

# Activating the problem of forming flexible skills in student-athletes

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## Abstract

**Objective of the study** was to identify the demand for developing soft skills among student-athletes of the Ural Federal University (UrFU) as a model university in terms of organizing work with student-athletes.

**Methods and structure of the study.** The experiment was conducted in November–December 2023 using an online questionnaire (Yandex form). 150 student-athletes took part in the survey: 55% boys and 45% girls.

**Results and conclusions.** The educational organization of UrFU has a fairly developed sports base, which satisfies not only the needs of amateur athletes, but also professionals. This gives students a sense of care and interest in developing their sporting achievements. Student-athletes, receiving professional education, are focused on the quality of education and are ready to make additional efforts for self-development. Students are aware of the importance of soft skills for professional growth and self-development; most of them are focused on the development of communication, cognitive and organizational skills. Student-athletes assign priority soft skills to a specific sport.

**Keywords:** *student-athlete, soft skills, student sports, mass sports, high-performance sports, extracurricular activities.*

**Introduction.** The higher education system is the main social institution for improving the intellectual resource of society. Since the training of highly qualified specialists is aimed at realizing their professional potential in a certain structure of society, one of the optimal approaches to education involves the formation of narrowly professional and supraprofessional (flexible) skills. The latter make it possible to fully realize the student's potential, both professional and personal, in various sociocultural spheres. "The educational space of the university provides the creation of special opportunities and conditions for activating their potential, demonstrating their intellectual, creative, organizational abilities..." [5, p.48].

The formation of soft skills at a university is realized not only in the learning process, but also in the process of extracurricular work, through sports. A communicative, critical, organized, responsible professional who is able to interact in a team of like-minded people is in demand in the sports field at various levels. Student

sports is an extracurricular educational activity of students popularized in higher educational institutions. In the process of sports activities, students develop physically, which allows them to prepare for active work and form healthy lifestyle habits. Structuring student sports at the levels of "elite student sports, elite student sports and mass student sports" has significant heuristic potential [5, p. 34–35] in the educational space of the university.

This classification allows you to design the necessary elements of extracurricular activities in accordance with the specifics of sports activities. Grassroots sport reaches the maximum number of students, promotes physical health, social integration, builds positive interpersonal relationships, develops leadership skills and improves quality of life. Elite sports are aimed at achieving results in national and international competitions. The achievements of athletes are not only their personal success, but also a source of national pride and help strengthen the country's authority in the international arena.



The relevance of a differentiated approach in the educational space of student-athletes is confirmed by a number of studies. The parity of professional and soft skills is discussed in [10]. Flexible skills allow you to navigate not only professional activities, but also in a rapidly changing social environment.

The importance and necessity of developing flexible skills in educational organizations is proven in research [3, 9]. They view the development of soft skills as an important task for universities; believe that it is possible to develop the ability for communication, diplomacy, cooperation, relationship building, leadership, as well as the formation of team, public, “thinking” skills, the ability to present your ideas, creatively solve complex problems (including social ones), and make decisions in the process of participation in extracurricular cultural and sports activities of the university.

In the study [2], soft skills are presented within the framework of communication, cognitive and emotional intelligence, self-organization and management. Other authors include communication, management, self-organization, and effective thinking skills in the group of soft skills [1]. Pedagogical research has developed tools for the development of soft skills for students in general, which include master classes, TED conferences, case games, public events in the Open Microphone format [6], etc. In work devoted to the demand for soft skills with positions of students, teachers and employers, there is a similarity in positions regarding the importance of communication and organizational skills among all respondents, and discrepancies are recorded in the understanding of the degree of importance of managerial and effective thinking skills [7]. The few studies of soft skills in physical education have identified the components and technologies that facilitate their development and inclusion in educational courses [8]. Works are emerging that justify the need to include soft skills in student-athlete curricula and professional standards [4].

However, such studies are fragmentary. Research into students' understanding of the need to develop soft skills seems very relevant. The results of reflection will allow us to determine the forms and methods of extracurricular activities to develop soft skills.

**Objective of the study** was to identify the demand for developing soft skills among student-athletes of the Ural Federal University (UrFU) as a model university in terms of organizing work with student-athletes.

**Methods and structure of the study.** The target group is student-athletes who have results of no lower than I sports category in individual sports and no lower than II sports category in team sports, as well as those who have the Candidate Master of Sports category and the titles Master of Sports, Master of Sports of International Class, Honored Master sports having the right to receive this status in accordance with the Regulations on the status of “UrFU Student-Athlete” adopted at UrFU.

The study was conducted in November-December 2023 using an online questionnaire (Yandex form). 150 student-athletes took part in the survey: 55% boys and 45% girls. Based on the duration of sports activities, three groups were identified: those involved in sports from 10 to 15 years (56% of the sample), from 5 to 10 years (31% of respondents) and from 1 to 5 years (13% of the sample). In quantitative terms, by type of sport, respondents were distributed as follows: team sports (hockey, volleyball, basketball, football) – 72.6%; individual sports (judo, swimming, tennis, skiing, athletics, chess, e-sports) – 27.4%. Among the students surveyed, 44% are professional athletes whose careers are on the rise; the remaining 56% believe that their sports achievements are not progressing, but they continue their sports activities at the amateur level.

**Results of the study and discussion.** Active, responsible, organized, creative young people who are capable of transmitting positive energy and the spirit of patriotism to the youth environment, traditional values and a healthy lifestyle are in demand more than ever at the present stage of social development. In this regard, athletes are a reference group for youth audiences. The majority of student-athletes do not connect their professional strategy with sports. This follows from a decrease in the intensity of professional sports over the years of study: in the 1st year – 39%; 2nd year – 31%; 3rd year – 20%; 4th year – 10%. We believe that this is due not so much to the stagnation of sports results, but to a change in life priorities. This confirms the thesis that the development of soft skills in student-athletes has a deep semantic meaning.

There is a closeness between the positions of the university and the athletes themselves. 91% of respondents believe that soft skills help in their sports and professional careers. 93% of respondents said that the university is interested in developing their sporting achievements. Sports competitions of vari-



ous levels held by the university were rated quite highly by 73% of students. In addition to sports activities and activities as part of the curriculum, 64% of students regularly receive additional education in related areas of professional training, the remaining 29% only when there is a need, of which 48% see positive results.

Assessing their own skills, students believe that intellectual skills are developed at a sufficient level in 42%, communication skills – 26%, emotional intelligence – 18%; self-organization and activity planning – 11%, project and team management – 9%. We tend to view such results as a critical attitude towards ourselves and the results of our own activities.

Students believe that the first place in demand for soft skills is teamwork, communication skills, activity planning and self-organization; on the second - intellectual skills: critical and creative thinking, emotional intelligence and cognitive flexibility; on the third – management skills: project and team management.

Our expectations were based on the fact that team sports develop communication skills and were surprised when eSports came out on top. He is much more successful than others in forming planning activities. According to respondents, basketball, volleyball, football, hockey, as well as chess, contribute to the development of creative and critical thinking, and cognitive flexibility. Survey participants believe that individual sports build self-organization, management skills and emotional intelligence.

Certain difficulties in UrFU are associated with the sufficiency of resources and tools for personal development. Survey participants rated their satisfaction with their condition as follows: 58.6% – completely satisfied, 22% – partially satisfied, 5% – not satisfied and 14% – did not answer this question.

New data has been obtained on the interaction with artificial intelligence in the formation of soft skills. More than half (56% of respondents) believe that artificial intelligence will not be able to compete with humans in the areas of communication, creative thinking and emotional intelligence, but can easily cope with project management.

Additionally, a survey was conducted among the coaching staff about the importance of soft skills for athletes. Team sports coaches indicated the following gradation of soft skills for athletes: 1) activity planning and project management; 2) creative thinking and cognitive flexibility; 3) communication, teamwork and emotional intelligence. Coaches of individual sports prioritize: managing their own development; then cre-

ative thinking, cognitive flexibility, communication and emotional intelligence.

**Conclusions.** The educational organization of UrFU has a fairly developed sports base, which satisfies not only the needs of amateur athletes, but also professionals. This gives students a sense of care and interest in developing their sporting achievements. Student-athletes, receiving professional education, are focused on the quality of education and are ready to make additional efforts for self-development. Students are aware of the importance of soft skills for professional growth and self-development; most of them are focused on the development of communication, cognitive and organizational skills. Student-athletes assign priority soft skills to a specific sport.

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