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FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH REPORT

Comprehensive common report

S4B PROJECT - DIGITAL SOFT SKILLS FOR BLENDED LEARNING

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Introduction

The aim of this research (initial online and secondary focus groups) was to convene educators and other educational experts in a collaborative effort to dissect the current educational landscape, particularly in the context of the pandemic-induced shift towards distance education. This collective exploration sought to shed light on the realities faced by these professionals in their daily teaching and learning endeavors. The ultimate goal was to contribute to the development of a comprehensive map of the 12 most crucial soft skills important for the effective management of digital learning processes.

This investigative undertaking was driven by a set of well-defined objectives:

- Understanding the professional landscape

The primary objective was to gain an in-depth understanding of the present professional realities encountered by teachers and pedagogues. This entailed an exploration of the challenges, successes, and adaptations they have experienced within the evolving educational landscape.

- Assessing learning needs

A critical aspect of this initiative was to gather invaluable insights into the learning needs of educators. This entailed a comprehensive needs analysis to identify both "hard" and "soft" digital skills and competences that teachers perceive as essential for enhancing their effectiveness in the virtual classroom. Moreover, it sought to recognize the competences they already possess and deem vital in managing the teaching process within an online environment.

- Identifying crucial soft skills

Central to this research was the delineation of the most pivotal "soft digital skills" requisite for proficiently steering the digital learning process. This included an exploration of the human-centric abilities and qualities that facilitate successful digital education.

- Putting light on the challenges in distance education

A critical aspect of this exploration was to uncover the difficulties and challenges faced by educators in organizing and executing distance online educational processes. By comprehensively understanding these points, the research aimed to formulate strategies and solutions to mitigate them.

- Leveraging existing initiatives and practices

The initiative also sought to unearth existing initiatives, practices, and training programs aimed at enhancing skills and competencies. By spotlighting these endeavors, the research aimed to identify best practices and potential areas for further improvement at both school and national levels.

These objectives were meticulously crafted to guide the research in its pursuit of a holistic understanding of the educational landscape, with a specific emphasis on the soft skills imperative for navigating the challenges of digital learning. The resulting insights were poised



to not only inform the development of tailored project products but also to address the specific needs of the final users – the dedicated educators shaping the future of digital education.

Methodology and participants profile

A comprehensive analysis based on initial surveys and national focus groups was conducted across four countries, encompassing 58 educators and managers from various educational levels - 12 in Bulgaria, 15 in Romania, 19 in Portugal, and 12 in Spain.. The focus groups, held in Bulgaria, Romania, Portugal, and Spain, sought to delineate the essential soft skills for proficient blended learning. Each nation subsequently generated a detailed report, encapsulating the comprehensive discussions, findings, and conclusions.

Soft skills pre-selection process:

Soft skills	Bulgaria	Portugal	Romania	Spain
Innovation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Relationship Management	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Effective Communication	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Flexibility	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Inclusiveness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Motivation to development	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Organisational skills and time management	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Adaptability	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Commitment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Problem solving	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Empathy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Problem management	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Patience	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Perseverance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Passion and self-motivation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Self-consciousness/self-awareness	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Resolution and solution focussed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Observation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Critical thinking	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Active listening	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Self-leadership	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Self-confidence	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Resilience	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Creativity	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Negotiation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Openness to diversity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lifelong learning	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Teamwork	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Positive attitude	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Stress management	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Equity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Proactiveness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



In the preliminary phase, educators were tasked with choosing 20 key soft skills from a pool of 35. This initial stage aimed to identify the skills perceived as most relevant in a blended learning environment.

Soft skills final selection process:

Subsequently, participants were further tasked with distilling the 20 selected skills to a final list of 12. This process involved a deliberative voting exercise.

Key findings

Participants across all four nations identified various benefits of blended learning. Notable advantages included heightened family involvement, bolstered student autonomy, dynamic evaluation methods, and streamlined access to digital resources.

Educators encountered shared challenges in adapting to constant change, sustaining student engagement, managing emotional dynamics, and allocating time effectively. Technical obstacles, including camera use and privacy concerns, also surfaced as prevalent concerns. Participants universally acknowledged that flexibility, creativity, effective communication, and adaptability were critical skills for educators navigating the blended learning landscape. These skills were deemed essential for providing effective support to students.

In-depth cross-national insights

Consistent priorities - Despite diverse educational systems and contexts, certain soft skills emerged as universally pivotal. These included creativity, adaptability, effective communication, and motivation.

Innovative teaching strategies - Educators showcased a remarkable capacity for innovation. Creative methods like cooking lessons, virtual field trips, and personalized tests were employed to engage students, indicating a strong adaptability to online environments.

Technological competence - While teachers grappled with the challenges of adopting new technologies, many expressed a willingness to enhance their digital competencies. This adaptive mindset bodes well for future technological integrations.

Family engagement - Family involvement was viewed as a powerful asset, providing a unique opportunity for deeper connections between students, parents, and teachers. This collaboration was seen as pivotal for a supportive learning environment.

Soft skills by country

Soft skills	Bulgaria	Portugal	Romania	Spain	FINAL
Innovation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Relationship Management	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Effective communication	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Flexibility	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Motivation to development	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Organisational skills and time management	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Adaptability	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Problem solving	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Empathy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Patience	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Perseverance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Passion and self-motivation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Critical thinking	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Active listening	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Resilience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Creativity	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Lifelong learning	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Teamwork	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Positive attitude	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Stress management	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Specific soft skills selected

After a meticulous and collaborative selection process across all four participating countries, the focus groups collectively identified the following 12 soft skills as paramount for ensuring effective blended learning:

1. Creativity (Selected by all 58 participants):

Universally regarded as indispensable, creativity is seen as the cornerstone for designing engaging and effective blended learning experiences.

2. Passion and self-motivation (Selected by 44 participants)

Vital for sustaining enthusiasm and commitment, these skills drive educators to continuously improve their teaching methods.

3. Problem solving (Selected by 42 participants)

Integral for overcoming challenges in online teaching, problem-solving skills equip educators to adapt and find innovative solutions.

4. Organizational skills and time management (Selected by 42 participants):

In a digital learning environment, the ability to manage time and resources efficiently is crucial for productivity.

5. Effective communication (Selected by 42 participants):

Enhanced communication skills are pivotal for fostering meaningful interactions and conveying information effectively in virtual settings.

6. Innovation (Selected by 37 participants):

The capacity for innovative thinking empowers educators to develop creative and dynamic learning materials and approaches.

7. Teamwork (Selected by 36 participants):

Collaboration, even in a digital context, is seen as a fundamental skill for creating a supportive learning community.

8. Empathy (Selected by 36 participants):

Recognizing and responding to the emotional needs of students is vital for creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

9. Adaptability (Selected by 34 participants):

Given the rapidly evolving nature of online education, adaptability is crucial for responding effectively to changes and challenges.

10. Active listening (Selected by 27 participants):

Actively listening to students' needs and concerns is an essential skill for building trust, understanding, and effective communication.

11. Positive attitude (Selected by 26 participants):

Recognizing the importance of maintaining a positive attitude, even in the face of challenges, this skill equips educators to provide a stable and supportive presence for their students.

12. Resilience and stress management (Selected by 26 participants):

Recognizing the overlap between resilience and stress management, the partnership decided to combine these skills into one overarching category. This skill equips educators to not only bounce back from setbacks but also to provide a stable and supportive presence for their students.

These 12 identified soft skills stand as the cornerstones for educators striving to navigate the complexities of blended learning effectively. They represent a comprehensive spectrum of attributes that are indispensable for creating dynamic, engaging, and supportive online learning environments. Through the collective wisdom of 58 participants from diverse educational backgrounds, these skills have been recognized as the linchpin for success in the evolving landscape of digital education.

Recommendations

1. Teacher training and development

Rigorous professional development programs should be instituted to elevate educators' digital and soft skills. A specific emphasis should be placed on creativity, adaptability, and effective communication.

2. Promote flexibility and innovation

Encourage teachers to explore innovative approaches, leveraging technology to create engaging learning experiences. Platforms for sharing successful strategies should be established.

3. Strengthen family-school partnerships

Foster collaboration between educators and families through workshops, regular communication channels, and involvement in student activities. This will ensure a supportive environment for students in both physical and virtual settings.

4. Continued research and collaboration

Encourage ongoing research and knowledge-sharing among partner nations to refine best practices for blended learning. Establish a platform for collaborative projects and resource-sharing.

Conclusion

The four national focus groups yielded invaluable insights into the soft skills essential for effective blended learning. The pre-selection process, involving the distillation of 20 skills from a pool of 35, and the subsequent voting exercise to determine the final 12, demonstrated a robust consensus among educators. The unanimous endorsement of creativity highlights its paramount importance in the digital learning landscape.

These findings underscore the need for a holistic approach to teacher training, emphasizing both technical proficiency and the cultivation of critical soft skills. By fostering creativity, adaptability, and effective communication, educators can navigate the evolving landscape of education, ensuring the success of students in blended learning environments. This report provides a foundational framework for shaping future educational practices.