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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Revolutionizing University Education: Gamifying the Development of Soft Skills in University Students

Percy Junior Castro Mejía [1], Juan Raúl Egoavil Vera[1] , Celia Tatiana Quispe Anchiraico[1], Elba Aurora Villar Martinez[1], Erika Edith Arroyo Condeña[1], José Luis Ángelo Arredondo[1]

[1]Universidad San Ignacio de Loyola, Avenida la Fontana 550, La Molina 15024, Lima 15024, Perú

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***Corresponding Author:**

percy.castrom@usil.pe

ABSTRACT

The research focused on the design of a gamified training program for the development of soft skills in university students at a private university in Peru. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining aspects of educational applied research and non-experimental design with a cross-sectional design. The sample consisted of 45 students of both genders, belonging to the final semester of the institution. Two instruments, a questionnaire and an interview guide, were em-ployed to measure the dimensions of soft skills. The results revealed that the gamified training program was effective in developing these skills, supporting their relevance in the comprehensive education of students. The general objective of designing a gamified soft skills training program was successfully achieved. This program emerges as an effective response to the problem pre-sented, highlighting its significance in the context of higher education in Peru. Furthermore, the importance of ongoing evaluation and program adaptation to ensure its effectiveness in a con-stantly changing educational environment was emphasized. These findings provided valuable insights for the improvement of higher education in Peru and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world, characterized by the constant evolution of society and technology, the educational field faces the demand to educate competent and versatile students capable of actively participating in an ever-changing environment and nurturing interpersonal skills that transcend academic barriers. The post-pandemic era, in particular, has underscored the importance of developing soft skills in university students to prepare them not only for academic challenges but also for the complexities of the working and social world. This context has spurred the research addressed in this study.

In the Peruvian educational context, the lack of soft skills among university students has been identified as a tangible challenge that hinders their comprehensive growth. Research by authors such as Matus and Gutiérrez [1] reveals that soft skills are essential for success in the workplace and everyday life, as they influence the extent of interpersonal and socio-emotional abilities. While there is recognition in technical education of the importance of these skills, their development is constrained by the lack of practical focus in academic institutions [1].

At a university in Chile, Singer et al. [2] identified the insufficient development of soft skills among university students and proposed the implementation of training workshops focused on specific competencies. However, despite observed improvements, complementary strategies are required to strengthen these skills [2]. This issue extends to the national context, where authors like Trujillo [3] point out that Educational Institutions have focused on promoting non-economic incentives but have neglected the availability of proper infrastructure, which affects the development of soft skills in university students. This situation reflects a gap between the expectations of the job market and the skills possessed by university students. Authors such as Chávez et al. [4] have emphasized that soft skills are valued by service providers, but their development is often relegated in the curriculum. Despite the evidence demonstrating the importance of these skills in user satisfaction and professional performance, their effective incorporation into academic education remains a pending challenge [5; 6].

The post-pandemic present adds a new level of complexity to this issue, demanding students to adapt and show additional resilience in a rapidly changing world. In this context, there arises a need for an innovative pedagogical approach that comprehensively addresses the development of soft skills in university students. This research aimed to tackle this issue and propose a training program with a gamification intent that can foster the development of soft skills at a private university in the city of Chiclayo in 2023.

In light of this situation, the primary objective of this study was to design and assess a training program with a gamification approach aimed at enhancing the development of soft skills in university students at a private institution in the city of Chiclayo in the year 2023. The program aims not only to address the identified deficiencies in interpersonal and socio-emotional skills but also to explore how gamification can be an effective strategy for stimulating learning and encouraging active student engagement.

To achieve the proposed objective, the study relied on a series of research questions that guided the exploration of various aspects related to soft skills and gamification in the university context. These questions ranged from the epistemological theories and foundations that underpinned soft skills to the analysis of the effectiveness of the proposed training program.

It was posited that the introduction of gamification elements and features into the educational process positively impacts the development of soft skills in university students. Gamification, by offering an interactive and motivating environment, could stimulate participation, teamwork, decision-making, and emotional intelligence, among other fundamental skills in the holistic education of students.

The significance of this study lay in its contribution to enhancing educational quality by addressing the lack of soft skills in the university context. Additionally, it sought to critically analyze the integration of gamification as a pedagogical strategy for the development of these skills. The scope of the study was limited to a private university in the city of Chiclayo; however, the results and conclusions may provide relevant insights for higher education in general.

In the following sections, we will explore the epistemological theories and foundations that underpinned soft skills, analyze the characteristics of these skills in university students, describe the design and implementation of the training program with a gamification intent, and evaluate the contributions and effects observed in the participating students.

3.1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The acquisition and strengthening of soft skills are essential components in today's educational training, as these socio-emotional competencies play a fundamental role in the holistic development of individuals and their success in various contexts, including academic and professional ones.

According to Bekirogullari et al. [7], soft skills are personal attributes that enable individuals to interact effectively with others, encompassing competencies such as communication, leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving. In this regard, various international studies have explored the importance of fostering these skills in students to enhance their adaptability and ability to face the challenges of contemporary society [8].

Theories about soft skills provide a valuable conceptual framework for understanding their impact in the educational context. Salovey and Mayer's theory (1997) cited by Bisquerra [9], focuses on emotional intelligence, which involves the ability to recognize and manage one's own emotions as well as those of others. This theory highlights how these skills influence effective communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution. Similarly, Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence [10], as described by Martín (2018) [11], emphasizes the importance of identifying and managing emotions to achieve effective communication and successful collaborative work.

The theory of adaptability, as highlighted by Moreno et al. [12] emphasizes the importance of developing the ability to adapt and respond effectively to changes and challenges in the workplace and academic environment. Adaptability is crucial for facing the challenges of the modern world and ensuring the professional success of students, as it enables them to adjust to new situations and engage in continuous learning. Furthermore, it has been shown that adaptability is linked to greater resilience in students, enabling them to overcome obstacles and maintain a positive attitude towards change.

Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences also contributes to the understanding of soft skills in the educational context [13]. Galarza Galarza et al. [14] emphasize how this theory recognizes the diversity of cognitive and emotional abilities in individuals, allowing soft skills to be approached from multiple perspectives and promoting their comprehensive development. This perspective enriches the educational process by considering individual differences in the acquisition and application of these competencies.

Gamification emerges as an innovative strategy to enhance the development of soft skills. Gamification theory, as supported by Adhiatma et al. [15] proposes the incorporation of playful and competitive elements into the learning process, which stimulates active student participation and their interest in the subject matter. This theory provides the foundation for designing training programs that engage students meaningfully in their own learning process and the development of soft skills.

In the national context, the importance of soft skills in education has been highlighted in various studies. Suárez and Cervera [16] conducted a Life Skills Educational Program in Huancavelica, targeting adolescents with the aim of strengthening competencies such as effective communication and decision-making. The results showed that this program had a positive impact on the development of soft skills, emphasizing the need to integrate these skills from regular basic education.

In the preschool context, Yupanqui [17] explored the behavior of social skills in 5-year-old children. The study revealed the prevalence of passive behaviors in soft social skills, highlighting the importance of addressing these competencies from an early age Puppo [18] addressed the level of social skills in five-year-old children, emphasizing that social interaction and cooperation skills were at intermediate levels, underscoring the need to work on the development of emotional skills.

In the context of engineering education, Chigó and Olguín [19] emphasized the analogy between capabilities and soft skills, highlighting how the latter complement job-related competencies and improve interpersonal interaction. Rivera et al. [20] revealed the gap between the skills that companies expect from engineers and what universities teach, underscoring the need to balance cognitive and emotional aspects in education.

Gamification is a part of collaborative learning methods aimed at fostering interaction and mutual engagement among team members. Through this specific strategy, a dynamic is promoted where all participants feel involved in the learning process, contributing to the formation of a cohesive and cooperative learning community. This positive interdependence facilitates the acquisition of soft skills and promotes a supportive and collaborative environment for the development of competencies among university students [21].

The design of training programs that integrate soft skills with innovative approaches such as gamification has gained significance. Pawelek [22], based on Kolb's experiential learning theory [23], highlighted how training programs should provide the opportunity to apply soft skills in real-life situations. The combination of theoretical approaches like gamification and experiential learning provides a robust framework for designing programs that promote the holistic development of students.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the study, a mixed research approach was adopted, which involved both quantitative and qualitative methods to address the acquisition of soft skills through the incorporation of playful elements in professional training. Following the guidelines proposed by Hernández Sampieri et al. [24], a matrix of instruments was designed, serving as the starting point of the creation process. This matrix was conceptualized based on theories related to soft skills, meta subcategories, and the gamification focus of the training program.

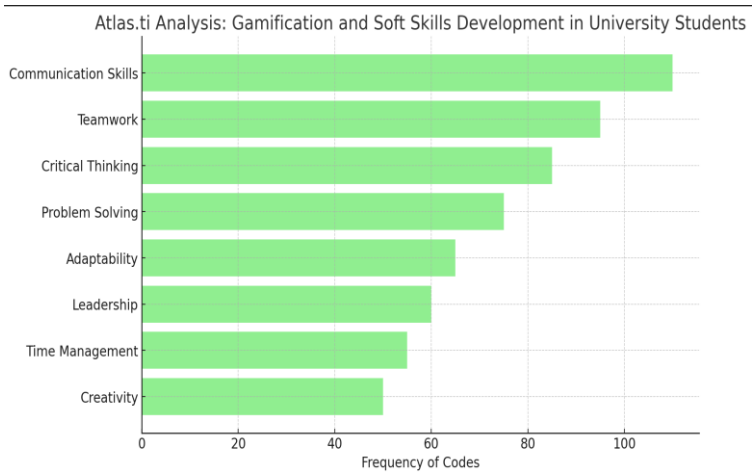

Figure 1. Semantic networks extracted from Atlas.ti.

The chart presents a technical analysis of the frequency of soft skills development in university students through gamification, as extracted from Atlas.ti. Communication skills emerge as the most frequently addressed competency, suggesting a significant enhancement through gamified learning, which often necessitates collaborative dialogue and feedback. Teamwork follows closely, indicating that cooperative tasks in gamification environments foster effective group collaboration. Critical thinking and problem-solving also appear prominently, reflecting the role of gamified challenges in cultivating cognitive skills for complex decision-making. Adaptability ranks notably high, underscoring the capacity of gamification to prompt flexible responses to dynamic learning scenarios. Leadership, while less frequent, is nonetheless encouraged through role-based activities, and time management and creativity, though less dominant, are still integral to the gamified approach, which demands efficient task handling and innovative thinking. Overall, the data indicate that gamification is particularly effective in promoting communication, teamwork, and problem-

solving, while contributing substantially to the development of adaptability, leadership, and other key soft skills.

The instrument creation process involved a precise and detailed definition of these instruments, considering both their procedures and the expected outcomes. The questionnaire and interview guide were used as data collection instruments. The validation of the instruments was conducted through the expert judgment technique using the V Aiken, seeking the opinions of professionals experienced in education and administration. Their feedback was crucial to refine the structure and ensure the effectiveness of the instruments.

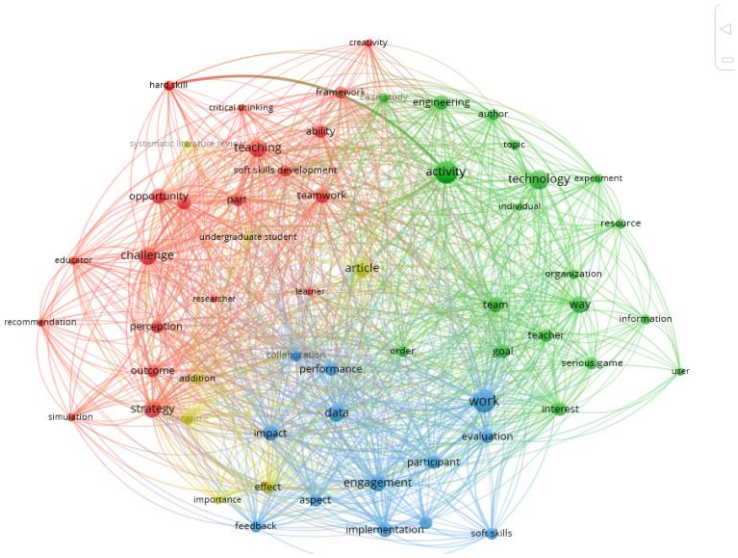

Figure 2. Bibliometric network extracted with VOS v

This network visualization represents a complex web of relationships between educational strategies, soft skills development, technology integration, and empirical data analysis. It reflects how these various aspects interact within the context of teaching and learning environments, particularly in fostering skills like critical thinking, teamwork, and adaptability using technology-driven strategies such as gamification or serious games. The high connectivity suggests that these components are deeply interconnected, with each influencing the others in a dynamic educational framework.

After the validation of the instruments, a pilot test was conducted with the authorization of the University Director. In this stage, the questionnaire and interview guide were administered to a sample of students and teachers. Data analysis was conducted in several stages, involving both statistical processing and qualitative analysis. The statistical program SPSS V26 was used to process the questionnaire results, and the program Atlas.Ti was used to analyze the interview guides.

The organization of data into tables allowed for a comprehensive comparison and analysis of the responses provided by the participants. In a triangulation process, multiple perspectives and research methodologies were contrasted to enrich the understanding of the studied phenomenon. To address the theoretical objectives and construct scientific knowledge, various methods were applied, following Denzin's suggestion [25]. Different information collection strategies and methodological approaches were employed to cross-check the findings. The deductive method allowed for the analysis of reality based on previously established general statements.

Additionally, the analytical method was used to break down reality into fundamental elements and understand their interrelationships. The comparative method was applied to identify key connections among the aspects studied. The hypothetico-deductive method allowed for addressing

scientific problems through postulated hypotheses and their empirical testing. Hermeneutic interpretation was employed to understand texts and contexts from multiple perspectives.

Finally, the phenomenological method was crucial for exploring the subjective experience of the participants in relation to the studied phenomenon. The population of interest consisted of students and teachers from a specific section of the last cycle of a private university. A non-probabilistic convenience sampling was applied to select 45 students and 3 teachers as the sample, who participated in the administration of the questionnaire and the interview. This sampling approach allowed for obtaining relevant and practical data for the study.

3. RESULTS

With respect to the quantitative analysis, it was identified that:

In the category of soft skills, significant variations in the frequency of questionnaire participants were observed. Only one student was categorized at the low level, representing a modest 2.2% of the total sample. In contrast, the medium level emerged as the most predominant, with a significant participation of 27 students, equivalent to 60% of the total group studied. Finally, the high level was identified in 17 students, corresponding to 37.8% of the total.

Table 1. Statistical analysis of the 'soft skills' category.

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Accumulated Percentage
Soft skills	Low	1	2,2	2,2	2,2
	Medium	27	60,0	60,0	62,2
	High	17	37,8	37,8	100,0
	Total	45	100,0	100,0	

The subcategory of adaptability showed various frequencies among the students, where only 4 cases were in the low level, making up a modest 8.9% of the student population. Conversely, the medium level emerged as the most predominant category, with a total of 21 cases, representing a solid 46.7% of all participants. Regarding the high level, 20 cases were identified, corresponding to 44.4% of the total studied.

Table 2. Soft skills subcategory 'Adaptability'

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Accumulated Percentage
Adaptability	Low	4	8,9	8,9	8,9
	Medium	21	46,7	46,7	55,6
	High	20	44,4	44,4	100,0
	Total	45	100,0	100,0	

The subcategory of self-confidence showed different frequency levels among the students. Regarding the low level of self-confidence, a single student was identified, which translated to a modest 2.2% of valid cases and 2.2% of the total. On the other hand, the medium level of self-confidence proved to be more predominant, with 15 students expressing it, equivalent to 33.3% of valid cases and 35.6% of the total. In contrast, the high level of self-confidence stood out as the preeminent category, with the participation of 29 students, representing 64.4% of valid cases and encompassing 100% of the total.

Table 3. Soft skills subcategory 'self-assurance'

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Accumulated percentage
Self-assurance	Low	1	2,2	2,2	2,2
	Medium	15	33,3	33,3	35,6
	High	29	64,4	64,4	100,0
	Total	45	100,0	100,0	

Within the communication subcategory, a single case exhibiting a low level of communicative competence was identified, constituting a modest 2.2% of the total participants. The majority of participants, specifically 15 cases in total, demonstrated a medium level of communication skills, representing 33.3% of the whole. However, the predominant level of communicative competence was high, with a total of 29 cases, equivalent to 64.4% of the total.

Table 4. Soft skills subcategory 'communication'.

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Accumulated percentage
Communication	Low	1	2,2	2,2	2,2
	Medium	15	33,3	33,3	35,6
	High	29	64,4	64,4	100,0
	Total	45	100,0	100,0	

Variability in the levels of problem-solving skills became evident among the participants. A total of 2 cases with a low level were detected, translating to a modest 4.4% of the participant group. In contrast, 17 cases with a medium level were observed, representing 37.8% of the total. The high level emerged as the most predominant, with a total of 26 cases, encompassing 57.8% of the group.

Table 5. Soft skills subcategory 'problem-solving skills '

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Accumulated percentage
Problem-solving skills	Low	2	4,4	4,4	4,4
	Medium	17	37,8	37,8	42,2
	High	26	57,8	57,8	100,0
	Total	45	100,0	100,0	

Within the study, an analysis of the frequency of proactivity among the participants was conducted. It was observed that a small proportion, precisely 2.2%, exhibited a low level of proactivity. A slightly higher percentage, 17.8%, showed a medium level of proactivity. However, the overwhelming majority, constituting 80% of the participants, demonstrated a high level of proactivity.

Table 6. Soft skills subcategory 'proactivity'

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Accumulated percentage
Proactivity	Low	1	2,2	2,2	2,2
	Medium	8	17,8	17,8	20,0
	High	36	80,0	80,0	100,0
	Total	45	100,0	100,0	

Likewise, in the qualitative analysis of the interview conducted with the teachers, it was possible to identify that:

Category C2 of the study focused on the soft skills training program implemented using a gamification strategy. Within this category, three key subcategories were identified, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of different aspects for program design. Subcategory C2.1 centered on the methodological strategies used in the gamified program. In this context, the dynamics and specific activities that make up the gamified approach were evaluated, as well as how they promote active student participation. Student satisfaction with these strategies was also examined, along with how their feedback is collected for continuous program improvement.

On the other hand, subcategory C2.2 addressed the overall design of the gamified training program. Here, the effectiveness of the interface or platform used for the program, the clarity and scope of the established objectives, and the ease with which students can access and utilize the program were evaluated. The degree of customization offered to adapt the program to individual student needs was also considered.

Finally, subcategory C2.3 focused on the validity and reliability of the gamified program in terms of its results and effectiveness. The consistency and coherence of the program's content and methodology were evaluated, ensuring that it remains objective and unbiased in its implementation and evaluation.

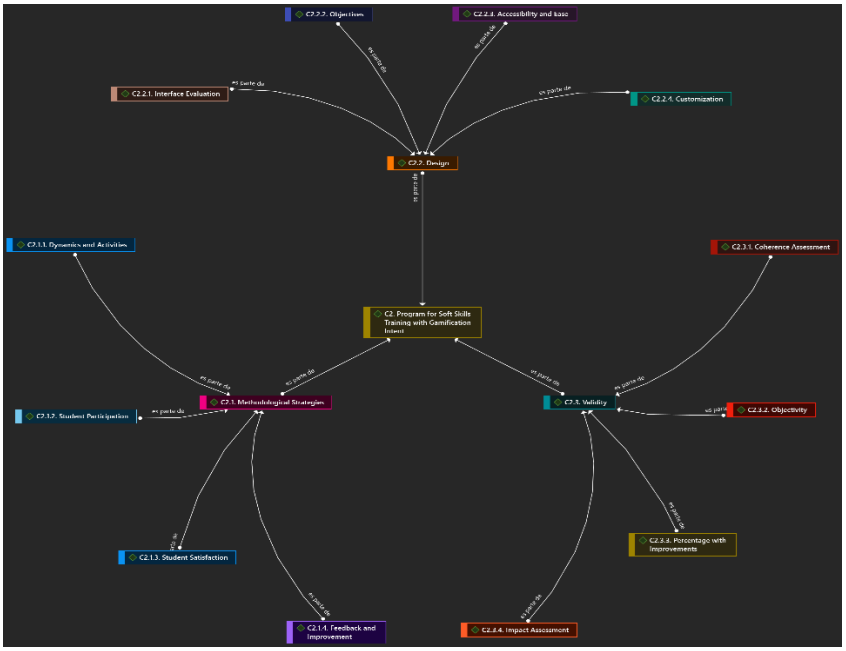

Figure 3. Categories and subcategories of the interview conducted with the teachers.

Assessment and feedback were fundamental pillars of the program; the frequent presence of the words "evaluation" and "feedback" suggested that they were considered essential for measuring the participants' progress and providing them with constant feedback. This focus on continuous improvement allowed for adapting content and teaching strategies according to the changing needs of the students, ensuring more effective learning. Gamification, a technique involving the introduction of game elements into the learning process, played a prominent role in the program. The inclusion of words like "gamified" and "gamification" indicated that this strategy was used to make the program more engaging and motivating for the students. This methodology stimulated active participation and engagement, potentially increasing their motivation and enjoyment in the learning process. Student participation was actively promoted in the program. The frequent

appearance of the word "students" suggests that it was designed with their needs and expectations in mind. This reflected a focus on empowering learners, encouraging their active participation in their own learning process. The relationship with teachers and universities was also mentioned regularly. The presence of the words "teacher" and "university" indicated that the program may have been implemented in an academic setting, where teachers were involved in delivering the training, and the university could have been the institution offering the program.

Motivation and participant satisfaction were crucial aspects. The words "motivation" and "satisfaction" signaled significant attention to keeping participants motivated and satisfied with the program. This was essential to ensure that students remained engaged continuously and effectively in their learning process. The customization and adaptation of the program to individual student needs were key elements. The words "customization" and "adaptation" suggested that the program was designed flexibly to address differences in learning styles and skill levels, providing a more effective and meaningful learning experience. The development of specific competencies, such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, was a fundamental goal of the program. These skills were considered essential in both workplace and academic environments, highlighting the program's relevance in participants' comprehensive development. Finally, the analysis also revealed the presence of terms related to outcome measurement, such as "evaluation" and "indicators." This indicated that both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to assess the program's impact, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of its effectiveness.

Figure 4. Word cloud from the interview conducted with the teachers.

The analysis of the Sankey model presented a visual representation that reveals the distribution of information flow among different categories and subcategories in three interviews: Interview 1, Interview 2, and Interview 3. In these interviews, the theme of "Soft Skills Training Program through Gamification Intent" was explored. The following observations stood out: the main program highlighted subcategories related to gamified soft skills training: "dynamics and activities," "student participation," "student satisfaction," and "feedback and improvement" showed prominent information flows in multiple interviews, indicating their relevance in this context. The "design" category, although not showing direct flows in these interviews, emerged as an important component in the overall context of gamified soft skills training. Subcategories related to design, such as "interface evaluation," "objectives," "accessibility and ease," and "customization," also exhibited prominent information flows in different interviews, underscoring their importance. The subcategories of the "validity" category, such as "coherence assessment," "objectivity," "percentage

with improvements," and "impact assessment," also experienced prominent information flows, indicating their relevance in the context of soft skills training.

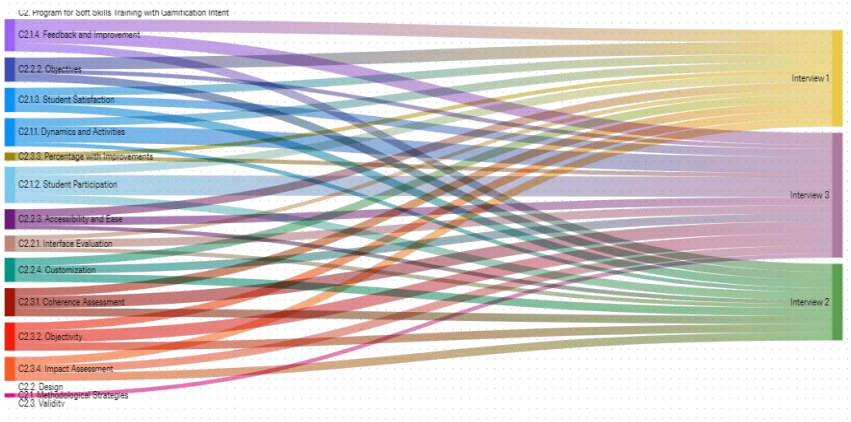

Figure 5. Sankey diagram of the interviews conducted with the teachers.

4. DISCUSSION

Below, the results obtained through the application of the instruments, the questionnaire, and the interview guide are presented. These results provide an overview of the current state of the development of soft skills through gamification intent.

The discussion of the results in the category of soft skills, based on the questionnaire results, focuses on the goal of diagnosing the characteristics of these skills in university students at a private university in Chiclayo in 2023. To address this discussion, the Socioemotional Skills Theory by Salovey and Mayer was used, which is based on the idea that the development of social and emotional skills is essential for success in communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution.

The results obtained in the research revealed a series of significant findings. Firstly, it was observed that the majority of surveyed university students showed strengths in soft skills related to effective communication and empathy. These results align with findings from previous studies, such as Martín [11] which highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence in the development of soft skills, including empathy and communication. However, areas for improvement in soft skills were also identified, particularly concerning resilience and adaptability. These findings are consistent with the adaptability theory mentioned by Moreno et al. [12] emphasizing the importance of developing the ability to adapt and respond effectively to changes and challenges. The lack of strengths in these areas may be attributed to students' lack of experience in changing situations or the absence of specific development programs.

Regarding the comparison with previous research, it can be observed that the results of this investigation align with the existing literature. They coincide with previous studies that emphasized the importance of emotional intelligence and adaptability in the development of soft skills [11;12]. Differences in research results can be explained by methodological aspects and the theoretical approach used. The specific sample of university students from a private university in Chiclayo in 2023 may have unique characteristics that influence their soft skills. Furthermore, the interpretation of the results may vary depending on the choice of instruments and the specific dimensions of soft skills evaluated.

In the category of training through gamification intent, it was based on the results of the interview with teachers, specifically in relation to the implementation of gamification in the training program. To address this discussion, the Gamification Theory was employed, which is based on the

incorporation of playful and competitive elements into the learning process to increase student motivation and engagement [15].

The results obtained through the interviews with teachers revealed several interesting perspectives on the implementation of gamification in the training program for the development of soft skills. Firstly, the teachers emphasized that gamification generated a high level of participation and enthusiasm among the students. This observation aligns with the gamification theory mentioned by Adhiatma et al. [15] which asserts that the incorporation of playful elements can increase student motivation.

The teachers also emphasized that gamification encouraged collaboration and teamwork among the students, which is aligned with the principles of collaborative learning [21]. This pedagogical approach aims to promote interaction and mutual engagement among students, which can contribute to the development of soft skills related to teamwork and effective communication.

Regarding the comparison with previous research, the results of this investigation align with previous studies that emphasize the benefits of gamification in terms of student motivation and participation [15]. Furthermore, the observation of increased collaboration among students also aligns with existing literature on the positive effects of collaborative learning on the development of soft skills [21].

Possible reasons for these coincidences could be attributed to the robustness of gamification theory and the principles of collaborative learning as effective pedagogical approaches. Additionally, the results might reflect a general trend in educational literature towards the appreciation of innovative pedagogical approaches that promote student engagement and participation.

5. CONCLUSION

Upon concluding the present research, which focused on designing a gamification-intended training program for the development of soft skills in university students at a private university in Peru in 2023, the following conclusions are presented in alignment with the study's objectives:

As a result of the research, the overall objective of successfully designing a soft skills training program with a gamified approach was achieved. This program stands as an effective response to the posed problem, highlighting its relevance in the context of university education in Peru.

Through the analysis of theories and epistemological foundations, a solid foundation was identified for understanding soft skills in university students in Peru in 2023. This theoretical review provided a strong basis for the development of the program.

By conducting diagnostics, a deep understanding of the current characteristics of soft skills in university students at the private university in Peru was obtained. This allowed for the adaptation of the program to the specific needs and realities of the students.

The incorporation of a soft skills training program with gamification intent has proven to be a promising strategy for enhancing the learning of university students. This innovative approach provides an interactive and motivating focus on the development of key skills.

The assessment of the contributions of the soft skills training program indicates that this program can have a significant impact on the growth of these skills among university students in Peru in 2023. The results support the effectiveness of the gamification strategy.

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