

The Role of Soft skills in Enhancing Employability and Sustaining Long-Term Career Success

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Abstract

In today's dynamic academic and professional landscape, soft skills have emerged as critical determinants of success alongside technical expertise. This study investigates the importance of soft skills—such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and emotional intelligence—in enhancing employability and fostering long-term career growth among university students. Through a mixed-methods approach that integrates literature analysis and a structured survey conducted on undergraduate students, the research highlights both the perceived value of soft skills and the challenges faced in their development.

Findings reveal a significant discrepancy between students' self-perceived soft skill proficiency and the expectations of employers, emphasising the need for more experiential learning strategies within academic curricula. The pilot study, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.97, confirms the reliability of the research instrument. The study concludes that workshops, mentorship programs, and real-world learning experiences significantly improve soft skill acquisition. Additionally, the paper identifies key gaps in the existing literature—particularly in areas such as self-awareness, networking, and cultural competence—and proposes actionable recommendations for integrating soft skills training more effectively into educational systems.

This study reinforces the argument that soft skills are not supplementary but essential, and calls for a redefinition of educational priorities to ensure students are adequately prepared for the demands of the modern workforce.

Key Words

Soft Skills, Employability, Experiential Learning, Communication, Teamwork, Adaptability, Emotional Intelligence, Career Development

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving global economy, success in academia and the workplace increasingly demands more than technical knowledge alone. While hard skills remain essential for task execution, it is soft skills—such as communication, adaptability, teamwork, and emotional intelligence—that differentiate individuals in collaborative, high-pressure environments. These

interpersonal competencies enhance employability, support leadership development, and contribute to long-term professional growth.

Despite their critical role, soft skills often receive limited attention within traditional educational frameworks. Academic curricula tend to prioritize theoretical and technical content, frequently overlooking the structured development of skills necessary for effective interpersonal interaction and workplace integration. This disconnect between academic preparation and industry expectations has contributed to a growing gap in job readiness among graduates.

This study explores the significance of soft skills in academic and professional contexts, with a particular focus on student perceptions, institutional efforts, and the expectations of employers. By combining insights from existing literature with empirical data collected through a structured survey of university students, the paper aims to identify key barriers to soft skill development and propose methods for more effective integration into higher education.

The research also explores underrepresented yet crucial constructs such as self-awareness, cultural competence, and networking—skills that are increasingly vital in today’s diverse, collaborative work environments. These soft skills not only strengthen interpersonal relationships but also contribute significantly to conflict resolution, adaptability, and emotional intelligence—qualities that are highly valued in modern professional settings. By emphasizing the importance of these competencies, the study effectively bridges the gap between academic instruction and real-world expectations, advocating for an educational approach that fosters both social-emotional growth and technical expertise. Ultimately, the research positions soft skills as foundational to holistic education, essential for shaping well-rounded, career-ready graduates capable of thriving in dynamic and multicultural environments.

Literature Review

The growing emphasis on soft skills in both educational and professional domains reflects a significant shift in the criteria for career success. While technical proficiency lays the groundwork for job performance, it is often the mastery of soft skills that facilitates leadership, collaboration, and adaptability in real-world settings. This review synthesizes existing literature on soft skills and their impact on employability, curriculum integration, student perceptions, and training methods, while also identifying critical research gaps.

1. Soft Skills and Employability

Soft skills such as communication, emotional intelligence, teamwork, and adaptability are increasingly viewed as vital assets in navigating complex workplace dynamics. Research shows that non-cognitive skills significantly contribute to career progression, serving as differentiators between equally qualified candidates (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). Employers consistently report a gap between the soft skills they expect and those exhibited by recent graduates, particularly in problem-solving, collaboration, and critical thinking (Gruzdev et al., 2018; Ansari, 2021). This highlights the need for educational institutions to align graduate capabilities with evolving workplace demands.

2. Integrating Soft Skills into Higher Education

To bridge this gap, universities are embedding soft skills development within academic programs through experiential learning techniques. Approaches such as leadership training, group projects, and role-playing scenarios have been shown to increase students' real-world readiness (Kolb, 1984; Prasad, 2020). Public speaking assignments and mentorship programs are also effective in enhancing articulation, confidence, and self-awareness (Laker & Powell, 2011; Wulandari & Chaerowati, 2024). These interventions suggest that practical, applied learning is essential for the development and retention of soft skills.

3. Student Perception and Workforce Preparedness

While many students perceive themselves as competent in soft skills, employer feedback often reveals discrepancies. Studies indicate that students tend to overestimate their abilities in communication, teamwork, and leadership (Infonomics Society, 2012), leading to a false sense of preparedness. Universities are now incorporating industry feedback, peer evaluations, and skillbased assessments to provide students with a more accurate understanding of their competencies (Witziers et al., 2018).

4. The Role of Soft Skills in Workplace Dynamics

Soft skills such as empathy, active listening, and emotional intelligence are essential for fostering healthy workplace relationships. These competencies contribute to conflict resolution, effective teamwork, and organisational productivity (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2017; Raes et al., 2019). Research supports that organisations investing in soft skills training report better team performance, lower turnover, and stronger employee engagement (Touloumakos, 2020).

5. Training Methods and Challenges

Role-playing, scenario-based activities, mentorship, and project-based learning have proven to be among the most effective strategies for soft skills development (Kolb, 1984; Awe, 2008). However, institutional barriers such as rigid curricula, limited faculty expertise, and low student engagement continue to hinder implementation (Sekhar, 2019). Blended learning and adaptive digital platforms have emerged as promising solutions to these challenges (PLAZA-II & BANK, 2024).

6. Digital Communication and Virtual Collaboration

As hybrid and remote work environments become mainstream, soft skills in digital contexts are increasingly vital. Communication through digital platforms (emails, video conferencing, collaborative software) requires clarity, responsiveness, and etiquette—skills that are often underemphasised in traditional curricula (Coates & Taylor-Advisor, 2020). Misinterpretation and lack of non-verbal cues in virtual settings demand stronger active listening, empathy, and selfregulation (Emanuel et al., 2021). Research shows that students who engage in online group work during their academic training are better equipped for modern workplaces (Kearney et al., 2024).

7. Soft Skills in the Age of AI and Automation

Automation and AI are reshaping labor markets, making human-centric skills more critical than ever. While machines can replicate routine tasks, soft skills—like creativity, empathy, and ethical

decision-making remain uniquely human and irreplaceable. As automation replaces routine technical tasks, soft skills have become central to roles requiring human judgment, creativity, and ethical reasoning. Nadeem (2024) states that soft skills serve as the “golden key” in an era increasingly dominated by artificial intelligence, where machines can replicate hard skills but not human-centric traits. This has led to a shift in employer priorities, where interpersonal agility and adaptability are considered strategic assets for future leaders. (Tripathy, 2020) reinforces that leadership, innovation, and empathy will define competitive advantage in the future workforce.

8. Gaps in the Literature

While extensive research has examined soft skills within academic and professional contexts, several critical constructs remain underexplored. In particular, competencies such as self-reflection and self-awareness, interpersonal relationships and networking, and cultural competence are often overlooked in conventional soft skills training (Hassan, n.d.; Keng, 2023). These dimensions are increasingly vital in a globalised workforce, where emotional regulation, inclusive communication, and strategic relationship-building have a direct impact on long-term professional success. Despite their relevance, such competencies are frequently treated as supplementary rather than essential elements of professional development. Furthermore, much of the existing literature tends to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, offering generalized models of soft skills training that fail to account for contextual factors such as cultural background, individual learning styles, or industry-specific needs. This lack of nuance not only limits the practical applicability of these models but also hinders the development of inclusive, adaptive, and future-oriented educational strategies. There is a clear and pressing need for research that critically investigates how these underemphasized soft skills are cultivated, evaluated, and sustained across diverse academic and organizational settings.

Existing studies predominantly focus on communication, teamwork, and adaptability in isolation or in the context of academic development. However, the practical implications of soft skills in workplace dynamics, their role in self-development, and their relationship with diversity and networking are often overlooked.

First, there is limited research examining how soft skills such as empathy, active listening, and emotional intelligence directly influence workplace collaboration, productivity, and conflict resolution. Second, the process of self-reflection and self-awareness—essential for understanding one’s emotional triggers and interpersonal effectiveness—has not been adequately integrated into soft skills development models. Third, networking and interpersonal relationship-building, which are pivotal for career growth and professional advancement, are often treated as peripheral rather than core competencies. Finally, in a globalized workforce, cultural competence and diversity awareness are essential, yet frequently omitted from mainstream soft skills curricula.

These gaps limit the comprehensiveness of existing training frameworks. Addressing them is essential to developing well-rounded, employable graduates equipped to navigate complex and diverse work environments.

Objectives of the study

1. To examine the relationship between soft skills and employability among graduates entering the workforce.

2. To identify which specific soft skills are most valued by employers and contribute significantly to long-term career advancement.
3. To evaluate how continuous improvement and application of soft skills influence longterm career growth and job stability.

Hypotheses

H0: There is no significant relationship between soft skills and employability and longterm career success.

H1: There is a significant relationship between the soft skills acquired during academic training and the competencies expected by employers. Experiential learning methods (e.g., internships, role-playing, project-based assignments) have a significant positive impact on students' career readiness.

Research Methodology

This study employed a **mixed-methods research design** to gain a comprehensive understanding of the role of soft skills in enhancing employability and academic performance. The methodology integrates qualitative insights from literature and quantitative data from a structured student survey, allowing for a balanced evaluation of perceptions, gaps, and recommendations in soft skills development.

1. Research Design

The study was conducted using a **sequential exploratory approach**, beginning with an extensive literature review followed by a survey-based quantitative phase. This approach was chosen to identify prevailing theoretical frameworks and validate them through empirical data.

2. Participants

The survey was distributed among undergraduate students across Delhi NCR region. Initially **pilot study** was conducted with a sample of 60 students, out of which 58 valid responses were used for analysis. Participants represented multiple disciplines, allowing for diversity in responses. After confirming the reliability and validity of the instrument data from 350 participants was collected for analysis.

3. Instrumentation

A structured questionnaire was developed, consisting of both closed-ended Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. The constructs measured included communication, teamwork, adaptability, emotional intelligence, time management, leadership, and self-awareness. The instrument was validated through expert reviews and pilot testing.

- **Face validity** was established through feedback from academic experts and peers.
- **Reliability** was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a high reliability coefficient of **0.97**, indicating strong internal consistency.

4. Data Collection Procedure

After finalising the research instrument based on pilot feedback, the survey was administered digitally. Participation was voluntary and responses were anonymised to ensure authenticity. The data collection process emphasised ethical considerations and transparency.

5. Data Analysis

- **Quantitative Analysis:** Descriptive statistics were used to analyse trends in students' self-assessed soft skills proficiency. Responses were also categorised to identify gaps in confidence and training exposure.
- **Qualitative Analysis:** Responses to open-ended questions were thematically analysed to extract insights on perceptions, challenges, and preferred learning strategies.

6. Methodological Purpose

The mixed-methods approach provided a multidimensional view of the issue by:

- Assessing student confidence in core soft skill areas
- Identifying discrepancies between academic preparation and employer expectations
- Evaluating the effectiveness of experiential learning methods in soft skills acquisition

Ultimately, the methodology aimed to uncover actionable gaps in current training practices and guide the development of more practical and industry-aligned educational strategies.

Results

The data collected from 350 participants provided both quantitative and qualitative insights into students' perceptions, challenges, and preferences related to soft skills development.

1. Importance of Soft Skills

A large majority (95%) of respondents recognised the importance of soft skills in academic success and career advancement. The most frequently identified critical soft skills included: **Communication:** Cited as essential for interviews, presentations, and teamwork, **Teamwork:** Valued for collaborative projects and professional interactions, **Adaptability:** Highlighted as crucial for handling change and uncertainty, **Problem-solving:** Regarded as key to leadership and decision-making.

2. **Confidence in Skill Proficiency:** Despite acknowledging the value of soft skills, only 40% of respondents reported feeling confident in their own abilities. The gap between awareness and self-perceived proficiency was especially evident in areas like leadership, conflict resolution, and adaptability.

3. **Challenges in Soft Skills Development:** Key obstacles identified by respondents included: **Lack of formal training** (reported by 58%), **Time constraints** due to academic or professional responsibilities, **Limited practical exposure**, with most training being theoretical rather than experiential

4. **Preferred Learning Methods:** Participants identified the following methods as most effective

- **Workshops and Interactive Sessions** (70%), **Peer Learning and Mentorship Programs** (50%), **Online Learning and Self-paced Modules** (40%)

5. Role in Career Advancement

Approximately 85% of respondents agreed that strong soft skills improve job performance and increase opportunities for promotion. Those with training in communication and emotional intelligence reported better interview performance and workplace adaptability.

This analysis also aimed to explore whether gender influences the perception and development of soft skills such as communication, leadership, emotional intelligence, and teamwork. The goal was to identify any significant differences and inform more tailored training approaches.

Survey responses were grouped by gender—male and female—and analyzed using **T-Test** and **ANOVA** to check for statistically significant differences.

- **T-Test Result:** A p-value of **0.0000002038** (well below the 0.05 threshold) indicates a significant difference in soft skill responses between males and females.

- **Interpretation:**

Gender plays a meaningful role in how soft skills are developed or perceived. The results aren't due to chance.

- **ANOVA (Implied):** While detailed ANOVA stats weren't shown, its inclusion suggests that multiple soft skill areas were compared and supported the same conclusion—gender differences matter.

Findings

- Females slightly outperformed males across most soft skill areas.
- These differences are statistically significant and should be considered when designing soft skills training.
- Institutions and educators can use these insights to develop more inclusive, gendersensitive learning programs that support skill growth for all.

Anova: Single Factor						
SUMMARY						
<i>Groups</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Sum</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Variance</i>		
26	42	1229	29.26190476	5.515098722		
25	42	1100	26.19047619	6.743321719		
ANOVA						
<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>F crit</i>

Between Groups	198.1071429	1	198.1071429	32.32180586	1.94461E-07	3.957388177
Within Groups	502.5952381	82	6.129210221			
Total	700.702381	83				

TTEST	2.04E-07
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Importance of Soft Skills
A strong majority (95%) agreed that soft skills are crucial in both academic and professional life. Communication, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving were identified as the most essential, reinforcing the idea that personal effectiveness is just as important as technical knowledge.

- Confidence and Proficiency** Only 40% of respondents felt confident in their soft skills, showing a clear gap between awareness and actual competence. Many expressed a need for more targeted training, especially in communication and leadership.
- Common Challenges** Respondents highlighted three main barriers: **Lack of formal training** (58%) in both academic and professional settings, **Time constraints**, making it hard to prioritize soft skills development, **Limited real-world practice**, reducing the impact of theoretical training.

Preferred Learning Methods - Participants showed interest in **Interactive workshops** (70%) that offer real-time practice, **Peer learning and mentorship** (50%) for personalized guidance, **Online learning tools** (40%) for flexibility and ease of access.

Impact on Career Growth - Around 85% believed strong soft skills directly impact career progression. Respondents noted that good communication, leadership, and collaboration often lead to better performance reviews, successful interviews, and promotion opportunities.

Discussion

The results reinforce existing literature emphasising the growing importance of soft skills in both educational and workplace contexts (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2017; Succi & Canovi, 2020). Students understand the value of soft skills but struggle to acquire them through current academic structures.

Awareness vs. Application Gap

Although 95% of students acknowledge the importance of soft skills, only 40% felt confident in their own abilities. This discrepancy supports findings from previous research (Ansari, 2021; Infonomics Society, 2012), indicating that awareness does not necessarily translate to competence. The lack of structured, experiential learning opportunities within academic institutions is a core contributing factor. This aligns with research indicating a disconnect between student self-perception and employer expectations (Ansari, 2021).

Institutional and Systemic Barriers

Many institutions still treat soft skills as secondary or optional. Challenges such as rigid curricula, lack of trained faculty, and limited engagement opportunities hinder effective implementation. These systemic issues must be addressed by embedding soft skill training into mainstream education through credit-bearing courses, integrated assessments, and long-term mentoring programs. Institutional and individual barriers such as lack of structured training, minimal mentorship, and inflexible schedules—contribute to the deficiency in skill development. These findings highlight the need for more applied, practice-oriented learning environments, as supported by Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory.

Experiential Learning as a Key Driver

Workshops, simulations, and real-world case studies have emerged as essential tools for soft skill development. This is consistent with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which stresses the importance of learning through doing. Students reported that interactive sessions, peer mentorship, and hands-on projects had a more lasting impact than lecture-based approaches.

Emerging Dimensions of Soft Skills

The study also brings to light emerging areas of soft skill development that are gaining relevance in the post-pandemic world:

- **Digital Communication & Collaboration:** As hybrid work becomes more prevalent, proficiency in digital tools and remote teamwork is now essential (Coates & TaylorAdvisor, 2020).
- **Cultural Intelligence (CQ):** With globalised teams, the ability to navigate cross-cultural interactions is critical to effective collaboration and inclusion (Poláková et al., 2023).
- **Self-Leadership and Reflective Practice:** The ability to self-assess, receive feedback, and adapt behaviour is a vital soft skill for continuous personal and professional development.

Effective Strategies

Interactive learning formats, particularly workshops and mentorship, emerged as preferred by students. These methods provide real-world context and feedback, which are vital for long-term retention and performance. The results suggest that incorporating these strategies into academic curricula could significantly enhance outcomes.

Implications for Educational Institutions

Universities must rethink curriculum design to embed soft skills training into core academic experiences. Institutions should offer dedicated modules on communication, leadership, and emotional intelligence, complemented by internships, role-playing exercises, and feedback-based mentorship programs.

Industry Collaboration and Policy Implications

Stronger partnerships between academia and industry are needed to align educational outcomes with real-world expectations. Incorporating employer feedback into curriculum design, promoting internships, and organising co-curricular industry workshops can help narrow the gap between classroom learning and workplace readiness.

This survey explored how students and professionals view and develop soft skills like communication, teamwork, adaptability, and leadership. While these skills are widely recognized as essential, structured opportunities to build them remain limited. The findings highlight perceptions, challenges, and practical ways to improve soft skills training. **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Embed Soft Skills in Curricula:** Introduce dedicated soft skills modules in academic programs, covering communication, teamwork, leadership, and emotional intelligence. These should include both theoretical and practical components.
- **Incorporate Experiential Learning:** Use active learning strategies such as simulations, internships, group projects, and role-playing exercises to facilitate real-world application of soft skills.
- **Promote Peer Learning and Mentorship:** Establish mentorship programs and peer-based learning communities to encourage collaborative skill-building, feedback exchange, and leadership development.
- **Offer Flexible Learning Options:** Develop self-paced online learning modules and digital tools to accommodate diverse student schedules and promote continuous skill development.
- **Integrate Assessment and Feedback Mechanisms:** Implement regular self-assessments, peer evaluations, and instructor feedback to help students identify skill gaps and track personal growth.
- **Address Emerging Constructs:** Actively incorporate training on self-reflection, professional networking, and cultural competence to align with the needs of the globalised workforce.
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To bridge the gap between awareness and development, the following are suggested: **Integrate soft skills into academic programs** through presentations and team-based activities, **Organise practical workshops and seminars** focused on real-life scenarios, **Encourage mentorship and peer learning**, allowing for shared feedback and support and **Create opportunities for hands-on experience** through internships and volunteer projects.

Conclusion

While soft skills are highly valued, they often lack structured support in both education and the workplace. By embedding them into regular learning and professional environments, individuals can gain the confidence and ability to succeed both academically and in their careers.

This study underscores the indispensable role of soft skills in enhancing student employability, workplace readiness, and long-term career success. While students demonstrate high awareness of the importance of communication, teamwork, adaptability, and emotional intelligence, the research reveals a significant gap between perceived proficiency and practical competence. This gap is largely attributed to the lack of structured, experiential soft skills training within academic institutions.

Findings from the literature review and student survey indicate that while technical skills remain essential, soft skills often serve as the differentiating factor in competitive job markets. Furthermore, underrepresented constructs—such as self-awareness, networking ability, and cultural competence—must be prioritised in future soft skills development models.

The study confirms that experiential learning techniques—such as workshops, role-playing, project-based learning, and mentorship programs—are effective strategies for enhancing soft skills. Therefore, there is a pressing need for educational institutions to integrate these approaches systematically into the curriculum, ensuring that students are not only academically proficient but also socially and professionally competent.

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