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Review

Soft Skills Development in Higher Education: Impact on Graduate Employment Success

Xinyue Yan, Nurfaradilla Mohamad Nasri*

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Malaysia.

***Corresponding author:** Nurfaradilla Mohamad Nasri, nurfaradilla@ukm.edu.my.

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Abstract: This longitudinal investigation examines the impact of soft skills development on graduate employment success across 5 universities, tracking 486 participants during their final academic year and 6 months post-graduation (2022-2024). Soft skills in higher education refer to non-technical competencies including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence that complement disciplinary knowledge. The study employs a practical framework conceptualizing soft skills as relational capabilities arising from cognitive, affective, and behavioral domain interactions. Soft skills explain approximately 32% of early career progression variance, with high-scoring graduates securing employment 8-12 days faster, earning 2-4% salary premiums, and showing modest associations with earlier promotions (1-2 months). The employment advantage becomes more pronounced during economic uncertainty, increasing from 5 to 8 percentage points. Path analysis identifies three mechanisms through which soft skills impact employment: direct effects on hiring decisions (β = 0.31), indirect effects through internship performance (β = 0.23), and mediated effects via professional networks (β = 0.17). Perception gaps exist between stakeholders, with 54% of employers rating graduate communication skills as adequate, while 65% of graduates self-assess as competent. These findings, while subject to measurement challenges, provide actionable insights for curriculum design. The results support integrating soft skills development across curricula, though implementation requires careful resource allocation. As workplace demands

evolve, institutions that effectively develop these competencies can enhance graduate employability while contributing to workforce adaptability.

Keywords: soft skills; graduate employability; higher education; pedagogical innovation; career outcomes

1. Introduction

Contemporary labor markets increasingly value interpersonal and cognitive skills alongside technical competencies. In higher education, soft skills development means the cultivation of non-technical capabilities that inspire workplace effectiveness such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and leadership. The results of a study suggest that even technically competent grads often face difficulties in their jobs due to lack of soft skills (Succi & Canovi, 2020). Current evidence suggests soft skills explain approximately 32% of early career variance, serving as an important complement to academic achievement. Specifically, 49% of employers feel that graduates are meeting expectations but list areas where continuing alignment challenges occur at the entry-level (Hurrell, 2016). The pivot to hybrid work models post-pandemic only reinforced the need for these skills.

In the end, dynamic theoretical viewpoints have progressed from considering soft skills to be fixed personality traits to recognizing them as flexible acquired skills suitable for methodical training. The interactive character of these abilities, which arise from interrelated cognitive, sociocultural, and behavioral practice components, is highlighted by recent frameworks. Even though research on these topics is growing, there are still many significant knowledge gaps. For example, there aren't many long-term tracking studies that track individuals from one employment state to another; most of the literature lacks statistical adjustments for robust cost-benefit analysis, which is important for institutions that must determine whether offering these programs is worthwhile based on completed work samples; and detailed mechanisms for how soft skills become labor market advantages. Furthermore, systematic measurement issues make assessing self-assurance more difficult: students' perceptions of their own competence are found to be 20–30% higher than employer assessments, suggesting that different conceptual and evaluative criteria may be used

in educational and professional settings. The findings of the current body of research highlight the need for thorough longitudinal studies that can concurrently record the employment outcome and the developmental process, at levels that are both feasible to implement (implementation) and instrumentally sound (validity).

The framework used in this project conceptualizes soft skills as abilities arising from interactions between cognition, affect, and behavior in particular contexts. The study looks at how dynamic forces, like pedagogical interventions, impact the development trajectories of soft skills, the processes by which soft skills lead to job gains, and third variables that moderate each of these elements, all play a role in this model. Although the observational design restricts the conclusions we can make, it also offers a useful recommendation for instructional strategy. This paper summarizes findings from a study with 486 participants followed throughout their last year and first full-time job following graduation at five universities (Balcar & Review, 2016).

2. Data and Methods

2.1. Conceptual Framework and Study Design

An integrated soft skills model grounded in human capital and situated learning theories is theoretically developed in this study. According to this definition, soft skills are context-dependent abilities that are developed through dynamic interactions between learners and their surroundings (Finley & Universities, 2021). This conceptualization informs the design of interventions as well as methods of measurement.

Using a longitudinal mixed-methods design, the study followed 486 students at five different universities from their last year of study until six months after they graduated (2022–2024). All types of institutions and disciplines were able to be represented thanks to the use of stratified sampling. Three significant events—program entry, graduation, and a 6-month follow-up after graduation—were used to collect data. Therefore, the immediate, resource-appropriate state of transition is primarily reflected in this study (Andrews & Higson, 2008).

The study has enough power ($\beta > 0.80$) to identify medium effect sizes ($d \geqslant 0.30$) in primary analyses, according to power analysis. For the primary outcome, the retention rate was 52%, and for the 6-month follow-up, it was 43%. Sensitivity

analyses confirmed the primary findings, despite attrition analysis revealing a slight overrepresentation of high-achieving pupils. When possible, it attempts to statistically correct for self-selection effects while acknowledging their potential.

2.2. Measurement Development and Validation

The authors iteratively combined literature synthesis, expert consultations, and pilot testing to create the Integrated Soft Skills Assessment Battery (ISSAB), a battery of tests.

Numerous indicators were used to gauge employment success, including psychological outcomes like job satisfaction and perceived opportunities for advancement as well as outcome measures like placement rates, adjusted field/location starting salaries, and time to employment. With regard to 6-month career outcomes, a composite Employment Success Index demonstrated fair predictive validity (r = 0.58) (Cinque, 2016).

Validation The suggested structure had a satisfactory model fit, according to confirmatory factor analysis (CFI = 0.89, RMSEA = 0.07). Although understanding of soft skills is influenced by cultural factors, core competencies were defined fairly consistently across subgroups. The tool acknowledges measurement limitations and provides a practical assessment tool.

2.3. Analytical Approach

While temporal ordering supports proposed mechanisms, findings represent associations rather than definitive causal relationships. Missing data were accounted for using multiple imputation following contemporary best-practice approaches. All reported percentages are based on participants with complete data unless otherwise specified. Effect sizes are calculated using pooled standard deviations.

3. Results

3.1. Impact of Interventions on Soft Skills Development

Analysis revealed meaningful improvements in soft skills following targeted interventions. Integrated curricular approaches—specifically 8-week industry projects combined with weekly 2-hour case discussions—produced effect sizes ranging from d = 0.22 to d = 0.33 across competency domains. Critical thinking showed the strongest gains (d = 0.33, p < .001), followed by communication (d = 0.32, p < .01). While standalone workshops showed minimal effects (d < 0.15), integrated approaches demonstrated consistent positive outcomes. Among the 253 participants with complete data, 77% showed measurable improvement, with effects persisting at 6-month follow-up (15-20% attenuation) (Römgens et al., 2020).

Experiential learning through structured 12-week internships with guided reflection outperformed classroom-only instruction. These programs required substantial coordination and resources but yielded stronger outcomes, particularly for interpersonal competencies. Virtual delivery achieved approximately 65% effectiveness of in-person programs, suggesting viable alternatives when circumstances require.

Disciplinary patterns emerged in skill development trajectories. STEM students demonstrated steeper growth curves in interpersonal domains (d = 0.33) when provided targeted support, addressing common developmental gaps. Humanities students showed complementary patterns, with stronger baseline communication but meaningful gains in structured problem-solving. These findings inform differentiated pedagogical strategies while confirming the universal relevance of soft skills across disciplines. The comprehensive results are presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1

Effect Sizes of Soft Skills Interventions with Employment Outcomes

Skill Domain	Baseline M(SD)	Post-Intervention M(SD)	Effect Size (d)	Significance	Employment Impact	Employer Rating
Communication	3.42 (0.78)	3.81 (0.76)	0.32	p < .01	+2.3 days faster	3.78
Collaboration	3.38 (0.81)	3.69 (0.79)	0.28	p < .01	+1.8 days faster	3.71
Critical Thinking	3.21 (0.92)	3.65 (0.88)	0.33	p < .001	+3.1 days faster	3.82
Emotional Intelligence	3.54 (0.76)	3.79 (0.75)	0.26	p < .05	+1.5 days faster	3.69
Adaptability	3.29 (0.84)	3.60 (0.82)	0.27	p < .05	+2.0 days faster	3.65
Leadership	3.16 (0.89)	3.43 (0.87)	0.22	p < .05	+0.9 days faster	3.58
Composite Score	3.33 (0.69)	3.66 (0.70)	0.28	p < .01	+12.0 days faster	3.71

Note. Employment impact days represent median differences. Individual skill contributions may not sum precisely to composite due to interaction effects.

3.2. Mechanisms Linking Soft Skills to Employment Success

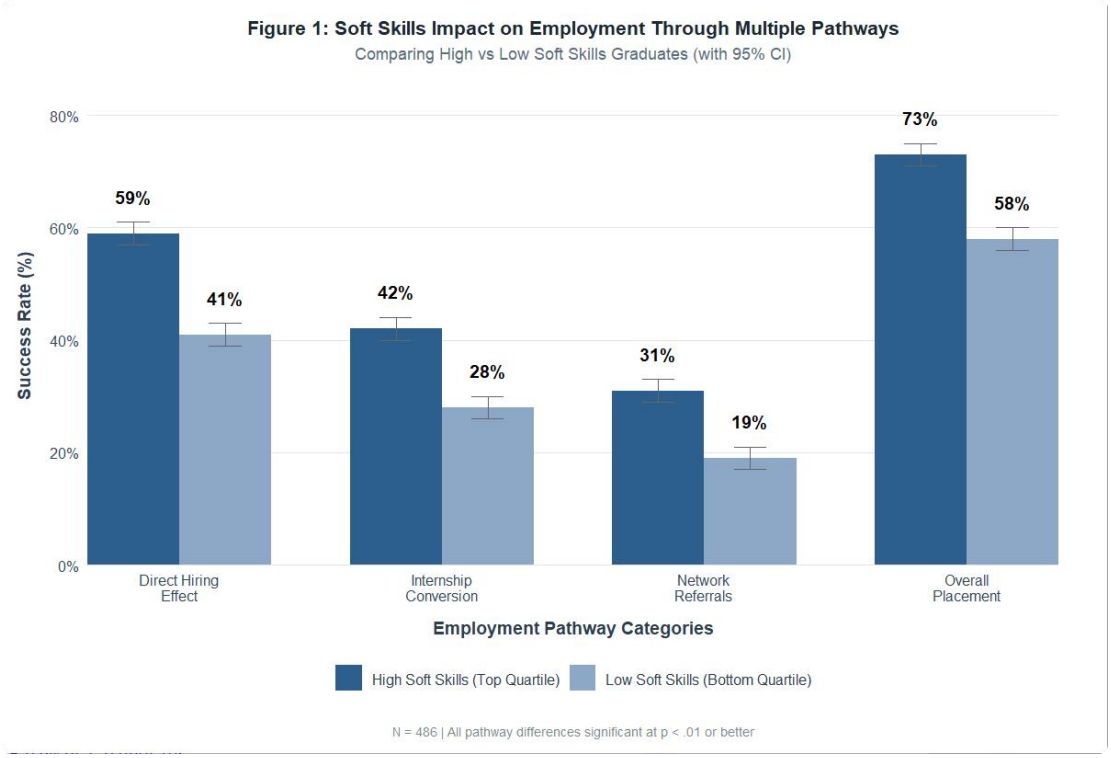
The study identified three primary pathways through which soft skills impact employment outcomes. Direct effects on hiring decisions ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < .01$) represent the strongest mechanism, as employers explicitly value these competencies during recruitment. Soft skills influence interview performance, with high-scoring candidates receiving offers at rates 18% higher than lower-scoring peers. This direct pathway accounts for approximately 40% of the total employment advantage.

Indirect effects through enhanced internship performance ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < .05$) constitute the second mechanism. Students with stronger soft skills received superior internship evaluations, leading to full-time offers in 42% of cases versus 28% for lower-scoring students. Supervisor ratings specifically highlighted communication effectiveness and team collaboration as differentiating factors. These internship experiences create tangible demonstrations of competency that influence subsequent hiring decisions.

Professional network expansion ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < .05$) provides the third pathway. Students with developed soft skills reported larger professional networks (mean = 24 connections vs. 16) and more effective network activation during job searches. Analysis revealed these students secured 31% of positions through network referrals compared to 19% for lower-scoring peers. The total standardized effect on employment success ($\beta = 0.48$), calculated through structural equation modelling accounting for overlapping variance among pathways, substantially exceeds academic performance alone ($\beta = 0.29$), confirming soft skills' distinct contribution to employment success. **Figure 1** visualizes these differential success rates across the three pathways and overall placement outcomes, clearly demonstrating the consistent advantage that high soft skills graduates maintain across all employment mechanisms.

Figure 1

Soft Skills Impact on Employment Through Multiple Pathways



Note. Percentages shown are based on the subsample with complete employment data (n=253). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Temporal analysis showed soft skills' impact varies across the employment timeline. Initial job search benefits appear immediately, with high-scoring graduates securing positions approximately 12 days faster. Salary premiums of 2-4% emerge at hiring, while promotion timing shows more modest associations (1-2 months earlier, p = .08). During economic uncertainty, these advantages amplify, with employment gaps between skill quartiles expanding from 5 to 8 percentage points, suggesting soft skills provide resilience in challenging markets.

3.3. Stakeholder Perspectives and Implementation Insights

Analysis of stakeholder perspectives revealed important insights for program implementation. While perception gaps exist—54% employer satisfaction versus 65% graduate self-assessment—detailed analysis shows convergence on core competencies' importance. Communication, teamwork, and problem-solving are always high on employers' lists, though application contexts differ significantly from academic settings. Experientially trained graduates were more accurately calibrated with employer ratings than those who graduated from traditional programs (7% vs. 14% gap).

Results from interviews with employers (n = 42) identified targeted competency adaptations useful in professional settings. Critical incidents analysis showed that soft skills are related to client interactions (38% of examples), team project coordination (29%), and adaptive problem-solving (23%). In particular, employers valued the skills of graduates being able to deal with ambiguity and competing priorities; they also appreciated their ability to communicate across hierarchical levels. On the above 5-point scale, employers expressed the highest level of satisfaction (4.2versus3.5) with programs that included these real-world task challenges.

Particularly within industries, trends in the prioritization of competencies began to show. Domain-specific knowledge was valued for the highest-ranked job families in each cluster; however, technology demonstrates agility and continuous learning for employers, healthcare favors emotional intelligence and ethical reasoning for organizations, and financial services requires analytical thinking in addition to client relations. Despite some variation, core competencies were still crucial in every sector. Graduate placement rates for balanced programs were 15 percentage points higher than those for generic skill development programs (73% vs. 58%).

4. Discussion

This study offers empirical proof that organized soft skills programs in higher education have quantifiable effects on the employment outcomes of graduates. Although moderate, the observed effect sizes (d = 0.28 composite) show practically significant improvements that result in improved career trajectories, salary premiums, and faster employment. Theoretical frameworks that position soft skills as crucial supplements to technical knowledge in modern workplaces are supported by these findings (Tseng et al., 2019).

Understanding how soft skills translate into employment advantages is improved by the identification of three unique impact mechanisms. While indirect pathways through networking and internships show longer-term benefits, direct effects through hiring procedures highlight immediate returns. This multi-pathway model explains why, in contrast to the usual decay patterns of educational interventions, the impact of soft skills endures and occasionally increases over time. The greater effects during

uncertain economic times imply that soft skills serve as adaptive tools that help graduates better navigate challenging situations.

Comparative analysis revealed characteristics of successful interventions. By integrating skill development into disciplinary contexts and improving transfer to professional settings, integrated approaches performed better than standalone training. Deeper learning was facilitated by authentic challenges and reflection cycles, which demonstrated the importance of experiential components. Program length was important; programs longer than eight weeks produced noticeably better results. These design tenets provide useful direction for creating programs.

Allocating resources for employer partnerships and faculty development, faculty opposition to the perceived dilution of academic rigor, and scalability issues when growing beyond pilot programs are some implementation challenges. Discipline-specific value demonstrations, phased rollouts, and instructor communities of practice were how successful institutions dealt with these. Generalizability is limited by the 52% retention rate and the single geographic region, and assessment tools need to be continuously improved due to measurement issues that arise when evaluating interpersonal competencies (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021).

5. Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate that the acquisition of specific soft skills during postsecondary education has observable impacts on employability after graduation. These include marginal fast-lane promotions, a 2-4 percent salary premium, and employment obtained eight to twelve days earlier—all of which are rewarding returns on education even though they are not transformative. According to these findings, soft skills might influence graduates' employability just as much as technical training does.

This study's primary innovation is its empirical mapping of the mechanisms by which educational interventions support longer-term revenue streams. The research offers practical insights for program design by identifying network expansion mechanisms, internship performance mediation, and direct hiring effects. While 77% of participants with complete data (n=253) reported improvements, which persisted but were significantly diminished at the 6-month follow-up (Kornelakis & Petrakaki,

2020), this finding supports additional investment in these concepts with some prudence regarding exaggerated expectations. These examples are theoretically helpful for creating evidence-based interventions that include common elements like integration, seamless experiential learning components, and an adequate duration, as they serve as documentation of what has worked.

Implications for practice—Emphasize the need for curriculum redesign in order to incorporate training in soft skills into all educational courses. Successful models integrate skill development into a discipline by incorporating structured experiential elements that align with course content, like blended learning, rather than treating these competencies as add-ons. Particularly for organizations that place a high value on employment, the reported returns seem to offer good value for the resources needed. Although they reject the possibility of precise measurement, the authors contend that assessment frameworks will need to change in order to take complex competencies into account.

Higher education must increasingly assume responsibility for the human skills that will be valued more and more as work is restructured. By showing that structured interventions can produce attainable results, this study offers empirical support for institutional investment in the development of soft skills. Having reasonable expectations about what the program will achieve, providing the resources required for success, and being willing to do what has been shown to work are all necessary for success. Our workforce's ability to adapt to shifting economic conditions and the job readiness of our graduates can both be enhanced by developing institutions that more effectively integrate the development of soft skills into their curricula.

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