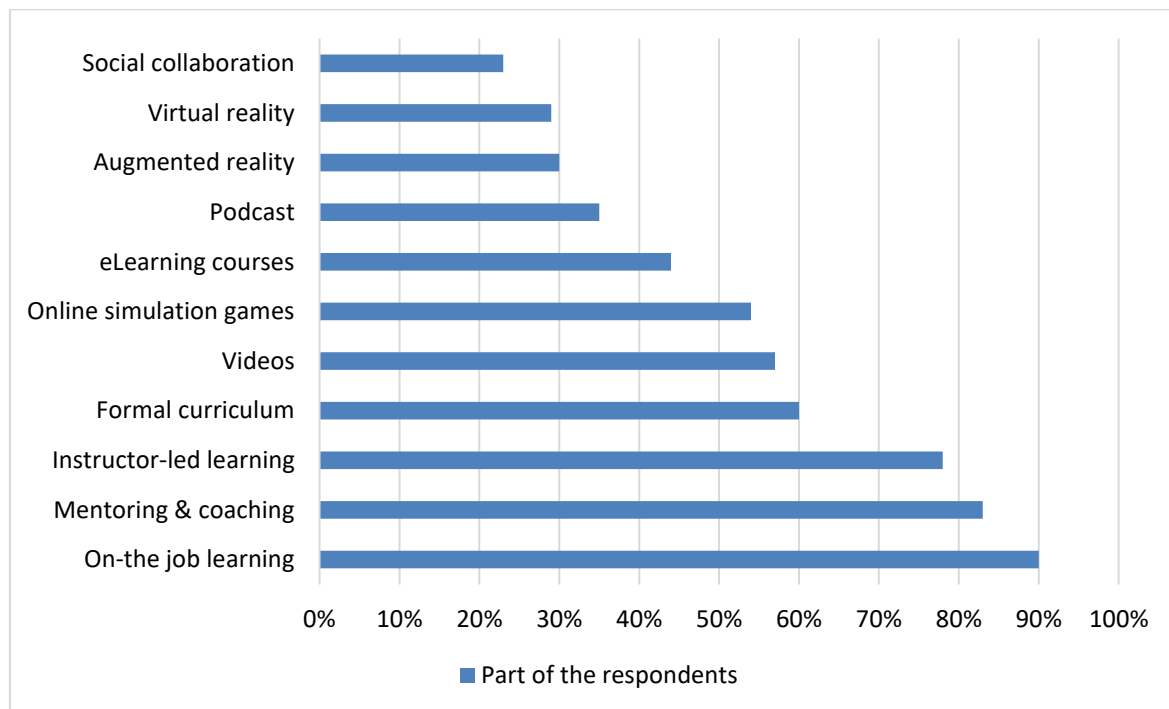


Figure 2 Interactive learning effectiveness.

Further research on the impact of blended learning on the development of students' soft skills reveals both positive and negative aspects of this approach. According to research Yoel (2023), students' emotional intelligence improves in a hybrid education format, which their results confirm. According to Malkawi (2023), using online elements in learning contributes to developing self-organisation skills and the need for better time management among students. As noted by Amhar (2023), a significant challenge is to prepare teachers to work with new technologies, which is confirmed by our research, which notes the need for additional training and resources. Compared to Liu (2023), our study looks at developing intercultural competence through blended learning. According to Mainga (2022), teamwork and leadership are vital skills that can be developed by integrating project-based learning.

The investigation into the influence of blended learning on the development of students' soft skills reveals both positive and negative aspects of this approach. For instance, Russo et al. (2022) demonstrate that integrated blended learning increases students' awareness of their skills, which aligns with Liu et al. (2023) findings, emphasizing the role of hybrid learning methods in developing career adaptability. Amhar et al. (2022) add valuable information regarding the need for teacher preparation in using new technologies, corroborating our findings about the necessity for additional resources. An important addition is Bilan et al. (2023), focusing on the development of digital skills, which is a critical aspect for the successful implementation of blended learning.

In contrast to Oluwagbohunmi (2023), the study points to the need for more attention to developing digital literacy among students, which is critical for the successful use of blended learning. Virtanen (2022) examines the effectiveness of gamification in learning, which requires further research, as this method is not always practical for all students. The results highlight the importance of cybersecurity, consistent with the findings of Songkram (2023), which describe the need to protect personal data in the context of the growing use of online platforms. The issues identified in the article (Meng, 2023) are relevant to our study, which identified problems in the expediency of balancing the format of the educational process. Thus, scientific research emphasises the unique contribution of blended learning to developing students' soft skills. There is a need to address several challenges in digital literacy to ensure the full implementation of blended learning in the educational process.

5. Conclusions

Blended learning is vital in developing students' soft skills, which is critical for a successful career in today's society. Students can acquire knowledge and develop critical thinking, time management, and emotional intelligence by integrating traditional and digital learning methods. This approach ensures that PhD students are well-prepared for the diverse challenges they will face in their professional and academic careers. The study showed that blended learning promotes a personalised approach to education, providing flexibility in choosing the pace and style of learning. This allows students to better adapt to individual learning needs and career development. The use of digital tools contributes to better learning of the educational material.

One of the main problems is inequality in access to technology and the Internet, which can lead to a digital divide among students from different socio-economic groups. A significant challenge is to prepare teaching staff for the effective use of new technologies and teaching methods, which requires significant resources and time. The issue of personal data protection is becoming increasingly relevant due to the growing use of online platforms. There is a need to develop new methods for assessing the knowledge and skills of students studying in blended formats. Global challenges include ensuring inclusiveness and accessibility of education for all students, regardless of their location or socio-economic status.

The exploration of blended learning methods in enhancing students' soft skills underscores the transformative potential of integrating technology and traditional pedagogies. However, to bridge the gap between theoretical insights and practical application, it is essential to incorporate actionable recommendations and strategies. Such an approach would empower educators and institutions to optimize the benefits of blended and competency-based learning systems effectively. I recommend adding more practical advice on refining blended and competency-based education models, enabling a tangible implementation of the research findings.

Comprehensive measures are needed to overcome the identified problems. First, ensuring all students' access to technology and the Internet is essential, creating conditions for equal access to educational resources. This will include public and private investment in infrastructure development. Second, it is necessary to improve the qualifications of teachers through training and professional development programmes. Implementing cybersecurity standards and protocols to protect student and teacher data is vital. Developing new assessment methods that consider the specifics of blended learning and provide an objective assessment of knowledge and skills is recommended. It is advisable to continue researching and monitoring the effectiveness of blended learning and adapting educational programmes to meet new challenges and opportunities in technology development.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical standards were adhered to during the research. Participants gave informed consent for their involvement and the use of their responses for academic analysis. Confidentiality of data was ensured, and the study followed all ethical norms and rights required for research involving surveys and interviews.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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