

“Strengthening Soft Skills in Dentistry Education Across Europe”

DENTA SOFT - From Vision to Impact: Building Soft Skills in Dental Education”

How we started?

The DENTA-SOFT project was launched under the Erasmus+ KA220 Strategic Partnerships in Higher Education framework, with the goal of enhancing soft skills training in the dental education curriculum across European universities. Coordinated by Medical University of Sofia (Bulgaria), the project brought together a consortium of forward-thinking institutions from Bulgaria, Turkey, Romania, and Greece.



PROJECT DENTA-SOFT



Issue 1 Autumn 2025



A PROJECT WHICH TRANSFORMS IDEAS

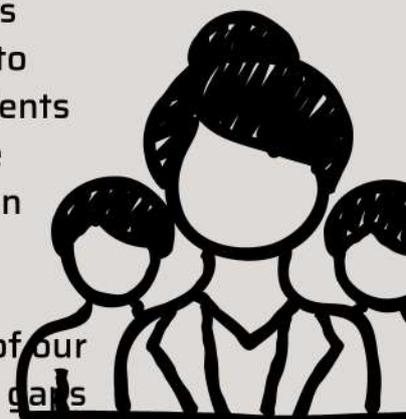
Story Starts Here

As we cross the finish line of the DENTA SOFT project, I am proud to reflect on how our university, together with our esteemed European partners, has transformed an ambitious concept into a tangible reality. At HMKU, we recognized early on that technical excellence in dentistry must be complemented by human-centred communication, empathy and professionalism — soft skills that are often under-emphasized in traditional curricula. Today, we share with you the story of our collaboration, the progress made, and the pathway ahead.

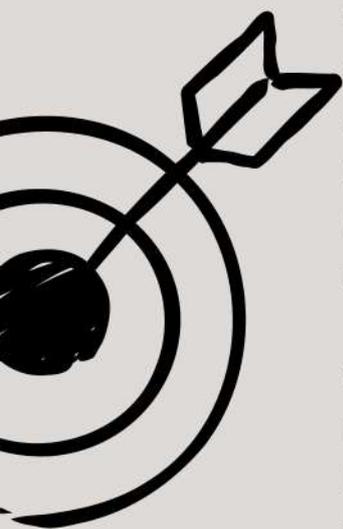
A Collaborative Network

Project Launch & Collaborative Framework

The project kicked off with partner meetings in 2023, uniting institutions from Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece, Romania and Spain. Our goal was clear: to develop, assess and integrate soft skills training tailored for dental students across Europe. HMKU assumed a key role as project partner, leading the local implementation of training modules and coordinating dissemination activities.

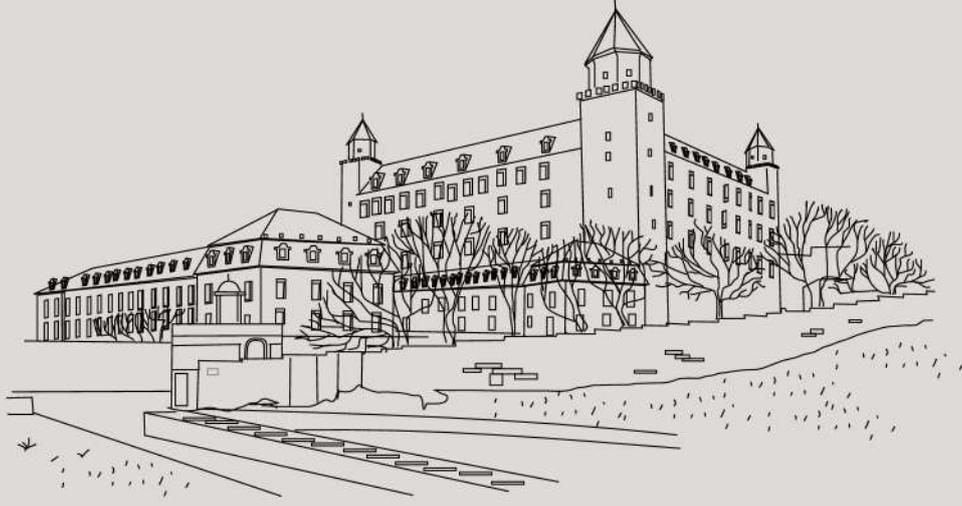


In those early months, we conducted a comprehensive needs-analysis of our Faculty of Dentistry, mapping existing curricula, identifying soft-skill gaps (such as patient rapport, active listening and stress management) and aligning our objectives with the Erasmus+ higher education quality assurance framework.



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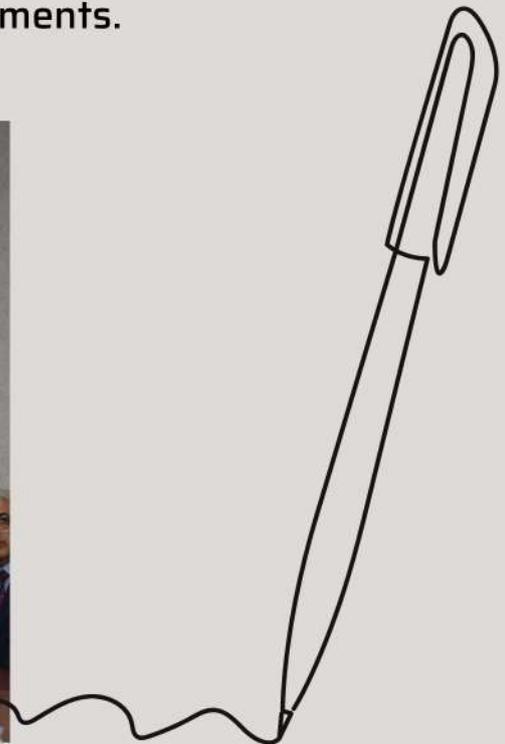
Soft skills—such as communication, empathy, ethics, and anxiety management—are essential for establishing trust-based, effective relationships between dental professionals and their patients. This project recognized the urgent need to embed these skills formally into academic programs, supporting a new generation of dentists who are not only technically competent, but also emotionally intelligent and socially responsive.



Representing Türkiye, Hatay Mustafa Kemal University (HMKEU) actively contributed to every stage of the project:

- **Curriculum Analysis:** We conducted a comprehensive review of our existing dental education structure, identifying strengths and gaps in soft skill development.
- **Training Modules:** We designed and delivered a structured training program that reached 150 students and involved interactive sessions, workshops, and evaluations.
- **Faculty Engagement:** To ensure sustainability, we included academic staff in training efforts, offering dedicated sessions on communication and behavioral competencies.
- **Skill Evaluation Study:** We assessed 139 dental students using a 7-criteria framework including empathy, first interaction, listening, anxiety management, and ethical behavior.

Our findings revealed key strengths in areas such as anamnesis-taking, while highlighting development needs in empathy and first-contact communication—offering valuable data to guide future curricular improvements.



Training & Implementation at HMKU



Between mid-2024 and early 2025, HMKU carried out a multi-tiered training programme:

- **Student Training:** 150 students engaged in five thematic modules covering (1) Introduction to Soft Skills, (2) Doctor-Patient Relationship, (3) Communication & Interpersonal Skills, (4) Dental Fear & Anxiety Management, (5) Stress, Time & Conflict Management.
- **Faculty Development:** Academic staff were trained to embed soft skills into their supervision and teaching practices — moving beyond technical instruction to modelling empathic, patient-centred behaviours.
- **Curriculum Integration:** We leveraged existing courses (Behavioural Sciences, Psychology, Health Communication, Ethics) and augmented them with role-play, simulations and reflective journals to reinforce learning.



Through these efforts, our dental students encountered new forms of experiential learning: simulated patient dialogues, peer-feedback sessions, and faculty-led demonstrations of communication best practices.



Evaluation Study: Measuring Our Impact



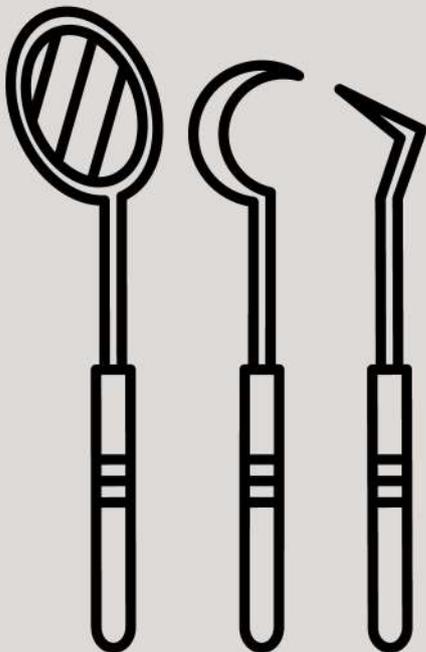
Following the training phase, we evaluated 139 students using a seven-criterion observational rubric:

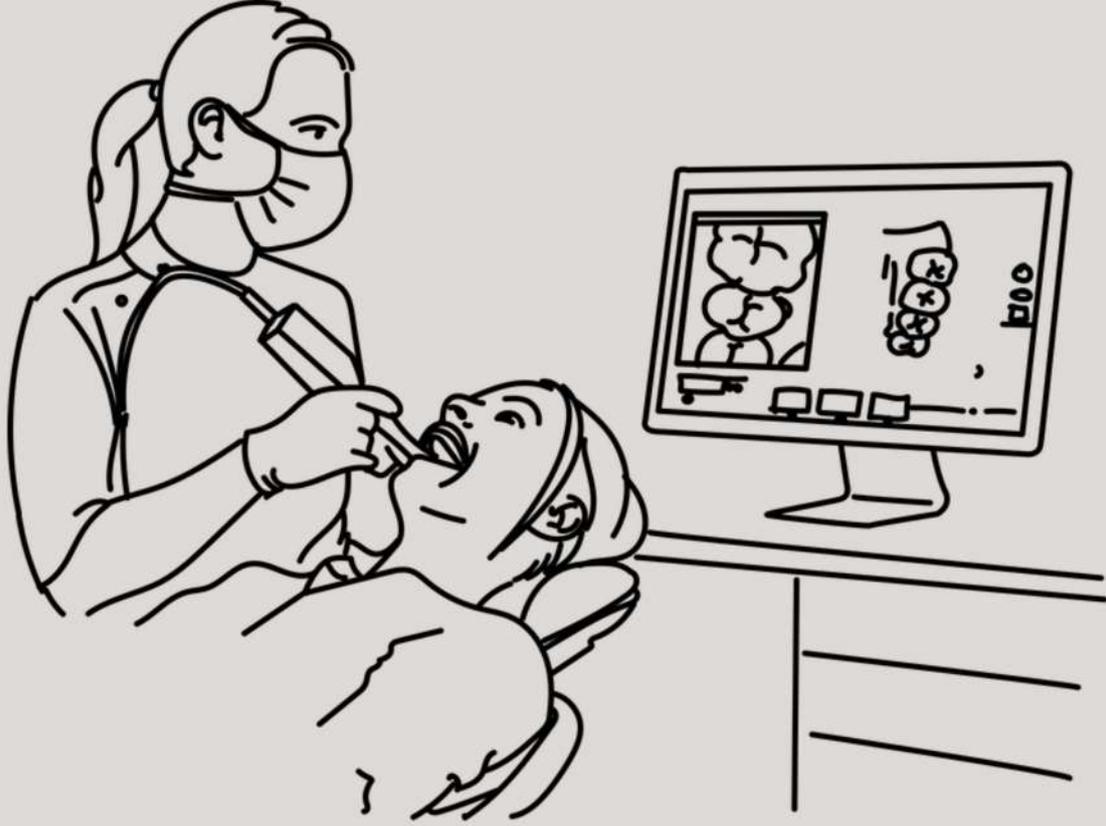
- A: Initial contact & rapport building
- B: Active listening & patient-focus
- C: Anamnesis (medical history taking)
- D: Information delivery
- E: Anxiety management
- F: Professionalism & ethics
- G: Overall communication cohesion

Key insights:

- Strength: Criterion C (Anamnesis) - 60% of students rated “strong” in structured history-taking.
- Areas for development: Criteria A (rapport) and B (listening) - high proportions rated “weak” or “moderate”.
- Medium performance: D, E, F and G - indicating solid foundations but clear room to grow.

These findings not only inform our local curriculum reform but also contribute to the wider DENTA SOFT consortium’s evidence base for soft skills training in dental education.





What comes next?

While the formal project phase ends, the real journey begins:

- Embedding soft skills into HMKU's dental curriculum as a standardised module, evaluated each year.
- Developing a soft skills toolkit (including rubrics and simulation scenarios) that can be shared with other Turkish and European dental faculties.
- Pursuing new Erasmus+ proposals, building on the network we established and the evidence we generated.
- Monitoring long-term student outcomes, including patient satisfaction, treatment adherence and graduate career profiles.

We invite all our students, academic staff and health-sector stakeholders to join us in this journey of sustainable improvement.

