Ulisse
Soft Skills for Employability

TRAINERS' HANDBOOK
How to design the ULISSE programme on soft skills

UNIVERSITÀ DI PISA · UNIVERSITY OF LATVIA ANNO 1919 · UNIVERSITAS Miguel Hernández · P.PORTO ISCAP · ERREQUADRO Research over Research

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1. Introduction

This is a practical guide to design effective and engaging short programmes to train and develop soft skills. It is the result of the ULISSE project, developed by a partnership represented by the University of Pisa (Italy), the Miguel Hernandez University of Elche (Spain), the Polytechnic Institute of Porto (Portugal), Latvijas University (Latvia), and the company Erre Quadro (Italy), a University of Pisa's spin-off. The University partners have all tested the ULISSE programme successfully.

2. The ULISSE project: context and main objectives

The ULISSE project is based on the idea that soft skills are the cornerstone for personal growth, the building blocks for the development of the "hard" skills and competencies required to succeed in the labour market. A worker's employability is seen to be more and more dependent upon possessing the hybrid skills – technical and soft skills – that employers increasingly value.

Therefore, it is important that students also develop their soft skills by learning to use appropriate tools, procedures and methods through a balanced mix of theory and practice. But how to do it? How to choose the soft skills to be trained?

Here you can find a synthesis of the methodology adopted in our project with the links to the documents that explain it in detail.

3. The ULISSE approach

ULISSE is based on a robust analysis of the most important soft skills extracted from different sources (papers, data sources, etc.) through text mining techniques. This research led to the **development of a Lexicon** containing and defining 25 soft skills, identifying groups of data records (clusters), unusual records and dependencies among the words extracted. This output can be accessed at this link.

The second step consisted in gathering information from the employer's perspective processing a big amount of job offers to get a ranking of the most frequent soft skills mentioned in them. Besides this, a survey with employers was conducted in all the partner's countries, gathering 200 questionnaires and 60 interviews. The result of this activity, together with a revisited literature review, resulted in a **Soft Skills mindmap**, which allowed us to shorten the original list of soft skills to 17 and to establish relationships among them.

The mindmap, represented in the figure below, also offers a detailed definition of each soft skill with the aim of adopting a common, clear terminology between

employers and job seekers.
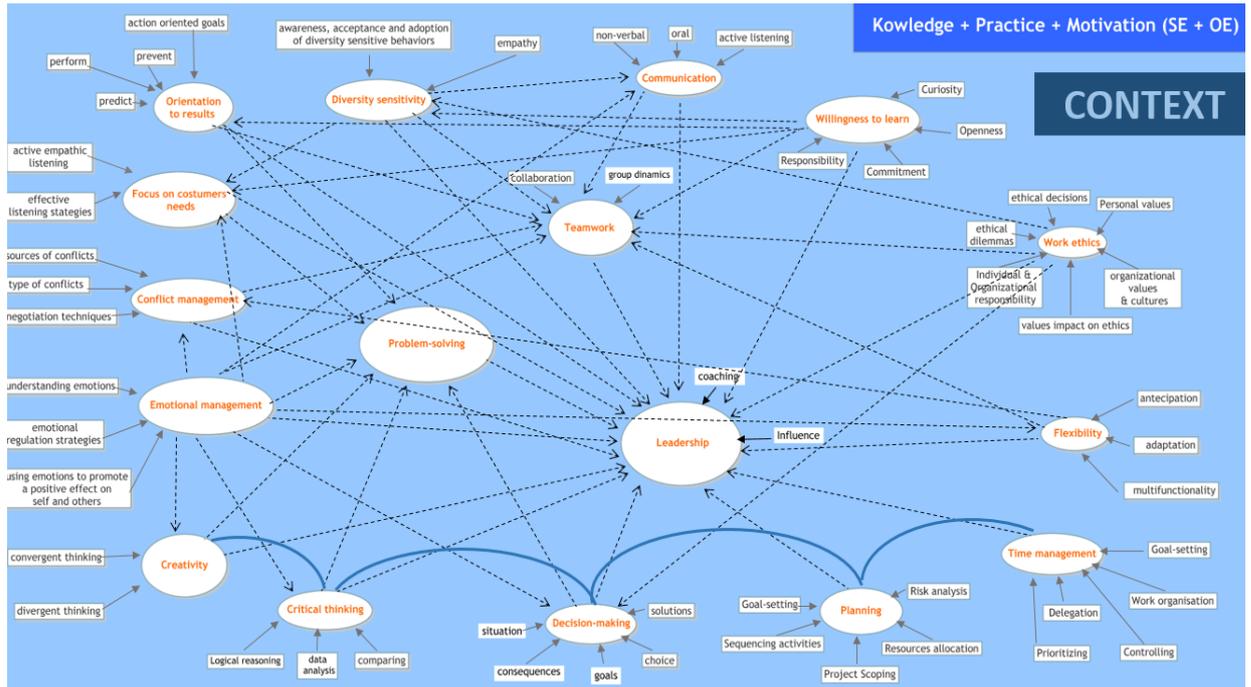
Figure 1 - ULISSE Soft Skills mind map

This is the list of 17 soft skills, in alphabetical order:

1. Communication
2. Conflict management
3. Creativity
4. Critical thinking
5. Decision-making
6. Diversity sensitivity
7. Emotional management
8. Flexibility
9. Focus on customers' needs
10. Leadership
11. Orientation to results
12. Planning
13. Problem-solving
14. Teamwork
15. Time management
16. Willingness to learn
17. Work ethics

Starting from this list, we selected 9 soft skills to be trained, directly and indirectly, in a pilot course tested in all the universities involved in the project. The selection

process of the soft skills was based on a Gap analysis, which allowed us to evaluate the gap existing between what employers demand from students in terms of soft skills (data gathered through the survey already mentioned) and what the students offer in terms of soft skills in their CVs (CV data processing). Furthermore, a mapping of the training offers on soft skills held in the partner universities has been conducted. This allowed us to get a shortlist of the soft skills highly demanded by employers but not trained enough in the universities involved in the project.

4. How to design an engaging programme: the case of the ULISSE pilot course

This figure represents the set of soft skills selected for the pilot course delivered by the Universities involved in the project. The choice of the topics can be made by each organization on the basis of their needs and tasks.
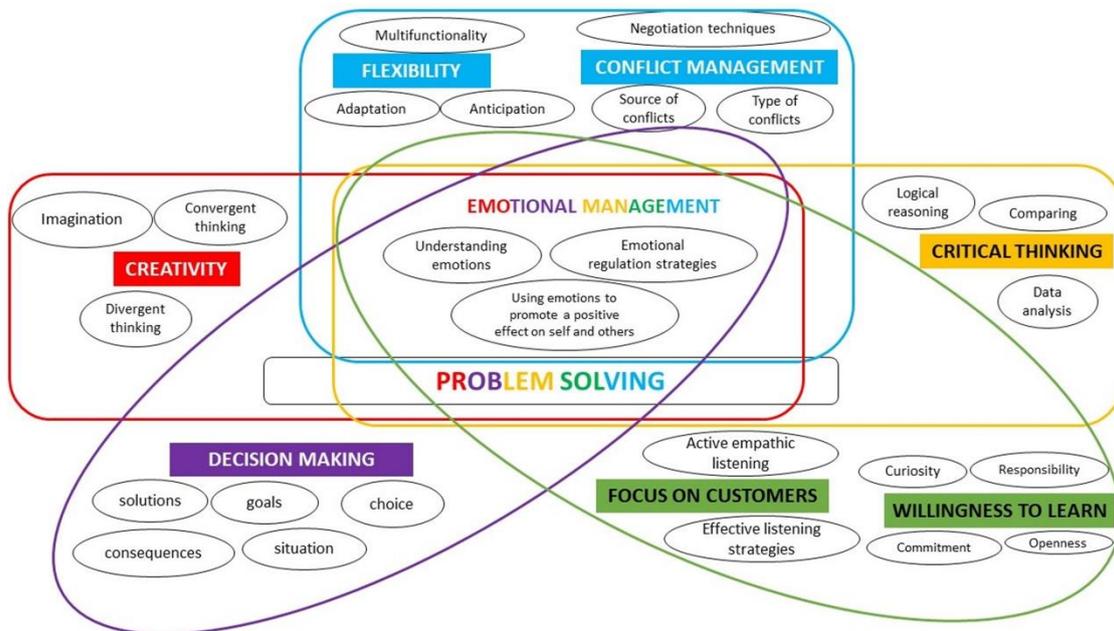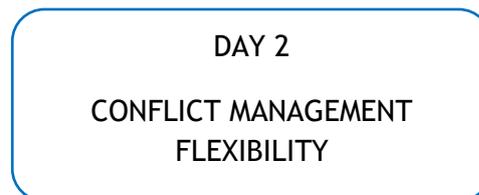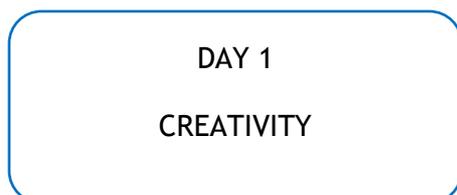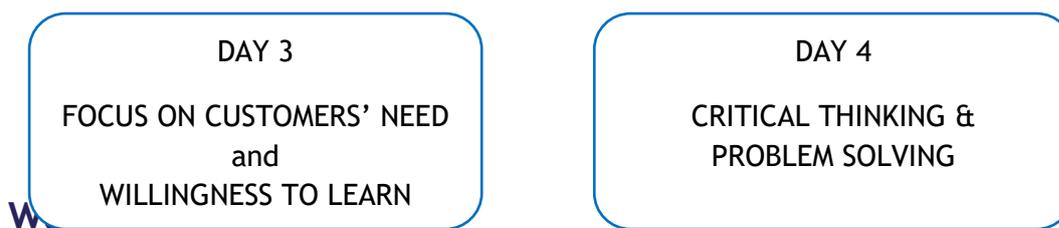

Figure 2 - Set of soft skills selected for the pilot course

The format

The course took place over 4 days and was delivered either consecutively or over two or more weeks, depending on each university's choice. Each day was dedicated to train a specific set of soft skills through different workshops.

DAY 1

CREATIVITY

DAY 2

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT
FLEXIBILITY

> **DAY 3**
>
> FOCUS ON CUSTOMERS' NEED
> and
> WILLINGNESS TO LEARN

> **DAY 4**
>
> CRITICAL THINKING &
> PROBLEM SOLVING

Workshops

During our pilot we tested two types of workshops:

1) **Well-structured activities** with a minimum duration of 3 hours, with a break in the middle, that blend robust theory and practical activities to carry out both individually and in sub-groups.
Each workshop should be focused mainly on one soft skill also covering other related soft skills.
The duration can be extended to more than 3 hours by expanding the part dedicated to the exercises, much appreciated by the students so that they can have more time to apply the concepts learned and become familiar with the techniques presented.

2) **Shorter workshops** (1h30m) with a brief introduction to the topic to be discussed and more space for students to express their views on the assigned topic. This activity works well if using videos and commenting on them.

Course materials

For each workshop/main topic a series of materials have been produced, mainly:

- **Syllabi**- Table of contents of the workshops, including learning outcomes, course content and objectives, methodology and duration, bibliography.
- **Slides** - Deck of slides to be adopted
- **Exercises** - Practical exercises, including the steps, tools and tips provided by ULISSE's trainers.
- **Multimedia** – Selection of online resources to be used as additional training materials for reinforcing learner skills

These materials are available on the project's official website https://ulisseproject.eu/training-courses/ in all the partner's languages (English, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Latvian).

Course mode

The pilot course was delivered either in presence, online or in blended mode, according to the specific conditions (CoViD19-related) of each country.

The choice that you make implies that all the materials (especially exercises and group activities) must be adapted to the selected mode accordingly. For example, if the course is delivered online you should adopt digital content sharing platforms that

can allow students to do their exercises reproducing an engaging work environment. Tips and tricks are explained in the various materials published on the website. This mix of course delivery experiences, all successful, demonstrates that with proper small arrangements this format works effectively.

Participants

The selection of participants should be based on diversity. Select a variety of people with different knowledge and skills (diverse background), gender and age in order to generate a more interesting work environment. Activities to involve participants:

• Arrange which disciplines/year of course should participate. The suggested maximum number of participants is set to 24. The even number is preferable to better manage the activities carried out by the subgroups and pairs.

• Set up a registration procedure and follow up.

• Make invitations and promotional material.

Organization

Roles

Programme Leader

He/she has general responsibility for organizing, planning, and running the whole course.

BEFORE	DURING
• Plan date and time of the event • Invite participants • Book facilities, equipment and accommodation (audio-visual aids: projector, screen, black-/whiteboard, flip over, paper, pens, sticky notes, etc…) • Book food and drinks • Appointment with and training of facilitators • Define and get prizes (if any) • Arrange payment or gifts for external helpers (if any) • Calculate a budget • Press contact (if needed)	• Open the course • Introduce guests • Register and follow up on participants • Group formation (if needed) • Make sure all equipment is working (slides…) • Delivery of certificates of attendance • Close the course

Teachers/Trainers

They are responsible for running a module on the development of a specific set of soft skills

BEFORE	DURING
• Prepare the syllabus and all the materials needed: slides, exercises… • Inform the Course leader on any specific types of equipment necessary to run the workshop • Implement the tools for evaluating the learning outcomes	• Run the module • Interact with the facilitator

Facilitator(s)

His/her/their role is to keep the process flowing by supporting the trainer(s) in distributing materials, assisting the students to accomplish their tasks. Facilitators are not necessarily content experts, but they should ease the processes and stimulate energy and focus in groups.

BEFORE	DURING
Support(s) the teacher/trainer in preparing all necessary materials to run the workshop	Assist(s) the students during all the activities creating a cooperative, lively and intensive atmosphere Supervise(s) the groups/sub-groups

Location

It is suggested to move participants to a facility outside their normal habitat: choose larger rooms/venues that allow group activities and socialization.

Ice-breaking activities

It is important to organize an ice-breaking activity on the first day of the programme to help the students get to know each other. This will facilitate collaboration and engagement. If possible, try to do a short game or icebreaker at the beginning of each day.

Food

In order to make the course a memorable experience and also to help students focus on their tasks and work in an engaging environment, don't forget to provide drinks and food. The small talks made in front of a drink can produce brilliant ideas.

Certificates

At the end of the course, students should be given an attendance certificate signed by the University.

Assessment of activities

Several essential steps should be considered while preparing the evaluation of training courses on soft skills. To design the evaluation processes it is necessary to begin with a clear definition of assessment goals, which are strictly connected with the expected learning outcomes. That's why a focus on evaluation is needed while the course is being planned and the syllabus is being prepared.

In the soft skills area, it is important to consider three elements that need to be presented to exhibit competent behaviour: knowledge, practice and motivation. **Knowledge** refers to a cognitive understanding of a soft skill and we may say that it reflects the "not-so-soft" component of each soft skill. Once cognitively understood, one needs experience in applying it behaviourally (**practice**). Finally, **motivation** is key to exhibit skills. In fact, once a skill is developed, a person may choose to use it (exhibit it) or not. If people believe that their actions will not have the desired consequences, they have little incentive to engage in those actions. These three elements have been taken into account when we designed the questionnaires used in the ULISSE course.

The following table shows the whole methodology/sequence adopted, with the timeline, the goal, the kind of questionnaire delivered and the target reached.

Table 1 - ULISSE Soft Skills Training Course adopted methodology/sequence

When	Assessment Goal/Why	How (Questionnaires)	Who
Before the course During application	Assess student's pre-training motivation to use as criteria for admission Create a baseline	1.1. Main questionnaire with the application form	Applicant students (if there were 25 registered students that will not participate in the course, these will be the control group)
		1.2. Main questionnaire without the application form	Non-applicant students (This questionnaire will be needed only if there were less than 25 registered students that will not participate in the course, these will be the control group)
During the course End of each workshop	Evaluate workshop satisfaction	2. Workshop Satisfaction Questionnaire	Participants (students selected to participate in the course)
	Evaluate course satisfaction	3. Course Satisfaction Questionnaire	Participants
			Participants

At the end of the course	Evaluate the course efficacy in the development of soft skills	1.2. Main questionnaire without application form	Non- participants / Non-applicant students
End of the last workshop		4. Peers questionnaire	Training Peers
One month after the course	Training transfer	5. Post-training transfer and learning questionnaire	Participants

These are the 5 Questionnaires adopted:

1.1. Main questionnaire with the application form

This tool is based on the questions that the trainers prepared in order to evaluate:

a) soft skills knowledge; and,
b) practice (based on scenarios)

Additionally, based on the learning outcomes expected for each workshop, a self-efficacy questionnaire was designed by a self-efficacy specialist to assess the soft skills attitudes of the learners (motivational part). In these three sections, we included the knowledge or practical techniques that were addressed in each workshop.

1.2. Main questionnaire without the application form

This questionnaire has the same structure as 1.1. questionnaire but not the questions used for the course application related to pre-training motivation.

2. Workshop Satisfaction Questionnaire

Each workshop was evaluated separately and this questionnaire was answered by the trainees at the end of each training day, focusing on five different dimensions:

a) Clearness of workshop objectives;
b) Interactivity level;
c) Relevance of the topics presented;
d) Quality of the delivery; and,
e) Workshop usefulness to soft skill development

Questionnaire 2 was applied daily to evaluate each workshop and to monitor the course process.

3. Course Satisfaction Questionnaire

For a general assessment, course satisfaction questionnaires were distributed at the end of the course.

4. Peers questionnaire: This questionnaire is composed of 20 questions relating to behavioural aspects expected to be developed by the course. It is important that the

trainers clarify to the learners that this questionnaire does not aim to evaluate the learners themselves but it is just to evaluate the course. Also, the answers are anonymous and the project team will only know who is being evaluated but not who did the evaluation.

5. Post-training transfer and learning questionnaire

The most important outcome is the actual implementation of soft skills in everyday life. To effectively assess this aspect, one needs to know if the trainees are using the learned soft skills in their day-to-day life.

On the first day of each course, trainers should group the students in sets of two or more participants, explaining that throughout the course, pairs and groups will always include the same students. This is important to facilitate the knowledge among trainees in order to facilitate the peer evaluation that takes place at the end of the course.

Another important issue of the evaluation process was the creation of **control groups** composed of students not taking part in the course that were asked to complete some questionnaires. Control groups were created in order to evaluate the learning outcomes of the students attending the course referring to students who did not. The partners included in the control group students that applied for the course but that were excluded (due to not fulfilling the course registration criteria or due to the fact that the target number of participants had already been reached) or non-applicant students willing to support the evaluation of the course. The control group assessment was done twice: before the course and just after it.

All questionnaires were translated into the respective National languages before the beginning of the course. The online platform Limesurvey has been identified as the most appropriate tool to collect participants' feedback throughout the soft skills course. The online questionnaires were available in English and the respective National languages: Spanish, Italian, Latvian and Portuguese.

The whole methodology adopted is described at this link.