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Registration number: 01020017274

Address: 1163 Budapest, Keringo utca 1F, Hungary

e-mail: gjsd@gile-edu.org

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to the latest issue of the Global Journal of Skills Development (GJSD). This edition, *Volume 4, Issue 2 (2024)*, centres on the dynamic intersection of education and skill development in our ever-changing world. As the landscape of learning continues to evolve, we are seeing the increasing importance of equipping learners with both technical and soft skills, while also leveraging digital tools to enhance learning outcomes and employability.

We are excited to present a collection of thought-provoking articles, each offering unique insights into the dimensions of academia and professional development. Let's explore what awaits our readers in this issue.

Pauline A. M. Bremner, Elliot Pirie, Madeleine Marcella-Hood, and Anne Singleton present a fascinating study titled *Exploring Knowledge and Perceptions of Level Learning Outcomes and Meta-Skills in a Creative Business School Context*. Their work delves into the role of meta-skills and learning outcomes in aligning education with the future demands of the workplace, focusing on the context of creative business schools.

In an increasingly digital world, the next paper addresses the growing influence of technology on education. **Lucilla Crosta, Anthony Edwards, and Josè Reis-Jorge** in *The Use of Social Media and Artificial Intelligence Tools by Online Doctoral Students: Skills Needed and Challenges*, explore how doctoral students are navigating the complexities of social media and AI as part of their academic journey. This research provides critical insights into the challenges and skills required to thrive in a digital-first academic environment.

Another key theme in this issue is the importance of peer support in academic success. **Jan Jones, Mervyn Ward, Patrycjusz Szubryt, Ute Franzen-Waschke, and Lisa Rowe**, in *Developing a Supportive Community of Practice: A Doctoral Case Study*, explore how informal Communities of Practice can enhance the doctoral experience. Their research highlights the potential of peer support to improve retention, identity development, and overall success for doctoral students.

The issue also touches upon global competence development, with **Rita Divéki and Eszter Lili Harangozó** examining this topic in their paper *Hungarian EFL Students' Perspectives on Global Competence Development in a Thematic Language Course*. They explore how thematic language courses can shape global citizens, equipping students with the skills and perspectives necessary for navigating today's interconnected world.

The focus then shifts to educators. In *Re-thinking Teachers' Roles for One-to-One Teaching - The Hungarian Perspective*, **Gabriella Jenei, Ágnes Sváb and Anna Zólyomi** discuss the need for teachers to adapt to personalised, one-to-one teaching scenarios. Their work underscores the importance of tailoring educational strategies to meet the individual needs of learners.

Continuing the theme of skill development**, Ann Njogu Wachira, Noah Cheruiyot Mutai, and Benjamin Bensam Sambiri**, in their review paper *Paideia Patristic Education: Analysis into the Acquisition of Soft Skills in Universities in Machakos County, Kenya*, examine the integration of ethical growth and practical skill acquisition through Paideia Patristic education. Their analysis highlights the role of soft skills in preparing students for the challenges of the modern workplace.

In his thought-provoking article, *Unlocking Potential with Multimodal Assessment*, **Jonathan Paul White** discusses innovative approaches to fostering critical digital literacy and inclusivity through assessment. His work offers practical solutions for skill development in a rapidly changing educational landscape.

Finally, **Yuliya Shtaltovna** presents a forward-looking perspective in her article *Rewriting the Future: How Metamodern Education Can Redefine Society and Leadership*. She advocates for transformation and leadership skills focused higher education and inner development for sustainable future, offering a compelling vision of how education can shape societies and responsible leadership in the metamodern era.

Before concluding, I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to our dedicated team of reviewers and editorial staff. Their commitment and tireless effort behind the scenes, especially with the increased volume of submissions, have been invaluable. Thank you for investing your time and expertise in making this issue possible.

As I conclude this editorial, I warmly invite academics, industry experts, and practitioners alike to engage with these important and thought-provoking discussions. We are excited to announce that *Volume 4, Issue 3 (2024)*, which will continue this dialogue, will be published in November 2024. Keep an eye out for this upcoming publication.

I wish you a pleasant and insightful reading.

Kind regards,

Dr habil. Judit Beke

Dr habil. Judit Beke is the Editor-in-Chief at GJSD

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GILE Journal of Skills Development

Exploring Knowledge and Perceptions of Level Learning Outcomes and Meta-Skills in a Creative Business School Context

Pauline A M Bremner
Robert Gordon University, Scotland
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2465-8398

Elliot Pirie
Robert Gordon University, Scotland
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5849-0119

Madeleine Marcella-Hood
Robert Gordon University, Scotland
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5920-4049

Anne Singleton
Robert Gordon University, Scotland
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7504-4610

Abstract

Much has been written about the necessity for graduates to be aware of their skill set and transferability for the workplace. Degree programs in Scotland have long relied on guidance from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) on the taxonomy or wording of level learning outcomes (LLOs), which are the building blocks of degrees. More recently, a meta-skills framework created by Skills Development Scotland (SDS) offers clarity around meta-skills and suggests relevant wording, but these do not always align with academic taxonomies. The current research sought to explore the relationship between LLOs and meta-skills further from an academic and student perspective. A qualitative approach consisting of staff interviews and student focus groups from a range of creative business courses was adopted. A thematic analysis revealed gaps in staff and student understanding of LLOs and meta-skill terminology. The findings support the argument that skills should be linked more obviously to modular learning and recommendations are made as to how these could be communicated effectively to aid understanding around the transferability of university-acquired skills to the workplace.

***Keywords/key phrases*:** employability, skills, transferability, learning outcomes, meta-skills

1. Introduction

The world of work is undergoing rapid change, and there is a new emphasis on lifelong learning, where it is predicted that university graduates and early-career professionals will not enter into a career for life (World Economic Forum (WEF), 2023; Skills Development Scotland (SDS), 2023; Soproni 2023). In order to prepare students for the future, it is argued that educationalists must break down barriers of classical course development and incorporate 'flexitive' pedagogies (Bowman, et al., 2022; Bremner & Air, 2023). National agencies propose meta-skills frameworks (SDS) and government action plans (Hepburn, 2021), which can be used to underpin teaching and ensure that graduates are 'fit for the future' (Advance HE, 2024, np). One such approach that is being implemented in universities is to develop authentic assessments (Ajjawi et al., 2020) and employability frameworks within university curricula (Behle, 2020). However, despite - and perhaps even as a result of - government policy, legislation, benchmarking provisions, academic pedagogies, and external agency recommendations there is a recognised gap in students' knowledge and perceptions of meta-skills (Bremner & Laing, 2019; Goldie et al., 2023). This suggests that graduates do not recognise and may therefore be unable to articulate the skills they have gained on their degree to their future employers. The current research seeks to explore this issue and make recommendations as to how knowledge of meta-skills could be delivered more effectively in university settings.

1.1. University degree development

Curricula development in Scotland has been guided by many things, e.g., the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) (equivalent to the National Quality Framework (NQF) in England), Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) benchmarks, and SDS meta-skills; all of which form part of the validation and design process of creative sector degrees in Scotland. LLOs form an important feature in the design of university degrees and the laddering of these across module units of study ensures appropriate progression throughout the various stages of the course. The QAA advises that LLOs are developed in accordance with the 'academic level of study using appropriate descriptors and consistent language. They reflect course and module aims' (QAA, 2023, np). LLO statements contain key verbs and the language of these is directed by educational taxonomies and SCQF requirements to ensure that they are relevant to the stage/level of study (Table 1). These form the basis of module unit descriptors (MUD), which make up the degree.

TABLE 1. SCQF CHARACTERISTICS AND ASSOCIATED TERMINOLOGY

Verbs addressing higher-order cognitive skills are used at level 10:	
SCQF characteristic	**Level 10 Honour's year**
Knowledge & understanding	
Practice: applied knowledge, skills & understanding	Execute, Illustrate, Modify, Operate
General cognitive skills	Argue, Compose, Conceptualise, Critique, Develop, Devise, Examine, Invent, Justify, Modify, Offer, Question, Reconcile, Test
Communication, ICT & numeracy skills	Adjust, Argue, Communicate, Critique
Justify, Reconcile	

Source: (Adapted from Bloom, 1956; Anderson *et al.,* 2016; Stanny, 2016; Newton *et al.,* 2020)

Benchmarking takes the form of subject statements from institutions such as the QAA and Professional, Statutory, and Regulatory Bodies (PRSB) with stipulated requirements for degree accreditation. Although not mandatory, the SDS suggests a meta-skills framework as a recommended toolkit for enhancing skills development in Scotland's young people and supporting employees' lifelong learning (SDS, 2023), which contributes to Scotland's economy and Industry 4.0. Drew (2023, np) argues that "when we apply metacognitive strategies, we become better learners', however, meta-skills are only a guide to be used in context and include: focusing, adapting, integrity, initiative, communicating, collaborating, feeling, leading, curiosity, creativity, sense-making and critical thinking.

Given the emphasis placed on developing these skills in Scotland, it is valuable to explore how these are recognised in university degrees. Despite the obvious crossover between meta-skills and academic taxonomies, there is a gap in knowledge around how these are perceived by academic staff and students and the current research aims to explore this further and make recommendations as to how these two ideas could intersect more effectively, particularly for students who are soon to be transitioning into the workplace. This study aimed to address the research question: *how do staff and honour's year students recognise, understand, and engage with level learning outcomes and meta-skills?*

1.2. Teaching and learning pedagogies

Psychological research underpins the concept of learning with authors such as Dewey (1902), Piaget (1936) and Lewin (1944) highlighting various approaches to learning development and the methods used. Dewey (1902) put the child and the curriculum at the centre and his philosophical approach exposed the significance of experience and social construction in the learning process. Piaget's (1936) seminal work explored the stages of cognitive development from childhood to adulthood and Lewin (1994) studied experiential learning as a cyclical process of reflection. These early models remain relevant and provide a theoretical grounding for the current study.

Literature in this area highlights the value of experiential learning, problem-solving, and reflection (Washburn, 1936; Kolb, 1984; Race, 2019). These themes are arguably particularly relevant in the context of the current research, which explores the perceptions of learning and skills development in a creative business setting, in a university that has strong industry links and places high emphasis on vocational learning and employability. In order to facilitate learning that will prepare students appropriately for the contemporary workplace, teaching methods have been adopted. Rote-style learning processes and closed-book examinations have evolved into more experiential learning approaches with authentic assessment (Vickers et al., 2023), allowing for meta-skills development. Constructivism is defined around 13 items, but conceptually based on the three aspects of realism, cognitive challenge, and evaluative judgement, and features considerably in the early stages of learning and teaching (Piaget, 1936). It has developed to include modelling, coaching, and scaffolding, whether in person or online (Heinrich et al., 2021). Students are placed at the centre with inquiry (Kali et al., 2021) and problem-based learning coming to the fore (Suryanti and Supeni, 2019). Latterly, design thinking theory has become a pedagogic tool in the development of work-based meta-skills and entrepreneurship (Bremner & Air, 2023).

Blessinger (2020) concludes that there has been an explosion of teaching gimmicks and the emergence of mythical educational philosophies. He argues that "knowledge and skills should

be taught explicitly and systematically using a coherent spiral curriculum where knowledge systematically builds upon itself" (Blessinger, 2020 np). Authentic assessments, which embody experiential learning, "have been found to have a positive impact on student learning, autonomy, motivation, self-regulation, and metacognition; abilities highly related to employability" (Villarroel et al., 2018, p.1). However, it is argued that university graduates still have difficulty articulating, translating, and transferring their acquired skill set and knowledge to the world of work (Chan, 2021). This is despite research highlighting that students are benefitting from Bloom's (1956) revised taxonomy (Sudirtha, et al., 2022), suggesting uncertainty around the value of university education in preparing graduates with real-world knowledge and skills. This argument forms the rationale for the current research, which explores students' knowledge, understanding, and engagement with the learning and skills within their degree, where there may be a need for greater clarity and more obvious communication of these.

1.3. Creative industries

The Scottish Government's (2019, np) vision for the creative sector includes "individual creativity, imagination, and curiosity and are where creative motivation provides the basis for living, working or studying". Creative industries education has developed to include subjects such as digital marketing, fashion management, and events alongside longer-standing courses, such as communications and media studies. The creative industries are recognised as one of Scotland's seven growth sectors, contributing approximately £5.5 billion to the economy and providing a significant economic, social, and cultural contribution (Scottish Government, 2019). Around 15,000 businesses operate in the creative industries and 98% of these are SMEs (under 50 employees) or micro-businesses (ibid). This comes with some key challenges for graduates who will go on to work in small, project-based teams or agencies, which are subject to change and may require a more diverse skill set than non-creative roles, which might be less varied.

These aspects make a creative business school setting a suitable context in which to explore the current research issue. The institution of study is a modern university with a long-standing suite of courses to meet the needs of the sector as well as more recent developments in new subject areas. Close collaboration with industry, a shift towards authentic assessment and a strong track record for graduate employment exist within the university and more specifically the creative business school setting. However, the LLOs that continue to inform the structure of the courses make no direct mention of meta-skills. The current study seeks to investigate students' understanding of LLOs and meta-skills in the context of their course and to make recommendations as to how these important elements could be combined more effectively.

2. Methodology

The methodological approach is exploratory and centred around interpretivism as a philosophical position. Interviews with academic staff and focus groups with final-year students were conducted to draw meaning from the lived perspectives and experiences of participants (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The qualitative analysis was underpinned by Patton's (2002) method, which enabled inductive exploration, where themes are identified from the data.

Six final-year modules were selected from an undergraduate creative business school portfolio. A purposive sampling approach was used to identify these modules (Honigman, 1982). The academic coordinator for each module was interviewed, and a small sample of students took part

in a focus group. The student participants were self-selected via an open email call for participants. This resulted in between two and five participants and two of the six focus groups turned into interviews due to a lack of response from students and where courses had a smaller participant pool due to cohort size (Table 3). Institutional ethical approval was granted, and the participants were anonymised throughout the research findings.

Two sets of questions were created, one for staff and one for students, and interviews/focus groups were structured into two parts: the first focusing on LLOs and the second focusing on meta-skills. Interviews/focus groups were semi-structured, and participants had the freedom to explore their answers in depth, which sometimes led to the emergence of new themes and ideas. Questions were themed in six areas: settling-in; understanding of LLOs; industry 4 and 5.0; awareness of meta-skills; meta-skills in the context of the module/degree; terminology and if/how meta-skills might be built into teaching most effectively. Examples were shown to participants to explore their views on how meta-skills might look in the context of a module unit descriptor. Appendix I outlines the degree context and the LLOs in each module at the time of research.

Interviews/focus groups were conducted electronically using MS Teams after the module had been delivered to aid reflection on behalf of the participants. Two interviewers/moderators were present in each interview/focus group for continuity, notetaking and to eliminate bias (Elias, 1987; Turner & Pirie, 2015). These were recorded and transcribed using the transcription function on MS Teams, which was checked for accuracy and corrected where necessary. Transcripts were analysed thematically and independently by the researchers (Patton, 2002; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Data saturation was reached by the fifth module, but a final one was included to confirm (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The findings and discussion are structured into the following themes: staff and student understanding of LLOs; student engagement with LLOs and MUD documents; staff perceptions of LLOs; and reflections on knowledge versus skills-based learning.

3. Findings and discussion

Participants were selected using a purposive stratified sampling technique (Suri, 2011) where six modules that are delivered to specific courses within a creative business school setting were selected and staff/students from that module were sought. The staff interview profile varied in terms of participants' subject discipline, level of experience and role within the organisation (Table 2). The interviewees were coded from I1-I6.

TABLE 2. STAFF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Code	Discipline	Teaching experience (HE) years	Role at University
I1	Hospitality	20	Lecturer/ Course Leader Responsible for Module development
I2	Tourism	9	Principal lecturer managing a staff team
I3	Fashion	2	Lecturer with fashion experience
I4	Events	9	Associate Professor and Course Leader
I5	Media	11	Lecturer cross-discipline
I6	Digital Marketing	3	Lecturer with industry experience.

Source: (Authors 2023)

The student focus groups varied in size and participants were split across six focus groups by course of study (Table 3). The focus groups were coded FGP1 – FGP6 for ease of reference.

TABLE 3. STUDENT FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Focus Group Number	Discipline	Number of Participants
1	Hospitality	7
2	Tourism	3
3	Fashion	3
4	Events	1
5	Media	2
6	Digital Marketing	5

Source: (Authors 2023)

3.1. Staff and student understanding of LLOs

Despite being from the same institution, staff and students did not always share an understanding of LLOs and the purpose they serve. Staff and student participants were able to provide an explanation, but all were subtly different. This appeared due partly to the terminology. Experienced lecturing staff, tended to associate level learning outcomes (LLOs) with the module unit descriptor (MUD) documents and referred to the two interchangeably. They recognised that LLOs should reflect the content of the module accurately with I2 describing these as "a fundamental driver of the module" and I5 referring to these as an 'academic tool'. I5 reflected on the language of LLOs stating "it has to be academic language, but it still needs to be clear". The findings demonstrate clarity on the honour's level (SCQF10/NQF6) wording, which was aligned with higher cognate terminology that is in keeping with the taxonomies of Bloom (1956), Anderson et al., (2016) Stanny (2016) and Newton et al., (2020).

3.2. Student engagement with LLOs and MUD documents

Despite current and prospective students having access to MUDs via the University's website, staff felt strongly that students were unlikely to engage with these documents. Staff recognised this could be because of information overload amongst students, where "LLOs get lost' amongst other materials" (FGP5). Staff perceived that students are most likely to engage with documents that link directly to a teaching topic and assessment. I3 was critical of the MUD due to its inflexibility, which remained relatively static and unchanged; they felt this led to inaccurate information in areas such as indicative workload (i.e., hours of suggested self-study), which may suggest credibility issues if these were scrutinised closely by the students. I2 reflected: "I think it's either a case where we have to take the module descriptors more seriously. Or accept that it's not the right way to be sharing the key aspects of the module with the students".

The student analysis confirmed that they did not engage with MUD documents, and most students openly expressed that taking part in the focus group was the first time they had engaged with the LLOs. There was consensus between staff and students that the wording of LLOs can be difficult to follow, where for example one participant observed "I certainly wouldn't use that word in everyday life" (FGP3). Students felt the language might be even more challenging in

certain circumstances, e.g., where English was a second language, or where a student had transitioned into a course later via a partnered degree link programme. Another challenge noted is where modules are delivered to multiple cohorts across several courses; with staff noting that it can be difficult to design LLOs for 'bigger modules'. Staff reflected that LLOs are sometimes dictated by the strategic direction of the university at a given time, where there is a risk that the wording might become superficial and LLOs may become less meaningful. In some respects, the staff and student perceptions here add to Blessinger's (2020) argument around educational philosophies where, in the current research context, the message is often lost around the purpose and value of LLOs, particularly to the students themselves.

3.3. Staff perceptions of LLOs

Staff were critical of their own module LLOs when asked to reflect on these in the interview, this was particularly true of staff with more teaching experience who felt perhaps more confident in criticising these. The staff mentioned 'inherited' modules with 'chequered histories', which had been handed over numerous times. They spoke of their difficulty in establishing ownership over these modules, which might also impact on the framing of LLOs. Criticism was often centred on what staff perceived as ambiguous wording, which they felt might be confusing for students, rather than that they felt the LLOs were inaccurate. This may be due to the 'level' element of LLOs, which requires higher-level language at honour's year and the use of particular words like 'critically'. Interviewees' critiques of LLOs varied and at times contrasted, where one staff member felt strongly that LLOs should reflect wider teaching within a module, explaining "I don't like this idea of teaching to assessments. I always think that stuff we cover within modules should go beyond what is assessed". Whereas others linked their LLOs directly to the design of their assessment when discussing these. This raises an interesting point as many pedagogical theories, such as those of Kolb (1984) and Race (2015) who suggest reflection and experience are important, are not represented in the wording of LLOs.

Some interviewees reflected on the timing of LLOs, which are written before a module is ever taught and it was recognised that a level of reflection is needed, especially after the first time a module is delivered. This was supported in discussions with staff who were teaching longer-running modules and who observed that LLOs were often left alone for long periods and not updated and developed. Indeed, none of the staff who were interviewed had made recent changes to the LLO for their module. I1 noted when discussing MUD changes 'I think sometimes you deliver it, you recognise a few issues, then you have assessments, you have holidays, you've missed the boat to make any changes'. This suggests that staff members' ability to evolve LLOs may be prohibited by the bureaucratic process involved and timing of the academic calendar. Staff interviewees recognised that LLOs have a part to play in the wider course structure, but the findings suggest that either a more regular process of evaluating LLOs is needed or that a more relaxed process for adapting/developing these would be beneficial.

Overall, from a staff perspective, the purpose of the LLO was linked to quality assurance, to help guide module content and assessment. As modules may change hands throughout their lifespan, LLOs give a continuous sense of direction and priority. However, this is only true if they are fit for purpose. The findings suggest that there is a need for a periodical review of LLOs rather than at present where the emphasis is on staff to do this proactively. There was also an observed belief amongst some staff participants that LLOs are fixed and cannot be developed, resulting in what was described as LLOs that are so general they are not useful or

reflective of the breadth and depth of the module and therefore the degree. Embedding a meta-skills framework into LLOs in a more obvious way may help to address this as long as those frameworks accurately reflect the teaching and learning of the module. Although these modules were created with employer input, there seems to be an inertia amongst staff, which skews the development of LLOs towards the benchmarking pedagogies rather than considering the authentic and experiential learning and skills being developed in the module. There is a tendency for overreliance on the theoretical approach over pragmatic reflection. This contradicts the use of authentic assessments (Villarroel et al., 2018) and compounds the issue noted by Chan (2021), where the findings suggest that students may have difficulty recognising the value of transferrable outcomes and skills.

The second place where LLOs are presented to students is within assessment documentation. Staff and students agreed and could reflect retrospectively that LLOs for a module were embedded in an assessment. FGP3 noted "I think the way they're written gets us really used to the same type of terminology that is in our assessment briefs'. Students recognised that these informed the assessment but, overall, were more fixated on the assessment criteria than on what knowledge and skills they had actually gained by studying the module. FGP4 noted 'what you're supposed to achieve by the end of the semester, so it's what you're working towards…". This suggests that students, even in their final year of study, tend to focus on short-term goals, e.g. passing an assessment, and, until this goal has been achieved, may be unlikely to engage with information around knowledge and skills more holistically for the future. These findings suggest something of a mismatch between the use of academic taxonomies such as Bloom (1956), which may require updating or further explanation in context to represent more authentic perspectives of the student experience.

3.4. Reflections around knowledge versus skills-based learning

Many pedagogies exist in underpinning skills development but there is a key difference in the benefits of authentic assessment in helping enhance the development of the skills themselves and also students' recognition of these. One participant highlighted "I don't have a huge amount of confidence myself in terms of what skills we should be looking to develop. I think I'm approaching most of this from a knowledge perspective" (I2). Staff were aware that their students gained a range of skills during their module but were not sure how to tackle this in a more proactive way. This extends the debate on academic taxonomies being more directed towards knowledge rather than skills development.

In discussions with staff about the skills within the modules, there was a clear distinction and thematic difference between knowledge-based modules (theory) and skills-based modules (practical). There was a sense, among the staff interviewees, particularly those who either teach across a broader range of subject areas (I5) or who have a strategic overview of various modules across the school (I2) that perhaps it would be more appropriate to build skills into the LLOs for some but not necessarily all modules.

When staff were shown examples of meta-skills and asked to reflect on these in relation to their module, they were able to do this easily. However, there was a tendency to select a high number of skills, but to note that some were only being addressed very briefly in the module, e.g., in relation to an academic model that was being taught in a lecture. Whereas students tended to be more selective in the skills they felt they had achieved in a module. This suggests that, for skills to be recognised by students, there is a need for these to be embedded more deeply into a

module. It also emphasises the value, in this context, of co-curriculum design where student feedback is valuable in helping inform developments in this area (Billet & Martin, 2018).

Table 4 highlights the variances between staff and students, e.g. where one of the more theoretical modules (6) proved harder for students to recognise skills. There was less variance in the more practical modules where, interestingly, most students recognised more skills than staff. Again, this emphasises the need for a collaborative approach to embedding skills into module content, involving staff and students and where academic taxonomies and industry input from organisations like SDS would help ensure authentic and meaningful results.

Contrastingly when examining some of the key LLO verbs for the inclusion of Bloom's (1995) taxonomy (Table 5) the greatest difference was in module No 4. This was a more experienced staff member participant and a Senior Fellow of Advance Higher Education Academy (SFHEA). I4 noted many of the Bloom (1995) verbs in their module, but these were not always recognised by the students.

TABLE 4. META-SKILLS VARIANCE

Module no.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**
Practical assessment	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Focussing					Yes student	Yes staff
Adapting		Yes student			Yes student	Yes staff
Integrity						
Initiative						Yes staff
Creativity				Yes student		Yes staff
Collaborating						Yes staff
Feeling			Yes student			Yes staff
Leading				Yes staff		
Curiosity	Yes student		Yes student			
Sensemaking	Yes student			Yes student	Yes student	Yes staff
Communicating						Yes staff
Critical thinking						

The difference in noting skills is highlighted by the word staff or student indicating who noted the skill while the other did not. Blank spaces indicate the skill was not noted at all. Programme titles: BA (Hons) Digital Marketing; BA (Hons) Events Management; BA (Hons) Fashion Management; BA (Hons) International Hospitality Management, BA (Hons) International Tourism Management; and BA (Hons) Media.

Source: (Authors 2023)

Another key theme was the individuality of students' experience, which might be exacerbated in the more practical, skills-based modules. The attainment of skills could be unique to a small group or individual student, e.g. conflict resolution and problem-solving. If skills were to be incorporated within LLOs more obviously, it would be important for there to be scope to identify students' unique experiences whilst also recognising the more transferable meta-skills that all students might gain. The individuality of experience and the reflective process are important factors, as recognised by other academics in the field (Kolb, 1984; Race, 2019). There was strong agreement that tutorials that facilitated collaboration, e.g. groupwork, enabled the

opportunity for meta-skills development in areas such as teamwork, adaptability, communication, critical thinking, innovation, and curiosity.

In focus groups, students were better able to recognise the skills they had gained within a module when these were built into practical tasks, for example working with clients on real-life projects or debating critical issues relating to their subject area, which supports earlier research by Vickers et al., (2023). For modules with a less obvious practical element, the assessment appeared to be the main memory for students when reflecting on the skills they had gained. This contrasts with the earlier staff interviewee's ideas that not all knowledge should be assessed. However, the focus group findings suggest that students place less value on teaching that is not assessed and may struggle to recall skills relating to this type of learning, e.g., more academic skills such as critical evaluation and research were less well recognised by students.

TABLE 5. BLOOM'S TAXONOMY VERB VARIANCE

Module No.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**
Practical assessment	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Modify			Yes student			
Offer		Yes student				
Operate		Yes student				
Question				Yes staff		Yes staff
Reconcile	Yes staff	Yes student				Yes staff
Test				Yes staff		Yes staff
Devise				Yes staff		
Examine				Yes staff		
Execute		Yes staff				
Illustrate		Yes student		Yes staff	Yes student	
Invent		Yes staff		Yes staff		Yes student
Justify						Yes student
Argue			Yes student			
Communicate				Yes staff		
Compose	Yes staff		Yes student	Yes staff	Yes student	Yes staff
Conceptualise	Yes student				Yes student	
Critique		Yes student				
Develop		Yes student				
Adjust				Yes staff	Yes student	

The difference in noting skills is highlighted by the word staff or student indicating who noted the skill while the other did not. Blank spaces mean neither staff nor students noted the skill at all.

Source: (Authors 2023)

It was evident students could recognise the skills they have gained retrospectively. This emanated from assessment feedback, which they felt was important in helping them develop and recognise the skills they had gained. FGP4 stated: "it's not just about what you did

wrong…but it's more like suggestions like different ways of how you could have approached the subject". Students felt that more obvious signposting of skills would help them to transition through their degree as a whole, e.g. "until now or maybe until a couple of weeks ago, I didn't really realise all the skills that I learned with the module with all the modules throughout university" (FGP4). They felt this would help them to contextualise their learning and practical experiences on their course and to document and remember this for the future, e.g. "we have done so much over the past years, it's impossible to remember all of them" (FGP3).

It was felt that a reflective tool that enables students to document and track their skills would be useful in preparing them for the next stage of their studies and ultimately their careers. FGP4 highlighted: "I don't think it's [always] apparent that you're learning these skills at the time, but certainly now in fourth year you're looking back. I can see that I've developed in most of these areas over the four years". They were better able to reflect on their experience of studying a module objectively and pragmatically after the weight of the assessment had lifted, suggesting this might be a suitable time for them to remind the students of LLOs and meta-skills.

The development of skills is linked most closely to what is learned, whereas knowledge is aligned more closely to what is taught**.** This suggests that knowledge is led by staff, whereas skills are more individual to a student's lived experience of undertaking that module. Staff have a greater degree of direction and control over knowledge-based indicators as opposed to skills-based indicators and outcomes. This is a key point that would need to be considered when building skills into LLOs, where the findings suggest that students would engage better with LLOs if skills were built into these. This reinforces the need for agencies to have a more joined-up approach and rework benchmarks to suit the needs of the work sector with staff and students, feeding into the process of embedding these in the context of specific courses.

Students were able to see the value of meta-skills in relation to their own career paths and recognised the importance of being able to articulate their skills to potential employers, e.g. "I definitely think that putting the skills in the outcomes would be helpful…I think they'd be more likely to then look back at the descriptor to help with CV writing as well" (FGP2). The findings give strong support for a signposting mechanism but highlight the need to communicate these skills in an appropriate, engaging and timely manner. The idea of the student journey and transition throughout the course and into employment featured strongly in the focus group findings, suggesting that students would benefit from a clearer sense of goal/level orientated learning that is more meaningful in addition to the high-level verbs upon, which are not recognised by students.

4. Conclusions and implications for teaching practice

This research examined the recognition, understanding and engagement of LLOs and meta-skills of staff and honour's year students. It has raised questions over the development of LLOs within degrees and their link to skills development. It brings into question student and staff understanding of the academic terminology used in curricula development, and the necessity to make this more meaningful for students and graduates. The findings suggest that students do not engage closely with LLOs for specific modules and staff appeared relatively resigned in their recognition of this. This, alongside other factors, places a lower value on LLOs and perhaps suggests why these are sometimes left for long periods of time without review when other aspects, such as the assessment, are updated more regularly.

Several challenges were noted in relation to academic design and student understanding and engagement with LLOs, much of which centred around the technical language used. Staff seemed to recognise that if the clarity of language was improved, then students might engage more meaningfully with these. This brings into question the usefulness of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy for students, perhaps particularly in a dynamic creative business context. The findings suggest that LLOs should be reviewed periodically to ensure these are fit for purpose but that the current process for doing so places too much proactive individual emphasis on staff to do so and that the regulatory procedures can act as barriers.

The findings suggest that there is no clear recognition amongst staff or students of the drive to align LLOs with contemporary meta-skills. This brings into question the Government's approach to SDS and that of the Scottish Education frameworks, where there is significant emphasis on this. Academic staff recognised the value of aligning LLOs with meta-skills but made the distinction between knowledge and skills-based modules. All staff and students were able to reflect on skills that were taught and learned throughout the modules that were discussed, particularly when these aligned to a real-life experiential aspect of the assessment.

Participants recognised that, although several skills were being developed within these modules and across other parts of the degree, there was no formal process of reflection and documentation of these, which meant these sometimes went unrecognised or forgotten. There was consensus amongst all research participants that students would benefit from a clearer understanding of both the knowledge and the skills they are gaining in their taught modules. These skills need to be conveyed and recorded through a medium they will engage with. The current study suggests that the MUD document (which staff relate most closely to LLOs) is not engaged with by students and so, for students to engage more effectively with LLOs, staff need to separate their thinking around these from the constraints of the MUD.

These findings contribute to the research field of skills, learning and knowledge, extending the work of many others such as Bloom (1956), Race (2019), and Chan (2021) but suggesting a need to revisit educational frameworks and taxonomies to reflect new needs of industry and a mix of knowledge/skills-based learning (Blessinger, 2020). The current research findings suggest that a re-conceptualisation of this sort would be of benefit to educators, employers and students, moving beyond the concept of what might be construed as knowledge-only LLOs to a more inclusive set of module outcomes.

A recommendation could be that meta-skills might usefully be built into the feedback mechanism for modules with a more obvious skills-based element. This is something that could be introduced and evaluated with staff, and students and through a broader review of contemporary meta-skills over a period to establish best practice in this area. A suggestion would be to use the updated acronym **SKILL**, which would stand for '**Skills, Knowledge, Innovation and Lifelong Learning'**. Skills and knowledge relating to each module should be identified and taught using innovative pedagogies to assist in developing a student's lifelong learning. The knowledge and skills should be identified using a co-curriculum design approach (Billet and Martin, 2018), where students can feed in from their past experiences and employers at a more holistic course-specific level to track meta-skills throughout the course but ensure that where these are mentioned at a modular level this is authentic. This process would benefit from regular review, particularly in dynamic contexts, such as the creative sector, which would require a less ad-hoc and more regular system of review, which is less onerous on individual

staff. Embedding meta-skills into the curricula and aligning these to LLOs would deepen students' awareness and understanding of the skills they are gaining and help them document these and articulate them to prospective employers.

5. Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study focused on a single but interdisciplinary academic school within one institution and sampled staff and students based on six modules. This enabled deeper reflection on the part of participants who were able to draw on their experiences more broadly and set this within the context of the specific topic, which helped guide interview and focus group discussions. Further research would be useful in exploring the perception and value of LLOs more broadly, in the context of more theoretical knowledge-based modules and more diverse subject areas. Longitudinal research would also be of value, for example engaging with alumni to explore their perceptions of the transferability of meta-skills gained on their course to the real-life world of work.

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Corresponding Author

The corresponding author for this manuscript is Pauline A M Bremner, MPH who can be contacted by email via p.bremner@rgu.ac.uk

APPENDIX I. LEVEL LEARNING OUTCOMES IN MODULE UNIT DESCRIPTORS

Module Context/No	Level Learning Outcomes On completion of this module, students are expected to be able to:
Hospitality Module No 1	1 Critically appraise the industry development from contract catering through competitive tendering to Facilities Management in the provision of hospitality services. 2 Synthesise the issues of managing aspects of hospitality provision and contracted-out services from the client and provider perspectives. 3 Identify and evaluate the issues/trends relating to the management of hospitality provision nationally and internationally
Events Module No 2	1. Critically examine the emergence of the experience economy and its implication for a relevant subject area 2. Critically discuss lifestyle consumption within a relevant subject area and setting 3. Critically discuss factors influencing consumer behaviour within an experience economy 4. Apply core concepts of experience and lifestyle to a subject specific case study
Fashion Module No 3	1 Appraise the range and scope of sustainability in the contemporary fashion system. 2 Critically assess a relevant aspect of sustainability for an allocated fashion project brief. 3 Evaluate and develop suitable communication methods for an allocated sustainable fashion project. 4 Present a portfolio of work relevant to an allocated sustainable fashion project, to a professional standard.
Tourism Module No 4	1 Critically evaluate current local and global tourism product provision 2 Critically evaluate the leisure tourists' behaviours and experience 3 Critically appraise local and global tourism development strategies
Media Module No 5	1 Evaluate critically the principle managerial challenges and functions in the media value chain and their application to media and content industry segments. 2 Identify structural and cultural barriers to organisational change and innovation activity, and outline strategies to remove or minimise such obstacles. 3 Appraise critically the role of strategy formation and innovation inside the media organisation and the constraints and limits within which it takes place. 4 Evaluate and compare functions and roles within media organisations and across sectoral value systems. 5 Assess critically the impact of new and emergent technologies upon strategy formation and innovation.
Digital Marketing Module No 6	1 Demonstrate a deep understanding of digital marketing project management and strategy, skills, principles and techniques to be applied to a practical context. 2 Expertly apply strategic managerial judgement and identify appropriate digital marketing methods, skills and tools to a digital marketing problem. 3 Critically identify and discuss issues involved in managing teams and projects in the digital marketing industry. 4 Evaluate critically their own practice and that of peer colleagues in a professional and adaptive manner with reference to academic theory and literature.

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The Use of Social Media and Artificial Intelligence Tools by Online Doctoral Students: Skills Needed and Challenges

Lucilla Crosta

University of Liverpool, UK
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1125-7931

Anthony Edwards

University of Liverpool, UK
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5342-0576

José Reis-Jorge

University of Liverpool, UK
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8031-600X

Abstract

Our paper aims to explore how doctoral EdD students in their thesis stage made use of digital technologies, social media (SM), and artificial intelligence (AI) tools. In this study, AI does not involve data on the use of the new generation of AI, which has been introduced in more recent years after this study took place. This paper refers to a 2nd stage qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews collected from research undertaken in 2018 into student use of digital technologies in an online professional doctorate programme. The original study utilised an exploratory case study approach, an online survey (n = 28), and a series of semi-structured interviews (n = 9). This study will add further qualitative findings and perspectives to those that emerged in the previous study. This study will help to provide new insights into the interview data that was used to inform the initial paper resulting from the research in 2018. We argue that the unique characteristics of online doctoral students as both individuals and learners determine the popularity of some digital tools and that, in order to make the best use of the full range available they need to develop new skills and a better understanding of the pedagogy associated with those digital tools and the value they can add to an educational context. This can be achieved through the provision of more systematic coaching and support systems. This in turn will contribute to enhancing students' feelings of belonging to a real academic learning community and their self-confidence and autonomy as online learners in general and in their performance in a Viva in particular.

Keywords*:* online doctoral study, doctoral students, EdD programme, digital tools, social media, artificial intelligence

1. Introduction

Social media (SM) has been increasingly used in education at all levels. There has also been a commensurate uptick in the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) because of its rapid development as an educational tool. SM is a mode of interaction that combines web-based applications and social software (Procter et al., 2010) that can be regarded as a collaborative conversational platform, located in open or closed online communities. Popular SM tools such as Facebook©, Skype©, YouTube©, blogs, and Twitter© created from Web 2.0 technologies are believed to improve learning outcomes and academic achievement (Junco et al., 2010) as well as promote networks and strengthen social relationships within a community of practice (Llorens & Capdeferro, 2011). Parr (2016) contends that the use of digital tools by students is contingent on the capacity of the technology to support the management of information and resources, and Dabbagh and Fake (2017) add that the facilitation of personalised learning experiences and enhanced experiential learning through collaboration and interaction are also germane. At the same time, the relatively newly developed AI tools which are associated with integrated semantic web technologies including 3D virtual worlds such as Second Life©, Joost©, and 3D avatars, are believed to provide learners with immersive, intuitive, and productive learning experiences (Rajiv & Lal, 2011). They can also be a further aid to communication, provide opportunities for the personalisation and differentiation of the curriculum, and allow students to explore beyond the immediate. Both SM and AI are increasingly playing a critical role in every aspect of learning and teaching in Higher Education (HE). In this paper, we use "digital tools" as an overarching term to describe both SM and AI.

A substantial amount of the available literature focuses on how digital tools are perceived by students and to what extent they impact their learning and social relationships at school and the undergraduate level. There are a very limited number of studies available on the use of digital tools for scholarly communication, high-level thinking, and peer support among mature online students at the post-graduate and doctoral levels (Gu & Widén-Wuff, 2010; Labib & Mostafa, 2015; Steindal et al., 2021). This is a missed opportunity because the online doctoral journey, although unique, has characteristics similar to those found in other contexts. It is an *"intensely emotional, ego-threatening venture"* (Hawley, 2010, p.7), with a 50% or higher attrition rate on some programmes for online learners (Park & Choi, 2009; Perkins & Lowenthal, 2014). As Hopwood (2010) points out, *"relatively few accounts of doctoral education present students as agentically shaping their own learning, practices or wider social environments"* (p. 194). Despite Boud and Lee's (2005) claim about the importance of doctoral students' capacity to use a range of tools and networks to become autonomous agents of their own learning, there is little empirical and theoretical evidence available on whether and how they make use of those resources.

In response to this relatively unexplored research area, our study aims to add to the literature on how mature students in the latter stages of their doctoral journey use digital tools (Wang et al., 2018a). Although this paper uses some of the qualitative data from the research done in 2018, we offer a different perspective from that of the initial published work (Wang et al., 2018b) as a result of an alternative type of methodology and analysis.

This paper will explore the literature on the use of social media and artificial intelligence in Higher Education and then explain why phenomenology is the main research methodology used in the study and related research questions. It will then analyse the four themes that emerged from the thematic analysis, namely: the use of digital tools; compulsory and non-compulsory

tools; the challenges of belonging to a virtual community, and the need for guidance, coaching, and training on the use of these tools. The paper will discuss each of the themes and it will draw conclusions on how the findings will have an impact on the development of online doctoral students' skills and the challenges they face.

2. Literature Review

Most of what is known about the use of digital tools for educational purposes in the HE context has resulted from survey studies conducted mainly with students at the undergraduate level who are engaged in face-to-face (FtF) learning and teaching. The main findings of these studies indicate that SM rather than AI tools have been used far more for entertainment and communication purposes than for learning. In distance learning, Rothkrantz (2016) contends that SM tools have similarly been used on a much greater scale than AI tools. This is confirmed in the relatively small number of papers examining AI in HE in the last few decades. However, given the current debate about AI it is unsurprising to note that there has been a significant increase in papers in 2021 and 2022 on the topic (Crompton & Burke, 2023).

2.1. The Uses of Social Media in Higher Education

In a survey of 150 Nigerian undergraduate students, Eke, Obiora and Odoh (2004) found that social networking sites including Facebook©, 2go©, WhatsApp©, Google+©, YouTube©, Yahoo©, Skype©, Blackberry© messenger and blogs were mostly used for entertainment and communication purposes. In 2013, Yaoyuneyong et al. noted that the US students they surveyed had positive experiences with networking sites like Facebook© and X (formerly Twitter©) and video tools like YouTube©. Similarly in Malaysia, Goh et al. (2013) found that the majority of the 153 undergraduate students in their study claimed to use Facebook© primarily for social purposes such as keeping up with family and friends. Less consensus appears to exist with regard to the use of SM tools for educational purposes. Salmon et al. (2015) concluded that many of their students enjoyed and benefitted from using SM tools such as Facebook© and Twitter© to enhance their learning through collaboration with a diverse range of people with whom they could network and exchange knowledge. An examination of the use of digital tools for effective learning by US college students revealed that search engines, social networking sites, online videos, and eBooks were more frequently employed than blogs, podcasts, mobile applications (apps), and digital libraries (Dabbagh et al., 2015). The students' adoption of self-directed approaches to learning was reinforced by the results of Dabbagh et al.'s (2019) survey of graduate and undergraduate students ($n = 463$) at a large public university in the US revealing that search engines, file-sharing tools, digital libraries, videos, and Wikis were the tools most frequently used for learning purposes. Other research is less conclusive. In Goh et al.'s study (2013) in a Mexican university, only a minority of the students who used Facebook for academic purposes valued its effectiveness and suitability as a learning tool. Goh's findings are comparable with those resulting from the work of Aucoin (2014) with adult Canadian mid-career learners who had mixed feelings about the value of using SM tools in their learning environment. There was nevertheless a small minority who did use these tools for educational and professional purposes. Similar results had been reported in previous studies showing little effectiveness of SM tools to enhance academic performance (Gupta et al., 2013; Li & Ranieri, 2010); and faculty members' disbelief in the value of Facebook© for classroom teaching (Moran et al., 2011). A more frequent use of SM tools for educational and professional purposes appears to occur among postgraduate students. Yadav and Vohra's (2016) survey of 116

postgraduate Social Science students in India indicated that SM tools were mainly used for searching for relevant information and promoting their research work. These findings are supported by the outcome of a survey of 300 doctoral students, also in India, suggesting that, apart from communication and entertainment purposes, the Web was often used to search subject databases, retrieve research-related materials, access e-journals and e-books, as well as for publishing and career information purposes (Shabna & Haneefa, 2016).

In online learning, there is scarce empirical evidence comparing faculty and students in relation to their use of SM. However, Roblyer et al.'s (2010) survey included 62 faculty members and 120 students in a mid-sized university in the southern United States. The survey revealed that students were much more likely to engage with Facebook© and were open to the possibility of using it and similar tools to support classroom work, whilst the faculty members were more likely to use traditional tools such as email for communication purposes.

Technology may have an impact on students' perceptions and use of SM tools for learning purposes. A study was conducted in China by Xiangming and Song (2018) with a total of 387 engineering students at the graduate level on the use of Rain Classroom, which the developers at Tsinghua University and XuetangX in China describe as a smart mobile-based digital toolbox specially designed to be used in blended learning, providing real-time feedback from teachers to students. The study revealed a statistically significant association with learning engagement and a willingness to share the learning experience. The effect of this type of technology used in more formal learning and teaching contexts is also evident in Sun et al.'s (2018) survey of 78 pre-service student teachers exploring the use of both mobile and web-based technology for learning purposes. The findings highlight how an instant messaging mobile app in conjunction with a discussion board used for knowledge construction purposes helped the development of social interaction and team building among the student teachers. These two studies provide some evidence of the potential of mobile technologies such as instant messaging or similar to promote a sense of engagement, commitment, and belonging among online learners.

Although this paper does not cover mobile technologies and SM apps, it is pertinent to include some reference to them given that they can be readily employed in an educational environment. However, the findings need to be considered with a degree of caution. Students with limited or no experience of using SM tools tend to be more reluctant and pessimistic about them (Goh et al., 2013), which suggests that their effect on learning cannot be simply attributed to the use of technologies per se but to the way they are used. (Wang et al., 2018b). Hence, one possible way of increasing the effectiveness of SM tools in learning and teaching is to encourage occasional and reluctant users to employ Web 2.0 tools for leisure and entertainment, whilst also encouraging them to capitalise on the affordances of these tools for their education (Costa et al., 2016).

> *Despite the lack of conclusive evidence, Chugh and Ruhi (2018) suggested that the "rapid adoption of social media technologies has resulted in a fundamental shift in the way communication and collaboration takes place. As staff and students use social media technologies in their personal lives it is important to explore how social media technologies are being used as an educational tool" (p. 605).*

More recent studies (Oleškevičienė et al., 2022) on the use of social media by HE students (not necessarily those engaged in doctoral studies) report that it becomes more acceptable when directly linked to the process of learning and teaching. Another study (Al-Rahmi et al., 2022) reported the

findings from a survey undertaken by over 430 HE students in Saudi Arabia during the pandemic. They concluded that in order for social media to improve student satisfaction and performance it needed to be embedded, provide opportunities for collaboration, be readily accessible, and be perceived to be easy to use. Collaboration and connectivity appear to be the most significant.

2.2. Artificial Intelligence Tools Used in Higher Education

Despite the recent emergence of ChatGTP©, empirical research on the use of AI tools in the HE context is even more scarce when compared with that available on social media. However, one such study was conducted in Russia by Atabekova et al. (2018) who investigated university students' use of Google web-based artificial intelligence tools for informal learning purposes. The findings of this study point to the potential of such web-based tools to develop students' self-diagnostic and self-control abilities, foster motivation for social interaction in quasi-professional contexts, and enhance learners' productive, reflective, and strategic skills. Another study involving 42 Turkish HE students in an Instructional Technology and Material Design course during the 2014–2015 spring semester concluded that they valued AI tools for allowing easier access to information and speeding up learning, and for being more reliable in terms of data and information safety (Yucel, 2017). The affordances of web-based AI tools reported by Atabekova et al. (2018) are of particular relevance in view of the need for these tools to become more understandable and easier to use by teachers and students (Morris, 2011). With the advancement of AI tools and the semantic web, it will be possible to develop new and more sophisticated software with the potential to better determine the needs of learners and tailor their learning experiences accordingly (Wang et al., 2018a).

A more recent study (Xin et al., 2022) employed an online survey of 274 Year 5 undergraduate, masters, and postgraduate students studying medicine in Singapore to examine their behavioural attitudes towards AI. The survey revealed that even though some students already had a basic knowledge of AI it did not mean that they were more inclined to learn about its use in medicine or employ it as a learning tool. Furthermore, Buchanam et al. (2021) in a scoping review of published work on nursing curriculum, reported that student nurses will be increasingly required to develop the skills, knowledge and understanding of AI in order to use it safely and effectively in their clinical practice.

Moreover, Alzahrani (2023) explored the attitudes of 350 students in Saudi Arabia toward the use of AI in higher education by employing a wide variety of theories and models including the 'unified theory of acceptance' and 'the use of technology' model as the lenses through which to view this issue. She found that despite any perceived negativity the potential benefits of using AI significantly influenced students' attitudes, behaviour, and intention towards using it. Shah (2023) believes that students need to develop the right skills in the use of AI, especially how to access and use it for learning purposes, particularly in the development of critical thinking.

Finally, Bissessar (2023) undertook a phenomenological study with students and staff at the University of Guyana who were interviewed about the benefits and challenges of using ChatGPT and assistive AI tools to complete assignments. Seventeen students and six faculty were involved. Results indicated that there was a need for the development of policies and procedures toward the appropriate use of AI tools. The benefits for both students and faculty in using these technologies were perceived to be the time saved by generating information and support for the teaching/learning process. The disadvantages were students' apparent lack of

creativity and their inability to think critically, the cost of the AI assistive tools, and the possibility of false information being generated.

In conclusion, the lack of consensus in these studies can be partly explained by differences in context, location, and culture. Ease of access to the internet, varying academic practices, the background of students, and the time when the studies were conducted may also be factors. Nevertheless, they do provide some evidence that highlights the potential for both SM and AI web-based tools to enhance online collaborative learning and engagement. However, given the exponential rate of change in the development of technology, more investigation is required before it is possible to draw firm conclusions about how it can be best utilized. This is particularly true in relationship to an under-researched area such as the use of web-based digital and artificial intelligence technologies by postgraduate students for doctoral studies.

3. Methodology

In this paper we adopted a qualitative methodology to provide an additional perspective on data from the original research study that investigated the extent to which EdD thesis students used digital tools to support their learning, why they used them, and what impact they had (Wang et al., 2018b). For that purpose, we formulated the following new questions:

1. How did the students employ the different digital tools they claimed to have used during their thesis journey?
2. How did the students feel about the use of digital tools in the EdD programme?

In the new study, we adopted a phenomenographic approach which Stolz (2020) explains as: "phenomenography is concerned with investigating the qualitative ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive, and think about various aspects of phenomena in the world ... [and] .... with revealing individual and collective levels of variation by focusing on the way people and certain groups or populations experience specified aspects of the world" (pp. 1081-1082).

The original study involved a "convenience" sample (Creswell, 2012) of 9 thesis stage students who showed an interest in the study and had the availability to participate. Data were collected via 40 to 60 minute semi-structured interviews conducted via Skype. They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview protocol in the first study was developed from a review of relevant literature. The current study used these same interview transcripts, but a different approach for analysing them. Indeed, a five-step process of analysis (Marton, 1986; Säljö, 1997) was employed which is consistent with our phenomenographic approach: (i) familiarisation through reading the transcripts to develop a good sense of the breadth and depth of the participants 'responses; (ii) data reduction and condensation through identifying the most relevant parts in the data that represent patterns of responses; (iii) classification through building an initial set of categories by comparing and contrasting similarities and differences in the responses that reflect the variation of the experiences; (iv) labelling through applying appropriate descriptors that best represent the categories; and (v) refinement through following the iterative nature of phenomenographic data analysis in order to modify the initial categories and reach a final set of categories that best represent the qualitative variations of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation we incorporated both a semantic and a latent perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Terry et al., 2017) into the analytical process. Whereas with semantic coding our aim was to identify explicit meaning of the participants' testimonials, latent coding

aimed at capturing and interpreting the implicit meanings of the participants' ideas, conceptions, and experiences. NVivo (v12) software was also used to aid this process. The interview data were analysed first by each individual author. The findings were then discussed and refined by the whole team, who collectively determined the final outcome of the analysis. This procedure allowed us to incorporate a form of "investigator triangulation" described by Denzin (2009) as a process involving different investigators observing the same data as a means to mitigate bias and enhance validity. Investigator triangulation and the incorporation of a semantic and latent perspective to the analysis served to ensure dimensions of "confirmability" and "credibility" of our analysis and thus enhance the "trustworthiness" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of our findings.

4. Interview Findings: Additional Perspectives

As a result of this second qualitative data analysis, four main categories emerged:

1. The use of digital tools.
2. Compulsory and non-compulsory tools.
3. The challenges of belonging to a virtual community.
4. The need for guidance, coaching, and training on the use of these tools

Each of these categories was further subdivided to aid the analysis. Category 1 related to Research Question 1 whilst Categories 2, 3, and 4 related to Research Question 2.

4.1. The Use of Digital Tools

The interview findings highlighted how various SM and AI tools were used in different ways and for different purposes by EdD students.

TABLE 1: LIST OF KEY SM AND AI TOOLS AND THEIR USE BY EDD THESIS STUDENTS

Tool	Personal	Professional	Interaction
Facebook	x	x	
LinkedIn		x	x
WhatsApp		x	x
YouTube		x	
Skype		x	x
Google Search		x	

Source: own compilation/calculations

The personal column indicates exchanges outside the scope of the programme. The professional and interaction columns apply to those activities which support learning. It is important to note that only Facebook© embraced both the personal and professional domains, whilst LinkedIn©, WhatsApp©, and Skype© were used in order to get in touch with other EdD students. The remaining tools were used to meet individual needs.

Facebook©

Those who used this tool did so frequently, very often on a daily basis. However, there was scepticism about its value amongst most of the participants. They were concerned about privacy

and the possibility of their public image being distorted. Perhaps these attitudes are symptomatic of an adult student group.

LinkedIn©

This SM tool was used widely by the participants, but unlike Facebook©, it raised far less issues connected to identity and image.

WhatsApp©

This tool has a special role within the EdD programme. Set up by the students themselves, it is used as a means of connecting those in the thesis stage in order to:

- Readily share documents,
- Ask questions and provide answers
- Act as an additional support mechanism
- Offer encouragement and congratulations on milestones reached.

It was one of the most important and heavily used of all the available tools, especially because of its utility and accessibility via mobile devices. The level of interaction inside the group was very high. Perhaps significantly the EdD faculty had no access to this WhatsApp group.

YouTube©

From the interviews, it was apparent that EdD students also made considerable use of YouTube©, especially for gathering information on how to write the literature review chapter and on how to structure the overall thesis. Clearly this was an individual pursuit which did not directly increase the level of interaction amongst students or with others outside the program.

Skype©

This was already one of the most widely used SM communication tools in the EdD. It was a central component of the student /supervisor relationship, facilitating real time personal interactions that were much more difficult to provide effectively by email. It also helped to engender a sense of belonging to a community, thus helping to limit the sense of isolation that is common in some aspects of the doctoral journey. Hence, Skype was highly valued.

Google© Search

This appeared to be the most well-known and the most used AI tool among those readily available to EdD thesis students. It. was accessed almost daily in the search for information, knowledge, and understanding germane to the EdD. Interestingly Google© searches could result in connections being made to some of the other tools mentioned in this research, particularly YouTube.

The comments below are typical of the views of the participants and support the above findings.

> *P6. '... more often than not I use SM for, again educational purposes, I'm a little bit of nerd. I read articles that are of interest, like LinkedIn for example or on Facebook, Twitter and other SM that I use. I usually stay away from the gossip type things, I read more intellectual stuff. As an EdD student, I use the workup group and I quickly look at it. Currently, we have over 30 people and sometimes it's just a little bit too much, too many things sometimes and sometimes it is towards the gossip type you know, I don't like that. If somebody asks a specific type of question where I can be of help then I am very happy to help. If I need some information which I think perhaps these people can*

provide me with, I ask, and again when somebody shares something relevant and meaningful, purposeful, I have a look and take it further. You can summarise it as I take it with a pinch of salt'.

P2. '...I'm quite active on SM; I'm on LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram. I have also used Snapchat, I have two teenage daughters who give me an update. I'm also in the education industry myself we run colleges in Bombay, so I am quite familiar with SM used by younger kids."

4.2. Compulsory and Non-compulsory Tools

From the nine interviews, it emerged that students categorised the SM and AI tools into two groups: those they regarded as compulsory and those that were not. The former group is mainly associated with official communication, whilst the latter with self-directed information gathering and sharing, as well as communication.

TABLE 2: COMPULSORY AND NON-COMPULSORY TOOLS

Tools Regarded as Compulsory	Tools Regarded as Non-Compulsory
Students were officially required by the University to use specific tools in the thesis stage. These included Blackboard©, institutional email, Skype© and other similar video-conferencing platforms. It was believed that they would help students to feel part of a community, especially those who for various reasons failed to fully engage with their supervisors and/or their peers. The common linking factors between them in this context is that they facilitated a degree of central control and involved no choice in what was used.	These tools were not officially required or indeed recommended by the University. They included WhatsApp©, LinkedIn©, and Google© Search. Similar to the tools deemed compulsory, they could help students feel part of a community, especially those who for various reasons failed to engage fully with their supervisors and/or their peers. However, because they were not controlled centrally, students were free to interact with each other as they wished. The main activity associated with the use of these tools appears to have been the exchange of relevant information, although this was not done on a regular basis.

Source: own compilation/data

Participants suggested that by making some of the non-compulsory tools compulsory much time would have been saved if it was accompanied by suitable training in their use in order to develop relevant skills. Some also claimed that these tools could expand the social and academic environments to which they had access. This would help to overcome the difficulty of connecting with their peers who were based in many different locations and who faced varied challenges in undertaking research at the doctoral level. They further argued that this could raise self-confidence and encourage more reflectivity.

4.3. Feeling Part of a Community

One of the distinct features that emerged from the additional analysis was the belief that if students were armed with the knowledge of how these tools should and could be used, a greater sense of belonging to a real community might emerge. In addition, they also claimed that the resulting increase in self-confidence could have a positive effect on their ability to prepare for and take part in an online Viva. Those tools with a significant interactive dimension such as WhatsApp© and Skype©, were highly valued.

In this context, we regard the term community as an online group that is both sustainable and academically purposeful. This concept owes much to the seminal work of Garrison and Anderson (2003) which resulted in a framework for a "Community of Inquiry". However, P3 had an interesting if alternative view on this:

> *"WhatsApp (community), you have to be invited into the WhatsApp app. So I don't know how to get into that, and even if I were, I would not be part of a research community, I would be part of a student community, they are different things"*

The issue of how to transition the group from the latter to the former is clearly important.

4.4. Guidance, Coaching and Training

This final category is perhaps the most significant of all. Some of the interview participants indicated that they were reluctant to use many of the tools available because of a lack of knowledge, skills, and confidence and/or the time to experiment. In order to address these limitations others suggested that the university should make a greater range of tools compulsory, thus increasing their use. They also stressed that there should be a concomitant increase in training and the opportunities to develop relevant skills. A few claimed that their understanding of what these tools were and how to use them would increase with much more targeted support and direct guidance from their supervisors. Knowing more about issues such as the pedagogy, the security, and the potential to add value to the learning experience of these tools would help in making informed choices about how best to use them.

5. Discussion

In this section, we briefly discuss the findings of our study with a focus on the two research questions and the four themes that emerged from our analysis.

5.1. Using Digital Tools to Support Learning in the Thesis Stage

This section addresses Research Question 1 and related themes. Our findings indicate that EdD students use a selection of digital tools to support their learning during the thesis stage and are generally more broadly aware of what is available. YouTube© , Skype©, and WhatsApp© proved to be the most commonly used for contacting thesis supervisors and peers and for seeking information on thesis related topics. Facebook© was popular with all the study participants but its use was limited to personal and other professional non-thesis related activities. These findings are in line with those of Goh et al. (2013) and Gupta et al. (2013) who conducted research in Malaysia's private higher education institution on Facebook© as a learning tool with a group of undergraduate students. They are also similar to some of the findings reported by Roblyer et al. (2010) who attempted to determine how likely higher education faculty (n = 62) and students (n = 120) were to use Facebook© for either personal or educational purposes, at a mid-sized American university in the South.

It is interesting to note that WhatsApp©, which is used on mobile platforms, was highly regarded by participants. The use of mobile technologies and applications and their impact on online doctoral students' work would be a useful area for future research.

Though there are positive aspects to our findings, they also suggest a failure on the part of participants to take full advantage of internet-related technologies in their learning. Perhaps concerns about security and privacy limit their use. It is questionable to what extent current SM

tools and those soon-to-come, can be used effectively by mature online doctoral students, given their unique characteristics as learners and the complexities of the online learning contexts in which they operate and their apparent lack of skills.

Unlike SM, the participants claimed to have little specific knowledge of AI tools, except for Google©'s Search Engine, which they used primarily to gather specific information and resources for their own research. This is reflected in the work done by Atabekova et al. (2018) who examined international student attitudes towards Web 3.0 tools at three Moscow universities and Avci Yucel's (2017) case study examining Turkish students' perceptions of Web 2.0 tools.

Although AI has great potential to transform the Internet from a platform of global interactivity and information sharing to an intelligent and efficient tool for information management, most of our study participants remain ignorant of what it is and how it can be applied. Given this lack of use of AI tools, its impact on online doctoral thesis students' remains unclear. Therefore, it is important to consider how AI tools are introduced to students and how they should be integrated into online learning settings, such as the EdD programme, to make full use of them.

5.2. Possible Impact of Digital Tools on the Online Thesis Stage

This section addresses Research Question 2. The impact of digital tools on doctoral thesis students is four-fold: they contribute to and enhance self-esteem, engender a sense of belonging to a community of learners, prompt greater reflection on the application of non-compulsory tools in support of learning, and create more awareness of the need for coaching and training activities in these tools.

5.2.1. Improvement in Self-esteem

Self-esteem is a combination of one's self-respect and self-confidence (Branden, 1969). Some researchers such as Jan et al. (2017) have claimed that self-esteem can be negatively affected by digital tools because they are used for interacting and engaging with others as well as gathering and sharing information. This could directly apply to those with less 'digital' experience and knowledge. SM tools, such as Facebook© and Instagram©, tend to expose the lives of users to others, thus provoking comparison. This may promote envy and dissatisfaction in equal measure (Jan et al., 2017; Steers et al., 2014). Whilst this observation has some merit, our study findings indicate otherwise. A number of our interview participants clearly stated that the use of SM resulted in an increase of self-respect and self-confidence. This growth in their self-image was achieved by being allowed to safely articulate their ideas and opinions publicly (via LinkedIn©), by learning from others (via YouTube©), and by getting support from their learning community (via Skype© and WhatsApp©). In this regard, we would argue that, unlike those who are younger, our participants were all mature, independent learners who have life and work experiences to draw upon. As a group, they appeared to be very critical of new technologies and rather than becoming actively involved at the outset tended to remain cautious. However, with familiarity, they recognised the potential of these tools and used them appropriately to best suit their specific needs. This supports our beliefs that the use of digital tools and the outcomes from such use is affected by a number of variables related to the users' characteristics (i.e., age, educational and professional background, life experience, knowledge base, etc) and their environment (i.e., cultural, political, and social factors).

5.2.2. Feeling Part of a Community of Learners

The idea of community pertains to social cohesion: relationships, trust, shared interests, and problems and solutions among individuals (Bond & Lockee, 2014). Within a community, learning and new knowledge are associated with professional and emotional help. Lave and Wenger (1991) asserted that a community incorporates not only dialogue and task completion, but reciprocal respect and support. Those within a community may comfort and collaborate with one another to enhance knowledge (Bond & Lockee, 2014), hence improving their general well-being. To some participants, digital tools such as Skype© and WhatsApp© provide a channel for emotional and social support so that they might be "travelling alone to individual destinations, but [be] together on the route" (Piercy & Gordon, 2015, p. 397). However, we noted that, from our data, not all study participants have developed a sense of belonging to an online community, and this seems to align with the findings of Crosta et al. (2016), who concluded that a majority of online post-graduate students in their study did not feel they belonged to an authentic learning community of peers.

5.2.3. Use of Non-compulsory Tools

The findings from our study highlight how students who readily engaged with technology valued the opportunity to use communication channels outside those prescribed by the University whilst involved in thesis-related activities. This not only improved interaction and information exchange, among others, but may have also encouraged some to explore new and/or different types of SM and AI tools. Although this form of exploratory activity was neither encouraged nor discouraged, the lack of time and the need to use the approved communication channels for thesis purposes meant that even the more adventurous generally used only what was required. The difficulties of becoming part of an online learning community, as discussed in 5.2.2, may also help to explain why students tended to avoid using non-compulsory tools. In addition, the fear of potential harm as a result of security and privacy issues, and the lack of belief in the usefulness of digital tools as a source of learning when compared with face-to-face interaction (Wang et al., 2018b) may also account for the students' tendencies to be conservative in the face of using these platforms. They appear to prefer to stick to those tools which were familiar and/or used for social and entertainment purposes. However, greater encouragement and support from peers might have boosted the students' interest in and confidence to try unfamiliar tools. Findings from other research indicate a positive association between the use of instant messaging mobile apps and students employing SM tools for learning purposes (e.g., Goh et al., 2013; Sun et al., 2018; Xiangming & Song, 2018). Building on such evidence it is justifiable to suggest that encouraging the greater use of instant messaging tools amongst this cohort of students will lead to their use as aids to learning in formal academic contexts.

5.3. Coaching and Training

The research participants clearly identified the need for systematic and formal coaching and support systems to promote a better understanding of what tools are available, the pedagogy associated with them, and how they can add value to an educational context. They believed that this should be the responsibility of those academics directly involved in their learning and teaching and/or the University itself. The need for this training is exacerbated due to the following:

1. The lack of familiarity with and the time to explore SM and AI tools by mature students. It could be argued that some in this group lack digital literacy, which is separate from computer literacy. It requires not only practical skills in the use of technology, but also

critical thinking skills, an awareness of the affordances of these tools, an understanding of the shared social issues created by them, and the necessary standards of behaviour expected in online environments (OECD, 2018).

2. Education is not immune to the effects resulting from a world characterised by unprecedented social, economic, and environmental challenges driven by globalisation and an accelerating rate of technological change. The use of both SM and AI tools in education is thus inexorably expanding.

The effect of rapidly evolving technology in education calls for an increase in the digital literacy of those involved. Chetty (2012) and Ohei and Brink (2019) believe that "…the key element of social revolution and transformation in educational institutes is nothing less than equipping students with general ICT knowledge and skills … [which] includes technical exposure to inspire lifelong learning; making best and appropriate use of social software technologies for conceptualization, representation, communication; individual development and professional competence" (p. 1841). Thus, a more explicit reference to the affordances of SM and AI tools and support in how to use them and developing connected skills may be important strategies to aid learning in online environments. Digital literacy in a strict sense, as an ability to use technology, should not be seen as an ultimate solution. How students make use of technology may also depend on their styles and preferences as learners and their own and their tutors' perceptions of learning.

6. Conclusion

The phenomenography study reported in the present paper aimed at exploring the use of digital tools by students in the thesis stage of a doctoral programme and to understand their perceptions about them. This type of qualitative data analysis allowed for an additional and deeper understanding of the participants' beliefs about and purposes for using digital tools, and the affordances of those tools as educational resources. The unique characteristics of the doctoral students appear to have determined their preference for some digital tools over others. The findings of this study help us to better understand their digital experience and skills as both individuals and learners. This understanding is becoming increasingly important as broader societal changes are reflected in the transformation of educational practice. Such changes are not just about a shift from the traditional classroom to online settings; instead, they imply a different learning mix. The future of brick-and-mortar universities could be limited as they become too expensive and time-consuming. However, they may "…continue to exist, but unless they completely customize their offer, students may have serious problems…[entering]… the labour market, despite the expensive course they attended and the degree obtained" (Sousa & Florencio da Silva, 2020). This has a particular bearing on the future of higher degree programmes.

We believe that more explicit encouragement, support, and training should be provided in the use of digital tools in postgraduate online doctoral education. This can be done in different ways: making support available to students through access to a resource centre that can provide timely guidance on the use of platforms and other tools particularly suitable to meet individual students' needs to perform the academic tasks at hand. Training can be provided in general and specifically, either through the integration of a specific course module on preparing for the thesis stage or through a collection of videos and other materials that students can use for the purposes of their research. More research is needed that addresses "when" and "how" involvement with digital tools would be best incorporated. However, it is our view that AI-driven technology, for example, can be of assistance to researchers, higher education leaders

and decision-makers in providing them with indicators to identify students' difficulties with access and use of digital tools, assess what students need for the successful completion of their studies, and make informed decisions about improvements in the support systems provided to students.

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Corresponding Author

The corresponding author for this manuscript is Dr Lucilla Crosta, Honorary Recognized EdD Supervisor (University of Liverpool, School of Histories, Languages and Cultures) who can be contacted by email via Lucilla.Crosta@liverpool.ac.uk.

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Developing a Supportive Community of Practice: A Doctoral Case Study

Jan Jones

University of Chester, UK
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3396-3806

Mervyn Ward

University of Chester, UK
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0100-4402

Patrycjusz Szubryt

University of Chester, UK
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3218-2952

Ute Franzen-Waschke

University of Chester, UK
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2127-1534

Lisa Rowe

University of Chester, UK
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0817-3398

Abstract

This paper employs a qualitative case study to suggest how the research journey of doctoral students can be improved in educational institutions by encouraging the formation of small and informal Communities of Practice (CoP). It examines themes emerging from the feelings and opinions of four part-time professional doctorate students about their study experience and participation in their emergent CoP. A peer group developed where the students share their experience, expertise, insight, and knowledge in a caring and supportive, but informal, forum. CoP could become an effective tool to aid retention, identity development and wellbeing of postgraduate level students, factors which have been previously identified as key areas of risk. An autoethnographic approach was used to review the feelings, perceptions, and opinions of the four case study group members about their experiences of the informal CoP to date. Thematic analysis of transcripts and WhatsApp communications was used to reveal the

perceived common benefits and gains from participation in the informal CoP such as joy, safe spaces, and identity development, aligning members experiences to a CoP lifecycle. The study found small group formation at doctoral programme induction, and encouragement for students to organise their own regular study days using of social channels, may impact overall success. Application and adaptation of this doctoral CoP model could form the basis for future research and a model for academic institutions to suggest to new and existing students.

***Keywords*:** community of practice, lifecycle, professional doctoral students, support, identity

1. Introduction

In February 2021, a group of part-time professional doctoral students met online for the first time as part of a research methodology module in preparation for their individual doctoral journeys. A planned hybrid model of physical attendance where possible, and virtual where necessary, fell subordinate to cautious controls on campus during Covid, shifting the programme online. Pre-assigned breakout groups on the course facilitated deeper student connections leading to the formation of a small study network of four, henceforth denoted as the 'informal CoP' to differentiate it from the formally pre-assigned programme group. By the end of the methodology module, these students were an identifiable group (Zander, 1982) who, on progression to the research phase, were joined by two others, consistent with Lave and Wenger's (1991) initial description of a CoP as a grouping which engages on a regular basis and shares an interest or passion. This informal CoP has contributed to identity and researcher development as their emergent CoP supports and encourages individuals by developing co-working skills, resilience, and knowledge.

The taught module online delivery used MS Teams, but the informal CoP activated WhatsApp for social interaction. Geographically, most of the informal CoP and their supervisor live in northwest England but one member is based in Germany. The group meets online, approximately every 4-6 weeks for an informal study day, exchanging greetings in the morning, having a brief academic and social discussion for 20-30 minutes, working for an agreed time, and then meeting again later or saying goodbye, depending on individual commitments. The time between online days is additionally punctuated by WhatsApp messages and emails.

Whilst sector resources, such as Vitae's (2011) researcher development framework provide a clear structure for researcher competencies, each doctoral student's development takes place within an exceptionally unique set of conditions, influenced by their cultural and professional backgrounds, work experience, role seniority, life stage, and family commitments. University faculties often anticipate completion of part-time professional doctorates within shorter timescales than that extended to part-time PhDs, paying limited regard to professional doctorate students' extant commitments, and creating a compressed and highly challenging life/study/work balance (Kot & Hendel, 2012).

Concurrently, contemporary modes of delivery have evolved from traditional face-to-face workshops, group discussions and supervision to largely digital synchronous and asynchronous methods, increasing opportunities for cohort diversity and access to a global network of professionals. Sophisticated levels of communication across programmes and institutions may facilitate larger interdisciplinary researcher CoP, adding further developmental opportunities, yet perhaps inadvertently limiting informal and social small group dialogue (Melián et al., 2023). Attempts to build upon the notion of belonging have naturally resulted in an increased

frequency and range of informational exchange, facilitated by an array of different asynchronous and synchronous communication platforms and channels. Extensive use of virtual media engagement does however risk technostress and zoom fatigue (Silard et al., 2023; Upadhyaya & Vrinda, 2021). The extant literature remains unclear as to the value of digital CoP for professional part-time doctoral students, particularly when juxtaposed with ever more intense levels of workplace and social digital communication. Whilst there is some collaborative autoethnographic research examining the real-world experiences of PhD students (Carson & Nicklasson, 2023; Vacek et al., 2021), there appears to be very little research exploring the creation and evolution of a digital CoP (Subedi et al., 2022) involving professional part-time doctoral students within a UK Business School.

Together, these tensions present a unique set of circumstances for students pursuing a professional part-time doctorate, particularly in terms of making sustainable progress and feeling a sense of belonging within a community of like-minded students who are on a similar journey (Lee, 2020; Studebaker & Curtis, 2021; Subedi et al., 2022). The membership of small CoP may provide the additional support mechanisms needed for new researchers who are developing their researcher identities whilst also providing a leveller in confidence and self-belief regardless of professional levels, roles, or sectors. Yet, whilst doctoral-level students are expected to be driven, autonomous learners, meaning that self-managed CoP are customary, separation from the wider cohort may inadvertently create potential issues around belonging, identity and learning across practice (Probst & Borzillo, 2008; Wenger, 1999).

To address this lacuna, this paper aims to advance our understanding of the effectiveness of a small and informal digital CoP through a case study approach (Yin, 2017). The study is set within a small UK Business School in the northwest of England and explores the experiences of four participants as they navigate a professional doctorate. The students and their supervisor are the authors. The study aims to offer a perspective on how other doctoral students could easily form their own informal CoP for mutual support and encourage doctoral programme leaders to consider similar initiatives.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Communities of Practice

The term CoP was initially described as a system of relationships between people, activities, and the world; developing over time, and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), where learning between members helps both professionally and personally. CoP are informal groups based on mutual interest underpinned by connections between participants. The perception of CoP developed further and by 2015 Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Traynor (2015) had moved the description of CoP onto a circle of individuals connected by a shared passion, interest, and desire to improve in their respective fields by working together on a regular basis.

Formal and informal CoP rarely attract specific focus but can be identified by their members and actions. CoP evolve language, documents, symbols, tools, images, roles, sensitivities, and expectations, reflecting the characteristics of culture (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Schein, 1997), and offer a clear context for participants to work out direction, strategy and priorities. Doctoral study can be a lonely journey and events like the COVID-19 lockdowns can jeopardise students' access to a community of peers which could enhance their learning environment (Lahenius, 2012).

Subedi et al. (2022) and Zheng et al. (2023) confirm the value of CoP to participants who collaborate through informal communication and networks, sharing experience, knowledge, and expertise, to create innovative solutions. Technology may facilitate better participation in CoP and communities can expand with technological development (Zanotti & Magallanes, 2015). Lee et al. (2015) describe CoP as a possible mechanism for improving knowledge sharing and whilst web technology may have not increased the intensity of participation, they found evidence of individual benefit from the ease of virtual communication. However, the overlaying of multiple communication channels requires careful implementation to reduce the risk of technostress (Silard et al., 2023; Upadhyaya & Vrinda, 2021).

2.2. CoP Lifecycles

Products move through identifiable (*lifecycle*) stages of introduction, growth, maturity, and decline (Levitt, 1965) and researchers have aligned CoP with the lifecycle. Zanotti and Magallanes (2015) interpret CoP as specialists from different fields sharing resources, experience, and knowledge, against three notions of lifecycle: interaction platforms, participants, and group goals. In considering continued action beyond the initial CoP, Pohjola and Puusa (2016) stress that group dynamics are pertinent in deciding whether to maintain input (*continue CoP activities and participation*), change (*differentiate activity and membership*), or disassemble (*dispersal, disposal, stand down and withdraw from*) the CoP.

In questioning how CoP can cultivate innovation, Zheng et al. (2023) consider the dynamic lifecycle of CoPs to link various industry sectors which may subsequently becoming self-governing and actively influence change. The CoP, rooted in shared professional experience and expertise using informal communication and collaboration, progressed through a project lifecycle from formation, expansion, transformation (*as different projects emerged*), and renewal, interacting with the wider community to disseminate knowledge through conferences and publication (Zheng et al., 2023).

2.3. Transforming Identities

Identities evolve when individuals are exposed to deep, new learning over time, typified by the multi-faceted opportunities within doctoral-level study, leading to a shift in long-held personal and professional beliefs and understanding. Identities are formed by environments, preferences, belief systems, heritage, subject disciplines and learning contexts, further shaped by interactions with others (Seyri & Rezazee, 2022). Context may affect the self-perception of identity and that of others, and learning and identity are inextricably linked (Baker & Lattuca, 2010). Engaging in academic learning alters self-perceptions (Packer & Giocoechea, 2000) and taking an active role in a CoP engenders a sense of belonging (Botelho de Magalhães et al., 2019); this is particularly evident in the regular and active participants of discussion groups (Seyri & Rezazee, 2022).

Seyri and Rezazee (2022) suggest that the online identities of doctoral students remain elusive, noting the effect of the contextual shift from face-to-face to online study during Covid-19 and its impact on individual identity development at a time of potentially great individual transformation. Whilst there is some collaborative autoethnographic research examining the real-world experiences of PhD students (Carson & Nicklasson, 2023; Vacek et al., 2021), virtual professional part-time doctoral identity is largely unexplored and there is little published on student university identity (SUI). Here, consideration should be given to linguistic

backgrounds, cultural experiences, the barriers that online work may present (Salimi & Banitalebi, 2023; Seyri & Rezaee, 2022), how individuals interact and engage, perceptions of how individuals are represented, and their place in the community (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). Virtual learning environments can be challenging, affecting confidence, performance, motivation, and rapport building when differentiating between classroom and social identities (Salimi & Banitalebi, 2023).

2.3. Learning in a supportive environment

The benefits of peer-assisted learning and mentoring (PALM) were known pre-Covid-19, supporting students with transition to university, gaining more popularity post-pandemic in enhancing student wellbeing (Meletiadou, 2022). Research into Learning Communities' (LCs), altruistic knowledge-sharing groups within an interactive and collaborative environment, evidences their success in facilitating goal achievement (Brouwer et al., 2022), alongside relationship-building amongst students, where knowledge is co-created or socially constructed (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978; Subedi et al., 2022). Additionally, the self-directed learning model by Boyatzis (2001), with trusting relationships at its heart, encourages team members on their journey and can be transferred from the workplace to academia (Goleman, et al., 2002; Zamnah & Ruswana, 2019).

Social Baseline Theory (SBT) suggests that any burden is less taxing and risky when not experienced alone (Beckes & Sbarra, 2022). SBT has often been associated with encounters in the real world, in which people can 'be in touch' in a literal way. Beckes and Coan (2011) acknowledge that relationships increase health and wellbeing, and this informal CoP shows that a sense of feeling better can also be experienced at a distance.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

An autoethnographic, qualitative case study (Yin, 2017) was used to review the feelings, perceptions, and opinions of the four members of an informal CoP about their experiences of their CoP to date (Ball, 1993; Stokes, 2011). The participants are also the authors alongside their supervisor. An interpretivist philosophy was adopted, recognising this informal CoP members' perception of events, interactions, and relationships (Saunders et al., 2023). Group epistemology includes knowledge brought to the informal CoP, shared, interpreted, and new insights created, and corroborated by members' memories and records. In terms of ontology, the group has substance and reality, vouched for by its membership, activities, products, and sustainability. Relativism was considered an appropriate stance as meanings, interpreted through discourse, both verbal and written, were shared and respected (Stokes, 2011; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In addition to individual goals, CoP members shared a common interest and shared values in progressing their research to thesis, completion, and achievement.

3.2. Data Collection

Data was taken from transcripts of two existing group discussion videos prepared separately by the informal CoP members for a symposium presentation in summer 2023. This secondary use of data was supplemented by comments from the informal CoP's WhatsApp account since its inception in February 2021. No further data collection was pursued. As the research aims to explore the real-time, organic development of a CoP among doctoral students, which is

inherently informal and emergent, the data collection through group discussions is reflective of the natural interactions (Anderson & McCormack, 2021) within this informal CoP, aligning with the study's interpretivist and autoethnographic approach.

TABLE 1: INFORMAL COP PARTICIPANTS – AS ENROLLED 2021

Student	Occupation	Degree	Doctoral Research
A	University Senior Lecturer	DProf	Transfer of Skills from informal settings into the workplace
B	Executive Team Coach	DProf	Supporting Leaders in Creating Workplace Wellbeing
C	AI Strategy Director	DBA	Skills Shift in Business Process Managers role during Artificial Intelligence introduction in organisation
D	Chair of Further Education College	DProf	Risk of Damage to College Reputation from Merger
E	Doctoral supervisor	Already holds DBA	n/a

Source: Own compilation

3.3. Data Analysis

Basic manual thematic analysis was used to discern key elements of group practice with supporting quotations/words used to underpin and evidence each (Bell et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This type of analysis is appropriate as it is based on individual realities and all group members contributed to and analysed both data sets independently before cross-checking and reducing/re-ordering themes, understanding and reaching consensus as a team. Coding and quantitative analysis was not pursued due to data size. Moreover, this method allowed the researchers to draw on their own experiences and emotions, which is a valid and recognised practice in qualitative research (Allen, 2015). Themes recognised reflect the core elements of CoP theory such as mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

3.4. Rigour, Validity, Reliability & Reflexivity.

Bias inevitably exists in this case study as the authors are writing about themselves, limiting claims of objectivity. The approach employed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) three considerations of validity: it is credible as the participants are also the researchers, it may be transferred to other CoP, and dependable as could be used for cross-sectional or longitudinal studies. In terms of reliability, whilst this type of study may be replicated amongst other informal doctoral groups, the internal and external elements such as researchers, context and timing will differ (Saunders et al., 2023) and consequently, the results may also vary. Acknowledgement of privileged access (Carlson, 2024) to inside knowledge (Yanto & Pandin, 2023) through CoP participation, and reflexivity is essential, as researchers' own experiences, values and views are the basis of this study (Stokes & Wall, 2017). These researchers conducted the research by examining the impact of their informal CoP (Meyer & Dykes, 2020). Reflexivity in this research has been incorporated through researchers' involvement in the CoP and influenced their interpretation of the data which is crucial in qualitative research (Finlay, 2021).

3.5. Ethics

The University provided ethical approval. All participants are the authors of this paper and confirmed their approval to use of their data. Anonymity and privacy are protected with participants referred to by letter.

3.6. Limitations

The scale of research and autoethnographic approach inevitably shapes the findings. The goal of the study was not to achieve generalisability to a larger population but rather consideration of transferability of the findings to similar contexts. Furthermore, the findings are intended to inform future research rather than provide definitive conclusions.

4. Findings

4.1. Themes from the Transcriptions and WhatsApp Messages

The Fourteen basic recurring themes identified from the video transcripts and WhatsApp messages are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2. EMERGENT THEMES FROM VIDEO TRANSCRIPTIONS AND WHATSAPP MESSAGES

Theme Identified	Theme Description	Theme in a Dialogue
Psychological Safety and Team Dynamics	Emphasis on feeling welcome and supported.	"It's a very safe environment for me to pitch some of my ideas." "I'm glad I'm on this journey with you." "Thanks guys, today was really useful and gave me the motivation I needed to get working on it."
Interpersonal Chemistry	A crucial factor in the group's cohesion and success.	"We get on fantastically well." "You are such a brilliant group of people to be on this journey with.
Communication Tools	Teams and WhatsApp for formal and informal communication.	"We might have a day together and we've got our own WhatsApp group." "Wow, my first What'sApp message. Whatever next!" "It was productive chat. We've just been learning about MS Teams transcripts"
Shared Purpose	Having an aligned vision and objectives.	"We want to contribute to academia, validate our hypotheses." "We should explore that option next time we are all together." "All contributions welcome."

Theme Identified	Theme Description	Theme in a Dialogue
		“Wow, this chat has been buzzing with activity.”
Group Cohesion	Interpersonal connection / cohesion between group members.	"Somehow our paths crossed...we are all in this together." “This was another great get together. Enjoyed it so much.” “I hope there’s (sic) more opportunities to get together.”
Interdisciplinarity	Spectrum of experience across different countries and disciplines.	“Thank you for providing this resource by activating your network.” “Thank you for sharing your learning in so many different areas.”
Spontaneous Interaction and Unscripted Collaboration	Focus on contributing to academia, sharing knowledge, and working together on research. Spontaneous communication through WhatsApp	“Unscripted collaboration...small sparks of ideation.” “I’m free after 10am so we’ll see when the others can fit in a meeting.”
Belonging and Inclusivity	Feeling accepted as an integral member	"I feel like I've always been part of this cohort." “Welcome to the gang.” “I can’t wait to meet everyone in person” “Thanks for making this a very special evening for me.” “It’s the time of year to say thank you for your support. I feel blessed to have you in my life.” “Without the good humour and encouragement of this group I’m not sure I would have made it this far.”
Fun and Joy	The importance of enjoyment in the research journey.	"The joy of being the researcher and being on this journey" “That was more fun than I thought it would be.” "It’s done and I’m excited for the feedback.”
Diversity	Reference to members from different countries and the importance of language in academia.	"From different countries"

Theme Identified	Theme Description	Theme in a Dialogue
		"...that is difficult to follow for someone who hasn't seen it and lives sooo far away" (sic).
Academic Discourse, Academic Challenges	Discussion about the difficulties of academic English for non-native speakers.	"Academic English or writing is a totally different story." "I've just sent an email that may help towards the definition you were seeking "
Distance Collaboration and Time zone challenges	Recognition of the effectiveness of online tools for maintaining collaboration. Acknowledgment of potential challenges in coordinating meetings across different time zones.	"Connect me from the distance" "Distance doesn't matter. You could be on the other side of the world. I could be on the moon. As long as we've got an internet connection it's just synchronization in time." "This time is just for us to use as we wish, and it doesn't matter if we can't make it. There will always be times when our jobs get in the way."
Flexibility and Adaptability	Recognition of the adaptability of the team in using online tools and bridging distances.	"We need to set it up or not everyone is on at the time when we need it. But WhatsApp, we can just throw in something."
Support System and Supportive Environment	Highlighting the value of the group in overcoming the loneliness of doctoral study.	"This group says 'try this, try that' and that was so, so helpful." "Can I help?" "Thanks for putting my mind at rest." "I knew you were there to support me." "Thank you for keeping me sane!" "Thank you…you supported me emotionally and with compassion." "It's a slog and feels a bit lonely at times." "Well, don't forget we're always here if you need a nudge."

Source: Extract of WhatsApp messages with surfaced themes, 2021-2023

5. Discussion

5.1. CoP formation and development

Tyndall et al. (2019) call for supportive doctoral research communities to exist more prominently as part of the doctoral programme structure and suggest that online formats early in research careers are not ideal, but this study had no option due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns. This informal CoP emerged from a pre-assigned mini cohort as part of a doctoral programme, less a means for peer review and more for social solidarity, as the members navigated a new academic pathway (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). This informal CoP lacked structure, hierarchy, or purpose other than to provide informal mutual support. Group commitment remains high; non-attendance or engagement is communicated via WhatsApp, more out of courtesy and concern for welfare rather than any formal expectation. The emphasis on participation within this CoP concurs with Tyndall et al. (2019) that doctoral community participation can help prevent attrition.

The emergent themes and corresponding evidence from the transcripts and WhatsApp messages in Table 2 demonstrate a caring, supportive, and flexible CoP, which embraces its diversity, and group dynamic, and fosters a culture of belonging. The informal CoP members work in different subject areas but embrace individuality and the knowledge and expertise that wider networks can bring. The informal CoP has existed for four years but did not meet in person for the first two years, largely because of the Covid-19 pandemic, and gelled over mutual determination to pursue doctoral studies. No negative themes emerged as the members here are free to participate however and whenever they like.

The informal CoP became acquainted with technology such as MS Teams and WhatsApp both professionally and socially throughout the pandemic, and which even now still supports informal CoP meetings. It is unknown whether participants perceived identities would have differed had they been in a classroom together for longer periods of time.

Whilst all informal CoP members are project managers of their own research, CoP participation is not hindered by distance or technology. From the outset as a break-out group in the taught module, virtual participation may have helped overcome hesitancy or nervousness about not being in the same physical room. Indeed, team collaboration is augmented by technologies and utilisation of these can lead to more efficiency in geographically dispersed CoP (Laitinen & Valo, 2018).

This informal CoP has been aligned with Laitinen and Valo's (2018) model which provides areas for interaction and frames for analysis of participant contribution. Although the frame for collaboration included a range of positions, this successful collaboration needed only two frames assisted by MS Teams and WhatsApp. The informal CoP organically started to use MS Teams to establish a work frame, supporting task building and work-related activities; the WhatsApp platform was used to establish a relational frame, establishing deeper relationships between team members. MS Teams and WhatsApp thus offer future doctoral study cohorts a minimum viable solution for effective remote communication and collaboration.

5.2. The CoP Cycle

The phases identified by Zheng *et al.* (2023) align with this CoP's experiences and the concepts of CoP (Table 2). The original pre-assigned break-out group in the *formation* phase evolved into a recognisable informal group (Zander, 1982). Early WhatsApp messages helped to establish social relationships for the first CoP of four doctoral students. This developed through an *expansion* stage, with the addition of two more students, thereby introducing wider knowledge, experience, and reference, albeit working in very different subject areas. As the students progressed further into individual research phases of their programme, the CoP matched the *transformation* stage, evidenced by the regular online Teams meetings, two social events and collaboration on joint activities, like a research symposium and presentation to other academic research students. This larger CoP proved supportive and productive, leading to group contributions, at seminars and a post-graduate research (PGR) symposium. The CoP is now moving towards the *renewal* phase, as MS Teams sessions are now booked a year in advance. No new members are being sought (one has already completed and left) so the CoP may be viewed as established and engaging in a cycle of activities. When members complete their doctoral studies, this CoP may cease to be useful and *disperse.* As Zanotti and Magallanes (2015) suggest, the media, key participants, and the goals may change, but the core intention, in this case support of CoP members, remains.

TABLE 3: CASE STUDY COP ALIGNMENT WITH LIFECYCLE PHASES

Stage	Description	Authors' Experience
Formation	Knowledge transfer from university to CoP	Formal taught module leads to informal CoP formation ***"My first WhatsApp message"***
Expansion	Sharing best practice and intra- learning	Members begin to meet regularly on an informal basis to discuss their own projects, share challenges and solutions ***"Thank you for providing this resource"*** ***"Welcome to the gang"***
Transformation	Co-production of knowledge	Delivering a research symposium session encouraging other early researchers to form informal supportive groups. ***"I hope there's more opportunities to get together"***
Renewal	Collaboration Knowledge dissemination	Writing academic articles together. ***"That was more fun than I expected"***

Source: Based on Zheng et al., 2023

The findings of Lahenuis (2012) largely align with the experiences of this informal CoP in that it came together for scholarly development, peer support, friendship, and a sense of belonging to a community to overcome isolation. Also, having an academic staff member in the community at the early stage of formation is beneficial (Devenish et al., 2009, cited in Lahenuis, 2012).

Engagement in groups can provide a strong social support. It enhances academic ventures, speeds completion, prepares participants for further progression in academia and their identity can develop in a critical but safe space (Tyndall et al., 2019). A desire for these to be prominent in doctoral programmes is evident and, alongside this case study, confirms that such communities are effective in combatting loneliness, attrition and providing safe spaces for practical, personal and identity development (Tyndall et al., 2019).

5.3. Distance, Identity & Belonging

The conveying of complex ideas, personalities and personal feelings were accomplished using technology, evidenced by Student B saying, "*Connect me from a distance*". Virtual convenience and flexibility were welcomed as the commute to campus for taught workshops was eliminated, particularly so for the group member living in Germany. However, this resulted in less connection and camaraderie with the wider module group; the informal CoP's two most recent additions had not had the same group cohesive experience as the original four as no CoP was established by their mini formal group at the taught stage.

Networking between individuals, mutual prior experience of the university and the caring nature of the supervisor impacted on the identities of individuals with some initial recognition of the CoP's "*technological whiz kid*", another as the "*organiser*" and another as the "*technical writer/editor"* (Salimi & Banitalebi, 2023). Identity is associated with participation in communities (Goode, 2010) and informal discourse helped CoP members evolve their new professional and sometimes personal selves in a safe and supportive space. Identity-wise, the doctoral journey can be confusing, especially as mature part-time students, with responsibilities as professional employees elsewhere, and as individuals, trying to establish themselves in an academic sphere. The contribution of the context is immense (Baker & Lucatta, 2010) and it is easy to see how group members may form multiple identities as they combine study, family, caring and work commitments. As almost all early contact was online, here, the CoP members did not have to differentiate, transition, and adjust from the classroom to the virtual context (Salimi & Banitalebi, 2023), making coalescence easier.

The struggle to remain focused and engaged is demonstrated by Student A stating, "*Without the good humour and encouragement of this group I don't know if I would have made it this far*". Greener (2021) identifies that isolation at doctoral level for Business and Management students can lead to attrition. Williams (2019) found that even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, a quarter of post graduate students considered withdrawing from their courses, highlighting that additional contact and support contributes to student wellbeing. Greener (2021) states over a third of students seek support with depression and anxiety, suggesting that institutional support is essential for student wellbeing beyond taught programme elements. The informal CoP finally met in person in February 2023, prompted by a conference resulting in a social evening together. A second social event took place before Christmas 2023, but distance prevented another member's attendance. This case study CoP maintains a supportive environment, demonstrating that SBT can occur in a remote learning environment if the social relationships are close, rich, and maintained through digital and virtual forums (Beckes & Sbarra, 2022).

Engaging in *academic* learning alters our self-perceptions (Packer & Giocoechea, 2000) and CoP participation engenders a sense of belonging (Botelho de Magalhães et al., 2019), particularly if a student is an active participant in a discussion group (Seyri & Rezazee, 2022). Member C said, "*It's a slog and feels a bit lonely at times",* demonstrating that a like-minded

community provides reassurance on the one side, and a sounding board on the other has a reassuring effect; member D responded "*Well, don't forget we're always here if you need a nudge."* Even if no CoP member can actively problem solve, the presence of '*someone else*' being there can alleviate negative feelings.

The power of social connections here was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, and this restricted ways of communicating, strong and well-established social connections drive towards higher capabilities of the individual and regulate IQ performance, and drive motivation (Marler et al., 2021). Inclusivity and belonging are important to maintain focus, wellbeing, and a sense of connection. Individuals are adopting the motivations and goals stated by others within the group, emphasizing the phenomena of the mechanics of social coordination (Bacon, 2023).

5.4 Fun and Joy

Making the doctoral research enjoyable, maintaining momentum, and deriving satisfaction can be highly challenging. While Davis et al. (1992) describe that enjoyment can be defined as an activity that provides pleasure, regardless of the results, working on research part-time, while juggling various prosaic activities, requires a great deal of motivation sparked seemingly out of thin air which can make finding the pleasure sometimes challenging. Pe-Than et al. (2014) emphasise that autonomy, competence, and relatedness can drive enjoyment. Relatedness is represented in this CoP as being connected to other individuals, and research activity in this CoP's case (Peng et al., 2012).

The group achieved enjoyment, one of the ingredients of joy which can potentially be identified as a key aspect in making this CoP successful and functional (Pe-Than et al., 2014). Moreover, perceived autonomy contributed to intrinsic motivation, which supports the process of research and learning of the individuals, supporting basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Humour can help with stress and tension relief, as evidenced in less formal WhatsApp discussions among informal CoP members. These joyful interactions, particularly at times of stress, may also be identified as a coping mechanism, whilst increasing resilience (Kim & Plester, 2021). Messages ridiculing our doctoral research journey, and laughing at our mistakes and shortcomings bring a sense of emotional regulation and perspective which can be described colloquially as "keep calm and carry on".

5.5. Study Limitations

This paper has focused on a small-scale study of one small informal CoP of four part-time doctoral students who are also the authors of this paper, along with their supervisor. It was based on our immediate informal reactions and thoughts, captured in verbal and written discussion amongst the informal CoP members. Scale of study, data collection and analysis, and risk of bias, minimise generalisability.

6. Conclusion

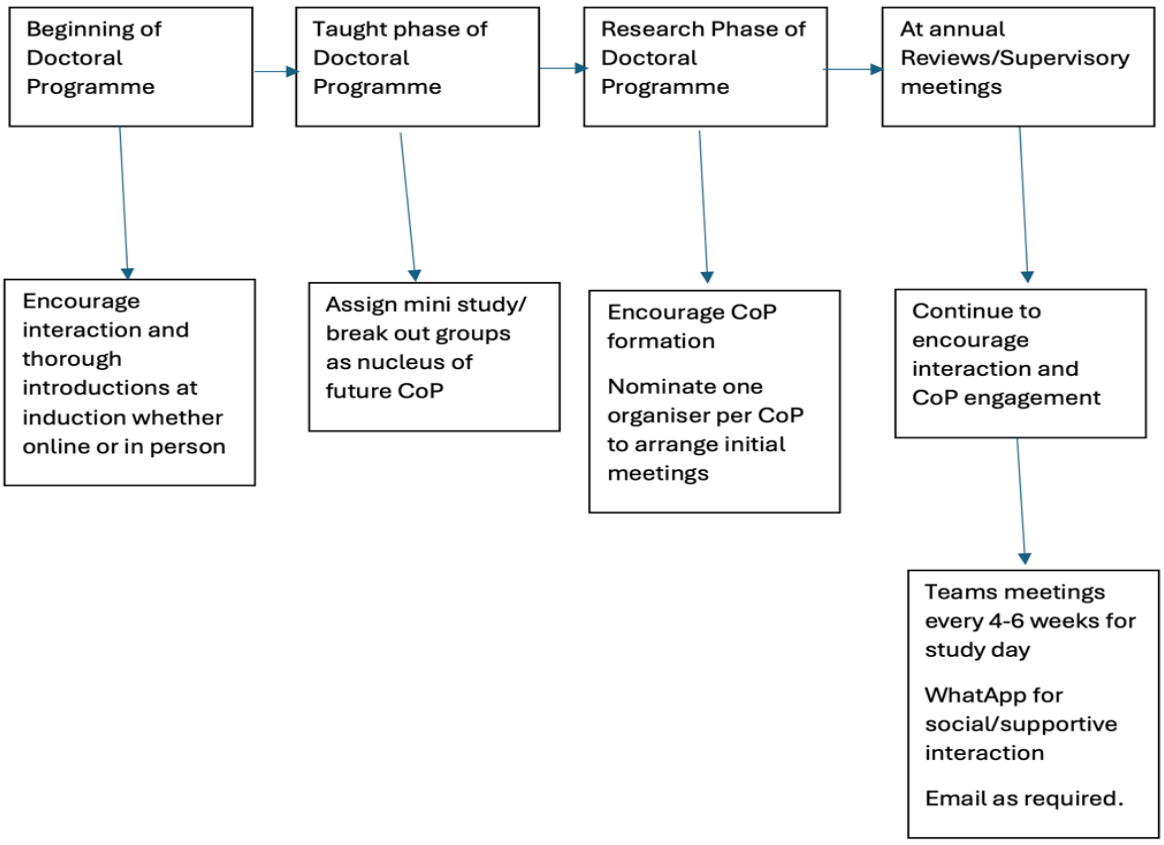
This study concurs with the views of Lahenius (2012) and Subedi *et al.* (2022) in that engaging in peer support has a positive effect on the experience of, in this instance, part-time doctoral students and therefore promotes their likelihood of success. The results support the notion that engaging in a CoP is a positive experience and should be encouraged. Lee et al. (2015) described CoP as a possible mechanism for improving knowledge sharing and whilst web

technology had not increased the intensity of participation in CoP, overall, there was evidence of individual benefit from CoP participation. This informal CoP's experiences thus far conform to a recent CoP lifecycle (Zheng et al., 2023). The study builds upon the extant literature, specifically the works of Vacek et al. (2021) and Carson and Nicklasson (2023) by offering valuable insights into the real-world experiences of professional doctoral students who have created a digital CoP as they have been completing their studies at a UK Business School.

The challenges of CoP participation might include overcoming personal differences and the time and commitment to maintain contribution. Possible drawbacks of not finding a CoP include isolation and foregone opportunities.

Although the findings here are limited, this study still evidences this case study informal CoP has worked for the individuals concerned and that grouping for social solidarity can contribute to continued engagement, fun and student wellbeing, whilst hopefully avoiding the common contemplation of leaving doctoral programmes (Williams, 2019). Members here remain engaged, and the initiative continues to provide the essential missing elements outside of taught study of ongoing support, friendship, joy, fun and an essential source of humour for all involved. Given this informal CoP's positive experience, the conceptual model in Figure 1. is offered as a guide for doctoral programme faculties and students to promote a safe space to encourage wellbeing and success.

FIGURE 1. CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR DOCTORAL COP



Source: Own compilation

Participation in this informal CoP is having a positive effect on the authors' doctoral learning experience, has deterred attrition, and could act as a beneficial model for other doctoral students or faculties to promote friendship, camaraderie, resilience, joy, and completion. Formal small group formation at doctoral programme induction phase, followed by programme leaders and supervisors' encouragement of students to organise their own regular study days and use of social channels, may have a profound impact on overall success. Application and adaptation of this doctoral CoP model could form the basis of future research.

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Corresponding Author

The corresponding author for this manuscript is Jan Jones who can be contacted by email via jan.jones@chester.ac.uk.

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Hungarian EFL Students' Perspectives on Global Competence Development in a Thematic Language Course

Rita Divéki

ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9342-7219

Eszter Lili Harangozó

ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9072-3594

Abstract

In today's increasingly complex world, education must equip students to become engaged, globally competent citizens, who can solve both local and global issues and are ready to face the challenges of the 21st century. The goal of global competence is to address these demands by strengthening the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes: a globally competent student can examine issues of global significance, understand other people's perspectives, engage in appropriate and effective interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds, and act for collective well-being and sustainable development. In this framework, this case study aims to explore how a thematic language development seminar focussing on global content can contribute to developing second-year EFL students' global competence and its perceived effectiveness. One group of students (N=18) from a prestigious Hungarian university was involved in the study, instructed by the first author. Data was collected over the course of the Spring 2023 semester from multiple data sources: student reflections after each thematic lesson, a beginning-of-the-term feedback sheet, an end-of-the-term feedback sheet, weekly student reflections, observation notes (by the second author) and reflective journals (by the first author). The findings emerging from this qualitative inquiry suggest that the students were satisfied with the course overall and could effectively gauge which global and language skills they developed during the course. These findings imply that designing courses with dual aims is both feasible and worthwhile, and with the help of regular reflection exercises, the students can be made aware of the development of their skills, leading to increased global awareness and satisfaction with the course.

***Keywords/key phrases*:** global citizenship, global competence, case study, English as a foreign language, teacher education

1. Introduction

In this era of global interconnectedness and rapid change, education faces the challenge of equipping students to navigate complex local and global issues while readying them for the demands of an ever-changing job market (UNESCO, 2016). This imperative has brought the concept of global competence to the forefront of educational discourse. Global competence encompasses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for students to examine global issues, understand diverse perspectives, interact effectively across cultures, and act for collective well-being and sustainable development (OECD, 2018).

Despite the efforts of several organisations (OECD, UNESCO, Global Education Network Europe), the implementation of global education and thus the development of global competence is still in its rudimentary stages in several countries. The challenges with implementation are further amplified in contexts where global education is only marginally present in formal curricula and Hungary, the focus of this study, currently lacks an "accredited formal global education curriculum" (CONCORD, 2018, p. 72). Furthermore, the prevailing educational culture in Hungary is characterised by a misconception that political discourse should be excluded from academic settings (Hunyadi & Wessenauer, 2016). Nevertheless, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study on global competence (OECD, 2020) corroborated that Hungary faces significant challenges in integrating global dimensions into its education system: Fifteen-year-old students demonstrated low proficiency in questions examining global, local, and intercultural issues, and scored significantly below the OECD average in areas assessing attitudes towards immigrants and perceptions of agency regarding global issues.

In this context, it is paramount to explore pedagogical strategies that enable teachers to successfully develop their students' global competence, thereby preparing them for real-world scenarios. This study investigates the potential of integrating global content into language education to develop global competence among university students. Specifically, it examines a thematic language development seminar at a prestigious Hungarian university, employing a case study design, to explore its effectiveness in enhancing students' global competence alongside their language skills from the students' perspectives.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Skills Needed for Thriving in a Globalised World

Due to the unpredictable nature of the job market, to make university studies relevant, university teachers must first develop their students' work-related, cognitive, and transferable skills, enabling them to use these abilities across a variety of work environments; and second, they should encourage the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to face the challenges of our time (UNESCO, 2016). The recent emphasis on skill development became evident in the popularisation of the term "21st-century skills" and the European Commission's (2022) declaration of 2023 as the European Year of Skills. There is currently no generally accepted comprehensive framework of the skills needed to thrive in the 21st century, despite the efforts of many authors and institutions (Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills - Griffin & Care, 2015; Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2015), and given the unpredictability of the future and the length of a century, developing such a framework could be in vain. A more pragmatic approach focuses on present-day employer expectations and current issues to address near-future challenges effectively. For instance, the

World Economic Forum (2020) identified eight essential characteristics of educational experiences and content that might identify high-quality learning throughout the Fourth Industrial Revolution, also known as **Education 4.0**:

a) Global citizenship skills.
b) Innovation and creativity skills.
c) Technology skills.
d) Interpersonal skills.
e) Personalised and self-paced learning.
f) Accessible and inclusive learning.
g) Problem-based and collaborative learning.
h) Lifelong and student-driven learning.

Considering these skills and characteristics can help tutors design more relevant and useful courses. Quality education in the first decades of the 21st century must "develop the skills, values and attitudes that enable citizens to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, make informed decisions, and respond to local and global challenges" (UNESCO, 2018, p. 1), according to the Fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4). Therefore, it is not surprising to find global citizenship skills at the top of this list. What is meant by global citizenship education and what skills are needed for being a global citizen are discussed in the following section.

2.2. Global Citizenship Education and Global Competence

Global education, an umbrella term which encompasses human rights education, education for sustainable development and global citizenship education, is defined by GENE as "education that enables people to reflect critically on the world and their place in it; to open their eyes, hearts and minds to the reality of the world at local and global level" (2022, p. 3). Global education has been on the agenda in Europe since the 1980s, and it has gained momentum in several waves, marked by numerous declarations and policy documents.

The United Nations made the development of global citizens one of its goals worldwide (UNESCO, 2014), marking the beginning of a new chapter in the promotion of global education. UNESCO (2014) created a complex educational framework called **Global Citizenship Education** (GCED), which "aims to empower learners to engage and assume active roles, both locally and globally, to face and resolve global challenges and ultimately to become proactive contributors to a more just, peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable world" (p. 15). GCED has widely influenced educational systems all over the world, and the global perspective is markedly present in the core curriculum in many countries, with explicit goals.

The importance of GCED was further highlighted when in 2018, OECD PISA started measuring students' **global competence**. A globally competent individual is seen as someone who has knowledge and understanding about the world and other cultures, has the skills to understand the world and take action, has the attitudes of openness and respect for people from different backgrounds, and who strives to value human dignity and diversity (OECD, 2018). Table 1 presents the components of global competence in more detail.

TABLE 1. THE COMPONENTS OF GLOBAL COMPETENCE

Knowledge	Skills	Attitudes and Values
Knowledge about environmental sustainability Knowledge of global issues Knowledge about culture and intercultural relations Knowledge about socio-economic development and interdependence Knowledge about global institutions, conflicts, and human rights	Reasoning with information Communicating effectively and respectfully Perspective-taking Conflict management and resolution Adaptability	Openness towards people from different backgrounds Respect Global mindedness Valuing human dignity and diversity

Source: based on OECD, 2018

The work to implement GCED in every country and at all levels of education is ongoing. GENE launched the European Declaration on Global Education to 2050 in 2022, providing evidence of continued dedication and further impetus for implementation.

2.3. Global Citizenship in English Language Teaching – Rationale and Empirical Background

The global dimension of education has long been present in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom and will continue to have a place in it for several reasons. Given that English is the international language, a global lingua franca, the main aim of English language teaching (ELT) is to prepare students for international dialogue with people from different backgrounds (Lütge et al., 2023; Starkey, 2023). Also, the current teaching paradigm, post-communicative language teaching, favours task and content-based teaching, so it easily lends itself to the incorporation of global topics and social skills (Lightbown, 2013; Starkey, 2023). Moreover, students, in general, seem to be interested in global issues (Oxfam, 2018) and if they are engaged in what they are doing in class, they can be more easily motivated to learn the language (Basarir & Sari, 2022; Lightbown, 2013). In many countries, these global, local, and intercultural issues are in the curriculum, and students are expected to be able to form and express opinions about them in language proficiency examinations (Oxfam, 2018). Most importantly, while dealing with real-life issues, students can develop their transversal competencies and their four basic language skills at the same time (Starkey, 2023).

Even though the literature abounds in articles on the importance of implementing GCED into ELT (Babic et al., 2022; Lütge et al., 2023; Wu, 2019), and the analysis of global themes in ELT textbooks (Ait-Bouzid, 2020; Akbana & Yavuz, 2022), to date, a limited number of publications has presented classroom research and case studies. From such empirical studies (Basarir & Sari, 2022; Bayraktar Balkir 2021; Divéki, 2024; Gimenez et al., 2011; Nelson, 2015; Tekin, 2011) it becomes apparent that students, in general, acknowledge the importance of dealing with global topics in EFL classes and they mostly view their in-class treatment beneficial for developing their competencies. Many participating students in the aforementioned studies claimed that they had developed their knowledge and understanding of the issues and effectively developed their global skills. They also realised that they had developed their values and attitudes (i.e., cultivated their sense of identity, became more committed to social justice, learned to value and respect diversity and started to believe that they could contribute to a better world) while dealing with global content. It is, however, crucial

to continue to write about good practices of implementing GCED to further inspire teachers to bring such issues into their classes. Furthermore, it is important to reveal the students' perspectives with the intention of further improving such courses to provide students with memorable and useful learning experiences.

3. Research Design and Methods

3.1. Research Questions

The study aimed to explore the participants' perceptions of a thematic language development course focusing on global issues, and the knowledge, skills, and attitudes it developed. To guide the authors' enquiries, the following research questions were formulated:

1. In the participants' views, what aspects of their global competence did they develop in a thematic language development seminar?
2. In the participants' views, how did the course and the activities contribute to developing their global competence?
3. What are the students' views of a thematic language development seminar focusing on global issues?

3.2. The Context of the Study

The study was conducted in Spring 2023 at a prestigious university in Budapest, in a thematic language development course run by the Department of Language Pedagogy. The course was instructed by the first author and observed by the second author. The course was both attended by students majoring in English studies and students attending the undivided teacher training programme in teaching English as a foreign language. The course is advertised for second-year students who have already passed a B2+ level proficiency exam. The instructors have considerable freedom in designing their course: while the main aim is developing students' overall language skills, the tutors may centre their lessons around any theme. The first author chose to design a course revolving around global issues to raise the students' social and global awareness while developing their language skills, mainly focusing on their speaking and vocabulary skills. The characteristics of Education 4.0 and the Global Competence framework also guided the instructor-researcher in the course design.

Given that the course was not completely new, the instructor already had a set of topics she intended to include, and worksheets for these topics had been created. During the first lesson though, the students themselves were also asked to choose the topics for discussion through a Mentimeter questionnaire. Overall, except for two (*bullying and free speech vs. hate speech*), they chose the same topics the students in the previous year had: *food waste, plastic waste, waste in the fashion industry, sex education,* and *gender equality*. The course was designed based on the flipped classroom principle: every week, the students received a worksheet on the learning management system (MS Teams) which they needed to fill in before the next lesson. These worksheets were based on videos and included comprehension and reflection questions, along with vocabulary development exercises and occasional research tasks. During the lessons, the questions from the worksheets were discussed in pairs or smaller groups, thereby maximising speaking time. After each lesson, the students were asked to write a reflection on MS Teams, in which they reflected on the tasks in the lesson and the handout and pondered

whether these exercises had deepened their understanding of the topic or had prompted them to change their mindset about these issues.

Apart from these tasks, the students were required to create two presentations. One was a joint presentation with two other group members: the trios could choose any one of the topics at the beginning of the semester and prepare a 15-minute-long presentation on the issue at hand, to introduce the topic with statistics and shocking facts. To create effective presentations, the students had to work together, research the chosen topics, and synthesise their findings in a visually appealing short presentation. The other presentation was the product of a project they could either undertake alone or in smaller groups. Throughout the semester, the students were asked to perform an act of social responsibility, document it, and present what they did in the final lesson. The instructor posted a few suggestions about such activities on MS Teams, but the students were free to choose their projects. Some students did volunteer work, e.g., helped sick children study, while others did random acts of kindness, e.g., helped old neighbours garden, or picked up trash in the neighbourhood. Some, however, decided to raise awareness of pressing issues: one group put out free sanitary products in the ladies toilet at the department to raise awareness of period poverty, one set up a TikTok channel and created content about solutions to food waste, and one distributed flyers at the university about the issue of burnout. The purpose of this activity was to raise students' social awareness and make them more engaged global citizens.

The students were assessed based on the completion of these activities and the two vocabulary tests they took (mid-term test and end-term test). The course schedule, along with the handouts created for the course can be accessed via the first author's website (https://shorturl.at/FFWD9).

3.3. The Participants

The participants of the study consisted of the students enrolled (N=18) in the instructor's thematic language development course in Spring 2023, including one male and 17 female students. The students were informed at the beginning of the course about data collection and their informed consent was sought for their assignments to be used for research purposes. To guarantee anonymous participation, everyone received a pseudonym (Student 1 – Student 18). After each direct quote or recurrent theme in the results section, the students are either marked as Student 1 or #1. The students had the opportunity to pull out of the study at any time. They were asked once again at the end of the course, and one student (Student 4) decided not to participate.

3.4. Tools and Methods of Data Collection

Data was collected during the semester, in the 10 sessions the group spent together. At the beginning of the semester, the students filled in a (1) *beginning-of-the-term feedback sheet* centred around the following topics: their news consumption habits, their ideas of being a global citizen, and their perceived knowledge of the topics they had chosen for the course. Each week, part of their assignment was to write a (2) *reflection* on the activities they had done in class, including what they had learned about the issues and whether they had experienced any changes in their mindset. Each student had to submit seven reflections during the semester, nevertheless, some students missed a few and one student pulled out of the study. Overall, 82 entries were subjected to analysis. After each class, the instructor-researcher also wrote a (3) *reflective journal* entry (N=10), which documented the classes from the teacher's perspective and included notes about notable moments during the course and indications of problematic

activities. To include another perspective, the co-author observed each class and created unstructured (4) *observation notes* (N=10), primarily focussing on student engagement and memorable moments. Finally, the students were asked to fill in an (5) *end-of-the-term feedback sheet*, enquiring into the skills they developed, the knowledge they acquired, and the activities they liked the most.

3.5. Methods of Data Analysis and the Quality Criteria of Research

The open-ended questionnaire data, the after-class reflections, the observations, and the reflective journal entries were all analysed manually due to the low number of instances using the method of thematic content analysis (Xu & Zammit, 2020). Since the article presents a case study with a low number of participants, the results are not intended to be generalisable, only potentially transferable to other contexts.

The fact that the students participated in a research project led by their teacher may have resulted in some subjectivity (Mackey & Gass, 2005), and they may have given higher scores on the feedback form to please the first author. The Hawthorne effect (Mackey & Gass, 2005) could have also influenced the results: the fact that an observer was present may have positively affected the students' work ethics. Even if these issues are inherent to classroom research, the authors took the necessary precautions to mitigate these effects. The multiple instruments and perspectives allowed for triangulation, enhancing the credibility of the study (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The instructor-researcher's close familiarity with the group and the materials proved to be an asset as it provided a deep perspective into the case, nevertheless, the co-author's fresh perspective and objectivity also benefitted the data analysis process. To avoid researcher bias, the two authors' codes were compared and negotiated.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Students' Views on the Aspects of Global Competence Developed during the Course

The beginning-of-the-term feedback via 5-point Likert scales and open-ended questions helped the researchers establish the students' profiles. They reported regular news consumption, primarily through social media and dedicated national and international news platforms. When asked *To what extent do you consider yourself up-to-date with current events in the world?* (1 = not at all; 5 = absolutely), they replied with a mean of 3.19 (SD = .75), and to the question *To what extent do you consider yourself up-to-date with current events in Hungary?*, with a mean of 3.44 (SD = 1.03), meaning that they are relatively up-to-date with what is happening around them but they are slightly more aware of the events in Hungary. Students generally identified as global citizens (M = 3.5, SD = .82), despite perceiving limited support from secondary education in this development (M = 2.5, SD = 1.03) (which underscored the findings of the PISA Study – OECD, 2020).

At the beginning of the semester, they were asked to assess their knowledge about the selected global issues for the course. Table 2 shows the mean values and standard deviations for both the global and local contexts.

TABLE 2. STUDENTS' KNOWLEDGE OF THE SELECTED ISSUES (SELF-ASSESSMENT)

The issue	Global context		Local context	
	M	SD	M	SD
Gender Equality	4.19	.66	4.13	.96
Plastic Pollution	4.00	.63	3.31	.87
Bullying	3.94	.77	3.69	1.01
Food Waste	3.81	.83	3.44	1.03
Sex Education	3.69	0.79	3.69	1.01
Waste in the Fashion Industry	3.69	1.08	3.00	1.10
Hate Speech and Censorship	3.38	.81	3.94	.99

Source: own calculations

Given the low number of participants, drawing statistical comparisons from this data might not be particularly fruitful; nevertheless, it becomes apparent from the table that the students were slightly more familiar with plastic pollution and gender equality than with the other topics on the list. This can be explained by the fact that these are rather topical issues both on social media and in school, and in many cases, they are part of language examination topics.

In their reflections, most students commented that by discussing these topics they became more knowledgeable about them. They elaborated by stating that they became aware of the extent (#2, #3, #5, #6, #9, #10, #12, #13, #14, #16, #17) and the complexity (#2, #6, #18) of the issues. In Student 9's words on fashion waste: "this was one of those topics which I didn't have previous knowledge about, and I also didn't think about the enormous impact it has on our planet and our environment". Student 17 was fascinated by "the extreme numbers of how much food goes to waste each year", and Student 13 "realised the extent of the problem worldwide". They seemed rather satisfied by the fact that they learnt about the solutions to these problems (#1, #2, #3, #6, #8, #13, #14) and they discovered local and personal connections, i.e., the relevance (#1, #3, #5, #6, #8, #11, #18) of these topics.

Considering the skills, they appreciated that they managed to engage with different perspectives (#2, #3, #5, #6, #7, #8, #9, #11, #14, #15, #16, #17, #18) during the course, both by watching the assigned videos and discussing the issues with their group mates. For instance, in the lesson on sex education, Student 5 truly enjoyed the opinion line task, where they could line up according to how much they agreed with a given statement, because "it made [her] realise how differently [they] think about [the topic]." Student 6 saw it similarly:

> I found it beneficial that we could get to know our classmates' opinions on this topic through different questions, and due to the form of the activity, I could exchange experiences and thoughts about the issue with many people with diverse ideas.

Student 7 mused about an activity connected to gender equality and how it made her see an issue (more swear words connected to women than men) in a different light: "I never thought about it before and I am glad I can see it from a new perspective." The reflections also highlighted that the students learnt how to reason with information. Some students (#5, #6, #10, #11, #13, #15) commented that the presentation assignment encouraged them to delve deep into these issues, research data and present it comprehensibly, considering multiple sides.

Another skill many students reflected on was the ability to take action (#1, #2, #3, #6, #12, #13, #14, #15, #16, #18). In their reflections, they elaborated on their responsibility to make a change

in their own lives by reading up on the topics and paying more attention to their activities in future. The following quotes capture the students' realisations of their roles in tackling the problems and some pledges for future action:

a) "We could all see that there are many ways to tackle this problem with a little bit of planning, using applications, such as Munch, taking responsibility for our actions and realising that every little step could make a difference." (#2 on food waste)

b) "I came to the realisation that even though I tried to do my best not to waste so much food; that is not enough, and I could do more. I learnt many ideas, like buying in bulk, organising food based on expiry date, composting or donating. I will definitely use these techniques to make less waste of food." (#3 on food waste)

c) "Overall, since I learnt about food waste, I've been trying my very best to take our biodegradable trash to a communal composting spot just a street away from our apartment. It might not make the biggest difference, but I know that every little action counts." (#9 on food waste)

d) "Since I've learnt how beach and waterfront cleanups actually help a lot, I would feel more useful participating in a program like this than before. I also feel an inclination to get into activism." (#13 on plastic pollution)

e) "I think it's really important to inform others about the circumstances their garments are made in and I will definitely encourage others not to shop from fast fashion [retailers]." (#16 on fashion pollution)

Some students commented on changes in their attitudes following the discussions. They reported an increased awareness of the issues and greater open-mindedness about the solutions to these problems. They acknowledged their role in global challenges and recognised the impact of small-scale actions.

Overall, based on the students' reflections, one can justifiably conclude that they effectively developed some aspects of their global competence: their knowledge about different global issues, their skills of taking perspectives, arguing with information and taking action towards well-being and sustainable development, and their attitudes of global mindedness (OECD, 2018).

4.2. The Students' Views on the Ways the Course Contributed to Developing Their Global Competence

In their reflections, the students highlighted several course components which helped them develop their global competence. One such aspect was the handout (#1, #2, #3, #6, #8, #10, #11, #12) that they needed to fill in at home before each lesson. Overall, the students appreciated that the videos they had to watch were informative and at times, shocking; and that the questions they had to answer were thought-provoking and open-ended. Another recurring theme was the group (#1, #2, #3, #6, #8, #9, #11, #18) itself. At the beginning of the semester, significant effort was invested in creating a safe environment, facilitating student bonding and open expression. The students commented that this safe space helped them open up and they enjoyed working with people with slightly different perspectives on these problems. The group atmosphere was also noted in the end-of-the-term feedback:

a) “Everyone could express their opinion in a constructive environment. It is always nice to be part of a community where people are curious about each other and can discuss their ideas freely.” (#11)

b) “I felt very comfortable, there was no judgment in the group - or at least I didn't feel it. The others were open-minded and they were not afraid to share their thoughts.” (#14)

c) “I found my classmates to be quite nice and accepting, sharing their knowledge about the topics and discussing their personal views and experiences openly. The general atmosphere was very trusting and empathetic, which is essential when one wants to see where the other is coming from in a conversation.” (#18)

Finally, the reflections indicate that the students found several interactive, hands-on activities particularly effective in developing their global competence:

a) The opinion line activity (#2, #3, #5, #6, #7, #9, #11, #15) facilitated spatial representation of opinions on sex education, allowing students to gauge the slight differences in opinion.

b) The gallery walk activity (#2, #5, #6, #8, #9, #10, #11, #15) provided the students with different sources connected to fashion waste, promoting in-depth discussions in pairs.

c) The station tasks activity (#2, #6, #7, #8, #9, #11, #13, #14, #17) on gender equality enabled varied small-group discussions across different aspects of the topic.

d) The put-a-finger-down activity (#6, #7, #9, #11, #14), inspired by a TikTok challenge, highlighted shared experiences of gender-based discrimination, eliciting strong emotional responses and nurturing empathic responses.

e) The role-play (#2, #5, #6, #9, #11) on bullying fostered empathy by encouraging students to step into the shoes of different characters.

f) The presentations on relevant issues (#1, #5, #6, #7, #8, #10, #11, #13, #14, #15, #18) enhanced research, synthesis, and information-sharing skills, both as listeners and creators.

The observation notes and the first author’s reflective journal corroborated high student engagement during these activities. However, whole-class feedback sessions were notably less enthusiastic, suggesting difficulties in whole-class expression. Additionally, while students enjoyed creating presentations, their delivery often appeared unpractised. Therefore, it would be worth putting more emphasis on encouraging students to speak in front of a whole group, which is particularly crucial for aspiring teachers in this cohort.

4.3. The Students’ Views on the Course

Based on their engagement during the course (documented in the observations and reflective journal) and their end-of-the-term feedback, it is reasonable to assert that most students had positive views of the course. They found that it contributed to developing their language skills, it made them more confident speakers, and helped them expand their vocabulary as well.

a) “Now I feel more confident in speaking in front of others, and I can express my opinions about different matters more effectively.” (#6)

b) “I have limited opportunities to have a conversation about such serious and important topics, so I think I'm more confident in sharing my opinion in general.” (#14)

c) “I learned many new words and expressions that I can use in the future.” (#3)

d) "During this course, I have learnt a lot of very useful terms, and the best part is that I can actually use them in essays, tests, or elsewhere, as they are useful." (#7)

As highlighted in the previous section, they enjoyed most of the activities and believed they led to developing their knowledge and understanding of global issues. Nevertheless, there seem to have been some components of the course some students did not necessarily enjoy: Student 14, for example, commented that she found some words and the activities that accompanied them too difficult, and Student 8 did not fancy writing reflections after each thematic lesson. Even though the reflections were not entirely popular (some students only completed 1-2 out of 7), those students who wrote them week by week had the chance to use the new vocabulary in context and reflect on their skills development at the same time.

Finally, to assess students' views on the course, it seems apposite to reveal how they answered the question: *Did the course – in any respect – contribute to you becoming a (better) global citizen?* All the students who filled in the end-of-the-term feedback (N = 13) agreed that the course helped them in various ways. In Student 6's words, "through broadening my knowledge regarding the environmental and societal issues, my opinion has changed about some of the problems, and because of this, now I feel that my mindset and way of thinking have improved". Student 14 saw it similarly and added that she developed her ability to take action: "I am now more aware of the society and global changes and things that are happening around me, and I have now more courage to speak up". Finally, Student 11 realised the importance of these discussions for teacher trainees: "I have realised how important these issues are, and while elaborating on them I started implementing ideas into my daily routine. And I am going to spread the importance of talking about global issues once I become a teacher."

4.4. Discussion of the Results

The results presented in 4.1. reveal an increased knowledge, awareness and understanding of global issues, which was an important goal when designing the course. These results underscore the importance of integrating real-life issues into the curriculum for awareness-raising purposes in line with findings from previous research (Basarir & Sari, 2022; Bayraktar Balkir, 2021; Divéki, 2024; Gimenez et al., 2011; Nelson, 2015; Tekin, 2011). As can be seen from the above, the incorporation of global issues with the right methodology could also entail the development of global skills and attitudes. The participants reported developing critical skills, such as perspective-taking (including empathy), argumentation and taking action, similar to students participating in previous studies (Divéki, 2024; Gimenez et al., 2011; Nelson, 2015; van Melle & Ferreira, 2022). It was, however, rather surprising that the students did not mention developing their critical thinking skills in their reflections, even though through reflecting on their development, they could have taken a critical perspective. Through the course, however, the students commented on becoming more global-minded and believing that making small changes in their lives counts in the grand scheme of things, similar to other researchers' students (Gimenez et al., 2011; Nelson, 2015, van Melle & Ferreira, 2022).

Based on the results presented in 4.2., the various interactive, student-centred activities (e.g., opinion line, gallery walk, role-play) turned out to be effective in engaging students and fostering global competence. While these activities enhanced the learning environment, their successful implementation depended on the initial establishment of a safe space through deliberate group formation tasks and the setting of clear ground rules. The main benefit of using these collaborative activities lies in their dual potential of improving global competence and

language skills, particularly speaking confidence (effective and respectful communication is an important subskill of global competence – OECD, 2018; Starkey, 2023). As pointed out above, however, it became clear from the observations that students prefer expressing themselves in smaller groups to speaking in front of other students. In future research endeavours, it would be thus beneficial to explore what activities could encourage them to step out of their comfort zones and confidently reveal their opinion in a whole class setting as well.

As presented in 4.3., overall, the students had positive experiences with the course: they enjoyed the activities and believed it was conducive to developing both their language and global skills. Even though the students signed up for a thematic language development seminar with language aims only at the beginning of the semester, the fact that they developed skills that will be useful for them in other aspects of life observably increased their satisfaction with the course. The feedback and the weekly reflection tasks also encouraged them to ponder the development of these skills, making them more aware global citizens.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the extent to which a thematic language development seminar focussing on global content can contribute to developing second-year university students' global competence and its perceived effectiveness. The findings suggest that integrating global issues into language education can effectively develop both language skills and global competence among university students.

The course successfully enhanced students' knowledge and awareness of global issues, corroborating previous research (Basarir & Sari, 2022; Bayraktar Balkir, 2021; Divéki, 2024; Gimenez et al., 2011; Nelson, 2015; Tekin, 2011). Students also reported developing global skills such as perspective-taking, argumentation, and the ability to take action, which are crucial components of global competence (OECD, 2018). Implementing interactive, student-centred activities proved particularly effective in engaging students and developing global competence. The students' positive responses to the course undergird the value of integrating global issues into language education. However, the study also revealed areas for improvement for future courses. Some students found certain aspects challenging, such as speaking in front of the whole class or completing regular reflections.

The study has several implications for both higher educational practice and policy. Language teachers should consider integrating global issues and competence development into language courses, to enhance both language skills and global awareness, preparing students more effectively for our unpredictable world. Nonetheless, as global education is a cross-curricular approach, other subject teachers could also assess their subjects and look for creative ways to integrate real-life problems to engage their students. For a potential long-term impact on education systems, it seems crucial to incorporate global education into teacher training programmes: future teachers should recognise the benefits of discussing global issues so that they become convinced to implement them in their own practice.

As for the pedagogical implications, the success of student-centred activities in this study implies that educators should prioritise such techniques in their teaching. This may require professional development opportunities to help teachers implement these activities effectively. The course material created by the first author, however, can help teachers include global topics in their classes: (https://shorturl.at/FFWD9). Finally, the role of reflections in promoting

awareness of skills development must be noted: while some students find the practice rather challenging, teachers should consider incorporating regular reflective exercises (probably with some scaffolding questions) into their courses to encourage meta-cognitive thinking. In the words of van Melle and Ferreira (2022, p. 15), there is an increasing need to develop "creative and curious learners who can think critically and analytically to become resilient in a changing world."

The limitations of this study include the small sample size, its focus on a single cohort at one university and the researchers' close involvement with the group in question. Future research could expand on these findings by investigating similar approaches across different educational contexts and with larger sample sizes, taught by non-researcher teachers.

In conclusion, this study provides evidence for the effectiveness of integrating global issues into language education to foster global competence. It suggests that carefully designed courses with dual aims of language and global skills development can effectively prepare students for an increasingly interconnected and unpredictable world. As one student aptly noted, recognising the importance of these discussions for future teachers, such courses can have a ripple effect, potentially influencing how the next generation of teachers approaches global issues in their own classrooms.

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Re-Thinking Teachers' Roles for One-to-One Teaching: The Hungarian Perspective

Gabriella Jenei
Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7224-2082

Ágnes Sváb
Kürt Alternative Secondary School, Hungary
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6965-4698

Anna Zólyomi
Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9280-5775

Abstract

While teacher training generally focuses on preparing trainees for teaching groups of students, during their careers teachers will face situations where they need to teach students in one-to-one situations. Private language teaching is a large, but often informal industry; therefore, its scale tends to be underestimated. The lack of research and teacher training in this field leads to clients (or learners) being misled easily by untrained tutors or people claiming to be professionals without any training in teaching. This review of the literature focuses on this vast, but largely abandoned area of language teaching to create a framework for the discussion of one-to-one teaching by clarifying the terminology with a focus on interpreting teachers' roles in one-to-one teaching based on the most popular English teacher training books in the Hungarian context. The implications of this review are relevant for any stakeholder involved in language teaching and learning. Within our theoretical framework, we have defined three main roles in three professional areas: instructors are course managers (course management), teachers (professional competencies), and supporters (social-psychological awareness and skills), being primarily responsible for course design, facilitating learning, and creating a supportive atmosphere, respectively. One-to-one teaching is unique and deserves not to be on the periphery of teacher training.

***Keywords*:** teacher roles, individual instruction, one-to-one teaching, professional development, personalised learning, theoretical framework

1. Introduction

According to internet-based surveys (Biró, 2020; Lannert & Sinka, 2009) on representative samples of Hungarian language teachers, it is safe to say that almost three-fourths of teachers (the majority being language teachers) are involved in teaching private students. Nevertheless, this aspect of teaching is generally not the topic of university or other teacher training programmes in Hungary. This is exactly why the authors have chosen to focus on teachers' roles in one-to-one teaching in the Hungarian context. It is difficult to find any programme that offers training specifically in teaching students one-to-one (e.g., a blended online course is offered by International House). Not only is there a lack of training in this area, but very little is known about this form of shadow education (Bray, 2007), whether it is supplementary to mainstream education or a form of adult education.

While this review aims for a general, broad overview of teachers' views of their roles as one-to-one teachers, the authors are fully aware that the underlying system is much more complex, with the interplay of an almost infinite number of variables that may influence teachers' roles and decisions in any given context. For the time being, it is important to be aware that in one-to-one situations, the teacher may have a variety of educational backgrounds, qualifications, and experience and the learners may also be of any age (from primary schooler to adult) and may bring to the lesson a variety of intentions and predispositions. They may be preparing for a professional presentation, a job interview, or a language exam or may need extra support as learners with special educational needs or language anxiety. Teaching may occur online or face-to-face in various circumstances ranging from an office, the learner's or the teacher's home, school to even a café. In all these situations the common denominator is – ideally – the expertise of the teacher, which guarantees conscious and careful management of a safe learning environment by adapting the methods, materials and personal reactions to the situation, none of which can be performed adequately without being professionally prepared.

In this paper, we will first describe the terminology for one-to-one teaching that we are using throughout the article. Next, we provide details on how we went about analysing teacher roles in this context including the three research focuses examined in this study. This is then followed by a general overview of the literature, after which we draw up the proposed framework for rethinking teacher roles in one-to-one teaching situations. In the conclusions, we summarise this framework and suggest avenues for further research.

1.1. Terminology

The terminology related to one-to-one teaching can be confusing: apart from one-to-one teaching, the terms private teaching or tutoring may be used to cover minor meaning variations. It is difficult to decide on the ideal term, especially as in everyday conversations, the more general term private teaching is the most frequent, both in British and American contexts based on Google n-gram plots (Davies, 2014) that is, on frequency counts based on millions of books written over the past five centuries. For this article, to stress the focus on the individual aspect compared to groups, the term 'one-to-one' teaching will be used. In this kind of teaching context, simply put, there are two people involved, one that is more knowledgeable about the subject (that is, concerning English as a Foreign or Second Language or the language taught) and another one who – for some reason – is in the position of wanting to – or having to – learn it. Maybe it is safe to refer to them as a private teacher and a private student, or teacher and student for the sake of simplicity and to distance it from pure coaching in this article.

In this paper, it will be assumed that a teacher is a person with at least a master's (MA) degree in teaching a foreign language, who educates people in a formal school or language school setting or works as a freelancer private teacher. Harmer (2015) noted that teachers can act as

"tutors to individuals" (p. 117), helping them, for example, in class or with individual writing - giving students "undivided attention to help them with their work" (p. 117), still, it can be argued that tutoring members of a group in or outside of class for a brief episode is different from planning and conducting a one-to-one course. A person may teach one-to-one with some teacher's qualification (e.g., CELTA, that is, Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) or without any teacher's qualification. Further research would be necessary to reveal the respective proportions and the discussion of whether or not teaching without a degree in a one-to-one setting is ethical is beyond the scope of this paper.

It should also be noted that language coaching is not the same as language teaching. A language coach is a person who has expertise in a specific language or languages and may have some background in teaching methodology, linguistics, or a related field. They may also have additional training or certification in coaching techniques and/or mental health, or psychology. While a teacher may also have these certifications and a coaching approach, what is relevant here is that teachers – as understood here – are those professionals who also hold a degree in teaching.

2. Method

This study aims to provide a framework for discussing and reframing one-to-one teachers' roles and responsibilities. This is necessary for further research in this field as roles discussed in the literature do not fully apply to the one-to-one context, the terms may be irrelevant, outdated or lacking when it comes to new technologies and approaches. Where relevant, the paper reaches back to teachers' shared background by first reviewing the literature used in teacher training in Hungary (Brown, 2015; Harmer, 2015; Scrivener, 2011; Ur, 2024), see Appendix A. We concentrate on the Hungarian context because this is a unique context in terms of language learning, and we have found no studies examining teacher roles in one-to-one teaching in this specific context. The perspectives from this review will be compared to the specific literature concerning one-to-one teaching (e.g., Wilberg, 1987; Wisniewska, 2010) and some new developments to reveal areas where special training would be required.

Research Focuses

1) Which of the teachers' roles identified through the review of the teacher training literature are meaningful in a one-to-one teaching situation and how?
2) What are teachers' additional roles in a one-to-one situation?
3) What implications can be formulated for one-to-one teaching based on the findings for language teachers, language learners and teacher training programmes?

First of all, the most relevant literature is scrutinised in line with the research focuses, and following this, the answers to the questions are presented in aggregate in the conclusion section. Based on the comparison of the literature on teachers' roles in the classroom and in one-to-one settings, three major areas emerge, and they align nicely with the main pillars of Scrivener's (2011) "enabler" (p. 18) role. "**The enabler**" encompasses the multifaceted role of the teacher as a professional who is able to "create the conditions that enable the students to learn for themselves", who "knows about the subject matter and about methodology" and is "confident enough to share control with the learners" (Scrivener, 2011, p. 18), and in the meantime, is responsive to learners' ideas and feelings and constantly adapts to them in planning, switching between methods and building an encouraging learning atmosphere.

The emerging three **areas of expertise that also apply to one-to-one teaching are**:

1) Course management
2) Professional competencies
3) Social-psychological awareness and skills

The first area, **course management** concerns the situational context, organisational procedures, technical and administrative duties and how much these are controlled by the teacher, the student and/or external factors. The second area includes the **professional competencies** that the teacher brings to the situation, including knowledge of teaching methodology, the language itself and a growth mindset to maintain and expand their knowledge and skills. The third one can be broadly described as the teacher's **social-psychological awareness** of themselves and the learner, (language-)learning related psychological factors **and skills** to overcome potential issues, and most importantly, the teaching approach and personal characteristics they need to establish a positive working relationship with the learner. After a general overview, teachers' roles will be discussed along these three main areas of knowledge, skills and competence.

3. A General Overview

A shared characteristic of teachers is that they bring their beliefs (views, conceptions, and perspectives) of their roles as teachers partly from their personal experience and partly from their shared backgrounds as trained professionals in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) and their professional practice (Borg, 2007). EFL teachers in Hungary in teacher training programmes not only have a shared cultural background but based on the requirements for the methodology final exam readings and topics (see Appendix A), it was concluded that there are three teacher training coursebooks used in almost all major universities and training programmes (editions may differ): Ur (2024), Harmer (2015), and Scrivener (2011). Therefore, first, these resources were consulted on the roles or functions of teachers (listed in Table 1.) even though these books focus on teaching groups of learners and contain little guidance for one-to-one teaching. While Brown (2015) is also among the most frequently used coursebooks for teachers, it does not have an explicit section on teachers' roles, though it does mention the teacher's role being mainly "facilitation of change and learning" (p. 90). We have chosen these three books as these seemed to be the most popular English teacher training materials used in the Hungarian context.

TABLE 1. LISTS OF TEACHERS' ROLES FROM ENGLISH TEACHER TRAINING MATERIALS

	English Teacher Training Materials		
	Ur (2024)	**Harmer (2015)**	**Scrivener (2011)**
Roles and functions	Instructor Activator Model Provider of feedback Supporter Assessor Manager Motivator	Controller Monitor and evidence-gatherer Prompter and editor Resource and tutor Organiser/task-setter Facilitator	Explainer (gives lectures and tasks) Involver (involves students by giving tasks, organises, and controls activities) Enabler (guide, counsellor or a resource of information)

Source: own compilation, based on Ur (2024, pp. 17–18), Harmer (2015, pp. 116–117), and Scrivener (2011, pp. 16–19)

Due to the overlapping meanings of these terms, it was necessary to deconstruct the meanings of these terms and based on their often-vague descriptions or definitions devise a new system (see Appendix B) to be able to build on existing terminology and find a way to adopt it (especially with larger-scale future research projects in mind, focusing on one-to-one teaching). The critical literature review process in this paper leads from roles as described in teacher training materials to what roles are required for one-to-one teaching, along with the elements of knowledge, competencies and skills required to fulfil these roles.

Further research was reviewed concerning potential roles for one-to-one instructional contexts. Examples of this literature include studies focusing on one-to-one instruction (e.g., Wilberg, 1987; Wisniewska, 2010) and language coaching (e.g., Kovács, 2022). The chapters of Wisniewska's (2010) book are centred around each of the five – mostly student-focussed – roles she identifies from the teacher's perspective (1) conversation partner, (2) observer and listener, (3) feedback provider, (4) mentor and guide, and (5) learner), highlighting the importance of understanding these roles in a one-to-one context. According to a more complex but earlier view (Wilberg, 1987), since both the instructor and the student are present in various roles at the same time, a one-to-one relationship is a many-to-many situation. There is no way to characterize all one-to-one teaching by one role or set of roles and these roles will dynamically shift, overlap, and change depending on the aim of the course, the student's age, level, the setting (etc. - probably an infinite list). Still, raising awareness of the variety of possible roles and approaches one can take may help teachers discover more about their identity as teachers and contribute to their professional growth by highlighting areas for development.

4. Course Management

It is difficult to describe the role of the teacher in a one-to-one situation due to the multitude of different types of courses, learner needs and the variety of contexts. The student may be a young person needing someone to check their homework and practice, it may be an exam preparation course, or they could be a businessperson preparing for a new role, presentations, and reports to submit. The teacher may work for a language school or could also be a freelancer. All these situations will require a different set of roles. The teacher may be expected by students to be a "controller" (Harmer, 2015, p. 116) in the sense that the teacher may give students information

about the course content, and how learning goals can best be achieved or negotiate mutual expectations, rules or norms for the sessions. For the one-to-one situation, the term "manager" (Farrell et al., 2021, p. 19; Ur, 2024, p. 18) is not applicable in the sense of managing group dynamics.

While some classroom management issues (e.g., how to plan, begin or end a session, how to establish or maintain rapport, how to handle critical moments, whether or not to allow the student to share personal stories) are relevant and require careful planning and consideration, in one-to-one contexts, these are not so complex as to require 'management'. Rather, we propose that for one-to-one teaching, the term 'management', or the teacher as **course manager** – in the sense of organisation and control – could rather be used to encompass administrative, procedural, organisational and design-related duties, tasks and roles. It is not to mean control but an understanding of the elements of the learning environment and the responsibility for introducing them to the learner for discussion. Wanting to manage all the possible aspects of the teaching situation though is a characteristic of the traditional view of "the transmission teacher" (Scrivener, 2011, p. 14), which still persists in many cultures, Hungary included. According to Scrivener, professionalism on the part of the teacher is shown rather by having enough confidence to negotiate, "share control with the learners, or perhaps hand it over entirely" (p. 18). Students' assumptions need to be taken into account when deciding on what approach to take as a teacher – if it is very distant from the teacher's stance, it is probably best to find a good compromise in agreement with the student, which also enhances language learning autonomy.

4.1. Situational Context for Learning

In a one-to-one teaching context, **management of** the components of the situational or virtual **learning environment** may involve practical issues such as the time and the location of the sessions (Goodyear, 2008). The physical setting also has an influence on learning and thinking processes, for example, how the teacher and learner are seated in relation to each other (Wisniewska, 2010), if it is a distraction-free environment (Schmidt, 2020), or if they are walking and talking (Turner, 2017). The physical aspects of the environment, such as furniture, space and air quality have been found to influence the comfort level and, thus the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Puteh et al., 2015). The ease of access to information (e.g., materials, learning resources, tasks, communication, dictionaries, etc.) and sharing information is crucial to maintaining an efficient learning environment free from unnecessary annoyance. If a learning management system is used, it should be discussed with the students or taught to them if needed. All of these factors discussed so far affect reducing or increasing the cognitive load (Choi et al., 2014) and influence the efficiency of one-to-one sessions.

The length of the course, the flexibility of the sessions, and how they can be cancelled or rescheduled are only some of the administrative issues that should be settled at the beginning when working with a learner (whether it takes the form of a contract, or informal notes based on a brief discussion depends on the situation). What might be interesting for employers is that "adult learners of English attribute their successes to a great extent to their employer" (Kálmán & Gutierrez, 2015, p. 599) if they establish a corporate culture that advocates ongoing development and life-long learning, both of which contribute to employees' professional development.

4.2. Planning Procedures, Tracking Progress and Managing Feedback

Teaching one-to-one is not a simplified form of whole-class instruction, and it necessitates a different strategy for both long-term planning (syllabus, long-term goals) and short-term planning (lesson plans). Lesson plans or weekly plans have either different meanings or may not even be interpretable, given the dynamic nature of the one-to-one context, where materials or topics for lessons can be brought by the student or the teacher, or both, depending on the

student's needs, aims or interests. **Instructional design management** in one-to-one instruction focuses more on the student's needs as the input for designing content (Wilberg, 1987), while the teacher may select the language forms, techniques, or tasks to best support them towards reaching their goals. For this, an introductory exploratory conversation is necessary to construct a learner profile, and a conscious ongoing observation or monitoring of the learner's progress. According to Gardner and Miller (1999), a profile will "describe the learner's needs, wants and abilities; record the learner's goals and study plans; document actions taken to fulfil the study plans; and record learning outcomes" (p. 84). Instead of trying to design a course for a given learner as an outsider, a one-to-one course plan can be built together with the student on a shared platform for planning (e.g., a co-editable document) and adjusted, if needed, as the course progresses. One-to-one instruction permits the teacher to operate in this manner and calls for an "enabler" kind of teacher (Scrivener, p. 18), who functions more as a guide, counsellor, or information resource. For teachers, this requires a fundamental shift from typical classroom language teaching practices (Wilberg, 1987).

Students, especially adult professionals, may enter the one-to-one situation with a language learning background or with expectations that may be unhelpful or unrealistic considering their present (e.g., job-specific) language needs (Kovács, 2022; Wilberg, 1987). It may take some time to adjust to the learning situation and make the shift from a passive, 'teach me' kind of attitude to a more productive, engaged presence with a willingness to take the initiative for their learning. The teacher can actively encourage learning by providing gradually more and more space for autonomous learning to take place with the development of learner responsibility, allowing for flipped lessons (Strelan et al., 2020) and adapting the pace to what is most suitable for the student (Scharle & Szabó, 2000). Kovács (2022) suggests that language coaching is especially useful in this respect, to support adults' learning experiences by guiding them upon entering the learning situation. Language coaches may help learners to clarify their needs and expectations, set realistic goals, and overcome barriers of learning by discussing previous learning experiences and adjusting their attitudes. This supplementary process helps the learner maintain motivation and provides a framework for beginning or closing the language course or period of learning.

When it comes to planning procedures for one-to-one lessons, in addition to creating a learner profile based on needs analysis; designing a framework for the course and having a plan for improving learner autonomy, it is important to keep track of what has been done and in the light of this, how the course should continue. Time should be devoted to reflection, and opportunities to give and receive information about mutual expectations and the perceived efficiency of the course. The teacher may provide continuous feedback channels (e.g., learning journals, quizzes may close with a few feedback questions), or devote time for feedback during sessions in the form of short interviews, written questionnaires, checklists or any other form. This is not about learner progress but more about what has been done, what seems to be working, how the responsibilities are shared, how teaching- and learning-related tasks are shared (e.g., who brings the materials, topics, tasks, or who designs vocabulary sets and how) and what might need to be done differently in the future.

4.3. Course Content, Resources, Materials

One-to-one English language teaching presents a unique opportunity to tailor learning experiences to individual students. **Materials design and content management** in a one-to-one context is an ongoing process. It relates to the question of control in that the material (tasks or content to be dealt with during the lesson) may come from a variety of sources. Students may provide the course content if they need support from the teacher in preparing for a professional presentation, or a job interview or if they need sessions that are supplementary to another

course. In other types of courses (e.g., exam preparation), teachers have a greater role in designing or selecting materials. However, in general-purpose one-to-one courses aiming at language skills development, it is a matter of negotiation between the teacher and the student. It may even vary from session to session depending on the flexibility of the teacher and the autonomy or agency on the part of the student. While the materials themselves may come from various sources, the teacher's role in pre-teach elements for efficient scaffolding for the student to approach it successfully, in organising, selecting and adapting those materials for optimal learning, providing explanations, and designing related practice materials and other activities (quizzes, tests) remains crucial.

In terms of roles and responsibilities, Scrivener's (2011) "involver" (p. 18) kind of teacher cultivates learner engagement by collaborating with students to choose materials that resonate with their goals and interests and try to find activities that will work for them (Scrivener, 2011, p. 18). The teacher is an "organiser or task-setter" (Harmer, 2015, p. 117) for engaging tasks and providing clear instructions or demonstrations. This approach necessitates active cooperation between students and teachers and may pose a challenge for the teacher as it might be impossible to plan in the long run and prepare for the lessons in advance (Alexa, 2021). A different view is put forward by Ur (2024), claiming that it is largely the teacher's responsibility to make the lessons interesting, and boring lessons indicate their failure in their role as a "motivator" (Ur, 2024, p. 18). She continues to state that the teacher as an "instructor" (p. 17) provides teaching materials and tasks, moreover, as an "activator" (p. 17), encourages the learners to use English themselves. Nevertheless, Ur (2024) also underlines that twentieth-century teachers see themselves more as "facilitators" (p. 16) than lecturers or 'tellers' who teach facts and students may choose freely from activities offered by the teacher or the lesson may be a conversation with a loose structure. Overall, it is best to have a balance between teacher-initiated instruction and a learner-centred approach where learning is based solely on students' input, especially when it comes to teaching individual language courses.

Wilberg (1987) argued that students in a one-to-one situation benefit most from producing their own personalised collections of the kinds of materials (texts, videos or other content) that they need, in other words, a portfolio, that is, an organised set of data that they can use. It is useful to keep track of content generated during the session or collect ideas for further sessions (Harmer, 2015), and it also promotes learning by serving as a beneficial tool for displaying the learning progress of the student (Tomlinson, 2017).

4.4. Digital, Technical Competences

Recent requirements from teachers in terms of technological knowledge include the ability to adapt to new technological advances. With the ever-increasing progress of new technologies, one-to-one teachers are often asked to teach online, which requires new methods, new instructional strategies, and a different approach (Hasper & Barkhuizen, 2023). It is another emerging field that deserves much greater attention in teacher education. Some of the essential elements of the complex, situated knowledge required for thoughtful pedagogical uses of technology are captured by the TPACK (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge) framework (see Koehler et al., 2013). As for the knowledge of technology, these days it includes, for example, the ability to use online resources, manage online communication and provide a platform for structuring materials and sharing them with learners, it might involve using learning management systems, videoconferencing tools, adapting to the use of AI (e.g., using chatbots for multiple purposes, using large language model-based tools and applications, AI-based image or video generation) for teaching purposes (including planning, course design, materials design or assessment). Taking into account that teachers are advised not to overlook its dangers, the use of AI may be particularly useful for promoting learner autonomy (Crawford

et al., 2023). The list of technological advancements that could be employed favourably in education is endless and would deserve another article as technology introduces a new set of opportunities and challenges relating to each of the teaching-related topics discussed in this paper. In addition, technological expertise must be combined with knowledge of the content to be taught and pedagogical considerations. For this reason, if teachers are to be **digital, technical designers** of language courses in the future, teacher training should move towards integrating technology for teachers in a meaningful, practical way.

5. Professional Competencies

The competence of the "teacher as professional" (Macapinlac et al., 2021, p. 19) encompasses methodological knowledge and skills to teach the target language. This is supplemented with linguistic expertise, or communicative competence that is not the same as a native speaker's knowledge of the target language. It is a more conscious, structured knowledge that makes scaffolding possible, that is, empowering the learner to build upon what they already know to improve their language skills.

Establishing a friendly, supportive learning environment with a sense of humour and adopting an open-minded, student-centred approach are among the features that describe the personality and approach of a teacher who can establish a positive learning atmosphere. All of this can be refined through reflective practices and continuous professional development.

5.1. Methodological Knowledge and Competence

While there is ample research and theoretical background to teaching groups of students, teachers in a one-to-one situation have few resources to rely on as even teacher training materials focus only on teaching groups (e.g., Harmer, 2015; Scrivener, 2011; Ur, 2024). Wilberg (1987) suggested that the reason behind this is the opportunity in larger groups to simply disregard some needs as all the needs of all of the students cannot be met anyway, whereas in a one-to-one situation disregarding the student's needs is simply not an option. Teaching one-to-one is therefore just as complex as teaching groups and requires knowledge of a set of different methodological approaches, as is the case with groups so that teachers can select the right alternative options for the given situation, depending on the learner's needs. While **trained teachers** bring an enormous amount of knowledge about teaching methods to a one-to-one teaching context, only part of that knowledge will be relevant and, in some ways, it will not be enough. While knowing how to develop group dynamics will be of little use, relevant knowledge will include knowledge about characteristics of individual learners (e.g., depending on their age groups), learning styles and strategies, how to approach teaching skills, such as speaking, listening, reading or writing and how to develop intercultural or global competence. In addition, trained teachers will, ideally, be able to structure a course, or a lesson, select relevant sources for skills development, explain grammar and vocabulary, and suggest techniques and design materials for practising the language (see "prompter" in Harmer, 2015; and "supporter" and "activator" in Ur, 2024). They will have information about language exam requirements and how to prepare for exams. The indicators of teachers' expected or ideal competencies have been described in various types of teacher competence frameworks (e.g., Muñiz, 2020; Symeonidis, 2019).

Trained teachers are often armed with a set of techniques and activities that work well in a classroom environment but become boring or monotonous in a one-to-one setting, especially online. What is worrying is that existing research shows that around half of those who offer one-to-one sessions do not have the professional background to do so, as they are not trained teachers (Biró, 2020). Presently, techniques for one-to-one teaching are under-researched and are usually not part of the university curriculum for teacher training, which is a questionable

practice, as these same teachers will be required to teach one-to-one in language schools, for example, without any further training. This opens a broad avenue for further research in the field of teaching methodology regarding teaching languages one-to-one and teacher training with this focus.

5.2. Communicative Competence in the Target Language

A language teachers' competence is certainly not confined to methodological knowledge, they also represent a **model of a competent language user**, to represent a "prototype of the English speaker" (Ur, 2024, p. 17) to students – hopefully not exclusively, meaning that they are only one out of the many that they encounter as learners (compare: "resource" or "prompter" ; Harmer, 2015, p. 117). It is important that teachers can model the language by producing appropriate samples of spoken and written language, in a natural and "extremely clear" (Harmer, 2015, p. 118) manner. It may be argued, however, that it is not enough for teachers of a foreign language to be communicatively competent (including discourse, linguistic, actional, sociocultural and strategic competence; see Celce-Murcia et al., 1995). They need a more acute awareness of language levels to be able to converse with students in a way that "the struggle for meaning - the negotiation of meaning" (Harmer, 2015, p. 118) provokes genuine language understanding and learning (compare "supporter" (Harmer, 2015, p. 18). They need to be able to provide interesting and relevant, but at the same time, comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982), which is only slightly higher than the learners' existing level of knowledge and can trigger language learning (Harmer, 2015). The language awareness that teachers need to be able to monitor their level of language production even in casual conversations is, in a way, beyond being able to model the language and being communicatively competent.

In addition to language competence, professionally competent teachers can be expected to be able to have knowledge of pedagogical grammar so that they can provide clear explanations about the language (e.g., its sounds, letters, vocabulary, grammar and communicative use) - as suggested by the roles "explainer" and "involver" (Scrivener, 2011, pp. 17–18) or "instructor" (Ur, 2024, p. 17). Further, increasingly important competencies that can be developed in one-to-one contexts just as well as in groups include awareness of social-cultural rules and norms, and global (Divéki, 2018) and intercultural competence (Chen & Starosta, 1996; Huber et al., 2014).

5.3. Evaluation and Assessment of Learning

Given the traditional transmission role of the teacher as a source of knowledge, teachers may feel tempted to overcorrect errors and mistakes, giving accuracy higher priority over students' ability to become competent communicators (Ur, 2024; Wilberg, 1987). This view is further strengthened by teacher training materials, stating that "error correction" is essential along with "the provision of approval and confirmation" (Ur, 2024, p. 17). Students may also expect to be corrected, an expectation coming from earlier language learning experiences (Kovács, 2022; Wilberg, 1987). While students need the teacher to be an "assessor" (Ur, 2024, p. 17) to provide information on what they are doing right and how they can improve, highlighting errors too frequently or improperly may disrupt the flow of the session or even result in the student's decrease in self-confidence and willingness to produce language (spoken or written). Harmer (2015) represents a 'softer' approach with the role of feedback provider under "monitor" and "evidence gatherer" (p. 116) of language learned and mistakes made. A good teacher should provide clear and positive feedback, as receiving encouraging feedback has a positive effect on increasing intrinsic learner motivation and supports learner autonomy (see Noels et al., 1999), while being fair, honest, and showing respect for the learner (Scrivener, 2011). Wisniewska's (2010) term, "feedback provider" (p. 138) covers all of the above concerning one-to-one

teaching: (1) correcting mistakes, (2) giving encouraging comments, praising or (3) encouraging, motivating and supporting learning.

According to Wilberg (1987), it is nearly impossible to measure a student's progress in a one-to-one course, but tracking students' progress may be useful to give and get feedback on how far the student is from their goal (e.g., a language exam, a promotion), what they have already achieved, what activities have proved to be most useful or what language area still needs to be learned. It is often thought to be up to the teacher as an assessor to decide if or how, and with what frequency and purpose assessment is to be carried out. However, some one-to-one sessions (e.g., tutoring, supporting the preparation for a meeting or a job interview) may not require any form of testing to take place. In other types of one-to-one contexts, it may be less risky and more efficient in **assessor** role to gather information and provide delayed feedback (Harmer, p. 116). The procedures for assessment, that is, the way information is obtained about the student's achievements might take a variety of forms from formal (e.g., written or oral tests) to informal quizzes, journals, or ticking off 'can do' statements. It may take the form of systematic observation and feedback, journals, and ranking activities (Graves, 2000). Teachers may opt for re-teaching or allowing the student to "reformulate his or her own content at a new level of awareness, skill and linguistic competence" (Wilberg, 1987, p. 4), if correction is really necessary. Another option is to work together with the student on their work in progress and help edit their work (e.g., producing written drafts and presentations). Editing can prevent error correction in that it aims to propose alternatives and not to correct errors (Harmer, 2015).

In the long run, the purpose of the teacher should be to provide the student a sense of agency and support in performing this analysis for themselves and enable them to become autonomous learners by being able to identify the language forms that they need, notice the progress that they have made and find areas for improvement for themselves.

5.4. Continuous Professional Development

The teacher may be methodologically, communicatively and interculturally more competent, still, language learners (adult professionals or not) will also bring their in-depth knowledge of a given field to the lessons. Teachers may be trained in some 'Englishes', such as EAP (English for Academic Purposes), Business English or other uses of ESP (English for Specific Purposes). Still, it is impossible to always have a trained professional who is also an English teacher. Content or technical knowledge may not be part of the English teacher's professional expertise, which means that lessons may become a collaborative effort with substantial learning for both parties. This, in turn, requires both participants, the teacher and the student, to approach the teaching situation with patience and an open mind, accepting that learning will occur on both sides, and it does not have to be a highly specialised field; teachers of teenagers will also learn about video games, influencers, the newest series or any other topic that the learner may find interesting. Content or technical knowledge is not the only area, though, for lifelong learning and professional development.

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is essential to maintain and enhance teaching effectiveness and involves a bottom-up process initiated by the teachers themselves as there are few communities to help teachers with a one-to-one focus. Professional collaboration is a key component of CPD, encompassing methodological, linguistic, technical/content knowledge, and reaching out for various forms of support. The latter may include working with pedagogical assistants, psychologists, language coaches, and teacher educators. The process could include mentorship (Berbain et al., 2023), conducting research (Borg, 2007), reflection (Macapinlac et al., 2021; Norton, 1994; Wolcott, 1995), and collaborative problem-solving (Dunn & Shriner, 1999). Self-efficacy (Zólyomi, 2022) and emotions play a crucial role in this development

(Samnøy et al., 2023), acting as catalysts that can either encourage or hinder engagement in CPD or seek the support of a professional community. The two major communities and international associations include TESOL and IATEFL.

6. Social-psychological Awareness and Skills

This last main section delves into the critical areas of self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and well-being, the teacher's ability to understand and manage their own emotions and empathise with their students' emotional states, all of which enable the teacher to be a **supporter** of learning. It covers a brief overview of the psycholinguistic factors that influence learning and touches upon the related fields of language coaching and counselling, and the essential practices for establishing rapport, maintaining motivation, and upholding professional boundaries.

6.1. Self-awareness, Emotional Intelligence and Well-being

Emotion permeates all facets of the profession, some challenging, some rewarding, still, teaching is mostly perceived as a stressful, overwhelming job, maybe less so in a one-to-one context. Grit, which is the power of perseverance (Duckworth, 2016) and resilience are characteristics that make a language teacher "emotionally well-adjusted, open to change and resilient to burnout" (Hiver, 2018, p. 12), which is necessary, looking at the list of personal characteristics that teachers are expected to have. Out of the three teacher training materials, Scrivener (2011) provided the most comprehensive description of the characteristics of teachers. The list includes flexibility, patience, paying attention to and adapting to learners' needs. Additional personal qualities of teachers from more recent studies that could have a considerable effect on their ability to establish a supportive and motivating environment include "teacher charisma" (Win & Kálmán, 2023, p. 260) communicated through "nonverbal immediacy, humour, caring, and confirmation" (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2014, p. 137). Further characteristics of charismatic teachers listed by Peták and Kálmán (2022) include "knowledge, preparedness, and positive character traits (e.g., approachability, caring, empathy, kindness, patience, etc.)" (p. 283) alongside the willingness to build caring and trusting relationships with students, which in turn contributes to students' motivation. It is undoubtedly difficult to decide for oneself if these characteristics are true or not. Feedback from mentors, colleagues, and most importantly, the students themselves is incredibly important. In their effort to develop emotionally, and professionally, and how to take and learn from feedback, teachers are **role models as learners** and set an important example whether it is grit, resilience, flexibility, patience, kindness or the importance of being prepared. The well-being of both teachers and students is another prerequisite for an efficient learning environment.

6.2. Awareness of the Psycholinguistic Factors that Influence Learning

Psycholinguistics is a multidisciplinary field focused on how people perceive, understand and produce language. Apart from psychology and linguistics, it has connections with biology, neurology, sociology, and language pathology (Traxler & Gernsbacher, 2006). Its findings shed light on cognitive, emotional aspects and linguistic rules and processes that affect any language user's experiences and thus language learning outcomes. Although it is a complex field, language teacher training usually incorporates some of the most influential theories that affect foreign language learning so that teachers have a better understanding of what is (or is not) happening as a result of their lessons (see Chaika, 2023; Omar & Fasial, 2023; Purba, 2018). This process requires the teacher to be an **observer**, who can reflect and act upon their observations to adjust their approach or procedures. Being an observer means nurturing attentive listening and seeing behind the curtains as the learner produces their output (Tomlinson, 2017). Once the teacher actively listens to the learner and tries to understand them, a myriad of opportunities opens up whereby the teacher can personalise instruction.

Some examples of areas where psycholinguistic awareness could help include, for example, 1) developing cognitive strategies to improve memory or provide easier access to information, 2) identifying language processing issues or learning difficulties so that students can get support from a specialist, 3) noticing language anxiety or limiting beliefs (Mercer & Ryan, 2010) due to previous learning experiences, and 4) identifying the level of difficulty of learners processing a text. Such awareness could help the teacher as a professional to support the learner. Alternatively, if the teacher cannot take action after noticing the issue, they can seek help from other specialists.

6.3. Language Coaching and Transferring Roles

Focusing on learner autonomy is arguably a more achievable goal in one-to-one teaching, where there is more time for the teacher to become a "supporter" (Ur, 2024, p. 17), or in Harmer's (2015) terminology, "prompter" (p. 117), to give guidance for learners on how to become more independent as learners and create the conditions to "enable the students to learn for themselves" (Scrivener, 2011, p. 18). With autonomous learning taking place in the classroom, the teacher can remain in the background and intervene only if necessary. In such a lesson, decisions are shared and negotiated with the learner, be it goals, activities or materials for class use, and the teacher is only there to guide the process or provide information when needed (Scrivener, 2011). It should be acknowledged, though, that while autonomy (self-determination, self-regulation) is key to developing independent, intrinsically motivated learners (Benson, 2009), not all learners are equally ready for autonomy. First, learners need to become aware of the nature of the learning process, change their attitudes so that they are ready to take on responsibilities as learners and then enjoy the freedom that comes with transferring roles and increased responsibility (Scharle & Szabó, 2000). Regarding the roles that can be transferred, for one-to-one lessons, they include choosing the material and deciding on the procedure for learning, being a source of information and knowledge, assessment and error correction (Scharle & Szabó, 2000). Supporting this process is essentially what coaching does.

However, there is perceivable resistance from teacher training institutions towards coaching as it embraces the ambiguity and uncertainty of our knowledge about language learning processes and the vulnerability of the teacher (Kovács, 2022). Nevertheless, shifting the focus from teaching to enhancing learning through metacognitive strategies, placing more focus on reflection, planning and individual goal-setting, or helping students overcome individual learning-related difficulties has the potential to support teachers' professional development. **Language coaching**, as defined by Kovács (2022), is "a learner-led process aimed at creating optimal target-language acquisition while working towards effective international communication skills in order to reach future-related goals" (p. 289). Elements of the coaching process may form a part of the teaching process by blending coaching tools that support learning with a professional language teaching framework. In other words, while coaching may be a part of teaching and teachers can acquire coaching skills through learning about language coaching, the professional, methodological, linguistic and cultural knowledge that teachers are trained in, cannot be replaced. As Harmer (2015) put it, "In the end, teachers are (or should be) facilitators – helping their students to achieve their goals, whether by coaching them, teaching them or tutoring them" (p. 117).

6.4. Relationship with the Learner

In trying to reach an optimal outcome in learning, it is essential to establish a good rapport with the learner (Bleistein & Lewis, 2015). Having a close and positive relationship with the learner helps build trust and understanding and thus maintain motivation. While this friendly atmosphere is crucial for effective learning, keeping professional boundaries is key in order to retain mutual respect towards one another.

Regarding the characteristics of teachers, Scrivener (2011) lists them as "features which create a positive relationship and atmosphere" (p. 16). Depending on the type of one-to-one session, teachers may take on different approaches in terms of how much they would like to present as figures who are in control or rather guide the learning process more indirectly. In a one-to-one instructional setting, it is important to consider the weight of the responsibility that the teacher has as the sole conversation partner. While the lessons should take place in the context of an atmosphere conducive to spontaneous, comfortable, and casual learning interactions, having informal conversations with the learner is not enough (Wilberg, 1987). The language used by the teacher should be adjusted to the learner's level and at the same time, respond to the learner's input in an authentic manner. The teacher should be observant and maintain a comfortable "balance and rhythm of speech and silence" (Wilberg, 1987, p. 9) as if it were "a dance. Your student is your partner [...]" (p. 8) which requires "sensitive adjustment and awareness of pace, rhythm and step" (p. 9). Moreover, teachers should sensitively adjust their questions and responses to the learner's language level and skills, both to provide a comprehensible model and to facilitate the learner's participation in the conversation. The way learners establish contact with speakers of the target language will affect the learner's motivation and attitude towards the language, which in turn affects self-regulation (Dörnyei et al., 2006).

7. Conclusions and Further Research

With this theoretical paper, we aimed to 1) investigate teacher roles that can be interpretable and meaningful in one-to-one teaching situations based on the teacher training literature, 2) examine additional teacher roles in one-to-one teaching situations, and 3) formulate implications for one-to-one teaching based on the empirical background. To achieve these aims, we carefully synthesised the literature to be able to draw up a framework for reconsidering one-to-one teachers' roles. To answer our first question concerning teacher roles based on the teacher training literature, we can conclude that there are three major professional areas, namely, course management, professional knowledge, and awareness of social-psychological factors and skills whereby teachers are expected to mainly act as course managers, teachers per se, and supporters, respectively.

As course managers, teachers are responsible for managing the course itself, the learning environment, the instructional design, materials and content, and designing the use of digital and technical tools. Teachers intend to establish an ideal context where learning can happen, and they create a course outline based on the learner's input. Additionally, in their course manager role, they take the learner's needs into account when designing content but ideally are also open and flexible towards incorporating content and materials provided by the learner. If need be, teachers also provide the technical support needed and design an online environment upon request.

The teacher role includes facilitating the process of language learning by providing guidance and instruction when needed using scaffolding. Trained teachers possess the ability to use methodologies that are suitable for the learner and if one does not work efficiently, then flexibly turn to another. Instead of acting as a resource of knowledge who is responsible for transferring the knowledge to the learner, the teacher supports the learner in discovering what areas of language are necessary and guides the learner in finding models of competent language use and materials. The teacher role also covers gradually shifting the assessor agency to the learner and enabling them to perform self-assessment, which has a role in promoting motivation and learner autonomy. Additionally, the teacher is a reflective practitioner (Grasha, 2002) who is up-to-date, open to continuous professional development and seeks opportunities to develop professionally.

Being a supporter means serving as a model for the learners by showing the history and background of being an open-minded learner. In addition, the supporter role also covers being

an observer, that is, being aware of the psycholinguistic factors that influence learning and thus adapting to the learner's needs. It also includes enhancing the learner's ability for self-assessment, providing opportunities for feedback (both ways) and learning from the learner. The teacher ideally has a coaching attitude when learners get stuck, identifies learning blocks or learning difficulties, and maintains a professional distance but also provides a friendly and open atmosphere, while is able to build trust and highly promote learner agency and autonomy. The supporter teacher can shift between roles as appropriate and transfer roles to the learner by increasing learner responsibility.

To answer our second question, after examining teachers' additional roles in a one-to-one situation, we came to the conclusion that the teacher is responsible for creating a learning space and an opportunity for the learner to develop. The teacher needs to establish a learner profile that is in-depth and detailed enough in order to be able to personalise the materials and the course to the individual. Besides this, the teacher is required to teach learning skills for more autonomy and agency and create personalised instructional and digital content design.

In the following, to answer our third question, we will describe the implications that can be formulated based on the findings for language teachers, language learners and teacher training programmes. With the skill of reflective observation and careful planning, teachers can tailor instruction based on their learner's needs. However, this undertaking may not be as easy as it sounds. As has been mentioned, adapting to the learner's needs requires a complex set of skills including careful observation, not to mention the need for in-depth professional knowledge. Continuous professional development necessitates a greater investment of time and energy, the teacher may feel alone with their questions as it may be difficult to ask for help – and identifying the appropriate time to ask for help is yet another issue –, reach out to a community, and there may be a lack of professional support from colleagues. It is imperative to establish good rapport and build a trusting relationship to get and give appropriate feedback, as the student is the most reliable source of knowledge on how to increase the efficiency of their learning in a one-to-one context.

From this theoretical review, we have also seen that the literature is scant regarding one-to-one teaching, and the materials used in the classrooms are typically not designed for one-to-one situations. In these unique situations, the teacher has more responsibility in choosing the appropriate materials, as regular textbooks may become boring due to them being designed for whole classrooms and lacking a personalised design completely. Moreover, adapting to the learner's needs often means extra work for the teacher and it also probably requires more planning than anticipated. Due to the fact that teachers sometimes may not have support for continuous professional development, teachers may have to rely more on themselves. Overall, we can claim that one-to-one teaching situations are markedly different from regular classroom teaching in many aspects, and language policy makers could implement the necessary changes in teacher training to prepare teachers for one-to-one teaching situations that are not at all rare in their practice.

While the present study focuses on teaching English as a foreign language, it is reasonable to assume that the discussion of terms and roles in this article may apply to teaching and learning other languages, as well, the only difference being the assumed teacher training background knowledge. Based on this review of the literature on knowledge, skills and roles of one-to-one teachers, further empirical studies are planned for a more in-depth understanding of one-to-one language teaching.

As in every review, it is imperative to be aware of potential biases that may have had an effect on the study. Selection bias may have occurred as we have chosen only three books that are used as English teacher training materials. Our choice was informed by the fact that these three

books are the most popular ones in the Hungarian context; therefore, the proposed theoretical framework is to be addressed carefully. We did not take a step further to mitigate this potential bias as the original aim of the study was not to generalise but to serve as a clarion call for initiating discussion on the matter.

As a further research avenue, it may be beneficial to create course outlines that are in line with the various roles of teachers and are suitable for one-to-one teaching contexts. In a follow-up questionnaire study, we investigate teachers' perceptions of their roles in one-to-one teaching situations. Besides quantifying this information, it would be imperative to dig deeper into this phenomenon and gain an in-depth insight into the following areas of investigation: how teachers approach planning, what materials they use, how their workload could be eased, what their challenges and difficulties are, what extra training would be beneficial for them (if at all), what training they already have and whether it is sufficient, how teaching skills need to be approached differently, and finally, how not to shift into coaching-only mode. This list, of course, is not extensive but contains some key examples to which if we find an answer, we may produce more effective one-to-one teaching processes. We are convinced that the time is ripe to focus our attention more to one-to-one teaching situations due to its unique characteristics and to enhance professional cooperation.

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Corresponding Author

The corresponding author for this manuscript is Gabriella Jenei who can be contacted by email via jenei.gabriella@btk.elte.hu.

Appendix A

TABLE 2. REQUIRED READINGS FOR THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODOLOGY FINAL EXAMS AT 10 MAJOR HUNGARIAN UNIVERSITIES WITH EFL TRAINING PROGRAMMES AND TEFL COURSES

	Universities and Courses with EFL Training Programmes	**Readings**			
		Harmer (2015)	Scrivener (2011)	Ur (2024)	Brown (2015)
1	Debreceni Egyetem	✓	✓	x	x
2	Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem	✓	✓	✓	x
3	Eszterházy Károly Katolikus Egyetem	✓	✓	x	✓
4	Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Miskolci Egyetem	✓	✓	x	✓
6	Nyíregyházi Egyetem	Not provided on the website			
7	Pannon Egyetem	Not provided on the website			
8	Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem	✓	✓	x	x
9	Pécsi Tudományegyetem	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Szegedi Tudományegyetem	✓	?	✓	?
11	CELTA course: Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages	✓	✓	✓	x
Total		9	8	4	4

Note. ✓ = it is required, x = it is not required. Trainings may use different editions of the same book indicated above. Apart from the above sources, other materials may be used during the courses, but those were indicated for fewer than three institutions or not indicated on the reading list available on the university website.

Source: own compilation, based on the official websites of the universities.

Appendix B

TABLE 3. A FRAMEWORK FOR DISCUSSING TEACHERS' ROLES IN ONE-TO-ONE TEACHING CONTEXTS

Professional Areas	Required Skill, Knowledge, Competence	Main Role	Role
Course Management	Establish the ideal situational context for learning	**Course Manager**	Environment manager
	Planning procedures, tracking progress and managing feedback		Instructional design manager
	Content, resources, materials		Designer of materials and content
	Digital, technical competencies		Digital, technical designer
Professional Knowledge	Methodological competence	**Teacher**	Facilitator
	Communicative competence		Instructor (resource, model)
	Evaluation and assessment of learning		Assessor
	Continuous professional development and openness to professional collaboration		Reflective practitioner
Awareness of Social-psychological Factors and Skills	Self-awareness, emotional intelligence and well-being	**Supporter**	Role model as a learner
	Awareness of the psycholinguistic factors that influence learning		Observer
	Language coaching and transferring roles		Language coach
	Establish rapport, maintain motivation and keep professional boundaries		Relationship manager

Source: own compilation, based on the review of the literature.

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Paideia Patristic Education: Analysis into the acquisition of soft skills in Universities in Machakos County, Kenya

Ann Njogu Wachira

Faculty of Education, The Catholic University of Eastern Africa

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-0671-2872

Noah Cheruiyot Mutai

Faculty of Economics & Business Administration, Berlin School of Business and Economics

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9677-223X

Benjamin Bensam Sambiri

Faculty of Economics & Business Administration, Berlin School of Business and Economics

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6662-0183

Abstract

The acquisition of soft skills is increasingly recognized as a crucial component of higher education, essential for preparing students to meet the challenges of the modern workforce. This study investigates the process of acquiring soft skills through Paideia Patristic Education (PPE) in universities in Machakos County, Kenya. This quantitative study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the PPE framework in promoting key soft skills such as communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and flexibility. Purposive sampling technique was used to target specific faculty members and students. Data was collected using structured and semi-structured questionnaires. The study's results show that PPE has a positive effect on students' soft skills, particularly in enhancing their ability to work effectively in teams and collaborate. Universities in Machakos County and beyond should strongly consider incorporating Paideia Patristic Education principles into their curricula. This would help cultivate crucial soft skills in students, better equipping them for the challenges of the contemporary job market.

Keywords: higher education, Paideia Patristic Education, professional advancement, soft skills, teamwork.

1. Introduction

Employers in today's highly competitive job market are increasingly concerned about the gap between the capabilities that graduates possess and the industry's expectations. Although graduates may have strong technical skills, they often face challenges in developing essential soft skills such as effective communication, collaboration, analytical thinking, and adaptability (Munir, 2022).

These abilities are critical for achieving personal and professional success and are frequently cited by companies as areas where new employees commonly lack proficiency. This growing concern underscores the necessity for educational institutions to provide both technical knowledge and comprehensively cultivate students' soft skills (World Economic Forum, 2023).

It is important to cultivate soft skills among graduates. Success and failure in the workplace can often be predicted by an individual's soft skills. Educators and businesses alike have emphasized the need for these skills to achieve favourable career outcomes and promote lifelong learning (Dubey & Tiwari, 2020). Employers prefer to hire candidates who will be productive, as this reduces re-training costs. However, a lack of soft skills among undergraduates can lead to a high rate of unemployment. Those who are employed often rely on mentorship and in-service training programs to boost their productivity at work (Igwe et al., 2022).

Ahmed et al. (2012) reveal that there is a demand for soft skills in the software sector, albeit this demand is restricted. The work of Fulgence (2015) on employability of university graduates in the workforce, establishes that communication skills, attitude, curriculum vitae presentation and behavioural qualities are important aspects that influence the decisions made by corporate recruiters to recruit graduates. Further, Kalufya and Mwakajinga (2016) show a substantial disparity in the emphasis on employability skills between employers and final-year students. The research shows that employers rank self-awareness, knowledge application, and teamwork as first, second, and third, whereas final year students placed them as first, second, and sixth.

Rather than focusing on the connection between graduates' development and acquisition of soft skills, the studies examine employers' perceptions of graduate skills and soft skill gaps in the labour market. While the research has not extensively explored the obstacles of obtaining and developing soft skills, some studies have concentrated on the teaching and learning of soft skills in higher education. Sanga (2019) establishes that teaching and evaluating soft skills in Tanzanian universities pose considerable difficulties, while Cornali (2018) analyses the significance of tertiary education in developing and perhaps enhancing soft skills. In Kenya, few studies have explored the use of Paideia Patristic Education (PPE) to acquire soft skills.

Paideia Patristic Education (PPE) is an educational approach that combines the ancient Greek concept of comprehensive development, known as Paideia, with the theological and ethical teachings of the early Christian Church Fathers, or Patristics (Jaś, 2013). This strategy aims to foster individuals who possess a wide range of skills and qualities, encompassing intellectual and cultural knowledge as well as spiritual and moral characteristics rooted in Christian beliefs. Central to this approach are classical writings and ideas, which are analysed and understood from a Christian perspective (Tarnas, 1993). The goal is to cultivate the holistic growth of individuals, addressing their intellectual, physical, and spiritual dimensions. PPE emphasises the development of both knowledge and virtue by placing a strong emphasis on community, tradition, and the transfer of wisdom. This educational approach, influential in early Christian schools and medieval universities, is currently experiencing a renaissance in classical Christian institutions. These schools combine rigorous academic study with profound spiritual formation (Watkins, 2015). The study seeks to assess the efficacy of this teaching strategy in cultivating fundamental soft skills among graduates. Using a quantitative approach, we evaluate the effectiveness of the PPE framework in fostering the growth of soft skills.

2. Literature Review

This section contains two parts – the theoretical review and the empirical review. The theoretical review discusses the Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism while the empirical review summarizes the key literatures related to acquisition and development of soft skills.

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study takes a Vygotskian social constructivism approach. Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism posits that individuals actively develop their knowledge and understanding. The theory states that as active learners, humans generate their own knowledge. It emphasises the importance of an integrated curriculum, where students explore a subject from multiple perspectives. Additionally, constructivists emphasise learner-centred teaching approaches (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). The theory highlights the significance of the interplay among interpersonal, cultural, and individual factors in human growth. Vygotsky believed that engaging with others speeds up the growth and improvement of cognitive abilities. He places great importance on the social environment in the process of learning and contended that interactions with others have an impact on learning experiences. Vygotsky and Cole (1978) claim that the social environment serves as the primary origin of all advanced cognitive functions in the brain.

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a fundamental term in Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism, which refers to the difference between a person's current level of development achieved by individual problem-solving and their potential level of growth achieved through adult supervision or collaboration with more advanced peers. The ZPD quantifies the extent of attainable knowledge within ideal instructional conditions. Within the ZDP, a teacher and a student engage in collaborative work on a task that the student cannot complete alone due to its demanding nature. Cognitive change in the ZDP takes place when an instructor and a learner collaborate and utilise cultural resources, resulting in the student internalising culturally mediated interactions (Schunk, 2012).

Vygotsky’s theory of social constructivism offers valuable insights into the acquisition of soft skills within PPE in universities across Machakos County, Kenya. In this context, soft skills like communication, teamwork, and critical thinking are not simply taught but developed organically through engaging with diverse philosophical, theological, and historical viewpoints. Educators act as facilitators, encouraging students to actively participate in discussions and reflective practices, thereby fostering skills essential for navigating complex societal challenges.

2.2 Empirical Review

Many college graduates aim to secure employment where they can apply their hard skills and knowledge. However, according to Meeks (2017), college graduates need to possess soft skills to thrive in the workplace. Soft skills are fundamental for individual success and the overall success of the company. In today's work environment, characterized by less repetitive tasks and increased autonomy, employees are required to make decisions independently, interact with diverse stakeholders, and communicate effectively across various organizational levels. Essential soft skills for any employee include teamwork, problem-solving, decision-making, and communication (Brungardt, 2011). Therefore, there has been rising interest in the need for soft skills training to enhance the overall quality of graduates from institutions of higher learning.

Soft skills, which are also referred to as employability skills, transferable skills, life skills or 21st century skills, are highly valued by employers and have been shown to significantly improve the quality of life and success in the workplace. Tushar and Sooraksa (2023) find a total of 87 distinct skills categorised into three separate temporal themes: the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s.

Notably, problem-solving, communication, teamwork, adaptability, and willingness to learn emerges as the most often mentioned talents throughout all time periods. Furthermore, Ngek Shillie and Nchang (2023) show that soft skills can produce a positive impact on the job performance of an individual. It is therefore emphasized that soft skills could be learned and acquired.

Soft skills should be integrated into the curriculum and evaluated separately, given the growing demand from employers for graduates proficient in these areas (Warrner, 2021). However, educators face challenges in integrating soft skills into courses without compromising essential course content. Additionally, the educational needs of college students and corporate employees are constantly evolving, necessitating educators to stay updated on these changing needs and required skills (Anthony & Garner, 2016). Further, Aljohani et al. (2022) demonstrate that institutions have a noticeable deficiency in providing students with the necessary training to gain these skills.

Factors contributing to unemployment among Kenyan graduates include mismatches between labour market demand and supply, as well as a lack of life skills training (Kapfudzaruwa et al., 2018). The current emphasis on global competitiveness in higher education has led to a competitive, commercially driven, and often low-quality massification of university education (Ireri, 2023). Furthermore, there is an excessive focus on subject area content, neglecting the crucial development of life skills or soft skills among students (Muyaka & Kitainge, 2021). However, in some higher education institutions, soft skills training is inadequately implemented, resulting in graduates who may struggle to meet the demands of the workforce (Bergin et al., 2019).

3. Methodology

3.1 Aim and Research Question

The aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of PPE in fostering the acquisition of soft skills among university students in Machakos County, Kenya. The research question is therefore: How does the implementation of Paideia Patristic Education influence the development of soft skills among students in universities within Machakos County, Kenya?

3.2 Research Design

The study used a quantitative approach and focused on applying PPE to analyse the acquisition of soft skills in universities in Machakos County, Kenya. This design allows for the collection of numerical data, which can be statistically analysed to provide objective and reliable insights (Black, 1999). Survey design was used to collect information from students and faculty staff from major universities in Machakos County. Surveys are useful in describing the characteristics of a large population (Gideon, 2012). The universities were of interest since they were the only ones with main campuses in the region and it was important to know how they impart soft skills to the students who then go on to join the employment sector in the county and beyond.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected using questionnaires which comprised of closed and open-ended questions. Questionnaires can be administered anonymously, encouraging respondents to provide honest and unbiased answers without fear of judgment or repercussions which permitted a greater depth of response (Jenn, 2006). The questionnaires were piloted at Daystar University, Nairobi. The data analysis process involved data cleaning, coding, keypunching into a computer and finally analysing. Data analysis has been done using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.

4. Results

The study's findings offer valuable insights into the efficacy of a PPE framework aimed at cultivating interpersonal and communication skills among pupils residing in Machakos County, Kenya. The findings provide a thorough analysis of the present condition of soft skills development and educational practices in the region, emphasising areas of proficiency and potential for enhancement.

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

	Gender	Frequency	Percent
Faculty	Male	5	55.60%
	Female	4	44.40%
	Total	9	100.00%
	Gender	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Students	Male	24	53.30%
	Female	21	46.70%
	Total	45	100.00%

Source: own compilation/calculations, based on survey data (2023).

The gender distribution among instructors and students in Machakos County is approximately equal, with a small male predominance in both groups Table 1.

The faculty is comprised of 55.60% males and 44.40% females, whereas the student body is composed of 53.30% males and 46.70% females. This equilibrium signifies a comprehensive environment in relation to gender representation inside educational institutions.

4.2 Student Results

4.2.1 Do Universities in Machakos County, Kenya offer classes on soft skills?

TABLE 2. WHETHER THE UNIVERSITY OFFERS CLASSES ON SOFT SKILLS

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	34	75.6%
No	11	24.4%
Total	45	100%

Source: own compilation/calculations, based on survey data (2023).

Table 2. addresses the question whether the University offers any classes on soft skills. The results indicate that a substantial majority of participants, up to 75.6%, confirmed that the institution provides courses specifically designed to enhance soft skills. This demonstrates a firm dedication by the institution to provide students with crucial interpersonal and professional skills, including teamwork, communication, and problem-solving. Nevertheless, a minority of students (24.4%), indicated that the university did not offer such lectures. This disparity indicates that although most individuals derive advantages from soft skills training, there remains a segment of the student body that may not be availing themselves of these valuable educational prospects.

4.2.2 Which soft skills are the most important for Universities in Machakos County, Kenya?

The participants were asked about the specific soft skills that are given priority in their universities. As per Table 3., the top ranked attribute was integrity, accounting for 33.3% of the total. Interpersonal skills followed closely with 13.3%, while oral communication and critical thinking tied at 11.1%. Teamwork, work ethics and morals, and professionalism each accounted for 11.1% as well. Analytical skills had the lowest ranking at 2.2%. Although most scholars have different views on what are the most important soft skills, they place communication as a must-have skill (Robles, 2012). Brungardt (2011) has identified teamwork, problem solving, decision making, and communication as the four soft skills necessary for any employee.

TABLE 3. IMPORTANCE UNIVERSITIES IN MACHAKOS COUNTY KENYA, PLACE ON THE ACQUISITION OF SOFT SKILLS

	Frequency	**Percent**
Integrity	15	33.30%
Interpersonal skills	6	13.30%
Oral communication	5	11.10%
Critical thinking	5	11.10%
Teamwork	5	11.10%
Work ethics and Morals	5	11.10%
Professionalism	2	4.40%
Analytical skills	1	2.20%
Total	44	97.80%

Source: own compilation/calculations, based on survey data (2023).

4.2.3 What co-curriculum activities are used in universities in Machakos County, Kenya to impart soft skills to the students?

The students were asked to choose from a list of activities provided by the university that are aimed at developing soft skills. According to Table 4., 60% of the respondents reported the availability of sporting activities, 20% reported long-term apprenticeships, and 8.9% reported field trips. Other activities included learning to play an instrument, such as the guitar or violin (4.4%), international and domestic travels (4.4%), and seeking the help of students with good soft skills to train their friends (2.2%).

We note that extended apprenticeships provide students with the chance to observe and acquire soft skills in real-life environments. It is advisable to motivate students to participate in hands-on learning experiences by actively engaging in real-world job settings to cultivate contextual soft skills. Research has demonstrated that contextual learning is an efficient method for acquiring soft skills (Arat, 2014).

While there are multiple activities that can assist students in cultivating soft skills at university, the research did not address these specific activities. Engaging in long-term workshops, engaging trainers who specialise in soft skills, and improving English proficiency are all highly effective in facilitating the acquisition of soft skills among students.

TABLE 4. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACTIVITIES OFFERED TO STRENGTHEN SOFT SKILLS ACQUISITION AND UNIVERSITY

Activities to strengthen soft skills acquisition	Daystar	Machakos	Total
Sports	12	15	27
Long term apprenticeship	15	4	9
Field trips	3	1	4
International travels and domestic travels	2	0	2
Learning to play an instrument (guitar, violin, etc.)	2	0	2
Taking the help of students who possess good soft skills to train their friends	1	0	1

Source: own compilation/calculations, based on survey data (2023).

As shown in Table 5., the small chi-square statistics (5.96) and its significance $p > 0.05$ indicate that it is very likely that the two variables – activities offered to strengthen soft skills acquisition and university- are independent of each other. Therefore, we conclude that there is no relationship between the university and activities offered to strengthen soft skills acquisition at the universities χ^2 (5, $N = 45$) = 5.96, $p = 0.31$. Therefore, there is not a strong link between the university and the events that are meant to help people learn soft skills.

TABLE 5. CHI-SQUARE TESTS

	Value	*df*	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.963[a]	5	.310
Likelihood Ratio	7.867	5	.164
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.860	1	.091
N of Valid Cases	45		

Source: own compilation/calculations, based on survey data (2023)

4.3 Faculty Results

4.3.1 How often do faculty members use the following strategies in teaching your courses?

TABLE 6. STRATEGIES USED BY FACULTY MEMBERS TO IMPART SOFT SKILLS

	Often	Sometimes	Always	Never	Rarely
Group discussion	55.60%	22.20%	22.20%	0.00%	0.00%
Case studies	44.40%	44.40%	11.10%	0.00%	0.00%
Role play	22.20%	33.3.0%	22.20%	11.10%	33.30%
Quizzes	55.60%	0.00%	33.30%	11.10%	0.00%
Mock interviews	11.10%	22.20%	11.10%	33.30%	22.20%
Debates	0.00%	11.10%	11.10%	33.30%	44.40%

Source: own compilation/calculations, based on survey data (2023).

As discernible in Table 6., group discussions and quizzes are often utilised instructional strategies, regularly employed by most educators. Case studies are frequently employed, although their usage is not as uniform. Role plays and mock interviews are infrequently employed, with a significant proportion of educators never or rarely utilising them. Debates are infrequently employed as a teaching approach, as most educators rarely or never integrate them into their instructional practices. This suggests a predilection for participatory and evaluative approaches, with less emphasis placed on role-based and debate activities.

4.3.2 How would faculty members assess soft skills development among their students?

According to Table 7., the lecturers agree that the course is highly effective in fostering teamwork skills. A significant majority (88.89%) believe it aids in developing organizational skills. Feedback is mixed for written communication: 55.56% agree it improves these skills, 22.22% are neutral, and 22.22% disagree. Educators focus more on understanding than memorization, with 55.56% disagreeing that memorization is prioritized. Opinions on problem-solving skills are also split: 55.56% agree, 22.22% are neutral, and 22.22% disagree. Feedback is mostly in grades, with 55.56% neutral. Good memory is not crucial, as 44.44% disagree. The course effectively sharpens analytical skills (77.78% agreement). The training is often successful in cultivating essential soft skills among students in Machakos County, namely in the areas of teamwork and analytical abilities.

TABLE 7. SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT BY FACULTY OF UNIVERSITIES

Skills development	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
The course helps students to develop teamwork skills	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%
The course helps students to develop organizational skills	88.89%	11.11%	0.00%
The course helps students to improve skills in written communication	55.56%	22.22%	22.22%
I test on what the students have memorized than what they have understood.	33.33%	11.11%	55.56%
The course has developed students' problem-solving skills	55.56%	22.22%	22.22%
I give feedback on the work only in the form of marks or grades	33.33%	55.56%	11.11%
To do well in this course all students really need is a good memory	33.33%	22.22%	44.44%
The course sharpens the students' analytical skills	77.78%	11.11%	11.11%

Source: own compilation/calculations, based on survey data (2023).

4.3.3 What do faculty members think is their students' proficiency level in the following skills?

TABLE 8. STUDENT PROFICIENCY LEVELS IN DIFFERENT SKILLS

	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Writing	11.1%	33.3%	44.4%	11.1%
Speaking	11.1%	33.3%	44.4%	11.1%
Problem solving	22.2%	22.2%	55.6%	0.00%
Presentation	11.1%	44.4%	44.4%	0.00%
Teamwork	0.00%	33.3%	55.6%	11.1%

Source: own compilation/calculations, based on survey data (2023).

According to Table 8., the students in Machakos County exhibit commendable proficiency in writing, speaking, and teamwork, with a majority being evaluated as "Good" or "Excellent" in these domains. The majority rates problem-solving skills as "Good," while there are concerns regarding inadequate proficiency. The students' presentation abilities are perceived as somewhat weak, since none of them were rated as "Excellent" and a considerable proportion were ranked as "Fair." In general, students demonstrate proficiency in teamwork and problem-solving, but there is potential for enhancement in presentation skills and, to a certain degree, writing and speaking abilities.

5. Discussion

This study investigates the process of acquiring soft skills through PPE in universities located in Machakos County, Kenya. PPE, rooted in classical and early Christian traditions, emphasizes comprehensive growth, ethical values, and community-based learning.

The findings show that universities in Machakos county offer lessons on soft skills. Among the most important soft skills are integrity, followed by interpersonal skills and oral communications. Others include critical thinking, teamwork, work ethics and morals. These are among the most important soft skills according to the World Economic Forum (2023). Accordingly, analytical thinking is seen as the most essential skill by a greater number of firms than any other skill and accounts on average for 9% of the core skills stated as desirable by companies. Creative thinking, a cognitive talent, is ranked second in importance. It surpasses three self-efficacy skills: resilience, flexibility, and agility. Additionally, creative thinking is considered more significant than motivation and self-awareness, as well as curiosity and lifelong learning. Dependability and attention to detail, which are the fourth self-efficacy skill in the Global Skills Taxonomy, are ranked eighth, following technological literacy (World Economic Forum, 2023).

This training is expected to have a positive impact on soft skills training as seen in other studies. The results of Yan et al. (2019) indicate that training has a statistically significant favourable effect on the evaluated human traits, specifically in the development of soft skills. However, Ngang et al. (2015) establish that teachers expresses apprehension regarding the inadequate acquisition of soft skills during teacher training, which hampers their ability to effectively support their work environment.

The findings on methods for teaching soft skills reveal that group discussions and quizzes are often used as instructional strategies, frequently adopted by most lecturers. This concurs with Nazaré de Freitas and Assoreira Almendra (2022) who show that active learning strategies that emphasize constructivism and collaborative practices developed in exchange milieus and groups are the most widely used teaching methodologies. Case studies are commonly used, yet their usage is not consistent. Role plays and mock interviews are rarely used, with a substantial number of educators never or rarely employing them. Debates are seldom utilised as a pedagogical method, as many instructors rarely or never incorporate them into their teaching strategies. Other strategies that are used include games (Viviers et al., 2016) in which they show educational games are effective in requiring students to apply the full spectrum of soft/pervasive skills.

Apart from class activities, Universities in Machakos use co-curriculum activities to impart soft skills. Most respondents emphasized that sporting activities were the most frequently mentioned approach for cultivating soft skills. Mareque et al. (2019) find that students who engage in certain proposed activities exhibit better levels of creativity, on average. Additionally, a favourable link was found between the quantity of recreational pursuits and the analysed measures of creativity. de Prada Creo et al. (2020) establish a strong association between participating in extra-curricular activities and developing crucial teamwork abilities.

A small fraction of respondents emphasized the inclusion of extended apprenticeships, which are essential for acquiring practical, context-specific knowledge of soft skills. Moreover, the chi-square test findings revealed that there is no statistically significant correlation between the place of instruction and the activities provided for the acquisition of soft skills. Vaughan (2017)

establishes that specific context of apprenticeship provides a distinct advantage in developing attitudes and interpersonal skills, which are distinctive to a certain area and may be acquired through learning, rather than being universally applicable, theoretical, and unchanging.

According to the academics, the PPE framework is seen as being highly efficient in promoting collaborative abilities. Most people agree that it helps in cultivating organizational skills, however opinions are divided when it comes to its influence on written communication. In addition, children in Machakos County demonstrate an impressive ability in writing, speaking, and collaboration, with a majority receiving evaluations of "Good" or "Excellent" in these categories. Although many individuals assess their problem-solving abilities as "Good," there are apprehensions over insufficient proficiency. Thus, we might deduce that the PPE framework is successful in instilling soft skills.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study highlights the efficacy and constraints of the PPE framework in fostering important soft skills among university students in Machakos County, Kenya. The main programs for cultivating soft skills include sporting activities and long-term apprenticeships, according to the key findings. Integrity was the most highly valued skill, followed by interpersonal skills. Finally, the participants unanimously acknowledged that the course they were enrolled in much improved their capacity to collaborate effectively within a team.

According to the results of this study, we suggest taking the following measures. Universities should prioritize the provision of specialized courses that specifically target the development of soft skills. Furthermore, it is imperative to enhance the coordination of sporting events and apprenticeships to offer students genuine opportunities to apply and develop their soft skills in real-world scenarios. Moreover, institutions must implement strategies to incorporate soft skills training into all academic programs, guaranteeing uniform and comprehensive cultivation of these skills across various fields of study. Furthermore, it is essential to continuously evaluate the advancement of soft skills, integrating input from both students and employers to consistently enhance and optimize the training structure. Ultimately, the efficacy of soft skills education can be heightened by engaging expert trainers who specialize in soft skills and organizing extensive workshops. These trainers possess expertise and training techniques that surpass what is generally offered by university instructors.

Potential avenues for future investigation include the following: initially, carrying out longitudinal research to observe the extended consequences of PPE on graduates' employment achievements and utilization of interpersonal skills will provide more profound understanding of its effectiveness. Furthermore, conducting comparative analyses between institutions in Machakos County and those in other regions or nations could yield useful insights into the most efficient approaches and areas for improvement in the instruction of soft skills. Furthermore, doing research that focuses on certain industries and their unique soft skills prerequisites could aid in tailoring training programs to better meet the needs of various sectors.

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Corresponding Author

The corresponding author for this manuscript is Noah Cheruiyot Mutai who can be contacted by email via ncheruiyot3@gmail.com.

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Unlocking Potential with Multimodal Learning and Assessment: A Discussion of the Barriers and Benefits

Jonathan Paul White

University of Trento, Italy

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3824-0371

Abstract

In the current dynamic education landscape, equipping students with flexible, critical and creative digital literacy skills is essential. Higher education plays a key role in this endeavour, as changes in the use of digital technology and academic practices have created an increasing need for teachers and students to develop multimodal competencies. To develop these skills, educational institutions should embrace and utilise multimodality in both teaching and assessment. Aside from meeting students' expectations to develop their digital literacy skills, multimodal approaches provide an engaging, interactive and creative experience of education. They also constitute a more inclusive method of learning, as neurodivergent students can access information and demonstrate knowledge in different ways. This article provides a synthesis of research into the barriers and benefits of multimodal learning and assessment. The paper calls for a change in mindset among education stakeholders, advocating for the recognition of learning as multimodal, and the implementation of multimodal assessment.

***Keywords*:** multimodality, assessment, engagement, neurodivergence, inclusivity

1. Multimodality and teaching

Multimodality can be defined as the use of multiple methods of communication with one common purpose or expression. Kress (2011) conceptualised this synthesis as constituted from diverse 'threads', such as image, speech, gesture or writing. One early and important notion is that images, audio, graphs etc. should not be considered as simply enhancements of a text; they multiply meaning, standing with text in a mutually constitutive relationship (Lemke, 1998). Recognising this requires a distinct change in mindset for higher education, which remains dominated in many disciplines by written and spoken forms of meaning-making in instruction, assessment and research.

Regarding the origins and pedagogical applications, multimodality has grown considerably as a field of academic enquiry from its inception in relation to science education (Roth, 1996), professional scientific print publications (Lemke, 1998) and discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Research has expanded widely, with recent book publications focussing on diverse subject areas such as English language learning (Diamantopoulou & Ørevik, 2022), higher education (Lacković & Olteanu, 2023), digital environments (Sindoni et al., 2019) and

organisation studies (Ravelli et al., 2023). In relation to English language teaching, studies have examined the use of multimodal approaches in teaching English for academic, specific and general purposes (Anis & Khan, 2023; Archer, 2022; Ganapati & Seetharam, 2016; Kustini et al., 2019;). Large-scale research has also been conducted, recruiting participants from university-wide student populations (Saini & Baba, 2024; Sankey et al., 2010; Smith & Storrs, 2023). Overall, these studies have found distinct benefits in multimodal teaching, conveying consistent findings in relation to engagement and motivation, explored in more detail below.

2. Assessment

Transforming or replacing assessments is a challenging endeavour. Diamantopoulou and Ørevik (2022) have pointed out that it is not sufficient to implement multimodal methods of instruction and text creation; institutions also need to recognise multimodal learning through formal assessment structures. Research also shows there is a mismatch between attention to students' multimodal text production and a view of assessment that neglects multimodal work (Tan et al., 2020). Other barriers to implementation have been suggested by Cope and Kalantzis (2017), who argue that subjects tend to be compartmentalised, relying on ready-made formats such as published textbooks and exams based on memorisation. Institutions and individual teachers can be resistant to developing and implementing new forms of assessment, as this takes work and time. There is the need to develop novel criteria, ensure constructive alignment of teaching materials with assessments and often to seek approval through formal quality assurance procedures.

To facilitate the transition to multimodal assessment, institutions can start with small-scale pilot programs (Ørevik, 2022; White, 2022) or provide professional development workshops (British Council, 2024) to equip teachers with the skills necessary to design and evaluate multimodal tasks. The Common Framework of Reference for Intercultural Digital Literacies (CFRIDiL) is a useful reference point, as it includes examples of 'real-life' assessment tasks (Sindoni et al., 2019). Along with teacher and peer-assessment forms, it offers an accessible guide to reliable and tested assessment criteria.

Despite the substantial challenges, studies show that multimodal assessments have been implemented in various disciplines and with positive feedback from students. The multimodal assessment genres studied include e-portfolios (Pourdana & Tavassoli, 2022), websites (White, 2022), webpages, videos and blogs (Sindoni et al., 2019), and posters (Ørevik, 2022).

3. Engagement and agency

While the implementation of multimodal assessments presents distinct challenges, there are considerable benefits that such approaches bring to student engagement and motivation. By embracing multimodality, educators can create more inclusive learning environments that cater to a diverse range of needs and learning preferences. Plastina (2013) and Ganapati and Seetharam (2016) found that multimodal teaching activities in English for specific purposes classes had a beneficial effect on student motivation and engagement. In another study, students' perceptions of a multimodal programme revealed motivation, enjoyment and engagement as key themes (Kustini et al., 2018). In fact, even when the use of multimodal methods has not shown a discernible improvement in learning performance, students commented positively on multimodal methods and perceived benefits in comprehension and retention (Sankey et al., 2010). Australian undergraduates in this study also commented that they found multimodal materials more interesting and enjoyable to use.

Agency is another important aspect of multimodal pedagogy. When students have the opportunity to create multimodal texts, they are both negotiating and democratising the curriculum, enabling a focus on personalised meaning-making through designing and shaping their communication into distinctive forms (Canale, 2022). Teachers can also experience greater agency, through the creation, synthesis and curation of multimodal teaching materials. Archer (2022) proposes that involving both students and teachers in multimodal text creation can instigate a shift in power relations from a top-down orientation to negotiation and discussion. The notion of multimodal literacy does not necessarily create more equitable learning environments, however. Watts-Taff (2022) argues that students and teachers must adopt a multimodal literacy mindset, establishing the conditions for a greater connection between teachers, students and texts.

4. Neurodivergence and inclusivity

The term 'neurodivergent' describes individuals whose cognitive functioning deviates from the average or socially defined norm (Ellis et al., 2023). To support neurodivergent students, presenting information through various formats is essential. This is because a multimodal approach expands opportunities for learning, as students can grasp concepts through their preferred learning channel (Edyburn, 2001; Ellis, 2024). Inclusive education has increasingly been linked to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which promote flexibility in learning and teaching by focusing on multiple means of representation, expression and engagement (UCLES, 2020). The guidelines recommend that a multimodal approach reduces barriers to communication for learners with disabilities, values forms of communication that have historically been undervalued, and expands opportunities for every learner to develop a broader range of expression in a media-rich environment (UCLES, 2020).

Learning environments should also include different options for students to demonstrate their understanding and competence. This is a key shortcoming in current institutions' provisions particularly with assessment. The original developers of UDL, the Centre for Applied Special Technology (2024), outline several drawbacks of traditional learning and assessment: limiting teaching methods and variety of content; hindering learners' ability to demonstrate understanding; failing to prepare learners for their future; and most importantly, restricting the types of learners who can achieve success. Although not specifically focused on neurodivergent students, my research (White, 2022) into multimodal assessment with university students revealed, unexpectedly, that students who were less successful in conventional assessments, such as essays and reports, performed better in a multimodal assessment. They also commented positively on the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding through various media. This indicates that, as frequently noted in UDL literature, multimodal learning and assessment enhance the overall quality and effectiveness of education for all students, not just those with specific learning differences.

5. Conclusion

This article has explored the development and effectiveness of multimodal learning and assessment. It has provided evidence to support the relevance of multimodality for developing learners' digital literacy and its positive perception by students as an engaging and motivating benefit for neurodivergent students, as it enables them to access information and demonstrate understanding in different ways. Despite the growth of multimodal research and teaching practices, assessments are often overlooked, with institutions relying on traditional ready-made

formats such as memorisation tests. The complex issue of assessing multimodal texts produced by learners is a key area for attention in future research and academic practice. This article advocates for an urgent change in higher education, emphasising the need to recognise learning as multimodal and to develop multimodal assessments using available tools such as the CFRIDiL. Implementing multimodal learning and assessments across the academy will enhance evaluation practices, provide a more inclusive representation of individual abilities and ensure young adults are better prepared for a multifaceted digital landscape. As higher education continues to evolve, recognising learning as inherently multimodal is no longer an option, but a necessity for fostering truly inclusive and effective education.

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Rewriting the Future: How Metamodern Education Can Redefine Society and Leadership

Yuliya Shtaltovna

International Business School, HS Fresenius, Berlin, Germany,
Higher Education Circle at Inner Development Goals; UA_IDG_Network, Ukraine

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2976-0305

Abstract

This food-for-thought paper challenges traditional paradigms and proposes a metamodern framework for redefining the optics on the role of education in society, advocating for a new social contract rooted in shared values, inclusivity, and interdisciplinary collaboration. How can we democratize higher education and empower individuals to navigate the uncertainties of the 21st century? Is moving beyond fragmented knowledge and fostering skills-based education truly beneficial? Moving beyond postmodern fragmentation, metamodernism emphasizes cooperation and holistic development, presenting a blueprint for transforming society by bridging individual agency and collective progress. The Inner Development Goals (IDG) promotes skills-based and humanity-focused leadership that addresses the inner and outer dimensions of sustainable development. This transformative skills-based approach to leadership encourages educators and institutions to embrace complexity and ambiguity, preparing future leaders to leverage inherited chaos for meaningful change. This approach challenges traditional paradigms and calls for a dynamic interplay that aligns with the metamodern ethos.

Keywords/key phrases: Higher Education, Inner Development Goals, democratization, , skills development, metamodernity, New Social Contract

1. Introduction

The 21st century requires new ways of thinking and understanding feelings that will help us survive and prosper in a world where the Internet has radically changed our lives. Postmodern humanity is struggling with spiritual and environmental depletion in a new philosophical paradigm.

Some apparent frameworks and applied manifestations of metamodern philosophy in the field of "people development" mark the emergence of the need to re-sign a new social contract for education from the International Commission on Future Education UNESCO (ICFE, 2021) and a new psychological contract between employers and workers, by Institute of Personnel and

Development (CIPD, 2021). The New Social Contract on Education (ICFE, 2021) should unite humanity in the face of the challenges of the 21st century around shared values and collective efforts to ensure the development of knowledge and innovation needed to build a stable and peaceful future for all social, economic, and environmental justice.

2. Era of Uprising Metamodernity

Respected critics of postmodern revisited postmodernism's values and premises, accentuating the constant complex development of modernism and denying that postmodernism can be a substantial or long-term detachment from it. Postmodernism is sceptical of interpretations that claim uniform validity for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races; on the other hand, it concentrates on relative truths for each individual or within each paradigm and therefore has a relativistic view of reality.

What is emerging after postmodernism? One must go beyond the boundless inhomogeneous polyphonic eclectic decentralized postmodernism and take a meta-position to answer this question.

The monograph *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* (Storm, 2021) goes beyond these deconstructive projects to offer a way forward for the humanities and social sciences by introducing a new model of a theory called metamodernism. Through postmodernist critique, Storm gives a new, radical description of the ever-changing nature of society - the "social ontology of the process" - and its materialization in temporary zones of stability or "social species." According to Storm's wording, the prefix "meta-" here "primarily offers a position of a higher or second-order outside (post) modernism" (Storm, 2021, p. 5).

Metamodernism is a revolutionary manifesto for research in the human sciences that offers a more inclusive future of theory in which new forms of both progress and knowledge can help us survive and prosper in a world where the Internet, Globalisation and International Law Violations have radically changed our lives, where humanity is struggling with the inner capacity to comprehend and react to these challenges overloaded with environmental depletion of our time.

A shared understanding of the instability of planetary life in the Anthropocene gives rise to a compass of survival (Raworth, 2017) as well as to the viability of humanity in a new philosophical paradigm and the opportunity to reach the next level of social development. The frameworks of **integrated dynamics** (Wilber, 2000), **spiral dynamics** (Beck & Cowan, 1996; Graves, 1970; Cowan & Todorovic, 2000), **rethinking organizations** (Laloux, 2014), **applying Theory U** (Scharmer, 2016; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013), **integral politics** (Fein, 2023), and **integral management** (Pekar, 2016) have significantly influenced contemporary approaches to leadership, organizational transformation, and cultural dynamics. Each of these perspectives provides unique integral insights into understanding human development, value systems, and strategies for leading change effectively in diverse settings.

The anthology *Dispatches from Time Between Worlds: Crisis and Emergence in Meta-Modernity* is an attempt to perceive the context by exploring the preconditions, coherence and scale of "metamodern" sensitivity: the structure of feelings, cultural ethos, epistemic orientation and imaginary worldview that emerged over the past two decades (Rowson & Pascal, 2021) almost as in the Skovoroda-Jaspers' discourse (Lyuty, 2022). Similarly in the eyes of metamodernists, our world system is dying, and another is about to be born with its own culture

- new rules, attitudes, norms and traditions different from previous epochs of human development. Reflecting on the combined influences of pre-modern, modern and postmodern thought, leading metamodern philosophers go beyond mere criticism of the vision and methods of a viable and desirable future, formulating the maxim that only a new revival can solve the meta-crisis (Pascal, 2021).

The anthology *Metamodernism: Historicity, Influence, and Postmodern Depth* unites the most influential voices in a scholarly and critical discussion of postmodernism (Van den Akker et al., 2017), explaining the aesthetics, arts, and culture of the 21st century. It explores a world immersed in chaos, characterized by trace elements, atomized avatars, billions of videos, microlearning and the clip thinking typical of the postmodern condition.

This qualitative transition from the philosophical ideas of diversity, atomization and palimpsest of postmodernism to the meta-idea of **meta=[beyond]:** reaches the position of the second-order supra-systemic point of view and the ability to organize the inherited chaos through the idea of **meta=[between]**: cooperation, collaboration, inclusion based on shared values and interdisciplinary cocreation.

3. New Social Contracts in Higher Education

The new Social Treaty on Education (ICFE, 2021) aims to unite humanity in the face of the challenges of the 21st century around shared values and collective efforts to ensure the development of knowledge and innovation needed to build a stable and peaceful future for all social, economic and environmental justice.

The psychological contract is a dynamic concept that can be applied to understand the relationships between an employer and an employee. The new psychological contract (CIPD, 2021) defines individuals' expectations, beliefs, ambitions and obligations, as perceived by employers and employees, and impacts daily behaviours. Recognizing how the context is changing from the pressures of VUCA reality and the challenges of the 21st century, the psychological contract offers a way to monitor employees' attitudes and priorities in terms of dimensions that affect a different level of performance and, therefore, a different level of relationship - the concepts of **cooperation, values-based inclusion, and co-creation.**

The adaptive, holistic, and integrative pedagogical approach suggested by this framework aligns with the multifaceted and dynamic nature of essential skills development in higher education (Cole & Donald, 2022). Emphasizing such transformational skills as *perspective - taking, long-term orientation, and visioning* highlights the necessity of understanding diverse viewpoints, applying strategic foresight, and developing a flexible vision to effectively address 21st-century challenges and navigate the complex realities of modern work environments. These skills are increasingly acknowledged across various professional fields (Baruch et al., 2023; Donald & Jackson, 2023). Skills development focusing on *social skills, communication, integrity, intercultural competence, and resilience* is vital across all areas of higher education (Donald et al., 2019, 2023 Nimmi et al., 2021, 2022). Universities must prioritize cultivating these transformational skills to ensure that graduates are prepared to manage the complexities and dynamic challenges inherent in future managerial roles.

Humanity is actively learning the methodology and direction toward a metamodern situation, as human-centeredness and the meta-idea of 'co-' are shaping both philosophical thought and the practical implementation of concepts in the humanities and social sciences. This is evident in applied framework manifestos from influential global organizations such as UNESCO, CIPD, the SDGs, and IDGs, which guide the future of education and cooperation.

The ability to see tectonic shifts in time, ideological trends, and their philosophical basis is a fundamental skill for philosophers, strategic leaders and 21st-century thinkers. This enables them to join the value-based global communities with values of **cooperation, collaboration, inclusion based on shared values** and **interdisciplinary co-creation.**

4. Opportunity for Democratization in Higher Education

The concept of "democratization of education" has gained significant attention in recent years as higher education institutions strive for more inclusive and accessible educational environments. In her work, Shtaltovna (2018a) undertakes a concept analysis to clarify the nuances of the concept of “DEMOCRATIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION” understanding this concept as a foundation for developing strategies and roadmaps aimed at democratizing education in Ukraine and beyond. Within the context of higher education, Shtaltovna (2018b) acknowledges the ambiguity surrounding the concept of “DEMOCRATIZATION” and distinguishes it from other related processes like liberalization, destandardization, and restructuring. Shtaltovna (2016) provides a conceptual framework that aids educators in the process of democratizing education in Ukraine and beyond.

In the realm of cyberspace and digital transformation, Makhachashvili and Shtaltovna (2021) explore the ontological and cognitive aspects of this evolving environment. Their research views cyberspace as an integral ontological entity with unique attributes that require new forms of cognition and perception. This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of educational democratization, as digital technologies play a crucial role in expanding access to education. Makhachashvili and Shtaltovna's work underscores the need for transformational innovative approaches to understanding and harnessing the potentials of the cyberspace in the pursuit of democratized education.

In business schools within higher education, the development of skills is crucial, not only to ensure academic success but also to prepare students for their roles as informed and responsible members of democratic societies and as leaders in sustainable and ethical business practices (Jakubik, 2019, 2020; Jakubik et al., 2023). For leaders in the 21st century, well-honed cognitive skills are essential for effective decision-making, strategic formulation, and the promotion of sustainable practices within their organizations and in broader social activism.

5. Higher Education and Pedagogical Focus on Inner Development

Indeed, Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are increasingly recognizing the need to integrate inner development as a core component of pedagogy to cultivate humanity-based and sustainability-focused leadership. Traditional education models often emphasize external, technological, and technical skills; however, there is a growing awareness that developing the internal human dimension is equally crucial for meaningful transformation toward sustainability. Inner capacities such as *self-awareness, empathy, critical reflection, and ethical*

decision-making can better prepare future leaders to address complex global challenges from an early age. This involves HEIs reimagining curricula to include transformative skills learning experiences that go beyond conventional classroom settings, encouraging students to engage deeply with both inner and outer dimensions of change.

The Inner Development Goals (IDG) framework has a distinctive motto: **Transformational Skills for Sustainable Development,** and unites a wide array of skills and competencies, structured into 5 core areas of focus. Essentially, the IDG framework serves as a foundational tool for educators, leaders, and individuals dedicated to fostering a more sustainable, responsible, human-centred and well-informed world (Shtaltovna et al., 2024).

Courses like *One Year in Transition* provide a compelling example of how inner development can be nurtured through experiential learning that combines micro-phenomenology and thematic analysis. Such approaches help students develop a more relational and interconnected perspective, supporting their ability to act as courageous and principled change agents for sustainability (Pöllänen et al., 2023). This pedagogical shift not only supports the development of sustainability competencies but also empowers students to internalize and embody these principles as part of their identity, facilitating long-term, systemic change at individual, collective, and societal levels (Garcia-Alvarez et al., 2023). By integrating these inner dimensions of leadership and sustainability into educational practices, higher education can be foremost in producing a new generation of leaders committed to ethical and sustainable development.

In the context of higher education, there is a growing emphasis on integrating inner development and sustainability into pedagogy to prepare future leaders who are equipped to navigate complex global challenges. Methodologies that focus on future-oriented research, such as those utilizing augmented reality and design thinking, are proving mutually beneficial in advancing sustainability-focused education. new ways of teaching and learning that enable inner dimensions, such as *self-awareness, creative confidence, and values-based engagement*. For instance, Nordén (2024) highlights how student teachers in higher education experienced transformative learning through activities like designing hybrid learning environments, which encouraged sustainability mindsets and competencies like intra-personal and interpersonal skills, futures-thinking, and professional knowledge-driven change. This study illustrates how integrating design thinking with inner transition approaches can foster a more profound commitment to sustainability within higher education by bridging theory and practice in didactic modelling.

Moreover, the concept of the "caring university" proposed by Disterheft (2024) further emphasizes the importance of nurturing both inner and outer sustainability for transformative change in higher education as they prioritize both community and planetary well-being. Experimental learning spaces, such as The CareLab for People & Planet at NOVA University Lisbon, have demonstrated the potential for *self-determination, emancipatory empowerment, and a sense of community* among participants. While these initiatives may not immediately lead to significant structural changes, they cultivate a culture of care and hope, laying the groundwork for more profound, systemic transformations. By adopting a more holistic approach that balances inner development with sustainability goals, higher education institutions can create environments that support personal growth and collective action toward a sustainable future.

The evolving role of universities in preparing students for the complexities of contemporary work and life has become a topic of increasing importance in both academic research and practical implementation. In their work, *The Role of Universities: Enhancing Students' Capabilities for Work and Life* (Jakubik et al., 2023), the authors provide a comprehensive framework connecting academic and operational competencies with students' life-world becoming. Shtaltovna and Muzzu (2021a) explore the impact of the pandemic in their article *Teaching Digitally-Ready Soft Skills for Employability*. This research investigates the adaptation of teaching strategies to the online teaching of essential soft skills in students, experimenting with various methodologies based on their digital capabilities and experiences (Shtaltovna & Muzzu, 2021b). The findings showcase digital teaching practices to effectively nurture students' crucial skills, especially when traditional classroom settings are disrupted.

In addition to the above sources, Shtaltovna's work (2021) introduces a unifying perspective on skill development assessment through a 6-level chart. This chart, proposed in the article *Can a skill be measured or assessed? 6-level skills development approach to skill assessment*, addresses the evolving concept of skills in academia and the professional world. Finally, Makhachashvili (2021) explores the adaptation of qualification assessment processes in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic analysing how universities in Ukraine and India utilized ICT tools for online assessment of language programs. Collectively, these sources underscore the imperative for universities to adapt and evolve in response to changing circumstances, whether driven by technological shifts or global crises.

6. Conclusion

Incorporating the ideas of metamodernity into the IDG framework in Higher Education across the globe calls for a **transformative skills-based approach to leadership** to provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the evolving educational and leadership landscape. Metamodernity, which emerges as a response to an evolution beyond postmodernism, reflects a cultural, philosophical, social, and educational context that rethinks the fragmented, atomized elements of postmodern thought. The metamodern "meta-idea" of **meta=[beyond]** marks a shift towards a higher-order, supra-systemic viewpoint. This shift is characterized by the ability to organize and make sense of inherited chaos through the concept of **meta=[between],** which emphasizes cooperation, inclusion, and interdisciplinarity.

In this context, metamodernity calls for the same suprasystemic vision of the needs of Higher Education and the Role of Universities in the face of the Sustainable Development Goals. It requires not just a philosophical shift but a practical framework that can be applied to leadership and education of both modernist and postmodernist paradigms.

The practical implications of this food-for-thought paper can reignite educators, policymakers, and leaders within higher education and beyond. By adopting a metamodern framework and integrating the Inner Development Goals (IDG) into curricula, universities can foster holistic and adaptive leadership skills necessary for addressing complex global challenges. Policymakers can leverage these insights to reform educational policies, emphasizing interdisciplinary collaboration, inclusivity, and the development of cognitive, emotional, and ethical competencies. This shift can lead to a more engaged, ethically driven, and sustainability-focused generation of leaders capable of driving meaningful change across sectors. For

practitioners, embracing this transformative skills-based approach means reimagining teaching practices and institutional strategies to prepare students not just for the job market but for active, responsible participation in an interconnected world.

Through integrating metamodern thinking into a transformative, skills-based approach to leadership, we acknowledge the importance of moving beyond fragmented knowledge and towards a holistic, collaborative, and adaptive model of leadership. This approach is aligned with the Inner Development Goals (IDG) framework, which promotes a holistic and integrative development of cognitive, emotional, and ethical capacities. It encourages leaders to engage in **deep cooperation, inclusion based on shared values, and interdisciplinary collaboration**, thus highlighting a more sustainable and responsible approach to leadership.

Ultimately, the Transformative Skills-based Approach to Leadership, informed by the principles of metamodernity, challenges traditional paradigms and invites educators, leaders, and institutions to embrace complexity, ambiguity, and the interwoven nature of today's world. It calls for a dynamic interplay between inner development and outer action, preparing leaders not only to manage inherited chaos but to leverage it for meaningful and sustainable transformation through cooperation and a values-based inclusive vision for the future.

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Corresponding Author

The corresponding author for this manuscript is Prof. Dr. Yuliya Shtaltovna who can be contacted by email via y.shtaltovna@gmail.com.