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Developing Soft Skills: Faculty and Employer Perspectives and Recommendations

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
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Abstract

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Many employers are concerned that recent business graduates lack expertise in soft skills needed to be effective in their professional roles. The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the urgent need for workers with soft skills competence in communication, flexibility, and resilience. Guided by Goleman's conceptual framework of emotional intelligence, this qualitative study examined potential solutions to reduce this gap among business graduates. The research questions investigated faculty and employer perceptions of and experiences with soft skills development and their recommendations to improve graduates' soft skill proficiency. Eight semistructured interviews were conducted after purposeful sampling. The data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding to identify themes and patterns. Results suggested that soft skills develop within a context of safety, empowerment, self-awareness, self-reflection, continuous reinforcement, targeted focus, accountability, and practical application. To promote these conditions, educational and business leaders should reorient institutional priorities and values, modify program design, and adapt pedagogical approaches to enable effective assessment, practice, and mastery of soft skills competencies. The findings provide university and business leaders with insights into functional changes needed within their institutions and classrooms to prioritize and improve the soft skills performance of business graduates.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my wife, Angela, whose heart of encouragement and intrepid enthusiasm kept me buoyed and hopeful throughout the research process. With her near to me, writing becomes a process of personal discovery and growth that inspires me toward greater endeavors. I also dedicate this study to my three young children, Liam, Lance, and Lydia, who will be navigating the world of work in years to come and will need the human competencies explored in this study. As I wrote this study, I considered the responsibility to steward their growth in soft skills in the coming years.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my parents, Frank and Lenore, who have always encouraged me to go to the next level in my education and provided me every opportunity to excel. To my committee chair, Professor Robert Hogan, I offer a special and endearing thanks for his thoughtful input into this research that taught me in significant ways, his commitment to my growth, and his sincere and effusive encouragement that left me edified every time I conversed with him. I treasure our interactions. I also want to thank Dr. Dorin Stanciu, my second committee chair, for his sharp-witted insights and expert guidance, which flowed out his evident genuine care. To Dr. Nicolae Nistor, the university research reviewer, thank you for your valuable feedback. Thank you all for your well-honed counsel and support throughout my journey. Your combined efforts are deeply appreciated.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Soft skills have a central function in the world of work (Anthony & Garner, 2016; Dall'Amico & Verona, 2015; Hurrell, 2016). They are considered by employers throughout all industries as essential employability attributes for graduates to successfully perform their professional roles (Jones et al., 2016; Karimi, 2020; LinkedIn, 2018). The U.S. Department of Education Employability Skills Framework refers to soft skills as part of employability, career-readiness, and workforce-readiness skills (Division of Academic and Technical Education, 2016). A national survey conducted by CareerBuilder found that 62% of employers rated soft skills among employment candidates as crucial and a key differentiator between candidates who may have the same technical qualifications (CareerBuilder, 2017a). However, while employers greatly value soft skills, some employees who recently graduated from undergraduate studies do not adequately exhibit these skills (Levy & Cannon, 2016).

This gap in soft skill proficiency is the difference between the soft skills needed to perform a job effectively and the soft skills a worker or potential worker possesses (James-Constantine, 2018). Employers have expressed concern about this disparity and its impact on their organizations (Martin, 2019; Meeks, 2017; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2020).

The population of interest of this study comprised employees who have graduated with an undergraduate degree in business within the past 5 years and are currently employed as management consultants (also often called business analysts) within consulting companies. Business degrees account for about one-fifth of bachelor's degrees awarded each year in the United States (Selingo, 2017). Of the 2 million bachelor's

degrees conferred in 2017–2018 in the United States, 386,000, or 19%, were business degrees. Between 2000–2001 and 2017–2018, the number of bachelor's degrees conferred in business increased by 47% (Institute of Education Science: National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). The consensus is clear in the literature review that new business graduates working as management consultants lack the necessary soft skills to function efficiently in the business workforce (Stewart et al., 2016). With changes in the workplace due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for soft skills at work has become more pronounced (Christensen, 2020).

Both employers and higher education leaders have recognized the need to understand how and why the underperformance of soft skills exists across multiple professions and industries (Karimi, 2020; Tulgan, 2016). Woodard (2018) pointed out that it is also valuable to identify and apply remedies to broaden and improve graduates' soft skills. The overwhelming consistency in current research and among industry experts and academic leaders has emphasized that the soft skills needed in the workforce have changed and continue to change (Levy & Rodkin, 2015). These shifts have implications for workforce readiness, hiring considerations, and professional training at work, as well as pedagogical priorities and practices at universities (McCord et al., 2015). At an individual level, improving soft skills is fundamental not only to graduates' job performance and professional execution of their role but to their lifelong learning, adaptive behavior, and personal growth (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013).

Furthermore, finding potential solutions to the soft skills gap in the workplace has potential positive social change implications. Karimi (2020) noted that employers may

become more aware of the benefits of professional development initiatives that strengthen their employees' soft skills. Academic leaders may also be more inclined to consider, adopt, and expand instructive methods both inside and outside the classroom to promote students' soft skills. Moreover, as future skills requirements within the work context change, higher education can be more aligned to workforce needs (Allen, 2018).

This chapter introduces evidence of the nature, relevance, and significance of the deficiency of soft skills among undergraduate students who have recently graduated and frames the research problem based on these findings. I define the study's focus and intent and describe the choice of research paradigm that supports this study as well as the guiding conceptual framework, emotional intelligence, which was the lens through which soft skills development was explored. I present the basic qualitative methodology that guided this investigation. I identify various assumptions, limitations, and potential biases in this study to ensure transparency. I also consider ways this study can advance knowledge in the discipline and how its potential contributions may advance practice and promote positive social change.

Background

Lack of Soft Skills Among Business Graduates

Soft skills can be defined as "non-technical, applied skills that employees are expected to possess" (Stewart et al., 2016, p. 277). Soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking are important skills across industries and are particularly needed in a globally connected environment (Stewart et al., 2016). Based on an analysis of over 25 million unique job listings, at least one of three highly valued skills

sought by employers, regardless of industry or occupation, was a soft skill (Burning Glass Technologies, 2015).

Although soft skills are immediately needed in business, a growing body of evidence supports the claim that undergraduate business graduates do not have the soft skills that employers expect them to possess as they enter their profession (Davidson, 2016; National Association of Colleges and Educators [NACE], 2016; Stewart et al., 2016). According to the Society for Human Resource Management, three in four employers say it is difficult to find graduates with the soft skills their companies need. Of the employers surveyed, 77% said that communication skills are in high demand, but 54% of them found it very difficult to find applicants with communication skills; 74% said that critical thinking skills are in high demand, but 64% described the process of finding applicants with critical thinking skills as very difficult; and 73% said that interpersonal skills are in high demand, but 55% of them found it very difficult to find applicants with interpersonal skills (Wilkie, 2020).

Leadership IQ (2020) surveyed 20,000 new hires and 1,400 human resource directors and found that 46% of newly-hired employees failed within 18 months of being hired – 89% of these "failed hires" were because of a lack of interpersonal skills such as coachability, temperament, and motivation, whereas 11% of these failed hires were because of a lack of functional or technical skills.

Workplaces Require Different and More Soft Skills

Although fluency in technical and hard skills will always be important, today's workplace requires a widening range of soft skills (LinkedIn, 2018; Schooley, 2017;

World Economic Forum [WEF], 2016). The literature review highlights the increasing complexity of the professional work environment, which is transitioning to a knowledge and service economy based on creativity (Bhagra & Sharma, 2018; Weiss, 2019; Wilkie, 2020). In the current business environment, competitive differentiation and economic growth necessitate a workforce competent in soft skills (Marope et al., 2018).

Industries are experiencing a disruption in the soft skills required in the workplace. In 2021, 35% of soft skills deemed important were different from those required in 2015 (WEF, 2016, p. v). Many jobs require higher levels of interpersonal and problem-solving skills because the work involves more extensive human interaction and response to people's needs and expectations (Karimi, 2020). The soft skills that were once relevant and prioritized are now being reprioritized, while other soft skills are gaining importance at work. The skills employers require are evolving, and the shelf-life of employees' existing skill sets are shortening; for example, organizations are placing greater priority on adaptability (Findler & Gorbis, 2013; Schooley, 2017).

Moreover, workplaces require the ability to work across both regions and cultures to solve problems; creativity and innovation to work across disciplines and departments; and authentic communication, empathetic listening, and team-building skills among employees and clients to spread across functions and ages (Matteson et al., 2016). In need of these soft skills, hiring managers have determined that recent college graduates are not prepared upon entering the workforce. Additionally, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019), employees will likely change jobs on average 12 times in their career, necessitating that they learn new soft skills in multiple work contexts. What is

clear from the literature is that a soft skill deficit persists even as employers' demand for those soft skills is increasing (Deming, 2017).

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The need for soft skills in the workforce has become even more critical during the COVID-19 pandemic. With more employees working from home, employers view soft skills as determinants of success (Deligiannis, 2020). Nunn (2020) identified soft skills that took greater precedence during the pandemic. These skills included the ability to refine one's skills and adapt as needed during lockdowns. Businesses need agile learners who can learn new skills in response to changing work requirements. Furthermore, when circumstances fluctuated during the pandemic, leadership was needed to provide clarity, coherence, and productivity. Problem-solving skills also have greater value in making effective decisions in uncertain times. Additionally, professional and seamless communication online via video conferences, virtual calls, and online presentations has become a standard requisite (Nunn, 2020).

Implications of the Soft Skills Gap

Nunn (2020) also stated that 99% of learning and development executives acknowledged that if the skill gap does not close within 3 to 5 years, customer satisfaction, product development, and innovation potential will significantly erode. A McKinsey 2020 report (as cited in Feld et al., 2020) underscored that skill-building has become an imperative practice in which, to emerge positively from the current crisis, organizations will need to cultivate their employees' digital, cognitive, social, and emotional skill sets, such as their adaptability and resilience. To offset the lack of soft

skills among new hires, many organizations are investing heavily in training, coaching, and developing soft skills among new hires so they can become more qualified for their roles. This added expenditure often concerns many employers who find it more cost-effective to hire someone with the right soft skills and then provide training on technical skills (Stoller, 2021).

A Soft Skills Gap Within a Global Skills Gap

Evidence has suggested that the soft skills gap is part of a larger global skills gap phenomenon. This global skills gap is a shortage in both technical and soft skills (Deloitte Insights, 2018). A skills gap occurs when there is an increase in demand relative to the current supply of these skills among candidates. With digital innovations transforming industries and organizations seeking to create greater value for customers, workplaces depend on skills that are constantly evolving (Karimi, 2020). Employers are concerned that new graduates do not have the overall required skills to meet workplace demands (James-Constantine, 2018; Karzunina et al., 2017; Mattis, 2018). Based on a Udemy Research 2017 skills gap report, 80% of Americans agreed there is a skills gap, with 35% saying it affected them personally (Udemy, 2017). Even though 43.2% of recent graduates were underemployed in 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau & U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), 60% of U.S. employers had to keep job openings vacant for 12 weeks or longer because they were unable to find qualified candidates (CareerBuilder, 2017b).

Soft Skills Development in Business Schools

Universities are often considered to be an essential source of a knowledgeable, innovative workforce (Jagannathan, 2017). Even though higher education leaders are increasingly aware of the deficiency of soft skills, many undergraduate business programs are unable to graduate students with the required soft skills (Hult Labs, 2014). Academic leaders have been making changes to their programs to address this gap (Clayton, 2015; Williams, 2015). However, many faculty members do not measure soft skill development in their courses, do not modify the traditional grading system to assess soft skills, and do not offer much feedback to students on their soft skills growth (Hult Labs, 2014; Marope et al., 2018). As a result, tracking students' soft skills progress throughout their academic journey has not yet been prioritized.

Employers expect universities to provide initiatives to support students' development of soft skills relevant to the work environment (Novellis, 2019; Tulgan, 2016; Weiss, 2019; Williams, 2015). Business schools at Harvard, Yale, Columbia, the University of Pennsylvania, Stanford University, Georgetown University, and others are developing courses in soft skills and are actively considering how their business programs can better teach and evaluate soft skill acquisition (Weiss, 2019). The dean and the senior associate dean of the Georgetown University McDonough School of Business, for instance, have stated that they need to adjust their programs to keep pace with the industry requirements for new skills, ways of thinking, and ways of relating to one another (Allen, 2019).

Why the Study Is Needed

Implications for Graduates

Addressing graduates' soft skills deficit is valuable to business students, business departments, and employers. For business students, proficiency in soft skills opens up options for employability. Business is currently the most popular major on college campuses, accounting for about 20% of bachelor's degrees awarded annually (Selingo, 2017). However, graduates' demonstration of skills is often more critical to their earning potential than their choice of undergraduate major or college (Rothwell & Kulkarni, 2015). Improving graduates' soft skills can increase their earning potential as well as improve their performance in the workplace (James-Constantine, 2018).

Implications for Employers

For employers, employee turnover and dismissals of new hires because they lack soft skills have financial consequences for organizations due to loss of return on their investments in new hire training and recruiting. Organizations' productivity, competitiveness, branding, and potential can be boosted when employees embody and display soft skills (Woodard, 2018). Therefore, addressing the soft skills gap may have wide-ranging implications for the labor market (James-Constantine, 2018).

Implications for Educators

For educators, graduating students with career readiness skills improves their programs' learning value and perceived benefit and relevance (Woodard, 2018). Understanding how to reduce the soft skills gap gives educators insights to strengthen their students' career preparation and improve alignment between academic offerings and

employment requirements. Higher education leaders would benefit from considering how to craft effective learning experiences and redesign curricula to ensure their students are suitably prepared to tackle complex questions in a global work environment (McDonough, 2020).

Impact on Accreditation

Ensuring graduates are adequately skilled for employment also has implications for business school accreditation and financing. Accreditation approves access to federal funding, subsidies, and student loans. Federal regulations require proof that degree programs lead to gainful employment, with graduates having debt-to-earnings ratios within the required limit (Gruhlke, 2017). Business programs use business education accreditation to be competitive. Business accrediting bodies have stipulated that business schools monitor industry standards and postgraduation success, such as "job placement outcomes…employment advancement, internships, entrepreneurial activity, and activity with positive societal impact" (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, 2020, p. 47). Not meeting these requirements can mean loss of accreditation and ensuing financial implications. Therefore, graduates' competency in and demonstration of soft skills gains have heightened importance for business schools in this context.

Problem Statement

The research problem examined in this study is that recent college graduates with undergraduate business degrees often lack the proficiency of soft skills needed as management consultants in consulting firms based in the Washington, DC metropolitan area.

Soft Skills Gap: A Relevant and Significant Problem

Employers, managers, hiring personnel, executives, and business owners are responsible for ensuring their organizations provide quality services (Gruhlke, 2017; IBM Global Business Services, 2010; Schooley, 2017). However, recent research has consistently documented employers' observations that business school undergraduates are not adept in the necessary soft skills to meet the expected quality standards (Gruhlke, 2017; Karimi, 2020). The attainment of soft skills by business graduates and the level of soft skills required to perform particular jobs are not aligned (James-Constantine, 2018). Graduates are ill-prepared to navigate a workplace that requires awareness of changing national and global contexts, cultural competence, mastery of verbal and digital communication, and adaptability (Marope, 2018).

The soft skills gap among business graduates is part of a larger soft skills gap among all recent graduates entering the workforce. Over 2 decades of research have offered clear evidence supporting the existence of a broadening soft skills gap in the workforce, particularly among recent graduates (Tulgan, 2016, p. 26). According to the Society for Human Resource Management (2019), 30% of employment candidates do not have sufficiently developed soft skills. Among executives surveyed by the Wall Street Journal, 89% said they had a very or somewhat difficult time finding employees with requisite soft skills (Davidson, 2016). A study of hiring managers found that recent college graduates were deficit in specific soft skills – 60% identified critical thinking and problem solving as most lacking among recent college graduates, 56% claimed recent

college graduates lacked attention to writing proficiency, and 46% lacked writing proficiency (PayScale, 2016).

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation (2017) reported that graduates lack foundational soft skills valued by employers across sectors. Of the employers surveyed, 81% said prospective employees lacked critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills; 75% thought graduates' innovation and diversity skills are inadequate. Furthermore, 67% of human resource managers prefer to hire candidates with strong soft skills even though they may be weak in hard skills (McGlochlin, 2018).

Soft Skill Development: A Gap in Practice

Prompted by the national labor market demands, universities are considered largely responsible for preparing graduates with appropriate soft skills for their professional future (Bhagra & Sharma, 2018). In recent years, the training and teaching of soft skills in university students have become high priorities because soft skills impact graduates' success in and adaptation to the work context (Guerra-Báez, 2019). However, the research literature consensus is that universities' methods to support soft skill development fall short (Martin, 2019). Currently, both workforce and business programs seeking to support soft skill development primarily include a mix of sporadic, interspersed activities combined with longer, continuous learning events and even specialized classes. These initiatives often lack programmatic coherence or proper scaffolding (Anthony & Garner, 2016; James-Constantine, 2018; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017). Research also lacks compelling agreement and specificity regarding how soft

skills should be taught, what specific soft skills should be included in university program objectives, and how the growth of soft skills can be measured (Rao, 2018).

Purpose of the Study

Focus and Intent of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the factors that contribute to the soft skills gap among recently graduated management consultants working in consulting organizations based in the Washington, DC metropolitan area to identify potential mechanisms to reduce this gap in soft skills. The study's focus was, therefore, to understand the perceptions, observations, and experiences of both business faculty and employers regarding the deficiencies in business graduates' soft skills development in order to ascertain how educators and employers may adequately provide students and employees with the soft skills needed to meet complex work demands.

Understanding the Perspectives of Academia and Businesses

To understand soft skills development among business graduates, gathering the perspectives of stakeholders involved in both the teaching and application of soft skills was instructive. These included (a) university faculty who provide learning experiences that promote soft skills development and (b) employers in several consulting firms based in the Washington, DC metropolitan area that require certain performance levels of soft skills from the management consultant role. Employers are involved in evaluating business graduate performance on the job, interacting with faculty over student internship programs, and sharing insight into the knowledge and skills future graduates need for professional success (Gruhlke, 2017). Employers who provided helpful insights into the

soft skill proficiency of new hires had past and current roles as human resource personnel, managers, direct supervisors, learning and development strategy leads, trainers, human capital development practitioners, and management consultants.

Research Paradigm: Interpretivism

For this study's research questions and purpose to be adequately addressed, faculty members' and employers' experiences in soft skills development need to be understood. Interpretivism allows for an analysis of the same phenomenon, soft skill development, under different circumstances, in the classroom and the workplace. From an interpretivist framework, soft skill development is not a single truth or experience and, therefore, needs to be understood from multiple experiences (Rehman & Khalid, 2016). Interpretivism assumes that each situation has multiple realities and meanings that can be defined from the standpoint of the individual faculty and employer. This study, therefore, required participants, as social actors in their contexts, to share their opinions, interests, values, and emerging meaning so I, the researcher, could understand their assessment of why a gap in soft skill behavior and knowledge exists among their students or employees and how this gap may be remedied. Interpretivism was the chosen research paradigm for this study because it lays the basis for the practical methodology of basic qualitative research, which supports the capture of the subjective viewpoints of research participants (see Merriam, 2015).

The data of participants' experiences and perspectives were elicited through the interview process (see Creswell, 2016). Key issues I sought to understand in the interviews were interviewees' assumptions and knowledge of soft skills development and

their perceived individual and departmental role, intentions, and expectations regarding the soft skill development of their students and employees. The credibility and dependability of this research study, therefore, depended significantly on the trustworthiness and clarity of the participants and my accurate capture of their feedback (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

A positivist approach to this study would have required soft skill development activities to be repeated in the same context with the same participants. An interpretivist approach, on the other hand, allowed me to examine and make inferences on soft skill development from contexts that are distinct and subject to multiple interpretations (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Given that interpretivist research is context-specific, generalizability of the findings of this study is limited. However, transferability of the findings is likely but requires I provide sufficiently detailed contextual data so that other researchers are able to find common ground in their research contexts (see Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Some of the contextual data can be found in Appendix A: Samples of Audit Trails.

Phenomenon of Interest

Soft Skills

The term *soft skills* is often used in the literature interchangeably with terms such as noncognitive skills, enduring human capabilities, human skills, nontechnical competencies, personal traits, socioaffective skills, personal qualities, life skills, readiness skills, generic skills, essential skills, skills for life, people skills, employability skills, core skills, and key competences for lifelong learning (Dall'Amico & Verona, 2015;

Whitehurst, 2016; Woodard, 2018). They include skills in oral and written communication, teamwork, decision making, problem-solving, critical thinking, ethical judgment, integrity, professional responsibility, work ethic, diversity awareness, leadership, time management, stress management, innovation, creativity, negotiation, interpersonal relationships skills, adaptability, motivation, and lifelong learning (Guerra-Báez, 2019; Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017; Rao, 2018; Stewart et al., 2016).

Soft skills draw from one's emotional intelligence, social intelligence, language ability, personality, and attitude (Martin, 2019). They are the skills individuals use to interact with their social environment at work. They work in sync with one's technical skills and are, therefore, vital to getting and keeping a job. Soft skills are also considered transversal skills in that they can be applied in multiple settings and contexts (Martin, 2019; Matteson et al., 2016; Nisha & Rajasekaran, 2018); for example, problem-solving can be applied when writing algorithms for a software program as well as when designing a solution to an environmental disaster.

Undergraduate Business Degree

A business degree refers to a bachelor's degree program in business from an accredited college or university. An undergraduate business program often has various business majors and concentrations. Specializations include accounting, marketing, sales, finance, international business, human resources, health services administration, management information systems, and business administration and management (Indeed, 2020). Business or management education is often housed under the concept of career and technical education (Jagannathan, 2017).

Professions of Business Graduates

A business graduate has the opportunity to engage in diverse environments and careers. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2016), seven of the top 11 undergraduate majors most in demand are in business-related fields, including accounting, finance, business administration, management information systems, supply chain management, economics, and marketing. The greatest demand in the near future is expected for accountants and auditors because of the growing complexity of the tax and regulatory environment and market research analysts because of the increased need to understand customer behavior through data and market research (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Soft skills add significant value to business graduates functioning in these various roles as graduates convert their technical proficiencies into economic output, which organizations need (Dall'Amico & Verona, 2015).

Management Consultants

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011), the role of the management consultant is to advise organizations on finances, personnel, marketing, distribution, operations, organizational structure, logistics, new technologies, and compliance to be more effective and competitive in the marketplace. Management consultants evaluate business practices and strategize to solve operational and organizational problems and gaps (Indeed, n.d.). To be hired as an entry-level management analyst usually requires an undergraduate business degree. A higher-level management consultant position requires an additional 4 years of consulting experience.

A senior management consultant is expected to have the equivalent of a graduate degree and 7 years of experience or an undergraduate degree and 10 years of consulting experience. A fourth level is as a partner or principal, which requires a graduate degree and more than 10 years of consulting experience (Allen, 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

Management consultants are expected to perform several roles requiring soft skill expertise. Their work in problem-solving includes improving efficiencies and creatively reengineering systems to transform an organization. Critical thinking is a key part of fulfilling their responsibilities as they reason about solutions to problems. Communication is a vital skill for management consultants who often interview personnel, submit written reports and proposals, and make oral presentations. Their work also requires teamwork and collaboration through regular team interactions, updates, meetings, relationship-building, trust-building, and engaging persons in various functional roles to accomplish set goals.

Soft Skills Gap

Employers have expressed dissatisfaction that recently hired business graduates do not have adequate job-related soft skills. Graduates, for example, many lack the interpersonal skills to apprehend organizational culture, norms, and protocol expected (McCord et al., 2015). Foss et al. (2018) found in a study that 67% of human resource leaders withheld job offers from technically qualified candidates because they lacked soft skills, and 43% of employees said that soft-skills-related challenges negatively impacted their work. In this study, I examined what circumstances may lead to this deficiency of

soft skills among business graduates to consider what can be done to alleviate this shortcoming.

Research Questions

In this study, I compared the perspectives of faculty and employers on the gap in soft skills of business graduates to identify possible approaches to reduce this gap. The study population consisted of recent graduates of business schools working in consulting firms based in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. The phenomenon of interest studied was the perspectives and experiences of both higher education business faculty and employers at consulting firms involved in work-related soft skill development.

Research Question (RQ)1: What are the perceptions of business faculty and employers of factors that contribute to the soft skills gap of recently graduated management consultants?

RQ2: What are the recommendations of faculty and employers to improve soft skills needed by management consultants?

Conceptual Framework: Emotional Intelligence

The conceptual framework for this study was emotional intelligence (EI) as developed by Goleman (1998). EI provides a framework to both conceptualize and analyze the development of soft skills. According to the National Soft Skills Association (2016), EI is considered a requisite and foundational competency for the expression and development of soft skills.

Goleman (1998) defined EI as “the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves

and in others and in our relationships" (p. 317). EI is also described as "an array of non-cognitive skills, capabilities, and competencies that influence a person's ability to cope with environmental demand and pressures (Martinez, 1997, p. 72). Drigas and Papoutsi (2018) defined EI as the ability to "identify, understand, and use emotions positively to manage anxiety, communicate well, empathize, overcome issues, solve problems, and manage conflicts" (p. 1). Based on these definitions, EI is the ability to manage emotions in intrapersonal and interpersonal contexts. Furthermore, as one's EI develops, one's ability to express a range of soft skills in the work environment improves (Livesey, 2017). Graduates who do not excel in soft skills are considered to be lacking in development in EI (Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations, 2021).

Goleman developed a model based on soft skills with four domains based on both personal and social competence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social skills/relationship management (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2017). When addressing the RQs, these domains were used to assess the nature of the gap in soft skills and recommendations for improving soft skill proficiency among students and employees.

Self-Awareness

- Do employees read their own emotions, preferences, motivations, and intuitions and recognize their impact on one's personal performance?
- Do employees know how to assess their strengths and limitations and develop a sense of self-confidence?
- Do employees have a sense of their capabilities and self-worth?

Self-Management

- Do employees stay focused on goal achievement, persist despite obstacles, adapt, show initiative, have self-control, and have standards of excellence and integrity in pursuit of goals?

Social Awareness

- Do employees empathize with others and their feelings and perspectives, express an active interest in others' concerns, show awareness of dynamics and issues within the organization, and are service-oriented toward others, such as clients?

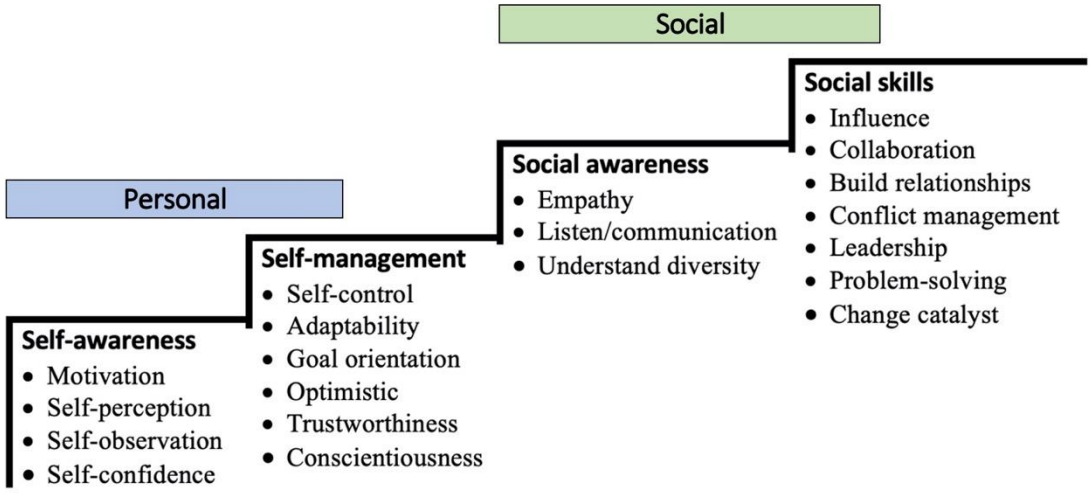
Social Skills: Relationship Management

- Are employees able to guide the tone of the group, collaborate and work in teams, resolve conflict, and develop others by addressing their needs and supporting their abilities?
- Are employees able to persuade and inspire others to get desirable responses and catalyze change?

As depicted in Figure 1, one domain leads to another – self-awareness enables self-management; self-awareness and self-management enable social awareness; and social skills are built on the three domains of self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness (see Cherniss & Goleman, 2001). In the process of soft skills development, individuals first develop self-awareness as they recognize their own thoughts and feelings toward people and situations. Then they progress toward understanding groups and social interaction, and then they become more adept at managing others' responses.

Figure 1

Development of Soft Skills



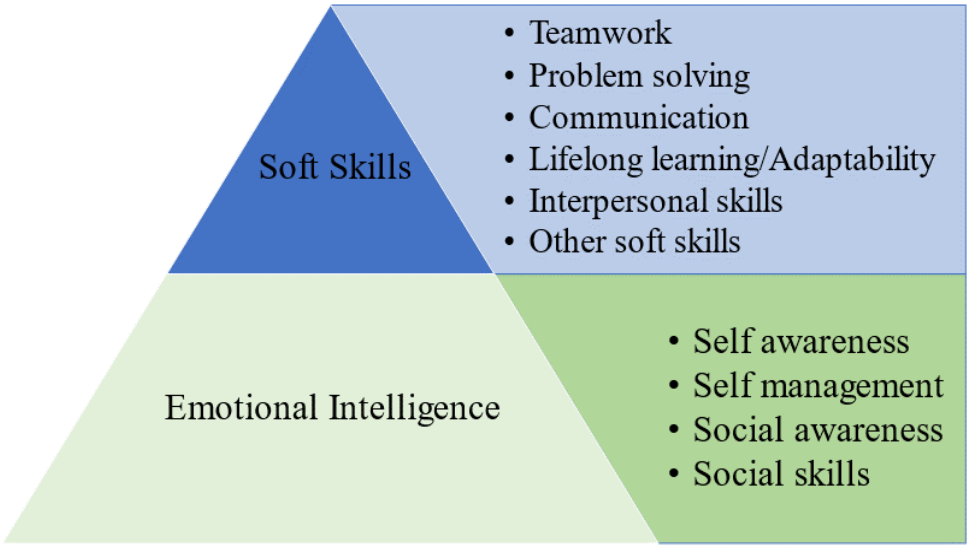
Goleman (1998) argued that EI provides the bedrock for competencies that he called *emotional competence*. As depicted in Figure 2, soft skills are linked to and empowered by EI; for example, the ability to recognize and anticipate others' feelings and concerns (social awareness) enables one to develop the soft skill of communication. Similarly, being able to regulate one's emotions (self-management) supports one being able to work through conflict in a team.

Studies have indicated that EI influences soft skills in a wide range of contexts, such as in the workplace, and can impact one's work performance, ability to communicate, problem-solving ability, interpersonal relationships, decision-making, team building, negotiation, and other areas of performance (Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations, 2021). EI enables soft skills to be identified and

measured, particularly with the goal of improving job performance (Emmerling et al., 2007).

Figure 2

Emotional Intelligence as the Foundation of Soft Skills



Applying EI as the conceptual framework for this study enabled me to address the RQs appropriately. As I analyzed the perceptions of faculty and employees regarding what issues bring about the soft skills gap and how this gap can be reduced, I considered whether the EI domains were being addressed in the soft skill development initiatives at both the university and work contexts. Applying an EI framework provided a further understanding of some of the constraints and opportunities in soft skill development in and across these environments.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative Design

The phenomenon examined in this study was soft skills development. A basic qualitative design was used to investigate educators' and employers' perceptions of the conditions that lead to the soft skills gap among recent business graduates in order to identify potential actions that can reduce this gap. I compared the experiences of individuals who have been deeply involved in the phenomenon of soft skills, both business faculty who seek to develop soft skills among their students and employers who require their employees demonstrate proficiency in soft skills. This study, therefore, necessitated a methodology that can effectively make sense of the various meanings people offer on this phenomenon.

Qualitative research provides a methodology to study meaning-making and understand how "people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 5). The authors also agreed that a basic qualitative design is appropriate to gather and examine participants' perceptions, experiences, and conditions regarding the soft skills gap and effective solutions to this gap.

Although adopting a positivist approach and a quantitative methodology may yield results that would be more generalizable, a qualitative methodology was more appropriate for this study. Qualitative methodology is designed to acquire meaning rather than measurement and is intended to describe the elements associated with soft skill development rather than to test a theory (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Examining Solutions to the Soft Skills Gap

A lack of alignment between employer needs and employee soft skills is referred to as the soft skills gap (Beardmore, 2019). National surveys have validated the presence of a soft skills gap. Human resource executives have consistently noted a lack of work ethic, communication skills, teamwork, and leadership from workers (Beardmore, 2019). In a job outlook survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2017), employers identified the top five attributes they need from employees: problem-solving skills (82.9% of employers), the ability to work in a team (82.9%), written communication skills (80.3%), leadership (72.6%), strong work ethic (68.4%).

RQ1 revealed what employers and faculty members think are the conditions responsible for the deficiency of soft skills among business graduates. RQ2 captured what employers and faculty members think should be done to rectify these conditions and mitigate the soft skills gap among business graduates. Responses from RQ2 emerged out of a consideration of perspectives that emerged from RQ1.

Basic Qualitative Methodology

The study used a basic qualitative methodology. Data collection included semistructured interviews of faculty members and employers, providing sources for comparative analysis. The use of two sets of participants provided two distinct viewpoints on the same questions. The data I collected via interviews were analyzed to draw out commonalities and differences among the perspectives shared to derive new insights that address the RQs (see James-Constantine, 2018). I analyzed interview transcripts by using open coding to yield initial codes from the data and draw connections

among codes. These codes were the basis of my categorization of the data and supported the thematic analysis of the qualitative data (see Creswell, 2018).

This comparative analysis strengthened the robustness of the study by utilizing multiple data sources that aid in understanding a phenomenon (see Merriam, 2015). To ensure the credibility and consistency of the inquiry, I used a combination of trustworthiness techniques, including member checks, audit trails, thick description, and reflexivity (see Creswell, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Definitions

The following are special terms associated with the phenomenon of soft skills development.

Curriculum: The curriculum is an academic plan into the what, where, when, who, how, and why of teaching and learning in a bounded learning experience. The what includes content and subject matter. The where includes the learning environment. The when includes sequence and procedures. The who includes learners, their characteristics, assumptions, and goals. The how includes instructional processes and methods and assessment. The why includes purposes, aims, and objectives (O'Neill, 2015).

Emotional intelligence (EI): EI is considered as a "set of abilities (verbal and non-verbal) that enable a person to generate, recognize, express, understand, and evaluate their own and others' emotions in order to guide thinking and action that successfully cope with environmental demands and pressures" (Van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004, p. 72).

Employability skills: Employability skills are a "group of essential abilities that involve the development of a knowledge base, expertise level, and mindset that is increasingly necessary for success in the modern workplace" (Division of Academic and Technical Education, 2016).

Lifelong learning: Lifelong learning refers to the formal and informal learning opportunities that enhance personal development, knowledge, and one's competitiveness in the workplace. Learning is not confined to a classroom or workplace setting but is a continuous learning process throughout one's life (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013).

Skill: A skill is "the ability either to perform some specific behavioral task or the ability to perform some specific cognitive process that is functionally related to some particular task" (Peterson & Van Fleet, 2004, p. 1298).

Skills gap: For the purposes of this study, a skills gap refers to "widespread shortfalls" (Cappelli, 2015, p. 252) in the skills of current or future employees who do not meet or match the skill set required in the workplace.

Soft skill: The term, soft skills, encapsulates a person's EI and social and interpersonal skills. Soft skills include "personal transversal competencies such as social aptitudes, language and communication capability, friendliness and ability of working in teams, and other personality traits that characterize relationships between people" (Cimatti, 2016, p. 97).

Soft skill development: Soft skills development is the process of mastering soft skills by participants through a bounded learning experience (Martin, 2019).

Teaching approaches: Teaching approaches and strategies are activities, procedures, methods, and tools used by instructors with the intent of stimulating student learning and development (Gill & Kusum, 2017).

Workforce development: Workforce development is commonly defined as "the use of education and employment infrastructure to prepare for future workforce needs through talent development, succession planning, recruitment, and training" (IGI Global, n.d.). Workforce development includes strategies and activities designed to enhance the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes of workers.

Terms With Multiple Meanings

Soft skills: Soft skills such as communication, leadership, teamwork, and critical thinking are not monolithic, clearly demarcated entities. What is communication by one employer may be understood as teamwork by another (Clokie & Fourie, 2016). Leadership involves communication. Problem-solving requires critical thinking. Creativity engages problem-solving. Ethical decision-making is part of interpersonal relating. As such, soft skills can be seen as a cluster of competencies (Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations, 2021).

Workplace: Workplace is used in this study to describe not only the physical or virtual location or work environment where an employee performs tasks and projects for an employer but more so the broader context of an employee fulfilling a role through relationships with others in an organization.

Assumptions

A central assumption in this study was that participants interviewed had a shared and broadly uniform understanding of the terms being explored, such as soft skills, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, and ethical decision-making. These terms often have different emphases when used in different contexts, so I sought to clarify their meaning during the interviews if needed. Another assumption was that the faculty and employer interviewees valued soft skills and aimed to discover common models that could support soft skills development. Furthermore, I assumed that the participants had experiences that would be mutually recognizable and understood, out of which common themes would emerge.

Another underlying assumption in this study was that participants provided honest and meaningful perspectives, data, and recollection of their experiences. Participants' genuine and thorough sharing is fundamental to the study's reliability, as the themes that emerge from participants' responses need to be grounded in an accurate retelling of their experiences.

Scope and Delimitations

This study focused on the soft skills of management consultants who recently graduated with an undergraduate business degree and were employed in consulting firms based in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. This category of graduates was chosen because of the impact they may exert on the labor market. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), employment in business and financial operations occupations is projected to grow 5% from 2019 to 2029, faster than the average for all occupations.

The number of soft skills considered were narrowed to five based on feasibility and because these soft skills have been identified throughout the literature as the most needed by employers and the most lacking among employees: communication (written and oral), critical thinking, teamwork, problem-solving, and creativity.

This inquiry was delimited by the bounds of a basic qualitative design and the intent of the two RQs. The RQs were crafted to uncover perceptions regarding the specific areas of what factors contribute to and what actions can potentially narrow the soft skills gap. This study was also delimited by the preset criteria for the choice of interviewees. The two stakeholder groups interviewed were limited to business faculty and employers from consulting firms based in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. They are active agents in the preparation, employment, evaluation, and training of management consultants. Employers are limited to consulting firms based in the Washington, DC metropolitan area because it is a national hub for many of their headquarters. I also reside there and am familiar with their presence in the area.

Potential Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which the analysis and results from this study can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings (see Creswell, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I applied various processes to ensure that the research context and assumptions are clear so the results of this study may be applicable to similar research contexts.

These processes included using thick descriptions of participants involved in the study, details of their background and the contexts and experiences they refer to, and

quotes from their interviews. From thick descriptions, other researchers can evaluate the relevance of the data and results to their studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through the use of member checking, I was able to confirm that I accurately captured participants' intended meaning and that the data collected and the results of the analysis were consistent. I also had an audit trail of the process to determine codes and themes so that the analysis and interpretation are shown to be drawn directly from the data.

Limitations

This study had several limitations, including the sample size, defining the wide range of soft skill requirements in the workplace, dependence on the accuracy of participant responses, potential bias, and agreement on the meaning of terms. Despite these limitations, this study can provide valuable insights to narrow the soft skills gap.

Sample Size

A practical limitation of this study was that the sample size of the two stakeholder groups – business faculty and employers – was relatively small. Having a small sample size in qualitative research limits the scope and application of the results to a larger population. The results interpreted are limited to the sample. Qualitative researchers have varying viewpoints on the appropriate sample size. On the one hand, Yin (2014) stated that saturation may occur with up to 30 participants; on the other hand, Stake (2010) argued that one or more participants may be adequate; and Patton (2015) contended that between six and 12 participants should be sufficient. Saturation requires that the RQs are sufficiently addressed and that no new information is being obtained from additional interviews.

The number of interviewees was initially set to eight to 10. This number aided feasibility and adequate thoroughness as saturation was met. The small sample size was able to fully address the scope of this study because this study did not require a large sample to make generalizations. Instead, the focus was to understand in-depth the phenomenon of soft skills among business graduates from the distinct viewpoint of faculty and employers. The small sample was offset both by the depth of the data gathered from the participants and their individually unique range of experiences in the field of soft skills. Choosing a small sample size allows for more nuanced data and detailed analysis and reporting, whereas using a large sample size could result in too diffusive perspectives (Creswell, 2018).

Defining Soft Skill Requirements

Another study limitation was the inability to define the soft skill requirements among management consulting firms. Undergraduate business graduates get employed in a wide-ranging set of organizations, roles, and levels of responsibility that require different softs skills and varying degrees of proficiency. Management consultants working in different consulting firms may have different role expectations regarding performance. To determine soft skills expectations within a specific role, an investigator would need to conduct interviews among a large sample of consulting employers familiar with the types of soft skills needed in the varying roles in each specialized job function, division, and organization. Furthermore, focusing on management consultants in just one organization could also be quite varied because the soft skills expected in one team or division may differ based on the size and nature of the project and the scope of assigned

responsibility. An assumption of this study was that management consultants' soft skills could be examined across multiple teams, divisions, specializations, and roles.

Accuracy of Participants' Responses

Another limitation was that findings were constrained by the extent to which interviewees were willing to thoroughly and accurately describe their perceptions of the soft skills gap and potential solutions. This limitation was mitigated by ensuring that participants met the preset criteria and by providing the interview questions before the interview, so they had the time to consider the questions and prepare to respond.

Potential Bias

My potential bias represented a possible study limitation because I came as an educator and a student with certain formed opinions. Additionally, biases from participants limited the level of trustworthiness of the study. The extent to which they are trustworthy, neutral, and unbiased is the extent to which the study is credible. Certain participant responses may not be entirely accurate because of concerns over public scrutiny, perception, and reputation, though the study's safeguarding of confidentiality likely offsets that.

Agreement on the Meaning of Terms

An additional limitation may be that participants may use different terms to describe similar soft skills, such as social skills, interpersonal skills, or relationship-building skills. This limitation was minimized by sharing and clarifying definitions with participants before, during, and after the interviews.

While these limitations do narrow this study's contribution in the field of soft skills, the study can provide helpful insights into several areas, including circumstances that impact soft skill development of business graduates, how soft skill development is addressed at work and business schools, and similarities and differences in approaches to soft skills development between workplaces and universities. The study may also add value to the dialogue regarding the influence of workforce requirements on educational priorities and strategies in undergraduate business programs.

Significance

Engagement of Academia and Industry in Lifelong Learning

The application of soft skills involves the concepts of EI and lifelong learning. Both concepts create a framework to focus consultations between universities and industry regarding soft skill development (Dehmel, 2006). Skills that are newly acquired and relevant today will not be as valuable in tomorrow's job and may rapidly become obsolete (International Labor Organization, 2019); therefore, EI and lifelong learning can provide rich insights into how universities and organizations prepare graduates and employees with the competencies that enable them to adapt to change. Furthermore, applying these concepts can broaden business education and workforce development, considering how to further invest in reskilling and upskilling initiatives, support workers in work transition, and reshape incentive structures to promote overall human development (International Labor Organization, 2019).

Potential Workplace Contributions

Value for Employers

This study may have value for workplaces where graduates are employed and universities where students prepare for work challenges. Employers have claimed that recent graduates frequently lack soft skills, requiring management to outsource entry-level jobs or better-trained workers who have the prerequisite soft skills (Schooley, 2017). Specialized and improved organizational training and upskilling focused on soft skills may help remedy this issue (James-Constantine, 2018).

Value for Educators

Faculty can benefit by integrating soft skills training approaches into their courses. A 2018 Strada-Gallup College Student Survey concluded that students have improved success when they understand the connectedness and relevance between their studies and their future work. In making these connections between graduates' college experience and the requirements of their future careers, academic leaders can recognize the need to augment soft skills in students' career preparation process. Additionally, the competitive situation graduates face, in which many are overlooked by employers because they lack soft skills, may drive universities to expand their curriculum offering to include more soft skills so they can more effectively respond to industry demands (Hubbard, 2019; Schooley, 2017).

Faculty may be more persuaded to evaluate their courses against soft skill development, identify possible gaps in their courses, and reconsider and even redesign their own methods and strategies (O'Neill, 2015). Faculty may also calibrate their

teaching goals according to industry expectations. The soft skills identified in this study may help them redefine their learning objectives, improve or re-envision their curriculum development process, engage in innovative thinking, strategically collaborate with internal and external stakeholders in shaping their courses, and evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching methods. This study may encourage faculty to challenge current assumptions that inform, explicitly or implicitly, their educational practices and introduce new approaches to teaching and learning. Faculty may be more inclined to incorporate more meaningful and focused soft skills learning experiences for their learners if they are aware of and equipped with recommended strategies and methods of instruction (Paniagua & Instance, 2018).

Value for Learners

Graduates adequately equipped with soft skills are more likely to succeed in the workplace. Such skills make graduates more marketable and appealing to employers because soft skills are a strong indicator of future professional success (James-Constantine, 2018). More than 80% of college seniors graduate without a job, with only 36% of graduates employed in full-time positions (Badal, 2016). Securing jobs after graduation gives graduates financial stability and the opportunity to contribute to the economic growth of their local community and country (Lea, 2019).

Implications for Positive Social Change

Soft skills development may be seen as an investment in social sustainability and social change (Opertti et al., 2018). Bridging the gap between academics and employability alleviates persistent difficulties employers face in finding employees with

the right skillset (James-Constantine, 2018). Sustainable development, economic growth, and organizational development are all tied to improved skills development. Additionally, addressing the soft skills gap can improve quality service, access to job promotion, and improve organizational culture (International Labor Organization, 2019; Karimi, 2020; Levy & Cannon, 2016; LinkedIn, 2018). Furthermore, providing insights into soft skills development can add valuable input into education reform and the relevant skills needed to address social challenges to promote national growth. As such, addressing "the skills gap is a defining social and economic justice issue of our time" (Desire2Learn, 2019, p. 4).

Summary

This soft skill deficiency directly following graduation is commonly called the soft skills gap (PayScale, 2016). Soft skills are considered life skills and 21st-century competencies that employees are expected to possess, which enable them to apply knowledge into practice in various contexts at work (Eilen, 2019). Soft skills can impact work performance, interpersonal relationships, and the ability to communicate, problem-solve, make decisions, collaborate in teams, and negotiate (Emmerling et al., 2007). In this study, I examined why a disparity exists between the business graduates' soft skills and their work requirements in which employers expect a certain level of competence in soft skills.

In keeping with the qualitative tradition, this study was guided by interpretivism, which underscores the value of the perspectives and experiences of participating faculty and employers. The framework of interpretivism enabled me to analyze and compare the

processes by which both faculty and employers described and explained the soft skills gap phenomenon and propose possible solutions derived from their experience (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). EI served as the conceptual framework to consider how to build soft skills over time because employees need to continuously enhance their skillset throughout their careers (International Labor Organization, 2019).

The next chapter provides a review of the literature surrounding soft skill development among business graduates. This review addresses what soft skills are, which ones are currently prioritized in the workplace, areas of current underperformance of soft skills among business graduates, workforce development and alignment with employer needs, and challenges in developing and measuring soft skills. Also examined is how the conceptual framework of EI can be applied in the analysis of soft skill development.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The research problem examined in this qualitative study is that undergraduates with business degrees are often not equipped with the soft skills their employers require when they enter their various professions. New business graduates are perceived to be lacking employability skills, both globally and in the United States of America (Clokie & Fourie, 2016; James-Constantine, 2018; Ortiz et al., 2016; Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017). Human resource managers indicated that candidates lacked prerequisite soft skills to meet their organizations' standards (Society for Human Resource Management [SHRM], 2019). These include problem-solving, critical thinking, innovation, creativity, the ability to deal with complexity and ambiguity, and communication.

According to PayScale's (2016) survey, 60% of managers claimed that new graduates do not have the critical thinking and problem-solving skills needed for the job, 56% of managers stated that recent graduates do not pay attention to detail, 46% said that new hires need to improve their communication skills, 44% of managers said there was lack of leadership qualities among new employees, and 36% identified interpersonal and teamwork skills as needing improvement among graduates. The purpose of this study was to identify conditions that give rise to this lack of soft skill competence among business graduates and to identify possible solutions that eliminate this shortcoming and enable business graduates to be better prepared for their future work context.

In this chapter, I present an analysis of current, peer-reviewed literature and seminal works related to soft skills. The literature explored includes the conceptualization of soft skills, the nature of the soft skills gap among university business graduates in the

workplace, elements that impact soft skill development, and factors that contribute to the soft skills gap. Also examined are soft skills development initiatives at places of work and academia and challenges developing soft skills at the workplace and in universities, including challenges measuring soft skill development to determine whether students and employees are growing in soft skills. Furthermore, EI as a conceptual framework for examining soft skills is explored.

Literature Search Strategy

Databases and Sources

This literature review was conducted by searching various multidisciplinary databases containing peer-reviewed journals, conference papers, newspapers, magazines, and university publications. These databases include the Academic Search Complete, ERIC and Education Source Combined Search, EBSCO, SAGE, ProQuest Central, and ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global Proquest. Multiple journals and resources were accessed through these databases. They include the International Journal of Educational and Pedagogical Sciences, Career and Technical Education Online Journal, Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Business & Professional Communication Quarterly, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, Journal of Applied Business and Economics, Frontiers in Psychology, AACSB Insights, Higher Education Research and Development, The Chronicle of Higher Education, Harvard Business Review, Business and Professional Communication Quarterly, and the Academy of Management Journal. Additionally, I consulted the publications and working papers of multiple agencies, associations, organizations, and research institutes involved in soft skills

analysis and development. They include the Association of American Colleges and Universities, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, International Bureau of Education, WEF, SHRM, National Business Education Association (NBEA), The Education Commission, Pew Research Center, Gallup-Lumina Foundation, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, the United States Office of Personnel Management, Chief Learning Officer, National Soft Skill Association, Gallup-Lumina Foundation, Institute of Higher Education, Wall Street Journal, and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.

Keywords

Keywords used in the literature search were *soft skills training, evaluation of soft skills training, soft skills gap, global skills gap, soft skills development, essential soft skills in business, the importance of soft skills, executive perceptions of soft skills, soft skill development in business programs, challenges in soft skill development, measuring soft skills, business education, business graduates, employability skills, soft skills and employability, career readiness, workforce development, professional development, training of new hires, upskilling, management consultants, consulting firms in Washington DC, teaching approaches and strategies, emotional intelligence, lifelong action learning, action learning, communication, working in teams, creativity, innovation, ethical judgment, problem-solving, critical thinking, interpretivism research*

paradigm, and *basic qualitative methodology*. Keywords were chosen because of their relevance and frequent appearance in sources.

This broad search process was efficacious because it yielded multiple relevant results. What also proved effective was locating the references cited in the various research articles and dissertations, as these yielded a plethora of additional resources and peer-reviewed research. Deciding whether to include or exclude specific literature depended on its relevance to the research problem and RQs.

Conceptual Framework

EI

Salovey and Mayer first coined the term EI in 1990. They framed EI as a type of intelligence, describing it as "a form of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action" (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 185). In his examination of EI, Bar-On framed EI in the context of personality theory and well-being (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001). In 1995, Goleman, with his book, *Emotional Intelligence*, formulated EI as part of a theory of performance. Goleman's theory of EI is directly applied to performance and effectiveness in the work environment. All three approaches see EI as the "ability to sense, understand and effectively apply the power and acumen of emotions as a source of human energy, information and influence" (Cooper & Sawaf, 2001, p. XIII). EI is demonstrated or applied through soft skills (Livesey, 2017). In this study, I used Goleman's theory of EI as the conceptual framework to examine how softs skills development can be supported.

EI Domains

The bedrock of soft skills is based on four EI domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social skills/relationship management (Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations, 2021). These domains provided the analytical framework for me to examine soft skill development in academic and employment settings as articulated by the faculty and employers interviewed for this study. The domains are summarized in Table 1, and the definitions and descriptions following Table 1 are drawn from the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations (2021), which is co-led by Daniel Goleman.

Table 1

Framework of Emotional Intelligence

Personal skills	Interpersonal skills
Self-awareness o Emotional self-awareness o Accurate self-assessment o Self-confidence	Social awareness o Empathy o Service orientation o Developing others o Leveraging diversity o Political awareness
Self-management o Self-control o Trustworthiness o Conscientiousness o Adaptability o Innovativeness o Self-motivation	Social action/Relationship management o Influence o Communication o Leadership o Change catalyst o Conflict management o Building bonds o Team capabilities, collaboration, and cooperation

The following section provides a more thorough description of the EI domains, as presented in Table 1.

Self-Awareness

- Emotional awareness: Recognizing one's emotions and their effects on one's actions and performance.

- Accurate self-assessment: Being aware of one's strengths and limits and being open to feedback, new perspectives, continuous learning, and self-development.
- Self-confidence: Self-assured of one's self-worth and capabilities and can act decisively and make decisions from this soundness of self.

Self-Management

- Self-control: Managing conflicting emotions and impulses and staying composed and focused.
- Trustworthiness: Maintaining ethical standards, honesty, and integrity; building trust through reliability and authenticity; can admit one's own mistakes; can confront unethical actions in others.
- Conscientiousness: Taking responsibility for one's performance by meeting commitments; being accountable; being organized and careful in one's work.
- Adaptability: Being flexible in handling change, multiple demands, and shifting priorities; adapting one's responses to fit changing circumstances.
- Innovativeness: Being open to and generating novel ideas, perspectives, and taking risks.
- Self-motivation: Readiness to act; striving to improve; acting on opportunities; persistent in pursuing goals.

Social Awareness

- Empathy: Sensing others' feelings and perspectives and taking an active interest in their concerns.

- Service orientation: Anticipating, recognizing, and meeting others' needs.
- Developing others: Recognizing what others need in order to develop; finding ways to develop their abilities.
- Leveraging diversity: Understanding diverse worldviews; being sensitive to group differences; respecting people from varied backgrounds; seeing diversity as an opportunity; and creating an environment where diverse people can thrive.
- Political awareness: Reading a group's emotional dynamics and power relationships.

Social Skills/Relationship Management

- Influence: Using strategies in persuasion to build consensus and support.
- Communication: Sending messages with clarity; attuning one's message to emotional cues; listening well; and seeking openness and mutual understanding.
- Leadership: Inspiring and guiding groups and people; arousing support by articulating a shared vision and mission; leading by example first; and guiding the performance of others.
- Change catalyst: Initiating or managing change; challenging barriers and the status quo; modeling the change expected of others.
- Conflict management: Negotiating and resolving disagreements; handling difficult people and tense situations; de-escalating disagreements; bringing

potential conflict into the open to encourage discussion; devising creating solutions.

- Building bonds: Developing instrumental relationships and networks; building rapport.
- Team capabilities, collaboration, and cooperation: Working with others toward shared goals; creating a balance of task completion and attention to relationships; sharing resources; promoting a safe environment; creating group synergy; modeling team qualities; building team identity; promoting active and enthusiastic participation; protecting team reputation.

Mastering self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management is likely to result in effective work performance (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001).

EI and Soft Skill Training

According to Cherniss and Goleman (2001), soft skills can be developed, but it takes time, motivation, and organizational support. Furthermore, soft skill training in an educational or workplace setting requires different practices than traditional cognitive instruction. Learning or improving soft skills not only involves appropriating new insights into one's current understanding or cognitive toolbox but also requires changing habits, such as becoming more attentive when listening or more open when communicating with others. Additionally, because EI is tied to one's sense of identity, trying to develop soft skills requires dealing with perceptions and motivations that are deeply ingrained in someone (Cherniss et al., 1998).

The Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations (2021) developed a set of guidelines for designing and promoting emotional learning to support soft skill development. The following is a summary of these guidelines that inform how the data from this study is to be analyzed (see Cherniss et al., 1998). These guidelines were developed by researchers and practitioners in the fields of management, organizational psychology, applied psychology, corporate employee research, training and development, and behavior change. There are four phases to the training process: prepare, train, transfer, and evaluate.

Prepare for Change

Assess Soft Skills Needs. Leaders in higher education and businesses should identify the specific soft skills that are important for the success of students and employees as well as the educational institution or business organization. An assessment needs to be made of the work challenges and the nature of the soft skills needed to ensure quality performance.

Assess Individuals' Strengths and Limits. Students and employees often are not aware of what impedes their effectiveness in certain areas or the soft skills they need to develop to be more competent in those areas. Additionally, this sort of feedback on soft skill proficiency can come from other individuals, such as an employee's manager or team members, rather than from the employee. This comprehensive feedback adds more clarity to the training focus.

Bolster Motivation of Participants. Employees can be motivated to engage in training when the initial assessment of the soft skills they need to develop is constructive,

and they can identify specific steps to improve. Motivation, readiness, commitment to change, having realistic expectations, and valuing the training are important in ensuring learning efficacy during the soft skill training, particularly if that training has emotional challenges for the participant.

Train for Soft Skills

Enable Self-Directed Change. Soft skills development should be customized and differentiated to learner needs. Learners are more motivated to engage in training when the goals are relevant to them and when training is adapted to meet each learner's goals and learning style.

Ensure Clarity of Training Goals. Goals towards achieving soft skills must be specific so the learner is clear about what is to be achieved. Having goals that are challenging but broken into manageable steps to be achieved helps with the self-efficacy and motivation of the learner.

Maximize Opportunities to Practice. In soft skills development, learning occurs on the job and not just in a training session. Practice and repetition over an extended period enable learning.

Provide Frequent Feedback on Practice. Feedback helps provide the learners with direction on their progress, can reinforce their motivation to continue with the development process, and can help them further cultivate self-awareness.

Use Experiential Methods. Engaging in active, concrete pedagogical methods, such as role-playing, group discussions, and simulations, are usually more effective and practical than lectures.

Ensure Group Support. Soft skills programs usually are more effective when groups, coaches, and mentors offer support and encouragement to learners.

Use Models. Observing the desired soft skills modeled by others is valuable to learners grasping how to embody the soft skills personally.

Promote Insight. Soft skills training should produce self-awareness of one's thoughts and feelings in different situations. Self-awareness is the first building block of EI and often creates opportunities for meaningful change. By becoming more aware of one's emotional responses in situations, learners are more capable of changing those responses.

Prevent Relapse Into Old Patterns. Learners seeking to develop or improve soft skills would need to overcome challenges as they go through the process of adopting new behavior. As learners respond to situations on the job, they can apply new skills, monitor their progress, and reframe any setbacks as opportunities to learn.

Transfer Soft Skills

Encourage the Use of Soft Skills in the Workplace. Applying soft skills should be reinforced in the work environment to strengthen the developmental process among learners and to ensure that past behavioral responses and attitudes do not reemerge. Follow-up assessment of soft skills after training can help support the transfer of learning and encourage accountability among learners.

Provide an Organizational Culture That Supports Soft Skill Development. Transfer and growth of soft skills in the workplace are significantly impacted by whether the organization supports a climate of learning and development. Many new soft skills

are not fully expressed until months after training, reinforcing the need to have a culture that values social support and development systems.

Evaluate Soft Skills Development

Conduct Ongoing Evaluation Research. Evaluation and continuous improvement are key to improving soft skills development programs. Many tools currently exist to conduct rigorous evaluations of soft skills, such as pre- and post-assessments that rate learners' performance at work by managers, team members, and subordinates. Some evaluations also use control groups to examine the impact of training programs on turnover and productivity.

Through these domains and guidelines, EI offers a language and framework for an analysis of faculty members' and employers' perspectives on soft skill development, which has implications for both higher education business programs and organizations. Goleman argued for the need to integrate soft skills development into organizations' functions, hiring considerations, succession planning, training modalities, and long-term upskilling initiatives; additionally, the EI framework and guidelines also have implications for the priorities, mission, and program development in higher education (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001).

Literature Review

History of the Term *Soft Skills*

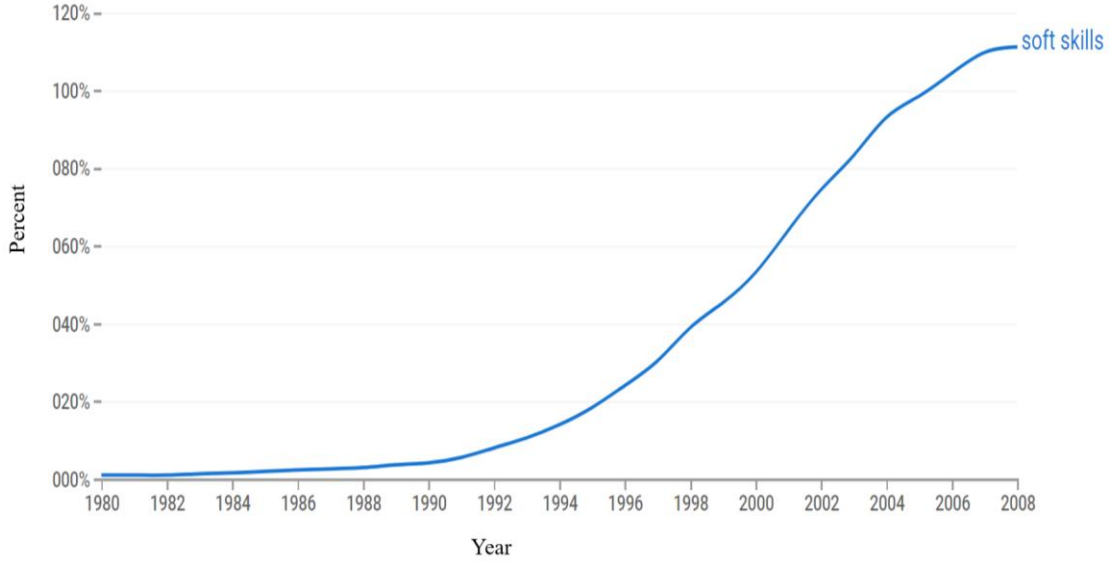
In 1918, Charles Mann published research on the necessity of soft skills education at universities and workplaces. He stated that "personal qualities such as common sense, integrity, resourcefulness, initiative, tact, thoroughness, accuracy, efficiency, and

understanding of men were universally recognized as being no less necessary than technical skills and knowledge" (Mann, 1918, p. 107). Another early exploration of soft skills was in 1936 when Dale Carnegie wrote that "the person who has technical knowledge plus the ability to express ideas to assume leadership, and to arouse enthusiasm among people – that person is headed for higher earning power" (as cited in Woodard, 2018, p. 40). Furthermore, in 1950, the American Society for Engineering Education released a guide entitled *Speaking Can be Easy…for Engineers Too*. Then in 1972, the U.S. Continental Army Command presented a conference on soft skills, which defined soft skills as "job related skills involving actions affecting primarily people and paper, e.g., inspecting troops, supervising office personnel, conducting studies, preparing maintenance reports, preparing efficiency reports, designing bridge structures" (Whitmore & Fry, 1972, as cited in Woodard, 2018, p. 41). This early conceptualization of soft skills inferred interpersonal relationships, communication, and writing proficiency.

Based on a Google search of usage of the term *soft skills* within books, it seems that the term was seldom used in books before 1990, but its usage grew steadily since then (Beardmore, 2019). Figure 3 captures the increase in public discussion of soft skills.

Figure 3

Soft Skills: Percentage Occurrence in Google Books (English)



Note. Google Books Ngram Viewer shows the rapid rise of the use of the term "soft skills" since the 1990s. Adapted from *Google Books Ngram Viewer*, 2021. https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=soft+skills&year_start=1990&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=3.

With the development of EI research in the 1980s and 1990s, soft skills became more studied by psychologists and behavioral scientists, particularly as industries became more focused on service, communication, and collaboration and sought to cultivate soft skills as a professional asset (Woodard, 2018). Since that time, especially as social and economic factors have increased the value of service and collaboration, researchers have started to focus more on soft skills as human capacities that may be measured and intently developed.

Meaning of the Term *Soft Skills*

A soft skill is the ability to access a combination of one's attitudes, values, knowledge, competence, and experience to perform a task or action (Cimatti, 2016). Soft skills include cross-functional skills in oral and written communication skills, teamwork, decision making, problem-solving, critical thinking, ethical judgment, social and diversity awareness, leadership, innovation, creativity, negotiation, interpersonal relationships, adaptability, and willingness to learn (Guerra-Báez, 2019). Multiple terms have been used to define softs skills. Some include life skills, transversal skills, generic competencies, key competencies for a successful life and a well-functioning society, key competencies for lifelong learning, 21st-century skills, transferable skills, future work skills, soft skills for talent, skills for social progress, people skills, and intangibles (Cimatti, 2016; National Network of Business and Industry Associations, 2014; Tulgan, 2016; Udemy, 2017). Soft skills are differentiated from technical skills, hard skills, and cognitive skills, which are often domain-specific (Matteson et al., 2016;).

A soft skill may be context-specific; it develops over time with practice; and it implies a level of mastery and quality, so there are degrees of competency in a skill (Matteson et al., 2016). Soft skills are both self-oriented skills, which one develops by oneself, such as the ability to plan, and interpersonal skills, which one develops while relating with others, such as the ability to negotiate (Cimatti, 2016). Soft skills can also be distinguished from traits and dispositions. Traits and dispositions are personal attributes and individual qualities which directly affect one's actions (Matteson et al., 2016).

Global Skills Gap

The literature on employability indicates that a skills gap persists at a national and global level (James-Constantine, 2018). The global skill gap can be defined as a "gap between industry expectation, academic skills inculcation and job-ready graduate's possession of competencies" (Bhagra & Sharma, 2018, p. 13). A World Bank meta-analysis of 27 studies found a consistency in the skills gap around the world, indicating that the greatest need from employers has been for employees with socio-emotional and higher-order cognitive skills (Beardmore, 2019). The soft skills gap examined in this study is part of this larger global phenomenon.

When defining the global skills gap, two measures are often used throughout the literature: the priority employers place on a particular skill they need; and employers' perceived satisfaction that this skill is met or not met in the graduates they hire (Mattis, 2018). Within the global marketplace, a skills gap can often be treated in various ways: too few workers are available to fill roles needed in organizations; job candidates lack the necessary skills and specialization to fill certain roles; and employees lack the skills needed to make the organization competitive (James-Constantine, 2018).

The Society for Human Resource Management stated that a growing skills gap threatens the United States' economic future, with not enough skilled candidates to fill highly skilled roles (2019). Businesses face a talent shortage. Of the recruiters surveyed by the SHRM (2019), 75% claimed that a skills shortage has made recruiting suitable candidates difficult, while 50% feel that skills shortages have worsened or considerably worsened in their organizations in the last 2 years. One reason for this persistent global

skills gap is that employers differ from higher education academic leaders on what constitutes graduate preparedness for the workforce (James-Constantine, 2018). This difference in perspective is reflected in higher education curriculum priorities, employer hiring expectations, and graduates' ability to secure a job.

Employees' Soft Skills Gap in the Workplace

The consensus in the literature points to a shortfall in the soft skills of employees. Employers have stated that the type and level of soft skills required in their workplace are not met with business graduates' proficiency in those soft skills (James-Constantine, 2018). Some studies, however, question the existence or pervasiveness of a soft skills gap.

Surveys of Employers' Perspective on Employees' Soft Skills Proficiency

According to a QS Global Employer Survey in 2018, for 14 of the 15 employability skills identified, the number of employers who consider each skill to be important was higher than the number of employers who were satisfied with the level of these skills in their graduate hires (Mattis, 2018). The 14 skills with an identified gap were: adaptability, problem-solving, teamwork, communication, interpersonal skills, organization, data analysis, technical skills, resilience, subject knowledge, creativity, language, leadership, and negotiating (Mattis, 2018).

In a 2018 Job Outlook Survey, the National Association of Colleges and Employers surveyed employers about the extent to which they perceived graduates were adept in career readiness competencies. Employers indicated that they considered only 42.5% were competent in a professional work ethic, only 41.6% were sufficiently capable

in oral/written communications, and only 55.8% were proficient in critical thinking and problem solving (Bauer-Wolf, 2018). A gap in employees' soft skills can be reflected in a failure to accomplish personal and team goals, conveying negative stress, unproductivity, lack of motivation, lack of a genuine human connection, lack of creative solutions, an inability to receive and give feedback constructively, and an inability to communicate with empathy (Karimi, 2020).

In another Job Outlook survey in 2020, the National Association of Colleges and Employers considered what skills employers need the most from employees and what employers focus on the most when reviewing resumés of job candidates. The survey found that 91% of employers were looking for problem-solving skills, 86% were looking for team-working ability, and 80% were looking for a strong work ethic as key attributes in job candidates. Other top attributes that employers seek in a candidate's resumé include leadership and communication skills (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2020). In measuring the skills gap, the 2020 study compared employers' need for certain employee attributes with employers' ratings of employees' proficiency in these attributes. The highest skill gaps were evident in professionalism/work ethic (a 48%-point difference), oral/written communications (a 44%-point difference), and critical thinking/problem solving (a 38%-point difference).

Counterviews

It should be noted that some arguments contend that a soft skills gap does not exist or does not exist as extensively as portrayed in the research. One argument is that a perceived soft skills gap inside an organization may be because of poor recruitment and

selection by employers (Fain, 2019). Another argument is that of soft skill withdrawal when an employee intentionally performs sub-par because of a lack of engagement in the workplace as a result of a poor-quality job experience (Hurrell, 2016). An additional recurring argument is that because of prior assumptions and biases involved in evaluating employees, employers may mischaracterize employees' soft skills deficit (Hurrell, 2016). In these cases, the responsibility for a gap in soft skills falls not on higher education, the government, or the employee but on the employer.

Soft Skills Required in the Workplace

To possess and demonstrate a skill is to be able to access and apply certain knowledge to perform a specific task (Dall'Amico & Verona, 2015; Hurrell, 2016). Additionally, successful execution of tasks requires having certain dispositions, being aware of context, being able to harness experience as needed, and being able to apply effort to achieve the task (Matteson et al., 2016). Employers have been increasingly targeting new hires who have a combination of hard and soft skills relevant to organizational roles, which will enable the new hires to perform successfully at work (Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017). Since soft skills are connected to performance, they are, therefore, intrinsic to employability skills (Harun et al., 2017; Nisha & Rajasekaran, 2018), job readiness skills (MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017), and business management skills (Nonet et al., 2016).

Priority Soft Skills Required in the Workplace

Table 2 is a compilation of various reports and surveys of the top five soft skills required in the workplace (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2018;

Berger, 2016; Burning Glass Technologies & Business-Higher Education Forum, 2019; Hart Research Associates, 2015; Jones et al., 2016; Karzunina et al., 2017; Levy & Rodkin, 2015; LinkedIn Talent Solutions, 2019; National Association of Colleges and Educators (NACE), 2016; SHRM, 2019; WEF, 2016).

Table 2

Top Soft Skills Required in the Workplace

Survey	Skill 1	Skill 2	Skill 3	Skill 4	Skill 5
PayScale (2016)	Critical thinking	Detail-oriented	Communicate	Leadership	Teamwork
NACE (2016)	Leadership	Teamwork	Writing	Problem-solving	Communicate
LinkedIn (2019)	Communicate	Organize	Teamwork	Punctuality	Critical thinking
Hart Research (2015)	Communicate	Teamwork	Judgment, decisions	Critical thinking	Knowledge
Jones et al. (2016)	Positive attitude	Respect others	Trustworthy, ethical	Taking initiative	Responsibility
AACU (2018)	Communicate	Critical thinking	Judgment, decisions	Teamwork	Independence
SHRM (2019)	Problem solving	Critical thinking	Innovation, creativity	Complexity, ambiguity	Communicate
Bloomberg Report (2015)	Strategic thinking	Problem-solving	Leadership skills	Communicate	
WEF (2016)	Problem solving	Critical thinking	Creativity	People management	Coordinating
Burning Glass (2019)	Analytical skills	Collaborate	Critical thinking	Creativity	Communicate
LinkedIn (2019)	Creativity	Persuasion	Collaboration	Adaptability	Time management

Table 2 highlights five current priority employer-desired soft skills:

- communicate (written and oral)
- critical thinking
- teamwork
- problem solving
- creativity

Soft Skill: Communication (Written and Oral)

Of the reports reviewed in the literature, the soft skill most valued by employers was communication. At the most basic level, communication is needed to complete work (Ortiz et al., 2016). This includes the ability to listen actively, interpret, follow instructions, and communicate orally and written (Clokie & Fourie, 2016). Woodard (2108) offers a synthesis of the characteristics of communication: “Influence, communication, listening, interpersonal communication, compassion, facility with language, negotiate, persuade, network, public speaking, active listening, providing feedback, inspiring, motivating, rallying, cajoling, verbal communication” (p. 38)

Communication also involves persuasion, teamwork, conflict resolution, leadership, and change management (Matteson et al., 2016). For employees to demonstrate effective communication, they need to be self-aware and empathetic to understand both what they hear and how they are perceived. Empathy enables employees to understand different perspectives and to be functional across different domains, generations, cultures, and regions.

Employers require employees to communicate respectfully, with clear articulation, using different modalities (James-Constantine, 2018). Additionally, they expect employees can share and provide feedback in an appropriate and constructive manner and resolve disagreements productively. Communication also includes the ability to be personable, sociable, and culturally appropriate, as well as the ability to engage customers and clients in a way that deepens relationships (James-Constantine, 2018). Communication involves sharing technical knowledge with nontechnical persons, asking the right questions, and contributing to shared knowledge. Communication could also be indicative of employee engagement (Clokie & Fourie, 2016).

Soft Skill: Critical Thinking

Critical thinking skills include reviewing, analyzing, synthesizing, comparing, and interpreting information through a logical and consistent thought process (Liu et al., 2014). Employees, who are critical thinkers, have the ability to apply knowledge to a new situation, assess different perspectives, understand causation, evaluate evidence, and understand implications and consequences (Thonney & Montgomery, 2019). Critical thinking also includes examining assumptions, uncovering hidden values, and assessing conclusions (Jagannathan, 2017). An employee is expected to have the ability to see the macro-view, analyze data accurately, and make decisions using clear rationale processes (Germaine et al., 2016).

Soft Skill: Teamwork

Employees who demonstrate the soft skill of teamwork are able to work effectively, productively, and respectfully with others over time, establish trust, fairness,

and credibility, and manage conflicts and differences constructively to maintain a smooth workflow. This type of employee has an awareness of the personalities, cultures, and traits of other team members, including those of different ages (National Network of Business and Industry Associations, 2014). Woodard (2108) offered a synthesis of the characteristics of teamwork: “Trustworthiness, empathy, likability, conflict resolution, emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, teamwork, team building, group dynamics, sensitivity to others, social graces, compromise, mentor, working relationships” (p. 38).

Teamwork is heavily invested in the corporate sector. Members of teams are expected to have networking skills, effectively manage time management, present persuasively, and lead different initiatives (Germaine et al., 2016). A team member is expected to engender productivity through collaboration, empower others, value the unique traits of others, and support a shared goal to promote team motivation, cohesion, and priority-setting (James-Constantine, 2018).

Soft Skill: Problem Solving

Problem-solving refers to processes involved in finding and acting on solutions to complex issues. It involves defining the nature of a problem, weighing, prioritizing, and testing possible solutions, and implementing and evaluating solutions. For employees to demonstrate problem-solving skills, they need to develop a multi-dimensional range of processes such as active listening, analysis, research, creativity, interdisciplinarity, communication, dependability, decision making, and teamwork (Dörner & Funke, 2017).

Soft Skill: Creativity

The term creativity is often used interchangeably with innovation. Employees who are creative are able to challenge existing patterns and norms and produce something new. They can generate a valuable or appropriate idea, product, process, or service and can conceptualize, initiate, and manage significant change within a context (Gondim et al., 2015). Creativity includes visioning, change management, and risk-taking (Matteson et al., 2016; Walia, 2019). Employees are expected to generate not only new ideas that further the mission of the organization but also be able to assess the merit of these ideas and improve upon them (Germaine et al., 2016). Creativity is, therefore, tied to organizational development and competitiveness.

Soft Skill: Ethical Decision-Making

Ethical decision-making requires employees to be aware of and evaluate whether a decision, behavior, course of action, policy, practice, and motivation is ethical or unethical. Ethical decision-making is the ability to consistently apply an ethical framework when making decisions. Employees who demonstrate ethical decision-making are able to engage in personal actions and interpersonal relationships through normatively appropriate conduct (Brown et al., 2005). Employees are expected to do what is morally right, be accountable for decisions, and consider the implications of their choices (James-Constantine, 2018).

The Value of Soft Skills in the Workplace

The workplace plays a significant role in soft skill development because it is where employees spend most of their time and often realize their strengths and

weaknesses in its challenges. Soft skills proficiency often is the key to career advancement (Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations, 2021).

According to Lydia Liu, Head of HR, “While hard skills may get a candidate’s foot in the door, it’s soft skills that ultimately open it” (LinkedIn Talent Solutions, 2019). Based on a wide cross-section of the literature surveyed, employers are looking for hires with proficiency in relationship building, dealing with complexity and ambiguity, balancing opposing views, teaming and collaboration, co-creativity, cultural sensitivity, and the ability to manage diversity (Badal, 2016; Fain, 2019). Employers value attitudes, character traits, and behaviors that enable employees to adapt to new workplaces, overcome problems encountered at work, and build trust through their consistent actions (Lea, 2019).

The Value of Social Skills

Employees with strong social intelligence can understand their own and others’ emotions, develop productive team relationships, establish rapport with subordinates, manage conflict among team members, and are likely to effectively communicate with individuals internal and external to an organization (Goleman, 1998; Livesey, 2017; Wisker & Poulis, 2015). Employees with strong interpersonal skills can foster customer loyalty and improve sales opportunities through effective networking, respond effectively to work challenges, support a positive work culture, and lead others (Badal, 2016; Meeks, 2017). Employees with strong communication skills imbue confidence and clarity in their relationships and are trusted to represent the organization to clients (Lea, 2019).

Miscommunication can create misunderstandings and negative effects. Likewise, consistent inaccurate grammar often reflects unprofessionalism (Ortiz et al., 2016).

The Value of Process Skills

Employees who can think critically can likely make effective decisions, communicate competently within a team, and provide quality results aligned with their performance goals. Employees who are adept in problem-solving and creativity provide resourcefulness and leadership by fostering new ideas and insights and creating opportunities for ideation and growth.

Organizations with employees competent in soft skills have the capacity to achieve organizational goals and effectively implement the strategies that advance organizational development. A deficiency in soft skills curtails workplace productivity, creates inefficiencies, inhibits innovation, and creates human resource management problems (James-Constantine, 2018).

Evidence of a Soft Skills Gap Among Working Business Graduates

Based on salary data and projected job growth rates from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the following are the career choices business graduates are most active in and the skills generally expected in these careers (Best Colleges, 2020; The Best Schools, 2020).

- Marketing managers typically need strong communication, interpersonal, and analytical skills to oversee marketing staff, plan marketing campaigns, and analyze market research data.

- Financial managers need reliable communication, interpersonal, and analytical skills to coordinate financial plans, write forecasting reports, and set financial goals.
- Sales managers need effective interpersonal skills, communication skills, and critical thinking skills to develop relationships with customers, oversee budgets, and strategize strategies for sales.
- Purchasing managers engage with clients, negotiate contracts, and oversee records and market trends. They need competent skills in communication, critical thinking, and ethical decision-making.
- Human resources managers need proficient interpersonal, communication, and organizational skills to oversee all employee-related issues.
- Public relations managers need adept verbal and written communication skills, time management skills, and decision-making skills as they engage with diverse audiences through various media
- Training and development managers need excellent communication skills as they deliver training programs
- Personal financial advisors should have strong analytical, interpersonal, and communication skills as they interact with clients, manage financial goals, and seek financial efficiency.
- Management consultants need analytical, problem-solving, and communication skills to gather and analyze data to solve challenges.

- Operations research analysts need critical thinking and communication skills to assess data to advise stakeholders on improving efficiencies.

Employability is a set of knowledge, skills, and attributes that enable business graduates to successfully find, gain, and maintain employment (Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017). Novellis (2019) identified skills that employers need from employees: "the ability to influence, strategic thinking, drive and resilience, and problem-solving…teamwork, networking, and time management…soft skills to deal with the pace of technological change…emotional intelligence…decency quotient" (para. 7).

Low Standards of Soft Skills Performance

The literature on employability, however, indicates that new graduates from business schools lack the required soft skills and abilities to function efficiently in their jobs (Clokie & Fourie, 2016; James-Constantine, 2018). National standardized tests found that business students developed less in critical thinking, writing and communication, and analytical reasoning than students who majored in mathematics, science, and engineering (Selingo, 2017). Tulgan (2016) reported that business graduates lack essential workplace skills, including communication, critical thinking, creativity, writing skills, professionalism, leadership, and teamwork (James-Constantine, 2018).

Schooley (2017) found that, in the interview process, students have been disrespectful, had a poor work ethic, were insubordinate in internships, and demonstrated poor communication skills. In examining the communication skills lacking among entry-level graduates, Clokie and Fourie (2016) identified several deficiencies. These include a lack of confidence in communicating, lack of professionalism, overreliance on email

when other means of communication would be more effective, not thinking through what others communicate about, and not meeting communication deadlines.

Soft Skills Required as Management Consultants

Management consultants work on problem-solving complex business, organizational, and operational challenges and provide a strategic improvement path for organizations. They provide expertise to help companies improve their efficiencies and corporate health. They conduct organizational evaluations, improve the design of systems and processes, and develop operational plans to enable organizations to operate more optimally (MyMajors, n.d.).

A management consultant or analyst is an entry-level role that provides business solutions to clients and must possess a robust skillset of both technical and soft skills. According to Allen (2020) and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), the core work of a management consultant includes the following:

- Functional expertise and specializations: Management consultants provide technical expertise in areas such as strategy development and implementation; mergers; leadership and governance; organizational design; organizational change; operations and process optimization; finance; risk management and risk advisory services; digital strategy and technology deployment; human resources and human capital advisory; and marketing (Corporate Finance Institute, 2019).
- Analyses and evaluations: Management consultants conduct research and analysis to diagnose issues and recommend interventions for organizations.

This role often requires interviewing personnel and conducting onsite observations to analyze problems, develop solutions, and recommend changes.

- Project management: They also provide project implementation, execution support, and monitoring and measurement. They facilitate discussions with clients to coordinate change management processes.

Given these roles, management consultants are expected to be proficient in several soft skills (Ademola, 2017), including the following:

- Problem-solving: Evaluating systems and processes to improve strategic outcomes is central to their roles. Problems that are diagnosed sometimes uncover other underlying problems (The Princeton Review, n.d.). Strategic thinking is, therefore, needed to analyze the whole system and process map interconnections and interdependencies within it.
- Communication (writing, speaking, presenting, and listening): Management consultants need to attentively listen to client needs, facilitate meetings, and be able to sell their ideas or insights clearly and persuasively, such as a change management plan.
- Managing client engagements and relationships: Analysts are expected to build trust not only by their technical expertise but also by their management of issues, accountability, openness, rapport, and conflict management skills. They are expected to demonstrate developed EI as they engage in diverse teams and work with senior executives.

- Critical thinking and analysis: Management consultants critically consider the clients' needs, evaluate multiple solution options, probe into the nature of the problem being addressed, and evaluate the implementation of solutions.
- Leadership: Consultants are brought on board to lead. This requirement involves identifying opportunities to improve operational capacity, manage processes, and influence a team towards a specific goal. They are expected to articulate a vision forward and a strategic means to fulfill organizational goals.
- Adaptability: Constant learning is needed to adapt to changing contexts, data, and the needs of clients.

Higher Education and the Soft Skills Gap Among Business Graduates

To succeed in the professional business environment requires graduates to be taught soft skills (NBEA, n.d.). The NBEA released Policy Statement 67, stating that being technically competent is insufficient. To succeed in the business environment in the 21st century requires focusing on soft skills, and teaching these soft skills adds significant value to student learning (NBEA, n.d.).

The Role of Universities in Soft Skill Development

University programs have been successful in teaching pure technical skills, but technical knowledge must be joined with soft skills to enable productivity and high performance in the workplace (Saeger et al., 2019). Some researchers have argued that inadequate student soft skills development methods reflect a failure in the university system (James-Constantine, 2018; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017) as universities have not narrowed the skills gap in the U.S. workforce (Christo-Baker et al., 2017). Along the

pathway from school to employment, the education system is not effectively equipping students with the soft skills they need to succeed (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2018). The burden of soft skill development, therefore, gets transferred primarily to the employer (Woodard, 2018).

Discrepancy in Perceptions Between Graduates and Employers

Recent research (Schooley, 2017) has indicated that a discrepancy persists between graduates' perception of their sufficiency in soft skills and employers' perception of how prepared graduates are in soft skills. The consensus in the research is that graduates feel more prepared than employers feel they are. As a result, employers reason that educational institutions should address this discrepancy and lack of alignment even as they question whether higher education programs adequately prepare students for their future professional context (Schooley, 2017).

Insufficiency in Traditional Academic Approaches

Given the prominent need in the workplace for greater mobility, adaptability, and life-long learning, university faculty often consider ways to employ learning strategies that support these abilities and traits among graduates (Meeks, 2017). However, traditional business education programs tend to prioritize teaching technical skills over soft skills (NBEA, n.d.). Students majoring in business spend less time studying than anyone else on campus. They also spend less time reading and writing than other majors (Selingo, 2017). Additionally, employers face difficulty determining the soft skill proficiency of job applicants. Traditional credentials identify aptitude in hard skills but not adeptness in soft skills such as teamwork or communication (Schooley, 2017).

Challenges of Soft Skill Development to Traditional Academic Approaches

Research into if and how students' soft skills can be improved does not have consensus in the literature (Cotler et al., 2017). However, much of the research acknowledges difficulties in teaching soft skills in a formal classroom setting, asserting that the training used for hard skills may not be effective for the inculcation of soft skills (Woodard, 2018). I did not find agreement in the research literature on "specific, measurable, assignable, realistic, and time-related (SMART) activities" (Connolly & Reinicke, 2017, p. 6) that effectively and reliably train students in soft skills. Furthermore, teaching soft skills is not as straightforward as teaching cognitive, hard skills. The processes of teaching soft skills often challenge traditional pedagogy; as such, conventional teaching strategies that focus on the acquisition of factual knowledge often need to be changed to facilitate the learning of soft skills (Hill, 2015).

A focus on fostering soft skill development has implications for how universities structure their curricula, design their pedagogies, and craft extra-curricular student life. Soft skill development shifts higher education's focus from teaching subject content to enabling students to become lifelong learners. Learning soft skills is a dynamic process that requires time, commitment, habituation, and the involvement of others (Cimatti, 2016). This may require exploring informal learning opportunities and different pedagogical tools. Faculty are challenged to become facilitators of learning who focus on the what of learning as much as the why and how of learning, sharing content as well as supporting soft skill competence (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2020).

Soft Skill Development and Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning underscores the importance and relevance of learning soft skills at every stage of one's development, not only at school but throughout one's lifespan, from childhood to old adulthood. It emphasizes that learning occurs anytime and anywhere and is not restricted or tethered to formal schooling or training but takes place through multiple modalities and contexts (Zuber-Skerritt and Teare (2013). Longworth and Davies (1996) defined lifelong learning as follows:

> The development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills, and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances, and environments. (p. 22)

Learning is not limited to a classroom or a practicum but is a process of continuous learning that permeates all stages and spheres of one's life. Soft skills development is strongly associated with a lifelong learning outlook in that a synchronized and continuous effort over multiple learning experiences is needed to develop soft skills (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2020). Lifelong learning advocates that the boundaries between one's school and job should be open so that opportunities for learning soft skills are created within and across these environments. (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2020).

A Learning Ecosystem

Lifelong learning conceptualizes higher education and employment as parts of a learning ecosystem rather than two separate and disconnected entities in which one can transfer learning and skills across domains. Lifelong learning, therefore, is more than program offerings but a broader consideration of how universities and employers create value for learners and employees, including how to create an enabling environment for learning and development and how to transform challenges employees face into opportunities for learning. (Jongbloed, 2002). Envisioning this interconnected web of human experiences can help academic leaders and employers promote learning in operational ways to bridge the divide between education and work. Lifelong learning implies the need for collaborative discussion and shared goals between faculty and employers.

Lifelong Learning in the Workplace

Lifelong learning is also a "response to, or even defence against, a changing, frightening and unknown technological, economic, social and political environment" (Dehmel, 2006, p. 52). Lifelong learning is particularly relevant in workplaces where information technology and globalization have been transforming the nature of work. Workers who are empowered with lifelong learning are more likely to assume responsibility, be more proactive in their own learning, anticipate the skills they need for future employment, engage in the necessary training, and thereby are more likely to protect their income security (International Labor Organization, 2019). Lifelong learning,

therefore, supports soft skill development, human development, professional development, adaptability to change, and work transition.

Empowerment of Learners

An underlying value of lifelong learning is that learners need to be empowered to take responsibility for their own learning (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). Individuals are able to identify their own gaps in soft skills and are self-directed to learn these soft skills (Cimatti, 2016). This concept has far-reaching implications for educators, industry, and governments as it requires a consideration of how to construct models for learning, teaching, and training that foster both opportunities and strategies for learning (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2020). This means creating learning experiences with a skill-based focus that support critical thinking and problem-solving and engage learners in self-directed knowledge-building (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). Part of lifelong learning is about promoting both the intrinsic desire for personal development and the need to be adaptive to changes in life. Lifelong learning, therefore, can lead to a more skilled workforce as individuals are encouraged to be on a track of continuous learning and development.

Workforce Development and Workforce Alignment

Organizations' heightened need for employees with soft skills can be attributed to changes in the workplace structure, as cultural diversity, cross-functional teams, virtual interaction, and global networking increase the need for interpersonal awareness and skills (Clokie & Fourie, 2016).

Soft Skills Development Through Experiential Learning

Workplaces are learning environments. They entail concrete experiences where learning occurs through action and application. Individuals create knowledge and develop soft skills by addressing problems, applying their skills in different situations, and reflecting on their experiences (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). As employers recognize the experiential nature of soft skills development, they can engineer opportunities for learning in the workplace (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2020). Soft skill development also involves social learning, as individuals learn *from* others and *with* others. Collaboration and diversity are intrinsic processes in a workplace as they potentially create mutual growth and synergy. Given the frequency of change occurring in the work environment and global markets, the workplace can be a driver of soft skill development as employers develop learning pathways and opportunities for their employees that extend their growth. (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013).

Workplace Initiatives for Soft Skills Development

Soft skills and EI training and development interventions are varied. Examples include human relations training, behavior modeling training, self-management training, coaching, meditation, counterconditioning, achievement motivation training, and sensitivity training (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001). Individualized professional development plans created in response to workers' soft skills needs and goals can improve chances for promotion, thereby motivating training commitment (Orazbayeva et al., 2020). Other avenues such as accredited training programs, wider professional

exposure, mentorship, and work projects can also challenge employees in different ways (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2020).

An underlying issue in soft skills training is that the methods typically offered in organizations are typically used without an understanding of what is needed to foster EI learning, including creating an encouraging organizational environment, making learning self-directed, encouraging practice, safeguarding against setbacks, and building in follow-up support (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001).

Adjusting to Labor Market Shifts

Workforce development connects the field of education with national economic development (Lea, 2019). Higher education workforce development needs to be aligned with the needs of the labor market (Jagannathan, 2017). To be aligned requires business school academic leaders and local employers to consult to identify precisely where the skills gaps exist so adequate solutions can be offered (Lea, 2019). Changing market forces necessitate a mutuality between businesses and business schools to both adjust to labor market shifts and proactively prepare for future changes. They are both expected to develop leaders who can adapt to changing market dynamics (Jagannathan, 2017).

Challenges in Soft Skill Development: Undergraduate Business Programs

James-Constantine (2018) outlined some challenges that higher education institutions face preparing students with required soft skills: faculty are not aligned with employers regarding skills needed by potential employees; faculty are unable to teach employability skills to students or do not prioritize these skills; assessments that inform graduates' employability focus on academic knowledge and less on soft skill capabilities;

and pedagogical and training tools are ineffective. Other barriers to soft skill development in the traditional college classroom include lack of teacher training, limited instructional resources, biased preconceptions in both faculty and students, and time constraints in the classroom (Jagannathan, 2017).

Furthermore, many business school faculty may be less certain about undergraduate students' ability to change or improve their soft skills at this stage in their development. When asked about the value of students' soft skill development, the dean of a major business school said soft skills were crucial in the workplace, but when asked about soft skill development initiatives in his business school, he said, "We don't do anything. I don't think that our students' emotional intelligence can be improved by the time they come here. They're already adults, and these qualities are developed early in life" (Cherniss et al., 1998, para. 5).

Current Academic Initiatives in Soft Skills Development

Many universities are trying to meet the challenge of workforce readiness through various initiatives within their undergraduate program and are integrating soft skills into their learning objectives and approaches (Dunagan, 2017). However, how different learning experiences reinforce soft skill development tends not to be well understood by faculty (Woodard, 2018). A challenge is determining and applying which pedagogical methods are effective and appropriate. Faculty may include the flipped classroom, problem-based approach, project-based approach, gamification, role-playing, demonstrations, portfolios, cooperative and collaborative learning, pairing, case studies,

project competitions, and simulations (NBEA, n.d.; The Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2017).

Some strategies used to develop soft skills include integrating soft skills within current courses of a program; conducting seminars and workshops during the weekend aimed at teaching different soft skills; offering two-week orientations at the start of each semester to train soft skills; and creating different courses for each soft skill which are integrated into current programs and taught by teachers who may be dedicated to the teaching of soft skills (Cimatti, 2016). These strategies often tend to be periodic distinct developmental events or activities and are not part of a philosophically-driven or intentionally-designed holistic teaching approach focused on soft skill development, which may include continuous semester exposure for the student (Martin, 2019).

Challenges Providing Active and Experiential Learning

The literature points to the need for active learning as opposed to passive learning to undergird soft skill development teaching. Active learning requires a different set of dynamics and use of time and increases the need for student engagement, which can challenge traditional ways students are accustomed to being taught. Teaching soft skills may be different from other university or workplace training because "developing emotional competence requires learners to unlearn old habits of thought, feeling and action that are deeply ingrained and learn new ones. Such a process takes motivation, effort, time, support and sustained practice" (Laabs, 1999, p. 69)

Research provides contradictory evidence as to whether soft skills can be developed through training (Livesey, 2017). Classrooms lack real-time, real-world

situational contexts and experiences where soft skills are authentically developed. Soft skill training requires changing behavior that cannot be learned in a traditional classroom setting (Stewart et al., 2016). A learning environment where students can practice and develop soft skills requires experiential training, applied learning, social interaction, and interactive real-life environments (Woodard, 2018). The ability of students to develop soft skills is, therefore, impacted by the opportunities to interact with others.

Students' lack of experience in a workplace setting makes it difficult to truly develop soft skills, which are abilities that must be embodied and demonstrated and not just cognitively recalled (Martin, 2019). The work environment is dynamically changing and has various real-time demands which require the contextual building of skills. Recreating such scenarios requires the input and involvement of multiple constituents, such as public and private sectors and educational and professional training resources (Christo-Baker et al., 2017).

Challenges Transferring Soft Skills From the Classroom to the Workplace

Another concern is that soft skills are significantly less likely to transfer from the classroom to the job than hard-skills training. Soft skills tend to be intrapersonal and interpersonal compared with hard skills, which tend to be technical and knowledge-based. Often, successful transfer depends on whether the soft skill learned in an academic setting was applied to a similar task at work (Jagannathan, 2017). The challenges of soft-skill transfer may result in a waste of time, effort, and money, with a lack of substantial evidence that soft skills training programs at school and work are not effectual as desired (Jagannathan, 2017; Laker & Powell, 2011).

Challenges Measuring Soft Skills

When evaluating soft skills development, a challenge is whether soft skills can be accurately measured and whether the methods for assessing soft skills, such as standardized testing, are adequate to determine if learners have grown in, modified, or mastered a specific soft skill. Beardmore (2019) synthesized the issue of measuring soft skills:

> [Soft skills] aren't about content. They cut across disciplines, sectors, developmental stages, and functions. They are often interpersonal in nature but encompass skills that are difficult to observe or measure as well. Vital for success in workplace and life, they must be learned through understanding, practice, and feedback. (p. 25)

A concern in measuring soft skills is the behavioral dimension to soft skills. Communication skills, for example, are demonstrated through leading discussions, speaking in meetings, and presenting in virtual conferences. Demonstrating cultural awareness is also conveyed through various forms of communication. A consensus of researchers supports the use of authentic assessments as an accurate measure of learning based on performance tasks designed to simulate real-world activities (Neely & Tucker, 2013).

Traditional measurements are designed to measure knowledge rather than have learners demonstrate actual growth in their ability to complete authentic tasks that solve real-life problems. Self-report surveys are often used, but this method relies on one's accurate assessment of one's abilities (Matteson et al., 2016). Another measurement

process for soft skills that may be more accurate is triangulating data from self-reported surveys with peer- and manager- or faculty-reported data for 360-degree feedback (Matteson et al., 2016).

The most common ways employers assess soft skills, in addition to using interview questions and observing candidates' body language during job interviews, is by asking behavioral questions, asking situational questions, evaluating projects, and using tech-based assessments. Other methods used to assess employees' soft skills in action include using artificial intelligence assessments such as Koru, Pymetrics, and Plum (LinkedIn Talent Solutions, 2019).

EI Instruments

EI instruments have also been used, such as the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), an ability-based instrument in which participants respond to questions based on short hypothetical situations or images rather than rate their level of abilities and their self-perceptions of their abilities. The MSCEIT collects data on a demonstration of ability, as opposed to collecting perceptions of one's own ability (Matteson et al., 2016). Goleman developed the Emotional Competence Inventory (ECI), which matches the domains of the EI framework. It is a 360-degree assessment that collects ratings on 20 social and emotional competencies from self, subordinate, peer, and supervisory surveys (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001).

As with other scientific measurements, the concerns regarding measuring EI and soft skills center around reliability evidence – consistency across time, across items, and across researchers – and validity evidence – that the method accurately measures what it

claims to measure (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001). Many of the EI measurements found in the literature have been empirically evaluated. Some are multi-rater assessments and surveys that are empirically linked to improved performance in a wide variety of professional roles. Some EI measurements are ability-based, behavior-based, and performance-based tests to measure individual growth. Others are self-report inventories to calculate individual EI in teams. More recent EI instruments include virtual reality (VR) simulations of the work environment. The next generation of EI measurements are more focused on being predictive and are intended for the selection and promotion of employees. As the body of measurements grows, reliability and validity evidence is expected to improve (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001).

Demographic Factors: Impact on the Soft Skills Gap in the Workplace

Age of Students and Employees

Multigenerational diversity significantly impacts the workforce and higher education learning experiences (Farrell & Hurt, 2014). A generational shift is taking place in the workforce in which millennials, those born between 1980 and 2000. They make up 35% of the American labor force, surpassing Generation Xers, and are now the single largest generational group in the U.S. labor force (Desilver, 2019). By 2030, millennials will make up 75% of the global workforce and comprise 50% of the U.S. workforce (Ismail & Lu, 2014). Understanding the characteristics of millennials may help understand the learning style and preferences suitable for teaching millennials soft skills and may also enable faculty and employers to adapt approaches during the transition from Generation X to millennials (Ismail & Lu, 2014).

Millennials have been identified with the following characteristics: the ability to multi-task; desire for structure; achievement-focused; technologically savvy; creative; team-oriented; and seeking attention and feedback (Barnes & Gearin, 2022; Farrell & Hurt, 2014). They are visually stimulated learners, given their exposure to mobile devices, video games, and digital media (Dice, 2018). Their learning style is distinctly active learning, with an aversion for passive learning, and they prefer structured and team-oriented learning with technological elements. They expect engaged teaching, active learning, practical application, flexible and customized learning experiences, learning across modalities, and hands-on, creative activities (Mahesh et al., 2021). For millennials, "doing is more important than knowing" (Dice, 2018, p. 79). Additionally, gamified learning experiences appeal to them (Dice, 2018). Millennials also have distinct workplace expectations. They seek to be change agents and expect that a workplace is a place of fulfillment and achievement while allowing them flexibility and variety (Farrell & Hurt, 2014).

Post-millennials or Generation Z share similar traits with millennials. They have a shorter attention span than millennials; regard technology as innate and expect it to suffuse their learning experience; stay connected through social networks; desire immediacy; are experiential and explorative; are keen to collaborate; are visual and kinesthetic; and are concerned about environmental and social problems (Mahesh et al., 2021).

Millennials and Generation Z graduates have certain tendencies that jeopardize their employability. These include confusing their technical proficiency as competence in

soft skills; poor face-to-face communication skills; a propensity for instant gratification; a need for well-defined structures on what they are expected to do; and a feeling of entitlement (Martin, 2019). They also lack followership, which is a set of soft skills that include respect for authority, corporate citizenship, and team loyalty. Millennials and Generation Z students are also not fully aware of how their attitudes and behaviors affect their employability (Tulgan, 2016). Additionally, they tend to have a low attention span, which requires understanding how to motivate them, and they expect some level of personalization (Cruz, 2020).

Developing millennial and Generation Z students' soft skills using traditional academic approaches may present multiple challenges. Given the characteristics of millennials, soft skills training needs to incorporate the use of personal feedback and attention, collaborative activities, flexible structures, and technology in active learning processes (Farrell & Hurt, 2014).

Culture, Religion, and Belief Systems

With the diversification of the workforce because of migration and global movements, preparing students and employees with the necessary soft skills to be successful in a diverse workplace is essential. Cultural, gender, and religious diversity in workgroups may influence members' communication and interaction (Mitchell et al., 2013). Communication styles and decision-making vary among cultures; for example, some cultures are very direct in communicating while others are more deferential; decision-making in some cultures is decisive while others have a consensus approach. Some challenges to diversity include conflict, miscommunication, the creation of

barriers, misunderstanding, prejudice, delayed work processes, and lower productivity (Mitchell et al., 2013). Employees from different cultures may have different assumptions and expectations; hence, cultural awareness becomes a significant attribute of workplace interaction.

The impact of diversity can also be very positive and can enable greater access to different perspectives, improved collaborative potential, and a widened knowledge base for the organization. The soft skills of communication and teamwork support one's ability to be aware and sensitive to diversity. This diversity can be expressed through awareness of varied local cultural nuances, multiple perspectives, local and global viewpoints, balancing rights with privileges, and balancing freedoms with respect (Findler & Gorbis, 2013).

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter provided a critical review and analysis of the broader research problem that inefficiency in the performance of soft skills exists among business graduates in the workplace. Business students are coming into the workforce without the adequate soft skills necessary to effectively navigate the standard workplace (Ortiz et al., 2016).

Soft skills refer to competencies connected to one's attitude, ability, and motivation (Lea, 2019; Martin, 2019). They are embodied in the ability to manage oneself and one's interaction with others through the use of emotional and social intelligence, language ability, and persuasion skills (Karimi, 2020; Martin, 2019).

The theory of EI undergirds soft skill development. The ability to perceive and manage emotions in oneself is the starting point to become aware of emotional dynamics in social settings and to manage interpersonal situations. EI may enhance work performance by enabling employees to develop and demonstrate the soft skills needed in their work context, such as adaptability and conflict management (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001).

Soft skills can be distinguished from hard skills in that soft skills are personal attributes that enhance an employee's interactions and job performance, whereas hard skills are one's technical knowledge, tools, and techniques (LinkedIn Talent Solutions, 2019). Employee performance can, therefore, be considered as two sides of a coin, with cognitive and noncognitive skills on either side (Karimi, 2020). Soft skills are often considered the software that runs the hardware or hard skills. Also noteworthy is that soft skills are not monolithic in that they carry different weights in different contexts; for example, cultural awareness is key in the field of public relations but not as equally important in database management (Lea, 2019). Furthermore, soft skills are transferable skills across roles and fields.

The research literature provided a broad consensus that the gap in soft skills necessitates greater support for workplace competency development, and soft skills development should improve at the university level. However, I did not find uniform consensus on the extent to which universities should hold primary responsibility for soft skills development and workforce readiness (Anthony & Garner, 2016). Some literature points to the charge of higher education to shoulder the burden of workforce development

and provide learning experiences directly informed by the workplace context. Other literature, however, claims that the soft skills gap is overstated because employers do not precisely identify the soft skills needed for a job. Business programs often downplay the importance of soft skills, in part because academic leaders face challenges defining, teaching, and assessing these skills (NBEA, n.d.). Additionally, some literature asserts that employers need to shoulder more responsibility for soft skill development and be more intentional in their workforce development processes (Fain, 2019).

This chapter also examined how soft skills cannot be mastered in one class or 1 year of classes. Soft skills have to be encouraged and cultured through years of learning experiences. Soft skills are contextual, developmental, interpersonal, and practical. To develop soft skills is to invest in lifelong learning. This compels greater focus on soft skills in the classroom, the need for a long-term vision of soft skill development, creating connective scaffolding from high school to college to employment, and active application and evaluation of soft skills inside and outside the classroom. Identifying soft skills development as a lifelong effort reinforced this study's data analysis process, given that coordination between faculty and business leaders promotes the growth of soft skills.

Chapter 3 focuses on the methodology supporting this study. I identify the data collection approaches and data analysis processes used in this study and outline the procedures carried out to support the credibility, transferability, dependability, and ethical integrity of the research.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that contribute to the soft skills gap among business graduates in the workplace to derive potential solutions to reduce this gap. The distinctive perspectives of both employers and educators were gathered via semistructured interviews to enable comparative insights from these stakeholders to emerge. This chapter outlines the research design, a basic qualitative design (see Merriam, 2015), the methodology, and the data analysis plan.

Research Design and Rationale

Two RQs guided this study. The first considered what faculty members and employers perceive regarding the conditions that influence the soft skills gap of recently graduated students in their professional roles. The second RQ considered faculty members' and employers' recommendations on ways to improve the soft skills of business graduate students so they are prepared for challenges in their future workplace.

A survey by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2018) identified a trending assertion among employers that recent college graduates are unprepared for professional challenges because of a gap in the critical learning of soft skills. This gap reflects a lack of graduate readiness (Karimi, 2020). This lack of preparedness is accentuated because the changing nature of work and industry prioritizes soft skills, and the success of organizations necessitates employee proficiency in soft skills (Karimi, 2020). In this study, I sought to garner in-depth thoughts from both educators and employers, who have been extensively involved in the teaching, research,

and examination of soft skills to present an analysis of the factors that lead to this gap and possible solutions that can mitigate this problem.

Basic Qualitative Research Design

A basic qualitative approach was used to answer the RQs of this study. In arguing for the value of qualitative research, Creswell (2018) stated that qualitative research could be used "because a problem or issue needs to be explored…[and] because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue…[that] can only be established by talking directly with people…and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find" (pp. 47-48). The purpose of this study was exploratory in that I investigated potential solutions to a real-world scenario – the soft skills gap among business graduates. The study was also complex in that I drew insights directly from individuals closely involved in the education and evaluation of the skills of business graduates. The qualitative methodology was, therefore, appropriate to this study.

A basic qualitative approach is also referred to as interpretive because it emphasizes that individuals construct reality and come to understand the meaning of a phenomenon as they interact with the world (Merriam, 2015). In this regard, conducting interviews enabled me to collect and report data on faculty members' and employers' unique intent, approaches, and experiences when assessing and developing soft skills among their students and employees. A basic qualitative approach also allowed me to elicit layered interpretations into the various contexts in which soft skills are taught and extract examples of concrete practice. Additionally, using a basic qualitative approach allowed me to discover and explore perspectives and gave me the flexibility to capture

and analyze emergent themes as the data analysis progressed from broad topics to narrower foci (Writing@CSU, n.d.).

Qualitative research is a practical and useful means to describe interpersonal phenomena that would be difficult to portray with quantitative research. A quantitative approach would not have allowed me to unearth wide-ranging or in-depth perspectives (see Creswell, 2018). A qualitative approach, on the other hand, enabled me to detect underlying conditions impacting soft skill development (see Jagannathan, 2017). Deriving statistics to answer the RQs was not a necessary outcome of the research purpose; additionally, creating hypotheses was unnecessary as the RQs did not require predictive outcomes to be determined. The intent behind this study was to extract new perspectives and not to corroborate hypotheses. Additionally, a quantitative approach would have been impractical to implement. I did not expect a sufficient number of faculty and employers would be willing to invest time during a pandemic with competing demands to complete detailed responses to a survey. However, I expected a small sample size of participants professionally involved in this research topic would be open to participating.

I considered other qualitative designs for this study, but I found these not to have as compelling a justification as a basic qualitative approach in responding to the RQs. Ethnographic research would not have been relevant to my RQs because ethnography focuses on culture and why specific behaviors occur under certain conditions (see Creswell, 2018). An ethnographic approach would not have been a practical option for

this doctoral study as I would have to have been present in multiple live classes through the course of a year as an undergraduate cohort goes through a year of study.

A grounded theory approach would have required significant participant observation of classes and evaluation of students' soft skills. Such an approach would have been beyond the scope for answering the RQs; also, theory development was not necessary given the parameters of the study (see Creswell, 2016). A narrative design would have been irrelevant as there was no need to describe a faculty's, student's, or employer's lived experience of soft skills to answer the RQs (see Creswell, 2016).

A phenomenological design is meant to explore participants' life experiences and the impact of these experiences in shaping the participants (Creswell, 2016). A phenomenological approach would have provided detailed descriptions of the experiences of teaching and learning soft skills and would have supported the process of collecting data through the span of a year across multiple courses and modalities; however, this would not have been practical for a doctoral study gathering data during a pandemic lockdown. A case study design would have been appropriate for this study; however, after many months of trying to secure a local site, responses from potential sites indicated that they were overwhelmed by the pandemic. The responses I received expressed general unavailability and unwillingness, given the atmosphere of uncertainty and stress produced by the lockdown. Faculty were occupied with the immediate challenges of COVID-19 and were unable to put more on their agendas. These limitations made it difficult to continue with a case study approach.

Role of the Researcher

My primary role as a researcher was to safeguard the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data in an unbiased manner and with ethical oversight (see Merriam, 2015). In that regard, I did not have any previous relationships with the participants and did not perceive any personal conflict of interest. My role also included protecting the confidentiality of participants' identities and ensuring the reliability of sources (see Creswell, 2018).

I acknowledge the possibility that personal biases were present in my preference for certain solutions to the soft skills gap and what I consider to be more compelling recommendations than those suggested by participants. As a practitioner in education, I acknowledge that I would advocate for soft skills to be more comprehensively and deliberately addressed in the undergraduate curriculum in stand-alone courses, more integrated into technical courses, and more effectively measured throughout students' programs. Additionally, I acknowledge my inclination to see corporate–university partnerships and dialogue strategically promote soft skill development through specifically designed collaborative initiatives and other exchanges.

I also recognize my responsibility to set aside personal experiences, beliefs, and attitudes and engage with an open mind to reduce bias and ensure that my findings are based on the experiences and ideas of the research participants and not my expectations. I approached the data with a keen emerging awareness and did not disregard data that may have contradicted any initial or predisposed notions I may have had. I bracketed any potential personal preferences or feelings that arose throughout this research. I considered

my personal responses to the interview questions and reflected on any prior assumptions and biases to ensure these biases did not skew judgment during the study. I sought to remain a neutral party as I collected and analyzed the data that emerged.

Additionally, my role was to evaluate the data and report my findings without regard to the results of other studies, the implications of this study's results to the participants' institution, and prospects of how the findings may be used in the future. My objective was not to leverage the findings to propose implementing solutions within institutions after the study was completed. I only intend that my findings be a scholarly resource for institutions to use as they see fit and to be a significant contribution to the literature. My goal was to engage objectively and to contribute to the unfolding body of knowledge on the subject matter of soft skill development.

Methodology

To answer the RQs, I used a basic qualitative design to collect, analyze, and report data. This design allowed for the data collection and analysis to be aligned with the research problem, purpose statement, and RQs (see Creswell, 2016). Data collection included semistructured interviewing of two groupings of participants: business faculty and employers. Interviewees were purposively sampled based on set criteria. The purpose of the interviews was to capture the unique perceptions of these two groupings. The Interview Protocol can be found in Appendix B and includes the interview questions aligned with the RQs. I compared the data sourced from the interviews to see where the views, ideas, and experiences presented by each interviewee overlapped and diverged (see Creswell, 2018).

Participant Selection

Population

Research participants included faculty members who taught in an undergraduate degree program in business and employers at consulting firms based in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. Both stakeholder groups had expert knowledge and experience in the study of soft skills and represented a portion of the population that directly impacts the phenomenon of soft skill development. The personal insights they provided captured the multiple realities constructed out of their experiences. The use of participants with two different backgrounds was, therefore, expected to provide two distinct and comparative perspectives on the RQs.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants with specific characteristics. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted, "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 96). This method of sampling enabled me to acquire an understanding of the backgrounds of selected participants and, thereby, establish their credibility to inform this study (see Merriam, 2015).

Sampling based on specific criteria allowed me to identify, select, and approach employers and faculty members who had extensive experiences, backgrounds, knowledge, and approaches related to soft skills. The sample size consisted of four business faculty members and four employers and was assessed based on the requirements of saturation. Saturation sometimes requires 30 interviews (Yin, 2014) or

one or more (Stake, 2010), or somewhere in between, such as between six and 12 participants (Patton, 2015). I ensured that the RQs were sufficiently addressed through saturation.

Selection Criteria

The selection criteria were based directly on the scope of the RQs. For the research purpose to be realized, the experiences and perceptions of faculty members and employers had to be collected, compared, and contrasted.

Faculty Participants. Faculty members needed to be currently in practice, having taught in an undergraduate degree program for the past 3 years. Faculty needed to have experience developing curriculum and could speak competently about their courses, program(s), how soft skills are approached, and student performance in soft skills. Priority was given to faculty who taught courses targeting soft skills development, published research on soft skills, or presented in a public forum such as conference presentations, articles, or blogs. This background ensured they had a track record of demonstrating deep analysis of soft skills, understanding of pedagogical practices and relevant theories, and participating in academic dialogue about soft skills.

Employers at Consulting Firms. Employers had to be currently in practice at a consulting firm based in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. The employers considered included managers, human resource hiring directors, project team leads, division supervisors, and others responsible for workforce development who have direct insight into employees' soft skills, such as learning and development strategy leads, trainers, consultants, and human capital development practitioners.

Purposeful sampling involved screening potential interviewees based on whether their profile reflected professional competence and experience to speak about soft skills development. Preference was given to employers who wrote or spoke publicly about soft skill development. Many of the nation's top consulting organizations are based in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. This geographical delimitation narrowed the scope of the study yet still allowed for variability of participants from different consulting firms.

These selection criteria safeguarded that the interviewees were appropriate, qualified, and knowledgeable. To determine whether potential participants met the selection criteria, I conducted a thorough search into their publications, speeches, professional background, academic qualifications, interviews, blogs, public statements, contributions in the fields of soft skills, teaching portfolio, and workforce development experiences. I prioritized potential participants based on how closely their expertise and training aligned with the scope of the RQs.

Number of Participants

Qualitative research samples must be large enough to cover the scope of the study and ensure that potentially important perceptions are uncovered (Merriam, 2015). Estimating the number of participants required to reach saturation depends on the amount and quality of data provided by participants and the scope of the study (Jagannathan, 2017).

Although the size of the sample was not determined a priori, I estimated the study's sample size would consist of eight to 10 individuals who had first-hand, direct knowledge and experience in soft skills development. I proposed having at least four

faculty members and at least four employers or personnel. I expected this number would sufficiently meet the scope of this study and enable adequate capture of participants' perspectives needed to address the RQs. This process facilitated a rich composite of insights and allowed comparative analysis of the interview data. The small sample size was able to generate focused and detailed data, which produced meaningful thematic relationships (see Creswell, 2018).

Identifying, Contacting, and Recruiting Participants

I created a list of potential interviewees of current faculty and employers who met the selection criteria. I searched the websites of Washington, DC universities and consulting firms based in the metropolitan area to identify individuals who met the search criteria. I also used LinkedIn to explore potential participants' academic and professional backgrounds. Once I identified individuals who seemed adept in the subject matter, I prioritized whom to contact. If the institutional websites did not have their contact information, I searched for their email contact either on their personal websites or other websites where their profiles were found.

I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the use of my drafted invitation (Appendix C), predesigned interview guide (Appendix B), and customized informed consent form. Once IRB approval was granted to contact participants, I reached out by email. My initial and subsequent emails served to (a) share the purpose of the study with the potential interviewees, (b) invite them to participate in a semistructured interview, (c) explain the voluntary nature of their participation, (d) affirm that their confidentiality and privacy would be protected, (e) share potential benefits of the study

and of their participation, (f) outline the timeframe expected, (g) set expectations for follow-up response and communication, (h) provide the informed consent form, and (i) provide the interview questions. Once they confirmed that they understood their rights and agreed to continue with their participation, I scheduled the interview and sent a Zoom calendar invitation.

Instrumentation

Semistructured, audio-recorded, online interviews were the primary instrument. Individual semistructured interviews (about 30-45 minutes each) were conducted with four faculty members and four employers. The interview process allowed respondents to share their reflections, construct meaning in unique ways, and address the RQs in detail. The interview process allowed me to gather data directly from experts and facilitated new ideas and perspectives to surface (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Appendix B outlines each RQ and the corresponding interview questions. Probing follow-up questions allowed for a flexible and fuller exploration of the topics as interaction with participants provoked new arguments to surface and details to be clarified.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol (Appendix B) was followed with participants after IRB approval for data collection was secured and after each participant provided confirmation to proceed with the interview. The data analysis plan, located further down, describes the interview process and maps the alignment between the RQs and the interview questions.

The interview protocol guaranteed a consistent line of inquiry among the participants and ensured that each interview was comprehensive, professional, and met

ethical standards. Interview questions consisted of open-ended questions that prompted participants to share their perceptions, knowledge, and experiences.

Once the participant logged onto Zoom, I completed the following steps:

1. Confirmed the participant was comfortable and that the audio and video quality was suitable for both the participant and the researcher.
2. Reviewed the purpose of the study and the purpose of the interview. (Interview questions were provided before the interview.)
3. Reminded the participant that I received IRB approval from Walden University. I recalled the content of the consent form and thanked the individual for agreeing to participate.
4. Reminded the participant of the voluntary nature of participating, including not answering specific questions or parts of questions and terminating the interview at any time without consequence.
5. Reiterated the confidentiality of the information the participant shared and the measures undertaken to ensure the privacy of the participant and organization and to secure the Zoom file and transcript.
6. Reminded the participant that the interview was to be recorded via Zoom (audio only) and transcribed and that handwritten notes would be taken. I confirmed permission to record the interview.
7. Confirmed the expected length of the interview was about 30-45 minutes.
8. Outlined the process for the semistructured interview, namely, that one question would be asked at a time and that after each response, I may ask brief

follow-up probing questions to get clarity or dive deeper into the content of the response. The participant could revisit questions as needed.

9. Reiterated the need for accuracy in participant responses to strengthen the credibility of the study. I underlined that there were no right or wrong or preferred or less preferred answers but a need for honest reflection.
10. Asked if the participant had any questions before the interview began.
11. Got verbal consent from the participant to begin the interview and begin recording.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Informed Consent

I adhered to IRB protocol, the National Institute of Health policies, and informed consent practice to ensure the rights and interests of the participants were upheld. I obtained IRB approval prior to engaging potential participants and collecting any data. I requested participants' informed consent to participate in the study by emailing them a Walden University-generated *Informed Consent Form* for their official approval. The informed consent form included a commitment that (a) the participants had the right to withdraw at any time without any negative or undesired consequence; (b) the study did not involve experimentation, manipulation, or deceit; (c) they would receive a $25 gift card to thank them for their participation; (d) they had the right to consult their own data which they provided; and (e) the data would be anonymized, secured, and only I, as the principal researcher, could access it, but that no other third-party would have access to the data.

Only participants who expressed their informed consent were included in further communication related to this study. When I presented my request for informed consent, I detailed the purpose of my research so participants were clear about the scope and context of the study.

Participation

In communicating with participants, I sought to establish appropriate boundaries and expectations. I reaffirmed that their participation was voluntary, and they could change their decision to participate at any point. To encourage confidence among participants, I communicated with them about measures to protect their confidentiality and privacy. These included de-identifying their names and storing their responses in my private password-protected computer. I addressed any concerns regarding the intent behind the study and confirmed that the interview was not intended to evaluate them as professionals or compare them with others or provide feedback to their superiors. I also ensured they had my contact information, and I would be accessible for any questions.

After individuals agreed to participate, I engaged in subsequent communication via e-mail to (a) set an agreed-upon time; (b) share information on what to expect during a recorded virtual interview; (c) outline any technical processes involved in conducting interviews via Zoom; (d) share a list of open-ended interview questions to enable them to prepare adequately; (e) request additional documentation that captured their perspectives and data on soft skills; (f) invite them to ask any questions about the study; (g) confirm their permission to record the audio of the interview; and (h) express gratitude for their willingness to participate in the study.

Data Collection

The interviews (30-45 minutes) were conducted and audio recorded via Zoom, a virtual conferencing application. The audio recording was saved to my personal laptop computer. During the interviews, I took notes to capture any real-time key data points, perspectives, and follow-up considerations. After the interviews, I generated a transcription via Temi automated transcriptions services and reviewed the transcription with the audio to ensure accuracy. I provided each participant with a summary of my preliminary analysis of the ideas they shared to allow them to review, add to, clarify, or detract parts of their responses or my findings. This opportunity for member checking ensured their ideas and words were accurately represented and added further credibility to the data collection process. I also affirmed the value of their participation in this study, expressed gratitude for their time and contribution, and indicated I would follow up with access details to the study upon completion.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis involved making sense of the collected data by identifying and categorizing units of data and associating meaning with those units of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Content analysis and analytic induction of the interview transcripts were used to answer the RQs (see Merriam, 2015). EI provided a broader interpretive framework for the descriptive and thematic analyses.

Connection of Interview Data to Specific RQs

The data analysis served to address the two RQs. The interview questions surrounding RQ1 were designed to draw out participants' thoughts on how the current context and practices of soft skills development may fall short or are constrained.

For employers, RQ1 sought to elicit perspectives on the follows:

- What soft skills employees lack
- What factors employers think impact the soft skills gap among employees
- How employers assess soft-skill proficiency of employees
- How and why employers may differ in their approach to soft skill development from academia
- How EI is supported in the workplace

Employers' responses are likely to bring to light any connections between employee training in the workplace and learning experiences in business schools.

RQ2 was intended to capture perspectives on how soft skills can be effectively fostered among students and employees. Also, I explored how any solutions or innovations proposed (RQ2) directly address the conditions that lead to the soft skills gap (RQ1).

Alignment of Interview Questions With the Conceptual Framework

Goleman's (1998) four EI domains provided an analytical framework to examine soft skill development: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social skills/relationship management. Table 3 shows the interview questions designed to prompt perspectives that could be directly addressed by the EI conceptual framework.

Table 3

Emotional Intelligence Issues Addressed in the Interview Questions

Interview questions	Question design
1. Have you observed a lack of proficiency in soft skills required for future roles in the workplace?	Identify self-awareness & social skills not demonstrated.
2. Have you observed a lack of self-awareness, social skills, and management skills required for future workplace roles?	Address the EI domains.
3. What factors do you think contribute to the soft skills gap in students/employees?	Analyze factors that contribute to EI development.
4. Many initiatives have been put in place to reduce the soft skills gap, yet it continues to widen. Why might this be?	Analyze initiatives that support EI development.
5. What constraints do you encounter in developing soft skills for students /employees? What constraints have you observed in those who seek to develop students'/employees' soft skills?	Consider how EI domains are supported in businesses and universities.
6. What approaches do you utilize or have observed that promote learners' development of soft skills?	Analyze faculty/employer EI development methods.
7. What soft skill development approaches have you found most effective/least effective? How do you determine effectiveness?	Analyze approaches that support EI development.
8. How do you assess (or have observed others assess) soft-skill proficiency?	Ascertain the role of EI when assessing soft skills.
9. What additional learning resources/learning experiences are needed to ensure effective soft skills for the workplace?	Identify how faculty/employer training supports EI.
10. What other practical and innovative solutions can be implemented to improve soft skills development initiatives?	Assess faculty/employer EI development solutions.
11. How might university departments and businesses collaborate to improve graduates' soft skills?	Evaluate the effectiveness of collaboration on EI domains.
12. How can student internships in the workplace strengthen students' / future employees' soft skills?	Identify how internships improve EI.
13. In what ways can business/academic advisory boards improve soft skills development among students and employees?	Examine advisory boards initiatives that support EI.
14. How has COVID-19 impacted soft skill development and the processes that support soft skill development?	Explain the impact on universities & business.

Coding Procedure

Immediately following each interview, the data was transcribed from the Zoom audio recordings via Temi's (temi.com) automated transcription service. When transcriptions were generated, I made initial notations to capture salient areas of focus that became initially apparent. Once I reviewed and corrected the raw transcripts, I added them to the analysis software, ATLAS.ti 22, to manually code, classify, and organize data into chunks based on the RQs and conceptual framework (Miles et al., 2014). I began clustering the data to distill meaning and determine what areas needed further focus. Coding involved reviewing each transcript line-by-line (see Creswell, 2018). Coding enabled me to gather and consolidate the data into discreet segments to facilitate meaning to emerge (see Creswell, 2016). I used open, axial, and selective coding of interview transcripts.

Open Coding. This first step of coding was to organize the transcripts in segments or basic units of meaning based on responses that addressed the RQs. I used a combination of predetermined and emergent coding. Predetermined codes were derived from the literature and conceptual framework and applied to the text. Emergent coding involved dividing data into segments, labeling the segments with meaningful codes, evaluating the codes to remove redundancy, aggregating the codes into categories, and then interpreting the meaning of the broader themes (see Creswell, 2018). When coding, I looked for data that occurred consistently. The codes highlighted from the data were short, succinct analytic units. Coding was the starting point that opened areas for

exploration. So, initial, open coding was provisional and was often reworded as my analysis progressed (Saldaña, 2016).

Axial Coding. Next, I condensed the codes into categories or broader codes and concepts and identified the context in which these categories occurred so patterns could emerge and comparisons could be made. In creating categories, I sought to preserve as closely as possible the language used by participants. I also compared and contrasted responses to discern any recurring trends or differences. The next step was to examine the relationships among the categories. This included re-coding and re-categorizing to a clearer sense of thematic organization. These processes enabled the refinement of codes and categories through an iterative process. Through this inductive process, a coherent narrative emerged that addressed the purpose of the study.

Selective Coding. The categories were then analyzed for emergent themes, patterns, comparisons, and contrasts. Themes were identified and characterized and served to frame the culminating analysis and emerging interpretation. Creswell (2018) suggested identifying five to seven themes for qualitative research.

Type of Analysis

I engaged in iterative rounds of coding, creating categories, and reorganizing and reanalyzing coded data. I re-examined the various categories and how they were clustered and related to draw out relevant and meaningful themes. Once the categories were clear, I reflected on emergent themes based on the conceptual framework of EI. I considered how the categories could be connected to determine themes. According to Creswell (2016), themes are the major ideas, beliefs, and language that emerge out of a reflection of the

codes and categories. From the analysis, I sought to derive 5 to 7 themes with subthemes. I also evaluated any contrary evidence or discrepant cases. Once no new themes were derived, I proceeded with data interpretation and reporting.

Data Management

Analysis software, ATLAS.ti 22, was used for data analysis. Appendix A provides an audit trail to demonstrate a sample of analytic processes and how conclusions were drawn. This audit trail was developed to describe some of the steps and decisions I made during the data collection, analysis, and reporting processes. Through audit trails, I provide evidence of the rigor at each of these stages, including the logical steps when determining codes and themes.

Treatment of Discrepant Cases

Discrepant cases may appear when participants provide seemingly contradictory data in response to the RQs. Discrepant information is typical and expected in the interview process (Creswell, 2018). I considered any contrary evidence or discrepant cases, such as when participants' experiences or viewpoints differed from the prevalent trends in the data. Through member checking, I gave participants the opportunity to clarify and confirm shared meaning.

As I analyzed the data, I read and reread the data both to confirm the emerging codes, categories, and themes and to actively disconfirm any ideas which I may have presumed at the start of the research process. I viewed discrepant cases as an opportunity to understand and analyze phenomena related to soft skills more fully. In some cases, discrepant data may be outliers that may be novel or ambiguous; in other cases, new

categories or themes may need to be constructed that add to or refine the overall interpretation, offering a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. If discrepant data could not be resolved within the themes that emerged from the other data, I was prepared to call these out and offer a likely rationale for this seeming incompatibility. Discrepant cases may also suggest opportunities for future research (Lea, 2019).

Trustworthiness

Issues of trustworthiness in the forms of credibility, transferability, and dependability are vital to the integrity and merit of this study. Several strategies and procedures were used to support internal and external validity and ensure that processes were thorough and detailed so that conclusions arrived were justifiable.

Establishing Credibility

Credibility relates to whether research findings match reality. Qualitative research is considered credible when interview responses can be verified and analyzed without any conditioning bias or misperceptions but as the participants mean them to be (Merriam, 2015). I used the following processes to support the credibility of this research.

Corroborating Data and Member Checking

As transcripts were completed, I compared each interview transcript with the associated audio recording to ensure all data were accurately captured. Member checking was used after all interviews to help remedy any instances of misinterpreting the meaning of participants' responses and enable verification of the accuracy of the interview data.

After each interview, I emailed each interviewee a summary of my preliminary analysis notes. I requested they review the notes for accuracy and alignment of meaning.

Reporting Data That Support Alternative Explanations

Another strategy I used was to report data that supported alternative explanations to understand perspectives and rationale that went beyond my initial expectations and the preliminary findings (see Merriam, 2015). I incorporated any contrary evidence or discrepant cases in my analysis.

Comparative Analysis

Comparative analysis of the data from the faculty members and employers produced insights on areas of convergence and divergence. The data from the faculty interviews were examined side-by-side with the data from the employer interviews. The characteristics of soft skill development in each environment—universities and places of work—were juxtaposed to determine whether generalizations could extend across both settings. Analyzing both environments helped explain how context influences perspectives regarding soft skill development. Analysis included considering what key elements occurred in both settings, what might be responsible for any patterns specific to each environment, and what could explain any similarities or differences of perspectives across each context.

Saturation

At the outset of this qualitative study, it was unknown what would be discovered in the interviews, what potential solutions they would generate or focus on, or how the analysis would evolve. The final analysis was shaped as the data were collected and the

coding proceeded. Through my preliminary analysis, I was able to detect when the data collected had reached saturation, the point at which existing themes are repeated, no new themes are revealed, and any additional information obtained does not generate new insight (see Creswell, 2016). I reviewed data from the different participants to ensure that their responses to the interview questions directly, relevantly, and adequately informed the RQs. Based on preliminary analysis, it was expected that saturation could be achieved by the 8th interview. Once saturation was reached, sampling was discontinued.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is being aware of the influence I exert, as a researcher, on the study and the impact of the research on me (see Merriam, 2015). Throughout the study, I sought to reflect on if and how any personal assumptions, expectations, and biases might influence my interpretations, such as by considering my responses to the interview questions. I recorded any biases and values that I recognized could influence my evaluation of the data and my choices throughout the research process.

Transferability

External validity is important in this study to determine the extent to which the analysis and results from this study can be transferable to other contexts (see Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thick descriptions were used to strengthen the external validity of this study and to ensure that generalizations or extrapolations from this study may be feasible for other research.

Thick Description

Thick descriptions included a description of the participants involved in the study, their experiences and research in soft skills development, the contexts from which they derived their perspectives on soft skills, and relevant quotes from their interviews (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The intent is to make clear why the participants interpreted experiences the way they did so other researchers are able to determine relevance to their own research.

Dependability

Dependability revolves around whether the meaning I ascribed to the interview data was consistent with the participants' intended meaning (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Dependability was established through member checking that corroborated the data collected was consistent with the intended meaning.

Audit Trails

Audit trails are provided (Appendix A) to strengthen the dependability of the study. The audit trails provide a snapshot of the analytic processes. Appendix A includes five codes, the quotations from which these codes were drawn, and an early analysis of the data housed within those codes. The coding process is described under "Coding Process" in Chapter 4. An outline of how codes were clustered to form categories and how categories were grouped into themes can be found in Figures 5 and 6. This transparency and clarity reveal the connection between the data and results and the logic behind the analysis and interpretation.

Ethical Procedures

Treatment of Participants

The protection of participants' confidentiality was valued in this study. I followed the procedures outlined by Creswell (2016) and the requirements outlined in the National Institute of Health's Certificate for the protection of human research participants. I received approval from Walden's IRB before conducting any data collection activities. Receiving IRB approval ensured that the proposed study complied with federal regulations and university policies, including the protection of participants and alignment with Walden University's social change mission.

In keeping with IRB requirements, I informed participants of the reason for the study and that their participation was voluntary. I ensured that any identifiers were confidential so participants and their institutions could not be recognized and that any data gathered could not be connected to them. I did not use their personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. I also requested consent from each participant prior to their participation. I outlined my adherence to Walden's IRB approval process and its ethical and institutional standards for conducting research.

Treatment of Data

Once I received IRB approval, I followed the protocols outlined in the IRB agreement to protect the confidentiality of the participants and their institutions. In keeping with the IRB requirements, I stored all data on my private password-protected laptop. All digital files were saved on the primary hard drive and backed up on a flash drive. Each is password protected and directly accessible only to me. This storage

enabled me to access the transcripts and the original audio recordings at all stages of the research. I am the only individual with access to my laptop and flash drive. All documents will be shredded, and all data deleted after 5 years.

All participants were de-identified, and each participant was assigned a participant ID number (i.e., Faculty 1, Employer 1, etc.). Audio files and transcripts were labeled with each respondent's number. Additionally, no demographic information about the participants (age, gender, race, residence) was collected. Additionally, privacy during the virtual interview was verified to mitigate any risk of intrusion or being overheard or observed.

Other Ethical Issues

Protection From Harm

I complied with the policies of the NIH to protect participants by not harming them mentally, physically, or legally in any way that may not occur in everyday life. Before the interviews, I asked participants to express any concerns regarding risk or unreasonable burdens. During recruitment for this study, I informed participants that their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary, required their informed consent, would not infringe their privacy, and would expose them to minimal risk, including embarrassment or stress. Furthermore, I reiterated procedures to ensure approved treatment of data, including that their data and personally identifiable information will be protected and eventually destroyed.

Conflict of Interest

There were no known conflicts of interest. I had no prior relationship with any of the participants. Also, since identities were protected and data de-identified, the study does not enable any participant or the researcher to derive personal benefit from the research process or the conclusions derived.

Summary

This chapter described the research design chosen for this study, including the rationale for the methodology, the criteria for participant selection, the data collection and data analysis processes, and various measures to strengthen trustworthiness, internal validity, external validity, and ethical standing. This study used the basic qualitative approach to understand the experience and insights of educators and employers on what contributes to and can potentially solve the soft skills gap among business graduates. The confidentiality of participants' identities and privacy was protected.

Data were derived from virtual interviews with four faculty members and four employers who met the selection criteria. This variety of data sources allowed for multiple lenses and enabled an interpretivist understanding of soft skill development. Coding of transcripts was completed via ATLAS.ti 22 to facilitate patterns and themes emerging (see Creswell, 2018). Although many interpretive possibilities could emerge from the same data set, the interpretation that was crafted directly addressed the RQs based on the EI conceptual framework.

Chapter 4 presents the results of the study. This includes a description of the setting of the study and the data collection and data analysis processes that were

implemented. The methodological strategies applied, as outlined in Chapter 3, are described to demonstrate the level of trustworthiness of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

In this study, I investigated the insights of a diverse range of faculty and business experts on the issues responsible for the soft skills gap among students and employees to determine how this gap can be remedied with more effective soft skill development approaches. The study's two RQs were addressed by drawing on the perceptions and experiences of business faculty and employers. The RQs elicited from the participants what factors they observed contribute to the gap in soft skills proficiency of recent graduates and what strategies and approaches they believe can improve the soft skills needed by management consultants.

The results of this study are based on data generated from interviews with four university faculty members and four employers from consulting firms, both groups located in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. Included in this chapter are the following: (a) a detailed description of the participants involved in the study and the contexts from which they derived their perspectives; (b) a review of the data collection process implemented, including how data were recorded and how data collection varied from the plan presented in Chapter 3; (c) a report on the data analysis process and how the coding process proceeded to generate categories and themes; (d) the findings based on the two RQs, and (e) evidence of trustworthiness in the implementation processes to uphold confidence in the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study.

Setting

Participant Demographics and Characteristics

In accordance with the selection criteria outlined in Chapter 3, potential interviewees were purposefully chosen based on their professional competence and experience to provide insights into soft skills development. Faculty participants also needed to be in practice in Washington, DC, and have experience designing curriculum, teaching, assessing, and contributing to developing their students' soft skills. Employers also had to be currently in practice at a consulting firm based in Washington, DC. They had to be engaged in the soft skills field through human capital development, research, or publications on soft skills. The following describes the characteristics of the participants involved in the study – their experiences and research in soft skills development and the contexts from which they derived their perspectives on soft skills.

Academic Backgrounds

Faculty. Faculty members had a range of academic degrees, including MBAs and PhDs in strategic management, communications, organizational leadership, education policy, leadership, social work, finance, and international affairs. They also had professional certifications in teaching, assessment, training, leadership skills profile® assessment, focus 360-assessment, Myers-Briggs type indicator, creative leadership assessment, on-the-job instructor qualified, certified professional coactive coach, and coactive leader.

Employers. Because employers worked in the consulting field, they mostly had MBAs, while others had postgraduate degrees in public affairs, enterprise architecture,

and information technology. Some had certificate training in various business and leadership specializations.

Departments and Internal Roles

Faculty. Faculty members were involved in a wide range of roles at their universities, which enabled them to observe and be involved in students' soft skills development and acquire a breadth of experience in this field. Faculty members had participated in the following ways: developing practice experiential learning initiatives; teaching at a skills institutes; teaching in MBA programs; serving as assistant dean of an MBA program; working as a clinical professor in management and organization; developing a quality enhancement program for undergraduates studying business; developing programs for students to complete experiential learning projects to gain teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills; developing a business foundations program; teaching professional and leadership development at three schools of business in the Washington, DC area; developing a mentorship program to provide students with hands-on industry experiences; serving as director of internship programming; serving as teaching faculty fellow; creating and launching communities of practice to provide a student-centric, experiential, cocurricular program to give students tools and skills to be successful in a particular industry; and teaching classes using experiential strategies on consulting skills and tools.

Employers. Some of the positions and roles of employers within their consulting firm included senior advisor, vice president, founder, board chair, principal consultant,

knowledge leader, lead researcher, insights and impact lead, innovation lead, artificial intelligence lead, and emerging technology lead.

Courses Taught

Faculty. Faculty members taught online, face-to-face, and hybrid courses in the following fields: problem-solving, collaboration, innovation, entrepreneurism, strategy, leadership in action, management consulting practicum, teamwork, developing professional skills, effective communication, professional competencies for social entrepreneurs, consulting skills, consulting for social impact, organizational change and culture, organizational development, adult learning, business strategy, management, managing people and organizations, nonprofit consulting, cross-cultural challenges in business, and communities of practice. This range of courses reflects their span of expertise related to teaching soft skills.

Consulting Experiences Related to Soft Skills

Employers. Employers engaged in a broad scope of consulting work, much of which involved soft skills development for clients. Consulting included the following areas:

- workforce agility
- the talent marketplace
- talent management
- change management
- workforce transformation
- organization development

- human resource solutions
- leadership
- emerging technologies and the customer experience
- driving innovation at an enterprise scale
- building/leading teams to make the future a reality
- VR training and simulations
- creating new business value through artificial intelligence and immersive experiences
- augmented reality (AR) solutions focused on training and education
- social collaboration
- employee productivity
- disruptive technologies and their impact on organizations.

Employers' consulting work was spread across many industries, including education, insurance, financial services, healthcare, pharmaceutical, telecommunications, entertainment, media, and transportation.

Research on Soft Skills

Faculty. Faculty members conducted research in the following areas:

- leadership
- cultural intelligence
- cross-cultural skills
- team dynamics
- experiential learning

- collaborative learning
- business writing
- building and leading experiential learning initiatives

This range of research reflects faculty members' depth of knowledge and familiarity with soft skills.

Employers. Employers conducted research, published, and sometimes presented their work in the following areas:

- the future of work
- human resource innovation
- workforce ecosystems
- disruptions in the workplace
- human capital trends
- developing the internal talent marketplace
- human-machine collaboration
- aligning workforce investment and value creation
- leading the social enterprise
- reinventing with a human focus
- redefining work, workforces, and workplaces
- creating meaning and structure for work
- how VR is redefining soft skills training
- college innovation
- the future of education

This range of research also reflects employers' depth of knowledge in soft skills in the workplace.

Cross-Section of Education and Consulting

During sampling selection, it became apparent that many educators had experience in the consulting field, and many employers had experience teaching in or working at universities. In addition, many participants had children at different levels of education in whose soft skill development they were deeply invested. This combination of consulting, educating, and family development brought a rich tapestry of perspectives and enabled a number of participants to speak competently about both environments.

Faculty. In addition to teaching at universities, faculty members had a wealth of experience working in the following capacities in nonprofit and for-profit organizations of all sizes across diverse industries:

- nonprofit executive
- chief learning officer
- coordinator for management education and development division
- corporate trainer
- chief executive officer for communications consulting company
- leadership coach
- behavioral health specialist
- training curriculum designer
- social entrepreneur
- career management consultant

- coaching strategist
- industry thought leader

Most of the faculty members served as consultants in the following areas:

- management of social enterprises
- learning and development policy
- social responsibility
- employee development and upskilling
- program planning
- operations and leadership
- strategic planning
- organizational development
- skills development
- talent management strategies
- employee development strategies
- employee retention
- collaboration within organizations
- workforce planning
- competency-based education
- micro-credentialing
- micro-pathways
- skills-based hiring
- training for human-centered design

For their work as consultants, many faculty received awards, including an award for innovation, an award for excellence in training, an award for excellence in leadership development, and an administrators award for innovation.

Employers. Many consultants also provided consulting work at universities. Some of these experiences include the following:

- skills-based curriculum mapping
- education reform
- design thinking and innovation strategies to build learning communities
- helping universities and other learning institutions design new models of education
- harnessing technology in learning
- learning science
- reinventing traditional degrees
- scaling of leadership development beyond the classroom

Personal and Organizational Conditions

During this study, no known personal or organizational conditions influenced participants' responses to the RQs. No known event occurred that impacted their experience responding to the interview questions.

Data Collection

Number of Participants

Eight participants took part in the interviews—four faculty members from three universities and four employers from four consulting firms.

Interview Process

Location, Frequency, and Duration of Interviews

This study consisted of eight interviews. I reached out to about 50 individuals, some of whom indicated they were unable to participate because of time constraints. To those who had not replied after my first outreach, I emailed or messaged again via LinkedIn or through their institutions' contact webpage. There was a 2-week interval from the first to the eighth interview, with interviews sequenced in no particular order but based on participants' availability. Interviews were held in my private virtual room on Zoom, lasting between 30 to 45 minutes each. The interview protocol (Appendix B) was structured to enable thorough yet flexible questioning based on the need to follow up on responses to open-ended questions. I was respectful of the participants' time yet invited personal interaction to create rapport and set the study's context.

Recording of Data

Interviews were conducted remotely using Zoom. Once the participants joined the Zoom room, our video cameras and audio were on. I spent the first few minutes introducing myself and the study, reviewing the confidential and voluntary nature of the interview, and responding to any questions. Before the recording commenced, we disabled our videos, so only audio was recorded. During the interview, I took handwritten

notes to capture overarching ideas, new thoughts I had not considered, follow-up ideas to research, and questions to clarify.

Once the interview was completed, I stopped the recording. Then the participant and I enabled our videos to conclude the interview. At that time, I thanked each interviewee for participating and confirmed that each would receive a summary and analysis of the interview content after I generated and reviewed the transcript. Once I ended the Zoom meeting, an M4A file of the recording was automatically created and saved on my laptop. I uploaded the audio file to Temi.com, a speech recognition transcription service, which produced a timestamped transcript. I used the transcript to start the member checking protocol. For every interview participant, I provided a preliminary analysis of the ideas that emerged from the interview. I emailed participants to review and provide feedback if they saw the need to address any concerns regarding accuracy.

Variations in Data Collection Process

No unusual circumstances were encountered in data collection that prompted any substantive changes to the proposed data collection process. A few modifications from the plan presented in Chapter 3, however, should be noted.

Contacting Participants. An invitation to participate in the study was sent by e-mail to the institutional e-mail addresses of potential participants. However, many of the research candidates did not have publicly available e-mail addresses. I, therefore, added two other contact options: I sent a message via their LinkedIn profile or submitted a message via their institutions' contact page, supposedly linked to their work e-mail.

Flexibility in the Interview. While I typically followed the order and wording of questions outlined in the interview protocol, I sometimes adjusted their sequence and phrasing to accommodate the flow and emphasis of the ideas being shared. All interview questions were addressed, and I was able to parse the relevant sections from the transcripts.

Population Focus. Given that faculty members have also taught students in programs outside of their school of business, they tended to apply their feedback based on their observations of *all* students. That is, they focused not on business students specifically but students generally. Likewise, employers did not narrow their feedback to management consultants but spoke about employees and clients as a whole. In that way, employers focused not on management consultants specifically but on employees and workplaces generally.

Data Analysis

Coding Process

Data analysis included iterative coding, researcher notes, and comparing data and emerging themes from a literature review. The qualitative data analysis software program, ATLAS.ti 22, was used to organize and analyze the data (ATLAS.ti, 2022). Transcripts were uploaded to ATLAS.ti 22 and manually coded based on the concept being communicated.

Iteratively Refining Codes and Organizing Coded Data

An inductive approach was used in coding. Coding began with an initial cycle of open, in vivo, provisional coding to identify emphatic ideas that arose early from the data

and the original language of participants without the use of *a priori* or predetermined themes such as might be derived from the literature review. Each code was used to isolate a segment of data and ascribe it a particular meaning so it could be reviewed later.

As I read through the text, I identified what was meaningful in relation to the RQs and immediately highlighted that text, naming it, commenting on it, and sometimes linking it to my notes or another coded section of text. As I identified each code, I wrote short descriptions to define each one. I tried to create codes that were useful in that they were not too general or too specific definitions. Each code encompassed only one concept. If I found multiple meanings from the text, I added multiple codes to that text. If I wanted to define the relationship between two segments of texts that were coded, I used the hyperlink feature in ATLS.ti to create that relationship, such as—one data point may justify, explain, expand on, support, exemplify, be solved by another data point.

When creating a code, I added a comment to distinguish the code more clearly and thoroughly. I used these code comments to work inductively by writing the ideas that first impacted me as significant. I also used comments to capture summaries of all coded segments and my ongoing interpretations. These comments became the basis of my preliminary analysis, which I shared with participants for member checking.

I repeatedly reviewed the transcripts to reconsider the text previously read in light of other codes that were developed to help me get a better grasp of the data set in its entirety. Reviewing the transcripts frequently helped ensure that no text was overlooked and all meaningful text was coded. I continuously consulted the list and definition of codes to ensure all the text ascribed with each code belonged to that code. ATLAS.ti 22

allowed me to reverse function the coding. In that way, I was able to remove or replace the codes as needed. Sometimes I aggregated codes by merging and renaming them to reflect a clearer or more comprehensive code or to avoid duplicating codes.

Visualization of Codes

Instead of analyzing qualitative data manually with highlighters, whiteboards, and post-it notes, I used the network feature in ATLAS.ti 22 to visualize codes within a graphical window. As I created a network of all the codes, I was able to link them as a way of defining the relationship between different perspectives. That is, these links showed that a particular idea from a participant may facilitate, be caused by, is a property of, is associated with an idea shared by another participant. This process of visually linking or connecting codes meaningfully could be seen within the network, and I was able to add comments within that visual space. Some segments of text had multiple codes attached, and I was able to parse them out visually and compare them. This process gave me an extra layer of analysis as I was able to connect ideas. One participant shared about what contributes to the soft skills gap with ideas shared by another participant about what approaches can effectively promote soft skills development. For example, multiple participants brought up issues regarding assessments, creating a safe environment, students' attitudes toward soft skills, and creating opportunities for students to practice and apply.

Creating Categories

Once satisfied that the data had been thoroughly coded, I sorted and organized codes based on their conceptual similarities and by identifying large overarching and

connective categories. I tried to avoid creating categories that were too broad or vague. Creating categories was the second level of coding. The categories provided an aggregated view of the sorted codes. I used the Folders feature in ATLAS.ti to filter and group codes into categories. I also created category codes within which I added sub-codes. Codes changed over time as I chunked similar codes and created clearer categories. Often, this involved disassembling and reassembling categories into other subgroups to determine if new patterns would emerge.

Creating Themes

This iterative process of defining categories helped me to identify patterns and relationships in the data. Categories that overlapped indicated that a relationship existed between them. Those relationships enabled me to explore meaning relevant to the RQs. The RQs were specifically designed to identify factors that contributed to the soft skills gap and how the gap might be reduced by addressing those factors. In this way, it was possible to link the responses to both questions. By examining these relationships, I was able to organize categories into a thematic framework. A defined thematic narrative to the RQs emerged as the categories were arranged in a coherent structure.

Codes, Categories, and Themes

The use of codes helped me manage the process of defining, grouping, and comparing segments of data. Coding allowed me to tag the salient ideas of the data in a meaningful way based on the RQs. The list of codes weaved a well-structured set of relationships and patterns from the data that enabled me to further analyze and craft a coherent story. I tried to make each code and category distinct so that their meanings

could be differentiated easily. I also verified that all codes grouped into a category were similar and representative of that category, and that each code appeared only once in a category.

Codes Derived After Initial Round of Coding

The finalized round of coding yielded 34 codes. Appendix A provides sample audit trails of five codes, the interview quotations on which I based the codes, and the preliminary analysis of the interview data.

Codes Related to the Gap in Soft Skills. Note that "Gap" refers to RQ1—a gap in soft skills, and "AP" refers to RQ2—approaches to reduce the gap.

1. Gap–Assessments and challenges assessing soft skills
2. Gap–Challenges creating a safe and equitable environment for ss development
3. Gap–Cost of soft skills development initiatives
4. Gap–Difficulty translating employer needs in the classroom
5. Gap–Anecdotal evidence of soft skills gap
6. Gap–Fear of losing employees
7. Gap–Impact of COVID-19
8. Gap–Lack of accountability of soft skills
9. Gap–Lack of continuity or continuous support in soft skills development
10. Gap–Lack of EI / soft skills development planning
11. Gap–Lack of empowerment
12. Gap–Lack of faculty/employer training on soft skills
13. Gap–Lack of mentorship and personalized help

14. Gap–Lack of relevance
15. Gap–Lack of self-awareness and self-reflection
16. Gap–Limited practice and application of soft skills
17. Gap–Valuing of technical skills and grades over soft skills

Codes Related to the Recommended Approaches to Soft Skills Development.

18. AP–Adapt soft skills development strategies for different contexts
19. AP–Adopt competency-based and micro-credential/pathways approach
20. AP–Translate soft skills into learning outcomes
21. AP–Create opportunities for applying soft skills
22. AP–Engage in self-reflection
23. AP–Explicitly incorporate learning strategies that support EI and soft skills development
24. AP–Engage internal and external stakeholders
25. AP–Listen to the needs of the students
26. AP–Promote experiential learning
27. AP–Provide mentorship, coaching, and structured support
28. AP–Reorient the values and culture of the institution
29. AP–Learning based on workplace expectations and long-term career paths
30. AP–Train faculty and employers to embody and equip soft skills
31. AP–Cost-effectiveness and scalability of VR technology
32. AP–Democratization using VR technology
33. AP–Safe environment for learning

34. AP–Utilize emerging technology for immersive experiences (VR and AR)

The network below (Figure 4) visually outlines some of the relationships among the codes. These 34 codes were arranged into 12 categories (Figure 5). From the 12 categories, four themes were assembled (Figure 6). The themes are explained in the Results section.

Figure 4

Relationships Among Codes

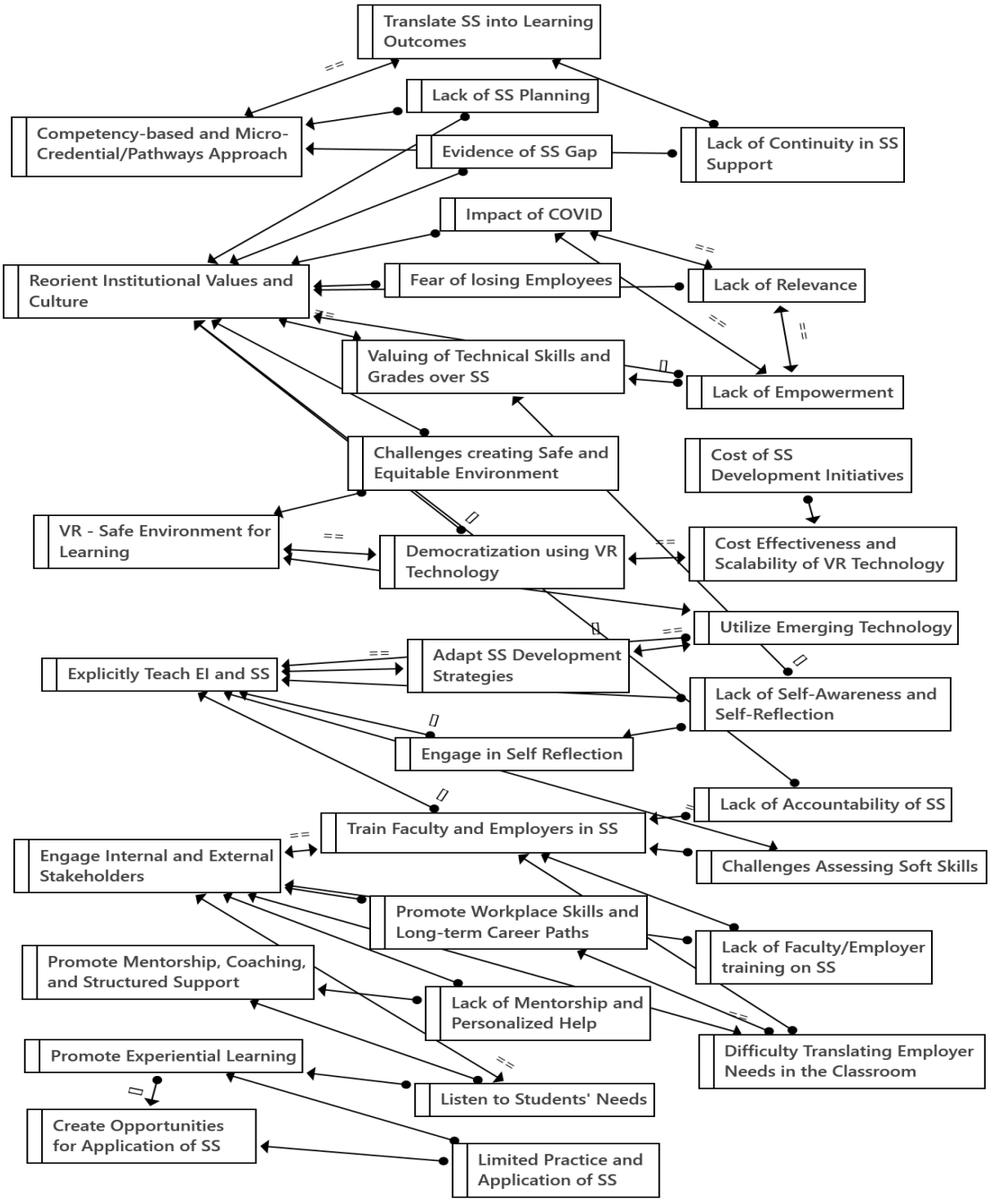
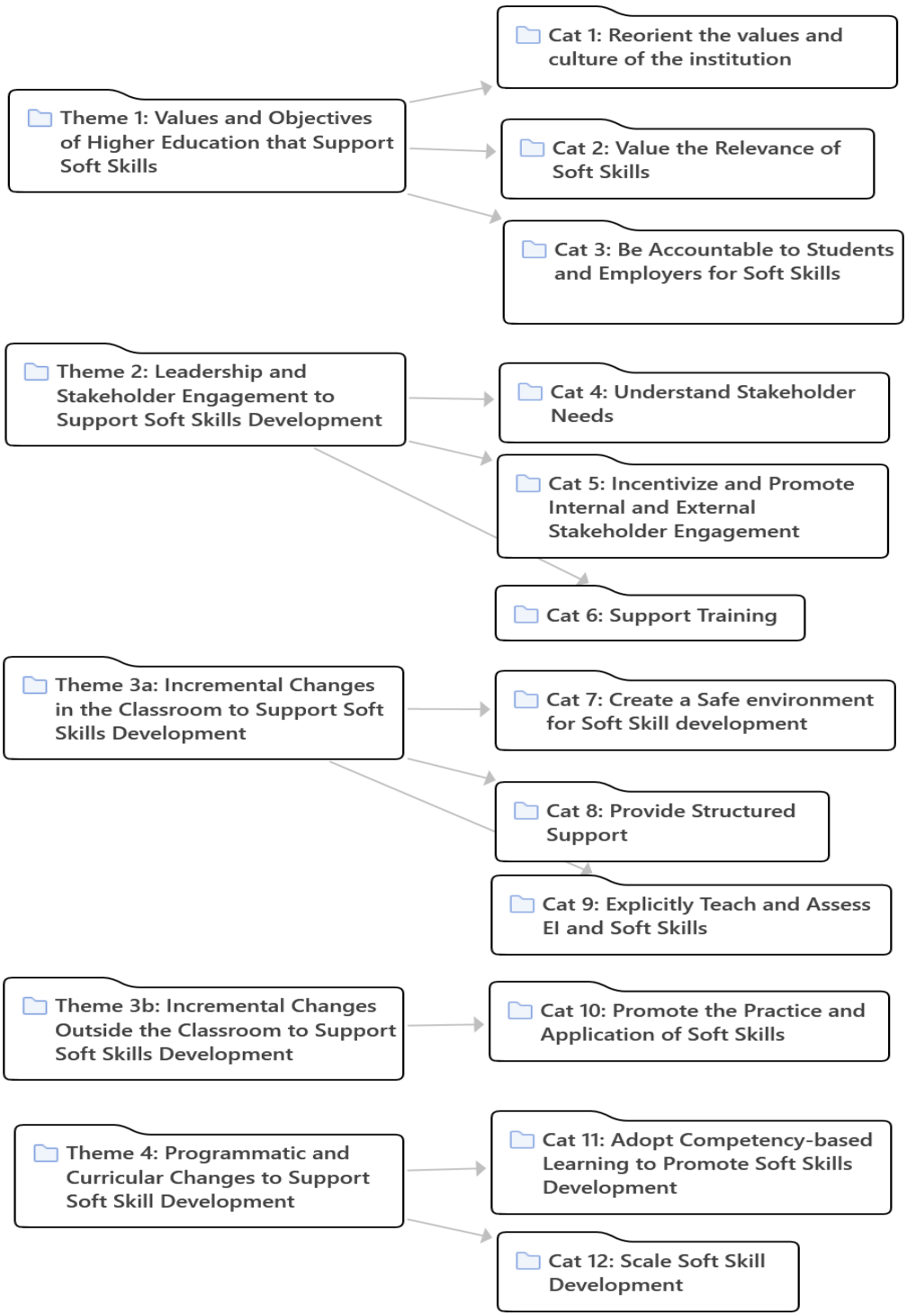


Figure 5

Categories Derived From Codes

Figure 6

Themes Derived From Categories



Discrepant Cases

No discrepant cases were identified in the analysis. Discrepant cases are considered to be data points—in this case, participant perspectives—at odds with the majority of the data or perspectives (Booth et al., 2013). No rival explanations emerged to influence the results significantly.

Results

The first RQ of this study sought to shed light on the perceptions of faculty members and employers on what they have observed contribute to the soft skills gap of recently graduated management consultants. The second RQ sought to understand the strategies, approaches, and ways of thinking these experts would recommend improving the soft skills of management consultants.

Overview of Themes

The data that emerged were organized into a streamlined approach.

- Theme 1: Values and objectives of higher education that support soft skills development: The first theme addresses the overarching changes required in institutions' values and culture for soft skills development to be effectively supported. The fundamental values and priorities that undergird institutions' goals and activities need to be reconsidered and reoriented.
- Theme 2: Leadership and stakeholder engagement to support soft skills development: To reduce the gap in soft skills, higher education leadership needs to champion and lead deliberate change efforts. Internal stakeholders (faculty and students) and external stakeholders (employers) need to be

involved and participative in this process and provide partnership through their input and strategic action.

- Theme 3a: Incremental changes inside the classroom to support soft skills development: While several approaches are already in place in universities to support soft skills development, more effective learning strategies in the classroom can be incrementally introduced, reinforced, or refashioned.
- Theme 3b: Incremental changes outside the classroom to support soft skills development: Soft skills development requires practice and application outside the classroom. Individuals grow in soft skills through real-life experience, which often occurs outside the classroom. Employers can facilitate this process, but it requires faculty and employers to collaborate and support their mutual needs.
- Theme 4: Programmatic and curricular changes to support soft skill development: Extensive programmatic and structural changes should be made to support soft skills development. Viable approaches, such as competency-based learning and skills-based mapping, require long-term coordination and strategic planning.

Theme 1: Values and Objectives of Higher Education That Support Soft Skills Development

Participant 8 shared, “[Employers were] saying students were not ready. They didn't have the tools and skills needed to be successful on day one.” This was a consistent concern even among accomplished universities in the Washington, DC area. Participants

described first-hand experience observing students' and employers' lack of soft skills. Participant 1 stated, "I have students who can't write a sentence. I am the ninth class in their 12 class MBA, and they can't write a sentence to save their lives." Participant 7 added, "E-learning honestly just is not that effective at all because people are multitasking while they're taking the training." Participant 3 claimed, "The biggest gap I see really starts with that self-awareness where [students] are not aware of how they come off to other people or the impact their communication style has on others."

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the soft skills gap into the spotlight. Participant 7 said,

> Many had no idea that 21st-century skills were so important until COVID. What you hear a lot is: why don't we teach these in school? They're becoming increasingly important, partly because people are being asked to improvise and be resilient. All these things—communication and empathy—just come into hyper-focus when you're in a crisis.

The challenge that Participant 4 noted is that "much of our educational system in many ways certainly does not emphasize soft skills."

One of the themes that emerged from the data was that higher education institutions need to reorient their underlying values and operative principles. For Participant 1, "It's a systemic issue." According to Participant 2, institutions need to embed the relevance of soft skills such as creativity, communication, humility, listening, resilience, and problem-solving within their modus operandi and modus vivendi.

Participant 1 reasoned that culture can empower or disempower values and that higher education needs to embrace accountability of soft skills more emphatically.

Reorient the Values and Culture of the Institution

Address Underlying Institutional Values and Priorities. According to Participants 1, 2, 3, and 4, higher education institutions and business organizations have predominantly focused on vocational skills. Both universities and workplaces prioritize technical skills above soft skills. In so doing, they undervalue soft skills. Participant 4 underscored that "both in educational endeavors and our work environments, we over-vector on the technical skill and the technical contribution that people bring. We overemphasize the importance of the substantive skill and underemphasize enduring human skills." Academic and business institutions have tended to view work and education in technical, rational, quantitative terms, much like programming computers require instructions. According to Participant 4, institutions are just beginning to understand the value and criticality of soft skills in human development. Participant 4 emphasized, "Much of what we use around learning competencies and performance in work is highly mechanistic."

Participant 1 claimed that organizational cultures seem to prioritize performance above personal growth. Similarly, universities value students' academic performance over their personal development. Participant 1 further contends that even when faculty and employers teach or emphasize relationship management, it is usually in the context of improving efficiency rather than empathy. Participant 4 supported this perspective: "We handicap ourselves or hold ourselves back or put ourselves in a box because so much of

our thinking about educational competencies and skills assume there's a primacy of the rational over social and emotional intelligence." Participant 4 claimed that there is no disconnect between our cognitive side and our emotional side: "our quantitative intelligence and our social intelligence are deeply interwoven." One does not have primacy over the over. Both need to be fostered and developed in our educational and work contexts.

Participant 6 asserted that "part of the tension of teaching professional skills is that students are so hardwired to get it right and get a good grade." The prevailing academic emphasis is that grades reflect success, knowledge, and accomplishment; students are, therefore, inclined to approach soft skills learning not as a process of personal and emotional development but as a process of getting a high score. As reiterated by Participant 3, "There's so much of a focus with teaching to the test…and there's very little focus on personal skills." Additionally, Participant 1 put forward that "we created a system for rating teachers that does not actually rate on the most important things, [so] we have faculty teaching to a test, so that [students] get high scores…and faculty gets good ratings."

The models that educational and business institutions have tended to adopt, according to Participant 4, have focused on developing humans for stable, scalable, efficient productivity. Assessments, for example, as stated by Participant 6, have been "built around knowledge and content…[and] not built around how well [students] collaborate or problem-solve." Participant 2 reiterated that even when self-assessing themselves, some students do not provide an authentic response but respond in an attempt

to get a better grade. But, as Participant 3 stated, “At the end of the day, you can get a good grade and not learn anything. Participant 6 indicated that the current grading system may not meaningfully reflect students' true development or reflect what they can do at work or how they will respond to challenges they face in the workplace.

Respond to Shifts in Complex Career Pathways. According to Participant 4, our educational and work views of competencies, to some degree, created systems that were designed for and may have worked in the past. The current system was designed to create a version of factory workers with single, stable jobs who could follow directions in an economy based on highly scalable and efficient ways of production. However, our concept of career has evolved, and, as argued by Participant 4, our “view what is a job and career is changing dramatically. We're moving from the notion of static jobs and linear careers to increasingly unstructured jobs in years on multiple career paths in the same or different organizations.” As explained by Participant 4, the education system that used to be relevant to earlier societal, economic, business, and labor needs is no longer relevant “relative to what individuals, families, communities, businesses, and governments need in a world where the output is very different.” The current systems are not suited to the lives of employees who will have a portfolio of jobs and multiple chapters in their careers that morph and move in different directions. As Participant 4 contended, the “three-box model of learn-work-retire” is no longer an adequate way to think about professional life as individuals are constantly reinventing themselves and their careers.

Preparing individuals for this complexity requires institutions to rethink and reframe their educational priorities. Institutions need to reconsider what a job is and what a career is and what educational strategies support a multi-chapter portfolio of non-linear careers. In this context, Participant 4 stated, “we need to deeply review the question—what is the role of universal education, pre-K through14? What are the objectives? What are we trying to accomplish with education? What educational strategies and institutions do we need now?” If the current system was designed for something else and our lives are different in the 21st century, we need to reimagine the higher education system. Participant 4 framed some considerations:

> What are the fundamentals that people need to know? What is the scaffolding on which to build educational capabilities and competencies? Is that scaffolding—reading, writing, arithmetic, science? Is it humanities and social sciences? Or is it helping people to learn to be autodidacts? Is it building your team capability, social intelligence, collaborative intelligence, your ability to solve problems, your ability to frame questions? And how do we combine a discipline-based scaffolding with an enduring human skills-based scaffolding?

Participant 4 commented that considering these fundamental questions prompts institutions to take a broader look at soft skills development, not as an add-on but as a critical value in promoting "enduring human skills" and developing continuous learners.

Participate in the Larger Learning Ecosystem. Participant 4 posited that learning is integrated into everything we do throughout our lives, and humans are naturally curious learners who prosper in multiple learning contexts. Institutions,

therefore, need to move from the narrow logic which prioritizes technical proficiency and services traditional career education. Instead, as Participant 4 asserted, they need to broaden their consideration of how higher education can serve to develop the whole person with social and EI within the "larger organic learning ecosystem involving civic, social, emotional, ethical, and moral lives." Supporting soft skills development requires institutions to progress beyond insufficient categories of academic and occupational success and embrace ways to foster continuous learning as it occurs in a dynamic ecosystem. According to Participant 4, "Being an ecosystem player in the portfolio of learning, work, and life is different than having a standalone function."

Democratize Learning. Another core value that must be considered in the context of soft skills development is the democratization of learning. Participant 5 stated that, typically, soft skills training has been primarily available to executives and leaders of organizations because of constraints of cost and scalability. However, Participant 5 argued that soft skills training should be designed, standardized, customized, and disseminated to meet the needs of "different types of learners with different personas." The widening gap in soft skills should, therefore, be addressed within a larger context of considering the implications of values such as democratization, inclusivity, and accessibility. According to Participant 7, "new majority learners, who constitute 60% percent of individuals for whom college was not originally designed," need to have access to training and opportunities for upskilling to encourage full participation in the economy.

Value the Relevance of Soft Skills

Promote the Relevance of Soft Skills. Participants shared that students are not taught the relevance of softs skills in their future work context. Without establishing relevance, students tend to disconnect from learning since they do not see the meaning and professional value of soft skills. Based on the experience of Participant 6, students' feedback ranged from "are you kidding me?" to just "check a box" because they considered a class in communication to be a "joke class." Participant 3 took for granted that students saw the relevance of soft skills:

> I spend quite a bit of time selling my own content. A lot of students' attitudes were—why do we have this class? This resistance is frustrating because you see it particularly from people who are definitely not as good in soft skills as they think they are.

Participant 1, who taught a strategy class, saw a change in students' engagement when she made soft skills germane to their personal life:

> I say to the students—we all use strategy in our personal life. Have you ever applied for a job? Have you ever moved cross country? Have you ever tried to lose 20 pounds? You use strategy to do that. And students were becoming more engaged, and their approach to the class was very different from other classes.

For learners to engage fully in soft skills training, they must perceive the immediate and future benefits.

Promote a Culture of Empowerment. A soft skill being taught is often contextualized to a particular role rather than to the empowerment of the individual. Soft

skills, by nature, require not just sharing knowledge but empowering people. Participant 1 contended that some organizations have been willing to accept “less than stellar communications” because the culture of those organizations does not value empowering employees. The key premise Participant 1 asserted is that what should drive soft skills training is creating a culture of empowerment: “I think the issue isn't what we're teaching students—it’s what we're teaching business leaders how to empower students.”

COVID-19 Pandemic Has Changed Priorities. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions have faced various disruptions. Soft skills have become increasingly important as employees are being asked to improvise and be flexible during unpredictable and fluctuating conditions at work. Participant 7 noticed during an engagement with employers that the soft skills required in the workplace are different than before the pandemic:

> What I have seen is a little bit of a shift from our employers in terms of what they are asking for...It used to be communications, critical thinking, collaboration. Those three Cs were the top. And now we've seen resilience and empathy make a rise.

Participant 7 indicated that soft skills are more crucial when people are in a crisis. Participant 2 confirmed that the pandemic has amplified the demand for other soft skills such as “time and stress management, flexibility, the ability to negotiate and compromise, humility, listening, not coming in thinking that you have all the answers, resilience, being able to bounce back from challenging situations.”

Restrictions to physical and social interactions have brought to the forefront students' mental well-being and EI development. Participant 2 expressed such a concern: “I'm very worried about our lack of social interactions that are more organic with people sitting in the same room that can pick up on non-verbal cues and see someone's facial expression.” Furthermore, according to Participant 8, the pandemic has also challenged institutions to discover how to restructure work and education to meet changing lifestyles. For example, universities that were not interested in online learning began to invest resources into online education not only for classes but for community development.

Be Accountable to Students and Employers for Soft Skills

Be Accountable for Soft Skill Development. According to Participant 1, universities are not held accountable for soft skills development because they expect the academic rigor at universities will filter out those students who are not sufficiently competent for that level. As Participant 1 stated, “[Students] get into college, and college really doesn't care. You're either going to make it or you're not. And if you don't make it, chances are, you're going to leave college.” Those who are proficient will survive, as universities favor the strong over the weak. Participant 1 underscored, “They don't hold people accountable for these soft skills because of the drops in enrollment.”

Additionally, employers do not want to lose employees despite their lack of soft skills because of costs in terms of money and effort to hire other employees. As Participant 1 asserted, “Employers see this mass exodus of professionals, and they don't

want to fire people because then they've got to incur the cost of replacing them." This lack of accountability perpetuates low standards of soft skills among employees.

Theme 2: Leadership and Stakeholder Engagement to Support Soft Skills Development

Participant 4 rationalized that creating an institutional culture and value system that supports soft skills development requires deliberate effort, design, and prioritization from leaders. Leaders need to engage a community of internal and external stakeholders to participate and buy into the goals and processes involved in supporting soft skills. Participant 8 claimed, "I know how universities work. The change happens slowly within. Ideally, it would need a robust team with a solid budget and leadership." Leaders would need to understand the needs of faculty, employers, and students, incentivize and coordinate engagement among these groups, and support training where needed. Participant 4 also put forward, "I don't think it happens organically. I don't think it's going to just sort of spring up."

Use the COVID-19 Pandemic as an Opportunity for Change.

COVID-19 provides an opportunity for leaders to carry out changes. Participant 4 observed, "The disruptions enabled industries, including education, to do things many thought were not possible." Some students engaged in experiential learning activities have benefited from practices put in place during COVID-19. Participant 8 also added, "These projects have been remote, and…it's provided students with community…provided clients with solutions to their problems…and has given our international and domestic students experiences to put on their resumes, even when

people were not hiring." The pandemic can be an opportunity for leaders to pivot and re-evaluate institutional priorities as they listen to the needs of stakeholders.

Understand Stakeholder Needs

Understand the Language of Employers. A number of participants indicated that despite engaging employers, career coaches, and recruiters to understand the needs of employers, teachers are not always clear what these needs are or how to convert these requirements into the classroom.

Participant 7 expressed this challenge:

> I think the gap exists for two big reasons—one on the supply side and one on the demand side. On the demand side of the employers—the way they articulate the soft skills they need are often reflected in ways that are either hard to measure, hard to identify off a resume, or hard to narrow, and faculty don't know what employers mean by—'attention to detail' or 'resilience,' 'initiative,' 'self-starter' often found on a job description.

Often, employers do not articulate their needs clearly, and clarifying their needs requires further dialogue and engagement. Participant 3 described a process of engagement with employers during brainstorming sessions:

> They wanted us to prepare students to work in diverse work environments. And when we teased that out further, it was less about what we might think of, like ethnic diversity or racial diversity. It turned out to be more like generational diversity because a problem that they see is that college-educated students who are younger get hired and are managing older employees, and they don't know

> how to navigate those differences. But I do not know how to teach that in the classroom. I could do a simulation that might get at it.

Educators have to deconstruct a soft skill into componential competencies and translate those competencies into learning outcomes that can be addressed and assessed in the classroom. According to Participant 7, technical skills, such as mathematics and coding, can be broken into subcompetencies and learning outcomes, but educators "have struggled to measure resilience or creative problem solving."

Align to Workplace Expectations and Long-Term Career Demands. Many participants spoke about the need for soft skills to be successful in the workplace. Participant 5 stated, "The number one skill to being a successful consultant is soft skills. You need to be able to solve problems, manage teams, communicate to a client, work in stressful situations, work with people's personalities." Some employees are technical specialists and struggle in these areas. Participant 4 added, "In human capital consulting, enduring human skills are a major part of what we recruit for and develop. What makes a great consultant is the ability to communicate, work with teams, lead teams, but play different roles on teams." Teaching soft skills is important in the context of students' career progression.

Participant 4 asserted that, given this pervasive need for employees with soft skills, faculty should be aware of and teach according to the standards expected at places of employment. Recruitment functions as a market signal for universities on what skills to prioritize and develop. Participant 1 acknowledged, "My expectation is to teach

students to be successful in your current role and make you more competitive for future roles. What do you need to do to be successful today and to get that next job you want?"

Teaching a combination of technical skills and soft skills has become more valuable in light of how individuals progress through their careers, with many employees moving through multiple careers in shorter timeframes in several organizations in different industries. As such, as Participant 4 stated, students need to be taught how to navigate through change.

Listen to Students' Needs. The soft skills gap is experienced directly by students. They are impacted by how universities provide and assess soft skills training. They are challenged by the requirements of employers. They have to navigate a career marketspace that places demands on them. Furthermore, their demographics play a role in shaping them, with many of them being millennials and, as Participant 7 described, "new majority learners." It is, therefore, vital for leaders to understand students. Participant 6 insisted, "If we don't meet students where they're at, it's just not going to work." Participant 8 echoed, "I really listen closely to the needs of the student, and that is why these programs have been really successful in that it's speaking to them directly."

Participant 8, for example, spoke about students' expressed need for opportunities for practice and application: "I have a passion for supporting our students. I know that it's the employers they want most—it's the experts out on the field they want most." Faculty also need to adapt their approaches to meet student needs. Participant 8 insisted, "We'd like all faculty to be more experiential because students are screaming out for it."

Additionally, as Participant 6 pointed out, student voices on advisory boards may help leaders understand students' perspectives and experiences.

Incentivize and Promote Internal and External Stakeholder Engagement

Participant 7 indicated that the soft skills gap exists because of issues on the supply side (higher education) and the demand side (employers). These stakeholders need to be brought together to understand the "competencies that make up soft skills…what are the actual skills that could be taught or asked for by an employer?" However, enabling stakeholder engagement can be challenging. As Participant 8 described, "Every single one of those universities struggles with employer engagement or engagement of these companies in order to support our students." Leaders, according to Participant 2, therefore, need to incentivize faculty and employers to translate the value of soft skills into initiatives that promote soft skills development.

On the supply side, as Participant 3 pointed out, getting faculty involvement is "hard because you're trying to corral a bunch of different faculty from a bunch of different disciplines…getting everyone to reflect meaningfully and in a synergistic way." Some faculty may not connect their classes to employer needs. Participant 8 added, "I don't know that faculty actually get that, but I think it's very important when you're thinking about overall curriculum design to see that you're meeting employers' needs." Participant 5 believed that faculty could help scale the use of emerging technology that supports soft skill development in the classroom so students have greater opportunities to practice applying soft skills.

On the demand side, as Participant 7 discussed, employers' articulation of soft skills needed in the workplace tends to be difficult to measure, vague to capture on a resume, and generic. Terms often used on job descriptions, such as attention to detail, resilience, and initiative, may be difficult for educators to codify in a program (learning objectives), teach (learning strategies), or assess (tools and artifacts). Participant 7 used a mapping exercise to engage employers and college designers to understand employers' perspectives on what skills are needed for particular job roles in high demand—"What absolutely needs to be in this pathway for you to be excited to hire these people?" Then they deconstruct and define each skill into subcompetencies and create a learning pathway or a micro-pathway for each role that will satisfy both college designers and employers.

Participant 8 spoke about the value of experiential learning to leverage the mutual interests of students and employers. Because student consulting work is a free service, employers "really line up outside the door" for students to whom they offer work experience and sometimes jobs. Employers benefit from the contributions of students' pro bono work, and they can hire talent whom they have vetted, trained, observed, and integrated into their company. However, some employers are hesitant to engage in experiential learning if the outcomes they hope for are not clear or expected to be achieved. Additionally, as Participant 8 noted, creating an experiential learning program requires the "Dean and the leadership that falls underneath the Dean to always champion and fully support this experiential initiative."

Participant 3 added that employers can also be incentivized to offer "long-term investment—scholarships, mentoring, volunteering to be part of these students' networks." Additionally, participants said that employers can engage universities through recruiting, alumni interactions, adjunct teaching, coaching, academic projects, career services, advisory boards, and experiential consulting work.

Support Training

While leaders need to be spearheading institutional changes to promote soft skills, faculty members need to be fully invested in the necessary change processes. Participant 1 posited, "I think it has to be top-down and bottom-up to make the change and equip them with the tools they need to empower others." Leaders need to ensure that faculty members are trained in learning tools that support soft skill development as well as how to embody soft skills themselves so that students and administrators have professional patterns and standards to follow and are aware of expectations. Participant 1 advocated, "We need to train faculty on how to help them develop their staff. We need to better look at what we're willing to accept." Often, faculty members do not exemplify soft skills themselves. Participant 1 also shared, "[Students] have been in this program for 2 years, and I'm the first faculty member that gives out my phone number or meets with them via zoom."

Theme 3a: Incremental Changes in the Classroom to Support Soft Skills Development

Many initiatives that support soft skill growth in the classroom should be utilized or strengthened. Participants recommended some in-class approaches and tools.

Additionally, they highlighted that creating the right environment and relationships in the class was vital to fostering soft skills development.

Create a Safe and Equitable Environment for Soft Skill Development

Soft skill development, according to Participant 2, requires open dialogue, vulnerability, willingness to share areas for growth, and willingness to change in an environment where one should not expect negative repercussions. Participant 5 gave an example of a training scenario for diversity and inclusion or sexual harassment, which employees typically are required to take:

> You sit in the classroom, watch some videos, and the teacher lectures and asks questions. Any executive or employee with any self-awareness says absolutely nothing—because it's not safe. If I disagree with anybody and express a different point of view, and it's not the correct point of view, you create conflict. If it's not managed appropriately, it could be the end of your career. But if you say absolutely nothing, you're completely safe—nothing ever happens.

Students and employees would not fully contribute in an environment that can potentially harm or embarrass them. Participant 2 explained that soft skill development requires " a certain level of courage" as individuals must identify where they need help and growth.

Furthermore, as Participant 3 affirmed, faculty need to create an equitable environment for soft skills development, given that students are at different stages of development, have different needs and goals, and grow at their own pace. Because students come into the class with different proficiencies in soft skills, the question Participant 6 asked, "Are we trying to have everyone reach a certain bar, or are we

acknowledging the variety of baselines and nudging them along the continuum?" For Participant 6, the goal is "to have everyone increase their skillset regardless of their baseline because not everyone is going to meet the standard." According to Participant 3, a further challenge faculty face is differentiating the instruction and assessments based on students' proficiency and needs.

Participant 5 advocated for VR tools as a safe option. According to Participant 5, based on various studies on VR training, respondents have stated they feel they can be authentic and respond truthfully without fear of being judged or coming into conflict with others. They can push the boundaries in their responses and understand the implications of their responses.

Provide Structured Support

Students also need structured support. Participant 1 put forward, "Everybody should have a mentor. Your mentor should be that person who's in that role you aspire to, and you can watch them and ask them what made them successful...I think coaching is invaluable." Many students may not have adequate modeling of soft skills. As Participant 6 stated, "We have many first-generation students who haven't necessarily had some modeling of some of these soft skills."

Mentorship and coaching inspire growth, provide models and patterns for development, and allow for objective assessment and feedback of students and employees. Participant 1 elaborated, "A coach helps you identify some areas to work on…Having someone actually see the emails you write or be with you at a meeting that you're running so you can get objective feedback—that's so helpful." Participant 2 also

acknowledged that coaches provide a ”higher level of expertise” and significant interactive learning opportunities for students, such as networking, but coaching is usually limited by constraints of time and availability.

Intentionally Teach and Assess EI and Soft Skills

Explicitly Incorporate Learning Strategies That Support EI and Soft Skills Development. Faculty need to explicitly teach students and employees EI and soft skills. Participant 6 thought that whatever that soft skill is, “the most effective approach is to target it and have assessments and activities wrapped around it. An intellectual exercise reading an article about emotional intelligence does not change behavior. That is, without a doubt, the least effective approach.”

Faculty should not only focus on technical skills or completion of a project but also hone in on the soft skills used and identify ideas for growth. Participant 2 stated, “I think it’s being explicit that teamwork is a learning outcome in and of itself.” According to Participant 7, students need to identify the soft skills they are developing throughout their program and be able to describe their proficiency in those soft skills to others:

> Faculty are not calling [the soft skills] out in a way that the learner could then demonstrate that they have that skill on their resume or that they could even talk about it in an interview. So, if the employer asked, ‘Tell me about your resilience skills,” they probably wouldn't choose anything related to school or ‘Tell me about your critical thinking skills,” I think a lot of learners wouldn't know what to say.

Having a focused and intentional strategy on a specific soft skill allows for adequate devotion to improving that soft skill. For example, Participant 6 had students reflect on "perspective-taking" when they considered how their perspectives on their peers at the beginning of the semester changed by the end. Students recalled the assumptions and experiences that guided them. Participant 6 reasoned, “We process as a group so that they appreciate their self-awareness and self-regulation.”

Address Assessment Challenges. Assessments are a significant part of soft skills development. Participants 2, 3, and 8 identified various assessments they used. These included goal setting and SMART goals; NEO Personality Inventory; ITP Metrics; assessments on five personality dimensions; DISC assessment; Strengths Finder; StrengthsQuest; and 360-degree reviews. They also noted that evaluations are often conducted at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester. They include self-evaluations, self-reflection, peer evaluations, team reflections, coaching evaluations, and capstone assessments.

Participant 3 also referred to the use of portfolios that enable faculty to track students' development throughout their program. The long-term record is more appropriate for monitoring soft skill growth. Additionally, as Participant 5 pointed out, in VR simulations, learners are given assessments at three points: prior to their VR training for a baseline assessment, immediately after their training to understand how much they learned during the simulation, and then 30 days after to determine how much they retained in the short-term.

However, despite the use of assessments, a number of challenges were brought up by participants:

- Based on the experiences of Participant 3, faculty are not often aware of validated, reliable, scientific, free soft skills assessments available for their use. For Participant 6, using “unscientific assessments…is simply a jumping-off point…I look for things that are free on the internet that give quick and dirty temperature checks.”
- With large classes, faculty find it difficult to assess students' soft skills. Participant 3 acknowledged, “It’s hard to tease out whether or not people have soft skills or not, and so it's hard to know whether or not you teach them.”
- Participant 6 observed that with faculty teaching to the test, assessing soft skills is not a common practice. Furthermore, according to Participant 3, in soft skills evaluations, students’ responses “are so superficial it's clear that students are just trying to get the grade.”
- Participant 3 noted that faculty are challenged with creating assessments that are fair to all students, given that students are at different stages of development, have different learning needs and goals, and grow emotionally at their own pace.
- Soft skills assessments do not really assess authentic growth in soft skills given the short duration of courses because, according to Participant 3, “learning is going to take place over a much longer timeframe.”

- Participant 3 observed that students are not inclined to put effort into developing their soft skills unless a grade is attached to the process.
- Some soft skills are difficult to assess, according to Participant 6. Soft skills such as risk-taking and assertive communication, which demonstrate a growth mindset, may incur failing and can be penalized in traditional assessments.

Build Self-Awareness Into Learning Strategies. Self-awareness is a key aspect of EI. Many participants specifically called out the lack of self-awareness, particularly among millennials, as a hindrance to developing self-awareness. Participants said that faculty need to foster self-awareness in their learning activities for any soft skills activities to yield behavioral change in students. Participant 3 stated, "The biggest gap I see really starts with self-awareness." Participant 3 further stated,

> If [students are] not self-aware, then basically you cannot give them feedback. And any feedback that you give them, they just deflect…Some are overconfident in their own abilities and don't have that humility and self-awareness. I do think it stunts your ability to move forward in the workplace. And you see people get stuck in their careers because they're not able to take feedback effectively.

Participant 2 reiterated this thought: "If you're not open to hearing, there's just no way you can improve."

Based on the experience of Participant 2, lack of self-awareness among students can be manifest as "difficulty listening" and wanting "positive affirmations…and validation." Participant 3 noticed that students tended not to analyze their own behavior, were unaware when they needed help, and were inclined to "blame other people for any

deficiencies." Participant 6 felt that students came to class with their "perspectives already baked" and were resistant to change, while Participant 5 spoke about students' general lack of empathy. Participants 2 and 5 posited that the cause of this lack of self-awareness may be the social media culture with its drive to seek attention and ascribe value and reward with likes and notifications, as well as the ability to hide behind a virtual persona when interacting with others.

Build Self-Reflection Into Learning Strategies. Many of the participants spoke about the value of self-reflection in developing soft skills. Participant 3 posited, "When you self-reflect, you're trying new behaviors." Self-reflection is where the growth of EI and self-awareness takes place. Participant 6 also affirmed, "Having people have an opportunity to reflect on a skill they're targeting is the way to show actual progress." Participants 2 and 3 spoke about their use of Kolb's learning cycle, which includes reflecting: concrete experience–reflect–conceptualize–experiment. Participant 6 claimed, "If you don't have a real meaningful, complex experience, then reflection doesn't work." Participant 7 spoke about the pedagogy of the micro-credentialing process, which involves reflecting—"learn about the skill, practice, reflect, and repeat in a sort of a cycle." Self-reflection needs to be deliberately built into the learning experience as a requisite for soft skill development.

Adapt Soft Skills Development Strategies for Different Contexts. Participant 2 recommended that when implementing soft skills initiatives in classrooms, faculty members should be flexible and adapt their teaching methods and strategies to changing classroom contexts and challenges:

> The same professor who uses the same strategies can have a really wonderful experience in terms of students' teamwork, and that same professor has a horrible experience the next semester. So, adaptation is probably one of the most important things to keep in mind in teaching these soft skills—not one strategy is going to work for everyone.

Students learn in different ways, and group dynamics in a class can impact outcomes.

Utilize Emerging Technology for Immersive Experiences. According to Participant 5, VR technology offers promise in soft skills development. In discussing the research supporting the effectiveness of VR technology in the training of soft skills, Participant 5 stated that "the upper 70% range of people had what we call 'aha' moments—now I understand more effectively why I shouldn't be doing it that way. It's those types of 'aha' moments that make the connections and help change behavior." As Participant 5 described, VR technology creates immersive simulations and enables repeated practice without learners getting distracted. Scenarios can be generated using branch narratives. Program designers can craft an interactive script simulating real life, creating rich and informative dialogue but in a way that is relatable and realistic. As Participant 5 stated, learners can practice "without fear of repercussion" and explore the implications of their responses to various scenarios.

Participant 5 viewed VR technology as another modality in a trainers' tool chest and is not a replacement for current training modalities. It is an additional tool that faculty can offer to students. VR technology is expected to become more commonplace, powerful, and versatile. Participant 5 was expectant that "within 5 years, every college

student will have some type of headset, be it a VR headset or an AR headset, just like they have their smartphone today, and they'll be walking around campuses." Participant 5 underscored the challenge for faculty: "Now's the time to start thinking about how to excite students' experiences."

Theme 3b: Incremental Changes Outside the Classroom to Support Soft Skills Development

In addition to offering in-class processes that support students' soft skills edification, educators also can introduce or strengthen students' application and practice of soft skills outside the classroom through experiential learning. Participant 2 highlighted, "Developing soft skills involves real experiences that are not just within the bounds of the classroom—something that interacts with the real world and that you are learning from."

Promote the Practice and Application of Soft Skills

Promote Experiential Learning. Many participants spoke of the positive impact of experiential learning on students' soft skill development. Experiential learning fills the need for tangible engagement that classroom settings cannot fulfill and, according to Participant 8, is considered "critical" to students' development. As described by Participants 2, 5, and 8, experiential learning involves "real client[s], real deliverables," "conversations in the real world," and "real meaningful, complex experience." Students are placed in "ambiguous, complex experiences…to engage within a safe setting" and exposed to scenarios they will face in their future work context. Participant 8 outlined, "We're providing co-curricular experiential learning that gives the students the tools and

skills they need in a particular industry to be successful on day one upon hire." Participant 8 also affirmed that students are "creating things that are really relevant and don't sit on a shelf."

Businesses often provide these experiential opportunities. Participant 8 shared about the experience of students who signed up for pro bono consulting over a few months with clients, creating deliverables with a team of students. They learned how to be consultants and gain deeper knowledge about a particular industry and processes and skills within that industry. Their experience is tracked by an engagement manager. Students get no credit because their work is not attached to a class, and they get no stipend, but, as observed by Participant 8, students are "are very dedicated and committed to it, and the demand is high because students know that they're getting the experience they need." Employers also benefit from these projects. Participant 8 affirmed, "The feedback I get is hugely positive. It is off the charts…testimonial after testimonial from these companies."

For several participants involved in experiential learning, they adopted Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Participants 2 and 3 emphasized the central role of self-reflection in one's experience because self-reflection allows for meaningful insights and connections to be made and activates one's growth.

Create Opportunities for Applying Soft Skills. Several participants spoke about how relying solely on lecturing about soft skills such as teamwork or even placing students to work on teams without proper reinforcement and reflective discussions are ineffective. According to Participant 5, students need ample opportunity and practice to

"interact with human beings, to become aware, read their body language, and understand how they're feeling and be empathetic." As Participant 1 reasoned, students learn by application. Participant 8 also contended, "They're learning theory. They're learning a lot about a particular industry, but they actually need to practice it in more."

Participants mentioned a number of activities that faculty provide, both inside and outside the classroom, to encourage practical application: simulations, use cases, VR technology, internships, team projects, escape rooms, live mock interviews, demonstration projects, personal challenges, and a teach-back method:

- Teach back— Participant 1 used a teach-back process in which students "apply what they learn in training, such as through a 'teach back' program where they share what they learned and can get opportunities to lead projects and meetings."
- Internships— Participant 2 supported the use of "internships for credit" that include classes on EI and built-in reflections to support soft skill development.
- Team projects— Participant 6 described, "I use their team experience as a mini-lab for them to work through…how to solicit input and give feedback."
- Escape rooms—In escape rooms, students must deal with ambiguity, collaborate, and problem-solve. Participant 6 claimed, "I think dealing with ambiguity is such an important skill that the academic environment just does not give that opportunity for many students to deal with that successfully."

- Personal challenges— Participant 1 shared, "At the end of every semester, I give them a personal challenge—Think of one activity you can do in the next 30 days to apply what you learned or you need more growth in."
- Demonstration projects— Participant 7 recommended that faculty provide "proving grounds…demonstration projects where you can practice and demonstrate that you can do the skill, but in small bites as opposed to vague projects."
- Virtual reality— Participant 5 underscored, "[VR] gives you that opportunity to practice…you're going to want to try it out for yourself, and if you can't do it with your peers…you could do interaction practice."

According to Participant 6, to promote experiential and action-oriented learning outside the class is not to discard traditional approaches such as lecturing. An effective lecture on ethical decision-making, for example, may include examining different ethical models and blind spots, identifying the skills and the attitudes associated with ethical decision-making, and having students slot typical business behavior on an ethical continuum. These are useful activities in class that can work hand-in-hand with outside activities.

Theme 4: Programmatic and Curricular Changes to Support Soft Skill Development

According to participants, the soft skills gap can be addressed in several ways: changing institutional values and culture (Theme 1); mobilizing internal and external stakeholders through leadership efforts (Theme 2); and introducing tools and programs

incrementally inside and outside the classroom which support soft skills development (Themes 3a and 3b). Theme 4 captures participants' perspectives on how soft skills can be improved by pursuing programmatic and curricular changes. These include adopting competency-based learning and learning outcomes that foster soft skills development, planning at departmental and programmatic levels, and scaling soft skills development through the institution.

Adopt Competency-Based Learning to Promote Soft Skills Development

Translate Soft Skills Into Learning Outcomes. Participant 7 discussed the relevance of competency-based learning to soft skills development. A competency-based approach translates large, difficult-to-define soft skills into smaller, componential, more defined parts that can be taught and assessed. As described by Participant 7, "We break down those topics into subcompetencies that are easier to understand—you break oral communication down into things like active listening, appropriate tone, and word choice." Technical skills, such as in the hard sciences and software programming, have practical, often sequential paths of development. In contrast, a soft skill, such as resilience, is more nuanced and multi-dimensional, making it more difficult to teach and assess. This is why, as Participant 7 stated, soft skills are "probably one of the last frontiers of converting a learning outcomes-based curriculum to a competency-based curriculum.".

Adopt a Micro-Credential / Micro-Pathways Approach. Participant 7 described how a competency-based approach supports soft skills development at a programmatic level. Competency-based learning focuses on soft skills at the

subcompetency level. Mastering several subcompetencies of a soft skill is required to earn a micro-credential in the form of a digital badge. With this approach, according to Participant 4, "students are given responsibility for their soft skill development, but in a guided framework." Furthermore, badges can be shared as proof of mastery on a resume or interview.

Many community colleges and workforce-based organizations offer micro-credentials as standalone courses. These standalone courses are part of a larger micro-pathway, often designed by educators and employers together. A micro-pathway defines a program based on a set of competencies a student needs to master for a high-demand job. A micro-pathway includes two or more micro-credentials that add up to a sub-degree credential. To ensure that soft skills are included in shorter-term certificate training, Participant 7 stated that colleges are often required to include at least one credential for soft skills in a micro-pathway. The micro-credentialing curriculum can also be incorporated into existing courses and programs.

Competency-based learning embraces a learn-by-doing approach, appropriate for soft skills development. Participant 7 explained that "the pedagogy is—learn about the skill, practice, reflect, and repeat in a sort of cycle." Subcompetencies are assessed using performance-based activities called "proving grounds." These are demonstration projects through which students can practice and demonstrate soft skills.

Promote Continuity Throughout Program Planning. Participants shared that traditional programs lack continuity in reinforcing soft skills. Soft skill development often requires long-term growth and may not become evident in a short semester.

Participant 3 claimed, “Sometimes the learning and the realizations aren't going to happen…until a year or 2 years later…Here are 14 weeks to go teach...but in reality, sometimes the learning is going to take place over a much longer timeframe. As Participant 6 shared, “This is a 15-week course, and these skills are based on a lifetime of experience, academically, socially, and vocationally.” As such, Participant 6 viewed the work as one of “planting seeds” and having to “nudge [students] along the continuum.”

To foster sustained and coherent focus on soft skills development, Participant 2 encouraged goal-setting—“setting goals…doing check-ins, getting feedback…You need at the front end to have some goals.” Participant 3 also affirmed the use of goal setting: “they set their SMART goals…so I teach in that framework of their own goals…quarterly and yearly goal setting…so every year you're reflecting on your goals [and] quarterly reviewing those. Participant 3 also has students create portfolios to preserve artifacts of their soft skills journey and complete journaling exercises to capture their self-reflections on their experiences and growth.

In this context of providing continuous support for students, Participant 7 suggested developing micro-pathways that provide a clear plan for students’ development based on skills they need for specific jobs. Required soft skills are mapped out, and students have to master subcompetencies in each soft skill. Programs are broken into units of learning that can be part of a certificate or degree. According to Participant 7, this approach allows for continuous and focused development of soft skills and other competencies throughout one’s program.

Scale Soft Skill Development Through Emerging Technology

Participants also addressed the question of how soft skill development could be scaled throughout programs. In this context, Participant 5 spoke about how VR and AR technology could be leveraged and be cost-effective. A constraint that a classroom setting often imposes on students' soft skills development is that it does not always provide a safe environment for students to be open and vulnerable when sharing areas of weakness or goals for personal growth. Participant 5 argued that VR tools remove that barrier and allow students to practice and take risks in a safe space.

Participant 5 described that through VR technology, soft skill training is scalable through a "no code way" of building a simulation within two weeks. Through "no code building," software developers are not needed to build programs. Faculty can choose from various avatars which represent various demographics and characteristics (age, race, ethnicity, physical appearance, voice, sex) which interact with the learners. Through a branch narrative process, various scenarios are mapped out with multiple conversations, questions, and responses. Furthermore, a cognitive agent within a VR simulation can serve as a student's coach during training. According to Participant 5, through these various interactions, learners engage in simulated conditions that enable them to explore, practice, and develop their soft skills. The process of developing and implementing VR programs is, therefore, not a barrier.

Participant 5 contended that cost is also no longer a major obstacle to scaling, as desktops and browser windows can be used instead of headsets. Additionally, VR technology is expected to become as ubiquitous as smartphones. The promotion of VR

technology can be harnessed when faculty realize that this technology facilitates the democratization and widespread distribution of training and content as students and small groups have opportunities to practice their soft skills. As Participant 5 reiterated, “Now's the time to start thinking about how do I do this? How do I use this technology to excite my students’ experiences?”

Discrepant Cases / Nonconfirming Data

After a detailed review of the data, coding, and member checking, I found no discrepant cases or nonconforming data that contradicted other data. No participant provided perspectives that called into question the argument that a soft skills gap exists or that soft skills are capable of being developed within an academic or work environment. No codes needed to be developed, and no analysis was needed to explain any incongruence in the findings.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The strategies and protocol outlined in Chapter 3 to achieve trustworthiness in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were adhered to during the data collection and analysis process. They are outlined in this section.

Credibility

Establishing credibility in this study is imperative to establishing trust in the outcomes. Credibility is the confidence in the accuracy of the research findings. In the case of this study, credibility is based on whether the research findings correctly interpret and draw plausible conclusions from participants’ original views and data (Korstjens &

Moser, 2018). To support the credibility of this research, I followed a number of protocols.

Corroborating Data and Member Checking

As transcripts were completed, I compared each interview transcript with the associated audio recording to ensure all data were precisely captured in the transcripts. Additionally, data collected and ideas that emerged from the interviews were subject to member checking. After each interview, I emailed my preliminary analysis to each participant to review for accuracy. This included initial codes and interpretations. On two occasions, participants gave feedback to clarify statements they made. This process of member checking strengthens the study's credibility, particularly because participants and researchers often look at the data with different eyes (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Furthermore, I trust the veracity of all the participants. They operated in a safe environment, did not have reason to have ulterior motives, and expounded with fluency and reflective thoughtfulness on an issue in which they have knowledge and experience.

Reporting Data That Support Alternative Explanations

A number of responses from participants were perspectives I had not considered or had not come across in detail during the literature analysis, such as the role of competency-based education and micro-credentialing in soft skills development; the value of self-reflection; and the application of emerging technology to support soft skill development. I did not consider these alternative explanations, disconfirming data, or discrepant cases but additional viewpoints, which I then incorporated into my overall analysis.

Saturation

Data saturation was also used to ensure credibility. Data saturation requires that research collection continues until no new themes emerge (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). It implies the requirement to not short circuit the process of accumulating additional data that may impact the study's outcomes. I sampled participants with diverse backgrounds to get a considerable range of perspectives. To test data saturation, I compared the data that emerged from the eighth interview with the data from the previous interviews. The eighth interviewer repeated several ideas and shared similar experiences to earlier participants, but no new codes or themes were evident. I, therefore, concluded that no further sampling was necessary as I did not expect further data that would significantly influence the direction of the study.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the process of critical self-reflection about oneself as a researcher—one's preferences and preconceptions (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). During each stage of the study—proposal development, sampling, before and during the interview process, constructing codes, and deriving interpretations—I reflected on my personal biases and assumptions regarding the processes and outcomes of the study. I examined my own expectations and motivations and how these could affect my research decisions. Two particular predispositions are worth noting. One is the tendency to default to expediency—feeling the need to make quick decisions at each stage to move the study along rather than taking the time to consider decisions carefully. The other is the tendency to desire an idea or interpretation that seems novel and sophisticated to appeal

to originality rather than following the leading of the data. With both of these inclinations, I had to consider the requirements of objectivity, thoroughness, and the standards of credibility to guide me.

Transferability

Transferability is the degree to which the results of this study can be applied to other contexts or settings with other respondents (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In this study, transferability is supported in several ways to enable future readers to compare the findings against their own research and experience. A diverse sample of participants was selected to capture a wide range of perspectives and experiences which may resonate with researchers. Additionally, published research on soft skills that I integrated into the study offers additional contexts and valuable comparisons with which readers could identify. Furthermore, I facilitated the transferability and relevance of this study to other researchers through thick description.

Thick Description

The degree to which researchers can see the relevance of this research to their research context determines how applicable and transferable the findings are to them (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Thick descriptions were included in the study, particularly in the following sections: settings, data collection, data analysis, and results. These include a depiction of the participants involved in the study, their experiences and research in soft skills development, the contexts from which they derived their perspectives on soft skills, and direct quotations about their experiences. Thick descriptions were used to provide a

rich enough set of data and contextual details to enable other researchers to find meaningful applications.

Dependability

The dependability of this study requires several elements to be addressed. First, dependability is the stability of the findings of this study over time. Though this study's findings relied on the perspectives of participants set within changing contexts of work and education, these contexts are not expected to change quickly to invalidate these findings in the near future. Second, the dependability of the study relies on participants' satisfaction that their ideas were accurately apprehended. This issue is addressed by member checks, described earlier. Third, dependability involves the extent to which the findings and interpretation of this study are accurately derived from and supported by the data from the participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This is addressed by sample audit trails.

Audit Trails

A sample of five audit trails in Appendix A demonstrates how they strengthen the dependability of the findings. The samples contain five codes, the interview data from which these codes were derived, and an early analysis of the interview data within each of the five codes. The audit trails make transparent the analytical process during the data analysis stage.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the degree to which the data and interpretations of the findings of this study were confirmed by other researchers (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Through

member checks, described earlier, participants reviewed a summary analysis of their interviews and were able to verify the accuracy of the data they presented. Additionally, when possible, I used participant-generated words and phrases as code descriptors (in vivo) and in reporting results to reflect meaning as directly expressed by the participants. Additionally, the consistency and agreement among all the data shared by the independent participants led to confirmability. The repetition of several data points and themes from these multiple sources showed the study's confirmability (Connelly, 2016).

Summary

After I reviewed the accumulated data, I inductively applied structure to the data by methodically assigning codes, ascribing meaning to the codes, and collating conceptually similar codes under categories. The analysis revealed four major themes.

Universities and businesses need to adjust their culture to more value and prioritize the empowerment and development of students and employees with soft skills relevant to the new demands of life and career development rather than concentrate on hard skills at the expense of soft skills. Attempts to strengthen soft skills development must be undergirded by an institutional ethos that is more accountable for soft skills and promotes their relevance to work and life (Theme 1). Leaders are central to any effort to reduce the soft skills gap. They must advocate for soft skills development and engage faculty, organizations, and students in a more broadened strategic and community endeavor (Theme 2).

Tools, approaches, and structured support that encourage soft skills growth should be intentionally implemented inside and outside the classroom (Theme 3). These include

creating active and experiential learning practices that enable students to apply targeted soft skills in a safe environment and allow for self-reflection. Faculty should also be resourced with assessment and technology tools to support students. Furthermore, programmatic and curricular changes can be adopted to both scale and scaffold soft skill development throughout students' programs and offer cohesive and continuous reinforcement (Theme 4). Competency-based learning is one such program development and mapping tool.

In Chapter 5, I provide an interpretation of the study's findings. I include insights from related literature and apply the conceptual framework to further expound on and provide richer context to the findings. I also revisit the study's limitations and make recommendations for future research. In addition, I suggest implications of the study, including the potential positive social change resulting from the findings.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to discover the underlying factors driving the soft skills gap among business students and employees to determine solutions to this problem. A basic qualitative design was used to investigate the perceptions and experiences of educators and employers regarding soft skills development. In this study, I sought to identify initiatives universities and employers can employ to promote soft skills growth among their students and employees. The need for soft skills has gained heightened importance because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in educational and work settings.

The findings revealed several key solutions that institutions could implement to improve soft skills for students and employees. Soft skills develop within a context of safety, self-awareness, self-reflection, empowerment, continuous reinforcement, intentional focus, accountability, and repeated practice and application. These conditions need to be created both within and outside the classroom. Within the classroom, pedagogical approaches that encourage active, personalized, and targeted learning promote growth in soft skills. Additionally, learning outcomes must be mapped to soft skills requirements that support graduates' career pathways. Outside the classroom, partnerships between universities and employers must be developed to provide learners with experiential learning and mentorship opportunities. Creating the conditions that foster soft skills growth requires leaders to change the traditional institutional value system that prioritizes technical skills over soft skills but now needs to promote whole-person development. In the following sections, I present my interpretation of the findings

and draw on applicable literature on soft skills and the EI conceptual framework to provide further context and amplification to the findings.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this research confirmed the consensus found in the literature related to soft skills development. Furthermore, because the study was conducted in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic when educational institutions and business organizations were undergoing unprecedented changes, this study was able to capture emerging ideas that extend knowledge in this field of soft skills development. I applied multiple analytical perspectives when interpreting the findings:

- Strategic perspective: The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic created a strategic opportunity to initiate change management processes that support soft skills development.
- Systems perspective: Soft skills development can be seen as a learning process that occurs within the larger learning ecosystem.
- Long-term perspective: Soft skills development requires consistent cultivation over a long period within and outside of formal education.
- Holistic development perspective: Soft skills development is effectively supported within the larger framework of whole-person development.
- Program development perspective: Higher education curriculum and programs may need to be redesigned to more ably support students' mastery of soft skills.

- Pedagogical perspective: Teaching approaches and tools that support the growth of soft skills need to be introduced or more intentionally applied within the learning experience.
- Technology perspective: The application of new learning technologies can provide rich opportunities for scaling soft skills development.
- Learners' perspective: Learners, whether they are millennials or Generation Z students, have certain needs and challenges that must be considered when creating learning experiences that support their soft skills development.
- EI perspective: Soft skills development is undergirded by EI growth. Initiatives that claim to support soft skills growth should be evaluated through the lens of EI.

Strategic Perspective: Convert COVID-19 Pandemic Challenges Into Strategic Opportunities

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions have had to urgently respond to and change priorities and practices in the face of unprecedented challenges, including social distancing, social frustrations, new customer demands, technological disruptions, and a climate of uncertainty. This study's data affirmed several issues related to soft skills that higher education and businesses face as a consequence of the pandemic:

- Several soft skills are now more urgently needed. These include resilience, flexibility, empathy, humility, listening, and time and stress management.
- The soft skills gap has drawn greater attention across industries because they are more valued and needed.

- The impact of social distancing and less social interaction has brought learners' mental health and EI to the forefront.
- The shift to teaching, training, and working online has challenged institutions to build more capability in virtual environments for training in soft skills.

Developing soft skills is often seen as a countermeasure to physical and psychological distancing. At the same time, skill-building is not a one-time focus or investment for many institutions but a significant long-term strategic investment.

This study's findings point to key practices that support phases of soft skills transformation. They mirror a number of findings in two 2021 McKinsey reports (Billing et al., 2021; Garcia et al., 2021), which surveyed how institutions were acting to close the skills gap in a post-COVID-19 world:

- Assess the soft skills gaps within the institution:
  - Assess the demand for specific soft skills among students and employers.
  - Determine the current supply of specific soft skills: Evaluate how soft skills development is currently being supported in the institution.
- Develop a soft-skills development strategy to ensure students/employers are equipped for workforce challenges:
  - Design a portfolio of initiatives to close the soft skills gap.
  - Design tailored learning journeys and delivery plans for specific roles:
    - Start by training faculty members and business leaders in soft skills.
    - Make soft skills training available to all students and teams.

        - Develop new approaches to engage and motivate learners to change their behaviors. Such tools should allow for practice and self-directed learning to reinforce initial learning.
    - Determine how to engage stakeholders who need to be involved in the process as enablers.
- Reimagine learning infrastructure for providing soft skills training at scale:
    - Initiate supporting structures dedicated to learning, such as mentorship, coaching, and the use of technology.
    - Deliver soft skills transformation at scale across the organization:
        - Develop digital delivery to be able to build skills more rapidly.
    - Implement dynamic tracking of soft skills training and impact.
        - Assess learners' behavior against expectations and rubrics.
        - Prioritize soft skills over technical expertise.
        - Prioritize mastery of competencies and behavioral change over traditional assessments.
        - Ensure that educators and business leaders are accountable for all individuals completing training.

These approaches require institutions to become more skills-based and create a new "workforce operating system" (Cantrell et al., 2021) that ensures that skills keep pace with demand. Underlying these efforts should be a change culture across the institution as the entire institution participates in a program of training to change the institution's culture, vocabulary, and target behaviors.

Systems Perspective: Embrace the Learning Ecosystem

The findings from this study point to the need for institutions to recognize that they are part of what Participant 4 referred to as a larger "learning ecosystem." A learning ecosystem is the interaction of agents (persons, groups, institutions) in which learning is fostered through those interactions. These interactions can occur in the digital space (Walcutt & Schatz, 2019). Educational institutions and businesses need to see themselves as part of a larger environment in which the various agents work together and connect with one another to support learning. Coordination between educators and employers must occur for learners to be continuously supported in soft skills development, inside or outside the classroom or virtually. A learning ecosystem provides a compelling framework to view this interaction among stakeholders.

Another recurring emphasis in the findings is that education needs to evolve beyond its current configuration as a linear and finite pathway that finalizes in a degree. Participating in a learning ecosystem compels institutions to shift away from a time-focused, disconnected, episodic learning model. As agents in the learning ecosystem, universities and workplaces should empower individuals to be self-directed learners who can pursue learning and develop new capabilities throughout their lives.

In this context, higher education needs to be "re-imagined," as per Participant 4, because the learning no longer culminates in a single degree program but rather is a lifetime experience of continual growth. The development of soft skills, therefore, needs to be seen not in a narrow context of adopting new teaching tools in a classroom but in a

larger framework of developing a learning ecosystem that requires organizational coordination, learning across boundaries, and continuous access to learning resources.

Engage Stakeholders in the Learning Ecosystem

One observation from hearing the perspectives of both educators and employers is the different angles of insight they both brought. Faculty participants in the study tended to have a microperspective of soft skills development, focused on classroom teaching and the immediate learning needs of students. Their focus was on the granular view of what is working and not working in their teaching experience. On the other hand, employer participants tended to express a macroperspective, focused on innovation, technology, and design thinking. They expressed a higher-level view of what was needed across the system to support soft skills development. Furthering exchanges between faculty and employers could yield rich perspective-sharing that would help both groups.

For example, faculty participants said that employers were not effective at communicating their business needs. In contrast, employer participants said that faculty were not adequately teaching students the skills needed at the workplace. However, in a few instances, participants shared experiences when formal exchanges between faculty and employers produced what Participant 7 called “eureka for us sitting in those design sessions with the employer and the school” and what Participant 8 claimed as “pages and pages of testimonials from students and employers.” Both groups need to engage more deliberately and meaningfully to better understand their mutual needs and align learning goals with career needs.

Long-Term Perspective: Develop Lifelong Learning

Another finding is that students experience a lack of continuity in the curriculum as soft skills are not reinforced or revisited throughout their program. A lack of sequencing, scaffolding, ordering, and building up of soft skills across each period of learning limits students' overall progress, particularly because soft skills require time and reinforcement to develop. Without the integration and bolstering of soft skills throughout their programs, students are not able to fully develop a more holistic view of their growth. One reason for this, as stated by Marope (2018), is that universities face a "tension between the core function of education, which is to produce a lifelong learner, and the instrumentalist function, which is contextual relevance" (p. 30). The findings affirmed that universities focus on technical skills for immediate functionality on jobs at the expense of developing traits that enable lifelong learning.

As the data confirmed, soft skills development requires continuous learning and support. To promote students' soft skills, higher education leaders would need to prioritize initiatives and values that support a culture of lifelong learning. Teaching students to become continuous learners and what Participant 4 called "autodidacts" enables them to adapt and function in varying work contexts and challenges. With continuous learning as a guiding principle, higher education institutions can seek to connect K-16 formal education with employment experiences as part of a larger continuum of learning throughout life.

The need to develop soft skills with a long-term perspective gains more traction in light of a 2020 Global Risk Report released by the WEF. It highlighted how the COVID-

19 pandemic has forced institutions and learners to become “future literate” (Oliveri, 2020)—to develop the capacity to better imagine and prepare for the future. This perspective underscores the need for soft skills development to be integrated into current learning decisions and strategies to better prepare students and employees for the future.

Holistic Development Perspective: Develop the Whole Person

Another finding from the study is that soft skills development is fundamental to whole-person development. This requires developing cognitive attributes as well as cultivating students’ social, emotional, civic, and ethical development and teaching capabilities such as flexibility and self-regulation to navigate throughout life (Walcutt & Malone, 2019). Focusing on whole-person development contextualizes soft skill initiatives within a larger educational philosophy. It requires universities to design learning experiences and support services that foster both socioemotional and intellectual growth. Whole-person development redefines educational objectives and strategies, broadens the metrics of student success, and places greater value on soft skills and EI.

Program Development Perspective: Design Competency-Based Learning

Another finding from the data is that a competency-based learning approach is being adopted as an effective way for learners to develop and demonstrate mastery of soft skills. A soft skill can be parsed into subskills that constitute that skill; these subskills are then configured as learning outcomes the learner has to demonstrate. Education Design Lab (2022) provided an example of how soft skills can be broken into subcompetencies:

- Resilience has four core subcompetencies—the ability to learn from experience, exhibit flexibility, demonstrate self-awareness, and focus on solutions.

- Empathy has core four subcompetencies—listen actively, validate the feelings and perceptions of others, identify the needs and values of others, and embrace diverse perspectives.

Competency-based learning uses authentic assessments to validate learners' mastery of each soft skill component. The key determinant is not that students completed a program of training in soft skills but that they can demonstrate proficiency in those soft skills. Adopting processes that measure mastery of competencies rather than time spent in a classroom can require significant shifts in an institution's culture, structures, and pedagogy and challenge fundamental shortcomings of traditional approaches.

Another key finding is that competency-based learning enables educators to translate employers' needs into learner pathways using skills maps. According to Education Design Lab (2020), a skills map is a grid consisting of three variables: skills needed in a specific career, the level of mastery needed of each skill, and the translation of those skills to job positions. A traditional curriculum map outlines student learning outcomes. In contrast, a soft skills curriculum map defines which soft skills a learner must master by the end of a program to be ready for a job role and where those skills are taught throughout a program. As such, learners can rate their current level of skills against the proficiency level for a job role and have a roadmap to track their soft skills development over time. This process gives faculty the ability to target and intentionally teach specific skills for specific roles, makes soft skills more visible throughout the program, and helps equip learners for the needs of an evolving workforce.

Additionally, when soft skills are defined, assessed, and mastered, employers no longer need to assume that prospective employees possess the required soft skills for a role based on a traditional diploma. Instead, employers see a record of capabilities applicants have already developed. A competency-based approach, therefore, creates a "common currency" (Stafford, 2019, p. 268) that faculty, learners, and employers can use and understand.

Pedagogical Perspective: Teach and Measure Soft Skills

Two concepts emerged clearly from the data with regard to pedagogical approaches that support soft skill development. The first is that practical application and experiential learning are required for soft skills to mature. The second is that assessing learners' soft skills produces valuable input into one's soft skill development process.

Encourage Practical Application and Experiential Learning

Another major finding that emerged from the data is that practical application and experiential learning provide an effective context for soft skills development. The gap in soft skills has compelled many universities to utilize an experientialist approach in which problem-solving, teamwork, and simulated work challenges are incorporated into the learning process. Through experiential learning, students learn by doing as they engage in hands-on, real-world scenarios and apply concepts they learn in the classroom.

The literature confirms the finding that soft skills development requires the application and performance of what one learns. Hodge et al. (2014) asserted that learners develop different skills through experiential learning: practical skills—learners develop skills and abilities required at a workplace; social skills—learners grow from being

immersed in relationships; personal skills—learners experience internal transformation through introspection and reflecting on their experience.

The findings also support the notion that through experiential learning, softs skills and behaviors can be transferred into business environments. Learning softs skills in an experiential context becomes more meaningful, particularly given the assertion in the literature that students do not always carry competence and knowledge from college to the workplace. Practice in real-world settings can, on the other hand, foster deep learning that transfers across contexts (Walcutt & Schatz, 2019).

Measure Soft Skills

Considering the data from a pedagogical perspective yields another key finding—faculty lack certainty, training, and agreement on using assessments for softs skills development and need support in this area. Despite the central role of assessments in measuring and promoting soft skill growth, faculty members often do not assess, infrequently or inconsistently assess, or use unreliable tests to assess students' soft skills. They often are not aware of valid assessments available, resort to familiar but inadequate assessments, or do not prioritize soft skills assessments. Furthermore, many summative evaluations of students' soft skills often simplify the complexity of soft skills such as creativity. Additionally, assessments often are given to students without regard for context. The difficulties and ambiguities surrounding assessments of soft skills challenge efforts to create effective and verifiable learning experiences that support soft skills development.

Another finding is that soft skills assessments can be used as a means to get students to reflect on their own growth paths. Assessments not only measure mastery. Formative assessments can capture data on learners' strengths and areas that need growth. This data can help inform students' learning and development goals, provide insights into how learners are growing over time, enable instructors to be more responsive and adaptive in their teaching, and suggest learning pathways designed to meet individual needs. Assessments can, therefore, serve the purpose of driving learning.

A further finding is that accreditation protocols can be used to evaluate how programs coherently and consistently address soft skills goals throughout each program. Accreditation requirements place responsibility on the institution to provide evidence of students' learning. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation, which specifies assurance of learning, requires schools of business to demonstrate that learners have achieved learning competencies (Borschbach & Mescon, 2021). Business schools can use program evaluation processes to map the achievement of program-level learning goals specific to soft skills development.

Technology Perspective: Use Emerging Technologies

A finding of this study is that VR and AR technology can support soft skills training. Several factors drive interest in these tools: the need to scale training; their record of success in improving soft skills; their ability to secure an emotionally safe environment where learners can take risks; and the draw of this technology to millennials. As learning environments have become more digital, VR and AR tools are gaining more appeal.

With AR/VR and artificial intelligence, institutions can offer learning experiences to help learners develop their soft skills. Learners can be fully immersed in a virtual scene without distraction and can understand the impact of their responses and actions in a low-risk setting. The opportunity to practice managing their own emotional reaction helps learners (Cook et al., 2020).

The literature supports the value of these emerging technologies to soft skills development. A 2020 PricewaterhouseCoopers study on the effectiveness of VR on soft skills training found that learners in VR courses can be trained up to four times faster, are more confident applying what they are taught, are more emotionally connected to VR content, and remain more focused and less distracted during training. Additionally, VR learning can be more cost-effective at scale (Eckert & Mower, 2020). Other test cases showed measurable improvements in various soft skills, including de-escalation, public speaking, and managing difficult conversations (Cook et al., 2020).

Another finding is that immersive experiences can often provide a better gauge than standardized soft skills assessments on how well learners respond in real-life situations. Learners who score high on multiple-choice tests do not necessarily perform as well in virtual scenarios. Learners may know the right answers in a written test but may not respond effectively in a real situation. Furthermore, VR tests have shown that learners grow in metrics such as retention, confidence, and accuracy of decision-making (Cook et al., 2020). With decreasing costs in VR technology and improvements in the immersive experience, VR learning is expected to accelerate enterprise training and education and be a viable option in an institution’s learning experience toolkit.

Learners' Perspective: Support Millennials and Generation Z Students

A key finding from this study is that millennials and Generation Z students often present challenges to teachers regarding soft skills development in the classroom. Millennials and Generation Z students often lack interest in developing soft skills. Many assume they are already sufficiently well-equipped with soft skills, often do not value the relevance of soft skills to their lives and professional future, and tend to put up barriers to personal change.

Certain attitudes and tendencies lead some faculty to label them as closed and lacking self-awareness and self-reflection. They often lose interest quickly in lectures but are more engaged in collaborating. They expect a great deal of attention, guidance, and flexibility from faculty. Additionally, they are overly optimistic about their academic and workplace success (Dice, 2018; Miller & Mills, 2019).

When traditional forms of pedagogy are not generally aligned to the learning styles and needs of millennial and Generation Z students, faculty and trainers are challenged to adapt their practices. They have to motivate students differently and persuade students about the relevance of content to their personal interests. Additionally, teachers find millennial and Generation Z students more engaged when they create opportunities for practical application and collaboration for hands-on learning.

EI Perspective: EI Conceptual Framework

The Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations developed a number of guidelines for promoting EI to support soft skills development (Cherniss et al., 1998). These guidelines apply to any institutional effort in which social

and emotional learning is a goal. A summary of these recommendations can be found within the “Conceptual Framework” section. The findings from this study align with the consortium’s guidelines for promoting social and emotional competence.

- assess employers’ needs
- assess learners’ strengths and limits
- create a safe environment
- have targeted goals
- provide relevance and deep connection
- make change self-directed
- maximize opportunities for practice and experience
- provide structured support
- promote insight and self-awareness
- provide an organizational culture that supports soft skill development

Assess Employers’ Needs

Soft skill development first requires understanding the social and emotional competencies critical for performing specific job roles effectively. This information creates a baseline for assessing student performance and growth and ensures that the soft skills taught align with the needs of employers. This data emphasized this need to engage employers in forums, advisory boards, design sessions, and brainstorming sessions to identify soft skills in which employers are interested. This process is part of understanding the “demand side” of soft skills. A needs assessment may formalize and

clarify employers' desired skills, particularly because many participants expressed difficulty understanding and translating employers' requirements into the classroom.

Assess Learners' Strengths and Limits

Another finding is that students' soft skills assessments should be based on the competencies needed for specific job roles, as articulated by employers. Generic assessments such as personality assessments, personal assessment tools, talent development tools, performance evaluation tools, and self-discovery tools need to be tailored to serve this purpose. Assessments can be administered before, right after, or a few months after training. No participant mentioned measuring soft skills proficiency for specific professional roles. This gap suggests an area where faculty can more align their curricula focus with the needs of employers, particularly if students need to demonstrate that they have mastered the skills needed for a distinct role.

Create a Safe Environment

Assessing and giving feedback on individuals' soft skills, such as their strengths and weaknesses, needs to occur in a safe, supportive, and caring environment. Faculty need to foster a positive and trusting relationship with students. Faculty need to be accessible, genuine, and empathetic to be able to create a safe context and space to cultivate open dialogue, vulnerability, and willingness to share. Creating a safe environment removes the psychological barrier of being judged and enables individuals to express emotions, take risks, trust others, and be challenged to grow emotionally and socially.

Have Targeted Goals

Learners need to have realistic expectations about the soft skill in focus, what is required to develop it, and how they can demonstrate this competence in different contexts. Teachers and trainers need to target the skill intentionally. Learners benefit when specific behaviors and soft skills are broken into subcompetencies that are clear and specific.

Provide Relevance and Deep Connection

For soft skills growth to take place, learners need to be open and willing to change; however, to be motivated to change, they need to understand how the competencies they are being asked to develop are personally relevant and professionally valuable. Learners need to be motivated to pursue change by understanding the "so why am I learning this" question behind learning activities. Those who are willing to learn often grow, but those who are dismissive of the value of soft skills tend to remain unengaged. Educators and trainers must establish how the soft skills being taught are applicable to students' personal growth, professional advancement, social mobility, and academic achievement.

Make Change Self-Directed

Another finding is that initiatives to promote soft skill growth are more effective when learners engage in a development activity or program tailored to their unique needs and goals. Allowing learners to define their own learning goals and engage in a customized training process based on their learning style can help foster deep engagement and growth. This approach combines, as Participant 4 stated, "self-guided

learning, teacher-guided learning, and team-enabled learning." Students are given responsibility for their learning. Through self-directed learning of soft skills, they diagnose their needs, define their goals, choose and implement appropriate learning strategies, and evaluate their learning outcomes (Li et al., 2021). The student drives the process, and the teacher supports it. This process also tends to improve students' social self-awareness.

Maximize Opportunities for Practice and Experience

Producing real growth in soft skills requires continuous practice and application. Habits have to be unlearned, and new habits have to be formed. Learners must learn and repeat new behaviors regularly over months to become engrained. Concrete, experiential learning and simulations of realistic situations encourage learners' soft skill growth. Such opportunities may include consulting work with businesses, arranged internships, organized demonstration projects, and required in-class presentations and group projects. A key aspect of the experiential approach is that the student becomes a stakeholder invested in outcomes. That personal motivation significantly improves their ability to apply knowledge and skills (Hodge et al., 2014).

Provide Structured Support

Learners need structured support when developing soft skills. Mentors, supervisors, coaches, peers, and team members provide a vital role in reinforcing learning. They often give valuable insights, perspectives, feedback, and detailed appraisals that benefit learners. Learners tend to become more self-aware and personally

motivated to improve when they receive helpful comments from experts (Kastberg et al., 2020).

Promote Insight and Self-Awareness

A key finding from this study is that self-awareness is essential for soft skill development. Learners need insight into how their perceptions, assumptions, feelings, and actions affect others. Learners with low self-awareness have challenges identifying what they need to change or where they need help. Lack of self-awareness makes internal growth difficult. Studies support introducing concepts of self-awareness early in the educational process. This includes first developing students' ability to recognize and manage their own emotions, identifying problem behaviors and coping strategies, goal-setting, and self-monitoring of their habits (Kastberg et al., 2020).

Provide an Organizational Culture that Supports Soft Skill Development

Another central finding is that soft skill development is better supported if the culture and tone within the institutions foster the necessary conditions. The climate within an institution impacts soft skills performance within the workplace. The data support the imperative that leaders need to reconsider and redefine institutional priorities and values to create a culture that encourages soft skills growth. Participant 1 posited, "Culture is what we're willing to accept…At what point does that individual employee give up because [soft skills are] not valued."

An institution's culture exerts an influence on learners and employees. According to Montgomery & Cook (2004), "Each culture sends forth a series of subtle messages that are internalized by all involved and, in turn, become the basis of that culture." To foster

soft skills development, leaders should reflect on the nature and impact of that culture and manage culturally-related behaviors and attitudes that positively and negatively affect soft skills development.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited by sample size, the variety of soft skill requirements in the workplace, reliance on the trustworthiness of participant responses, potential bias, and alignment on the meaning of terms. No additional limitations became apparent in the data collection or analysis process. Despite limitations, this study is expected to provide beneficial insights into soft skills development.

Sample Size

The sample selection was critical to this study by helping to offset the constraints of the small sample size. Though the sample size only consisted of eight individuals, the breadth of their cumulative experience, together with the two-fold background of many participants as both educators and consultants, added volume to the study. Additionally, this study does not require a large sample to make generalizations. Instead, the focus was to understand a specific delimited population in depth. Furthermore, saturation was achieved by the eighth interview. Saturation is not dependent on the number of participants but on reaching a point where no new information is being obtained from additional interviews (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Diversity of Soft Skill Requirements

Another limitation was the lack of uniformity of the soft skills needed by business graduates who work across several consulting firms, serve diverse roles with varied

requirements, and are engaged in a wide range of projects and responsibilities. This limitation was addressed as participants spoke in overarching terms about their experiences in soft skill development—they did not differentiate business students from other students or make a distinction between management consultants and other employees. They provided a uniform response across all populations and roles.

Accuracy of Participant Responses

Findings can be restricted by the extent to which interviewee responses are accurate and transparent. This limitation was mitigated by ensuring that participants met the preset criteria and providing the interview questions to enable participants to consider responses prior to the interview. Additionally, because I ensured participants understood the value of the study and their contributions to the study, I expected them to be reliable in their responses.

Potential Bias

My potential bias represents a possible study limitation and is addressed in earlier sections on “Reflexivity” and the “Role of the Researcher.”

Agreement on the Meaning of Terms Used

During interviews, I discussed the terms and the context of the study with the participants. The discussions during the interviews did not bring up any areas of dissonance between our shared understanding of the terms. However, a number of participants preferred the use of terms other than soft skills, such as enduring human skills, enduring human capabilities, and 21st-century skills. When the member check

brought up an opportunity to discuss any areas of misalignment, no concerns were expressed by participants.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the literature review and the data collected, soft skills are clearly desired by employers at all levels of the workforce and by faculty who want to provide more effective methods to improve students' soft skills. Educational practices and values that improve soft skills need to be strengthened not only within the classroom but also across institutions' programs and priorities. Based on the findings from this study and the literature review, several recommendations and compelling questions for further research should be considered in future investigations to extend knowledge in and dialogue about the area of soft skills development:

- Understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employers' and college students' soft skills needs.
- Measure the impact of VR and AR simulations on soft skills development.
- Evaluate specific learning strategies to determine their effectiveness in promoting soft skills development.
- Evaluate and compare the validity and reliability of various soft skills assessments.
- Examine mechanisms by which engagement between educators and employers can be improved to support soft skills development and career goals of students and employees.

- Analyze a case study of a change management process within a university to promote soft skills development.
- Examine whether credentials for softs skills help students get hired. Evaluate the extent to which badges and micro-credentials help level the playing field for students seeking to enter the workforce. Examine whether micro-credentials are being accepted by employers as proxies for soft skills.
- Analyze a case study of a whole-person educational approach in a higher education setting.
- Examine how higher education institutions can better support millennial and Generation Z students to develop greater resilience.

These suggested topics may be of interest to researchers and practitioners in the fields of soft skills, pedagogy, competency-based education, educational technology, psychometrics, and change management.

Implications

Potential Impact for Positive Social Change

This study has confirmed what much of the literature has stated—students and employees need further support in their soft skills development. Some participants used strong and revealing language to describe their experience dealing with the soft skills gap—Participant 1: “We as leaders are failing”; Participant 4: “Our educational system certainly does not emphasize these skills”; Participant 8: “It's what the students are screaming out for”; Participant 6: “There are times when I feel like I'm pushing a rock uphill”; Participant 8: “It becomes very frustrating.” This need for soft skills has become

more pronounced due to disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic. This study, which focuses on addressing students' deficiency in these core human competencies, therefore, is expected to have a significant appeal and impact.

Positive Impact on Educators

The Society for Human Resources Management reported that more than half of its members said that higher education has done little to address the soft skills shortage (Wilkie, 2019). In this study, I provide recommendations and insights on how higher education leaders can frame and address this issue. The results point to a comprehensive approach that entails evaluating institutional and academic norms, engaging leaders and stakeholders to harness change, and applying immediate and long-term practical tools within and outside the classroom and across programs. This study outlines a valuable framework to initiate discussions and practical action around soft skills development.

Positive Impact on Employers and Organizations

Studies have shown that soft skills enable individuals to perform more effectively in the workplace (Kastberg et al., 2020). Individuals proficient in soft skills tend to be self-motivated and show initiative, and, because of their social skills, build healthy relationships and support team learning. Organizations with a workforce proficient in soft skills can achieve growth, adapt to changes, reach goals, and embody a healthy work environment. Additionally, soft skills proficiency improves employee internal mobility, which boosts employee retention. This study contributes to the fields of organizational development and performance improvement by identifying how employees can be supported in their soft skills. This study also creates a context in which employers can

engage higher education leaders to discover and serve their mutual needs and grow in a symbiotic relationship. Furthermore, a framework is provided that outlines how soft skills training can be employed and scaled throughout organizations and can inform a larger overall strategy to develop resiliency and adaptability within organizations, particularly in light of COVID-19 pandemic challenges.

Positive Impact on Learners

This study describes a pathway to create the right conditions that support the soft skills growth of students. Soft skills are not just skills desired in the workplace to meet professional expectations—they are life skills that can be applied broadly throughout different contexts of life. A number of benefits can occur for learners as they grow in and master soft skills competencies: improved engagement and satisfaction in higher education and work; improved placement after graduation; productivity in the workplace; positive learning experiences for millennials and non-traditional students; development of the whole person; deeper engagement in lifelong learning; and growth in EI.

Individuals growing in soft skills tend to be more self-aware, socially-aware, and more adept at managing their relationships and interactions. They also tend to be more resilient and capable of adapting to change. Additionally, through self-directed learning, students can take responsibility for and be invested in developing their soft skills (Abbott, 2019). As Marope et al. (2018) expressed, “Knowing how to learn affords people the regenerative capacity to reinvent themselves for changing contextual demands. It is the source of currency, innovation, adaptability, agility, and resilience” (p. 31).

Recommendations for Practice

In many cases, when higher education leaders and faculty implement practices to improve educational quality, the approaches they adopt may actually hinder pedagogical innovations that support soft skill development. For example, improving efficiencies to boost the number of completed degrees or credits or to improve the quantity of generated research still perpetuate traditional priorities and direct resources and focus away from soft skill development initiatives. For many faculty members, excellence in teaching and learning is reflected in higher grades that only demonstrate technical knowledge. Improving student performance is limited to this narrow function. Promoting soft skills development, however, requires that greater weight be placed on initiatives that support students' growth of EI and institutional values undergirding whole-person development.

The following are recommendations for practice derived from this study to improve soft skills development:

- Develop a soft skills development and transformation strategy that implements change initiatives at scale across the institution based on a defined set of goals and values that support soft skills.
- Initiate strategic forums with internal and external stakeholders to encourage shared perspectives on soft skills and dialogue on workforce needs. Input from employers and students can inform the design of learning objectives and ensure educational offerings are relevant.
- Evaluate the soft skills gap across programs and departments.

- Increase incentives for teachers to engage in soft skill development. As conducting research significantly impacts the advancement of a faculty member's career, incentives should be offered to prioritize pedagogical innovation and teaching excellence in soft skills.
- Provide more targeted training and resources for educators in pedagogy that support soft skills development and support millennial and Generation Z students.
- Develop an office focused on soft skills development to resource faculty and students with strategies, tools, and research.
- Support communities of practice to advance soft skill innovation. Creating systemic changes that promote soft skill development requires collective efforts, peer learning, and collaboration. Organizing forums for educators to learn from one another can help strengthen efforts to bring institutional changes.
- Consistently integrate soft skill learning outcomes and requirements throughout university programs.
- Explore a path forward to adopt competency-based learning.
- Use assessments to encourage self-awareness, self-reflection, and goal setting.
- Implement active, practical learning and experiential learning.
- Provide opportunities for coaching and mentorship of learners.
- Incorporate the use of AR and VR technologies and digital infrastructure for soft skilling at scale.

Conclusion

A significant consideration from this study is that the process of improving soft skills development is not merely a pedagogical question. At its root, the process to resolve the soft skills gap is driven by a larger question—what is the role of higher education? What are the objectives? What are educators trying to accomplish? Exploring ways to improve soft skills development leads to a reconsideration of the values underlying institutions and brings up critical cultural questions about what society esteems. The process to remedy the soft skills gap is also an attempt to redress inefficiencies and shortcomings in the current education system, which is not designed to meet current and future life demands. To effectively reduce the soft skills gap is not only a classroom concern but an institutional and broader issue that requires a reevaluation of the fundamental values and ways of thinking grounding higher education.

Tied to the pursuit of improving soft skills is a larger vision that considers the goal of education as transformational, serving to empower the whole person. The conversation on soft skills development, therefore, joins the larger conversation about reforming and enabling higher education to create more relevant and effective learning experiences that foster individuals' life skills, holistic development, and self-directed learning. The dialogue on soft skills development contributes to the wider dialogue on how learning and development support student success and how learning and the learner become the center of the educational enterprise.

The process of improving soft skills among learners is also a strategic challenge. Institutions will need to engage in organizational and culture change as they shift focus

from rankings, research, and graduation rates to student success and lifelong learning. Leadership and change management processes will need to initiate behavior changes based on shared organizational goals. Process improvement strategies will need to be developed to ensure systems and processes are in place to support soft skill learning throughout an institution, such as student support, technology, and evaluation systems. Additionally, the process of adapting learning environments requires a strategic approach to define outcomes, identify gaps, provide development opportunities to improve innovation and best practices, and cultivate a community of practice.

The soft skills gap is a real, personal, and immediate experience that many learners and educators encounter. In the critical moment after the COVID-19 pandemic, as individuals seek to re-enter and advance in places of work, the need to have educational opportunities to reskill and upskill for immediate career options and grow in life skills is vital. The focus on career development in higher education brings up concerns through which universities need to navigate as they balance the value of whole-person education, with its emphasis on developing socio-emotional competencies, and the value of career preparation, with its practical concern for developing professional skills for vocational advancement. These are not mutually exclusive, but prioritizing soft skills development is part of that tension as universities seek to meet the needs of learners.

Many institutions are heeding the concerns of employers about the soft skills gap and are using this juncture during the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity for institutional change and recalibration. This focus on soft skills development is not a one-time, short-term investment but a significant long-term commitment to change. The

challenge lies not only with faculty, who often face multiple constraints. The challenge also lies with educational and business leaders who must embrace their roles within a larger learning ecosystem and foster future literacy as they prepare learners for a life of change.

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Appendix A: Samples of Audit Trails

The following are sample audit trails of five codes. Below each code is an early analysis of the interview data and quotations from which the codes and analysis were derived.

Codes Related to the Gap in Soft Skills

Code 1: Create Opportunities for Applying Soft Skills

- Employers should create opportunities for employees to apply what they learn in training, such as through a "Teach Back" program where they share what they learned and can also get opportunities to lead projects and meetings.
- Students do not just learn content—they need to learn how to apply the content.
- Simulations and use cases help create experiential learning opportunities in the classroom; however, there is no substitute for experience to develop soft skills.
- Action-oriented consulting projects require interaction with clients. These are pro bono consulting projects, not attached to a classroom, where students are staffed to three-month consulting projects with real clients producing valuable deliverables, practicing, and developing soft skills on those projects. Students work in teams. They interact consistently with the client in their team. They have an engagement manager on the team. They learn how to be consultants and gain deeper knowledge about a particular industry and tools and skills within that industry.
- Internships that include classes on EI and built-in reflections can support soft skill development. However, internships do not always have that team structure, nor do students engage in a structured manner with the client or an engagement manager.

- Team experience can be used as a mini-lab to work through steps in collaborating, such as dealing with conflict, soliciting input, establishing benchmarks, and giving feedback. However, faculty may assume that because they assigned students into groups and teams or that students listened to a lecture on effective teams and psychological safety they know how to collaborate.
- Escape rooms can serve as a practical simulation for developing soft skills in which students must deal with ambiguity, collaborate, and problem-solve.
- Live mock interviews with employers are helpful interactions with employers.
- VR allows learners to practice. Learning face-to-face, reading about soft skills in a book, or watching videos are valuable, but individuals need to apply and practice interacting regularly. VR is not a replacement for these modalities or real-world experience, but they help build confidence so learners can more confidently engage challenges in the real world.
- Competency-based learning embraces a learn-by-doing approach, even in an online environment. Sub-competencies are assessed using performance-based activities called “proving grounds.” These are demonstration projects where you can practice and demonstrate that you can do the skill, but in small bites as opposed to vague projects where you're doing it with a group, and maybe you're learning this thing, and maybe you're not. The proving grounds are supported with rubrics and aligned to the demonstrated tasks that indicate proficiency of the subcompetency. To earn the micro-credential and digital badge, learners need to be proficient across all four subcompetencies.

10 Quotations:

Interview 1

And one of the biggest complaints was, oh, I get all this great information, but my boss is so focused on this that I don't get to apply it. So, I changed the program to require a teach-back element, and the managers had to sign on to this so that when the employee came back from training, they had the opportunity to lead a team meeting and share what they learned, and we sent them back with exercises to do. By doing this, we were spreading the wealth. We were spreading the knowledge, but at the same time, the employee had that chance to demonstrate, and by demonstrating, it started changing the dynamic of the organization.

Interview 1

One of the things I do at the end of every class is, at the end of every semester, I give them a personal challenge—Think of one activity you can do in the next 30 days to apply what you learned or you need more growth in —this is the area that you need more growth in. And so, it's amazing how many of those students are coming back to me afterward and saying, professor, I took my personal challenge, and here was the outcome. So, I think it's not just teaching them—it's teaching them how to apply it.

Interview 2

They can do more action-oriented consulting projects that students work in teams supervised by a faculty member working for a client. So, get students into a situation that is a bit ambiguous that they have to figure out what the question is

as well as what the answer is, and work with someone to figure out that person's needs, even when that person might really not understand their needs themselves. Those kinds of situations lend themselves to building soft skills and working on the team, having to co-create something, and delegating and sharing work among people. So, I'd say when you can put them in those kinds of experiences, I find it more useful than a lot of other simulations.

Interview 2

We offered an internship for-credit course, and that's an asynchronous course that students are taking while they have internships. And each week has a different topic, and one week is emotional intelligence. One week is setting goals. Another is doing check-ins, getting feedback. So, every week, they're reading some articles and doing something that has a real application to their internship and then doing a reflection on it. So, for example, the emotional intelligence week, they are reading about emotional intelligence and then assessing themselves and their supervisor along the lines of emotional intelligence.

Interview 3

Creating ambiguous, complex experiences for students to engage within a safe setting in the classroom is sort of one pillar. The next piece is lecturing them about a problem-solving method or different types of emotional intelligence, and then you give them some information but also give them a chance to experience it. So, within my undergrad settings, I tend to do experiential activities where they

have to get their classmates to organize something, and some artificial barriers are set up. There are also use cases and simulations that I've used.

Interview 5

It just gives you that opportunity to practice. You can learn face to face; you can read it in a book; and you can watch videos, but you're going to want to try it out for yourself. And if you can't do it with your peers, for whatever reason, you could do interaction practice in VR now. Is it going to give you just like it is in the real world? It will help you become more connected to it, that's for sure. Is it a replacement for doing it in the real world? No, it's practice. It's just to help you build confidence. So, you can actually have conversations in the real world. One of the big things that we see with VR training is that you can practice; it's a monster confidence builder. And being able to be confident is the biggest challenge about going to that next step to have that difficult conversation with somebody.

Interview 6

I use their team experience as a mini-lab for them to work through some of those steps in learning how to solicit input and give feedback. I really emphasize conflict is not the problem. It's how you deal with the conflict. And no one is going be penalized if you raise conflicts and concerns. You actually earn points by addressing it. So, I try and set it up so that they're rewarded for talking about conflict versus feeling like they're throwing a colleague under the bus.

Interview 6

The majority of the semester was dedicated to them creating escape rooms. And the idea was to work on collaboration, creativity, problem-solving, dealing with ambiguity because not a lot of guidance or instruction is given. I think dealing with ambiguity is such an important skill that the academic environment just does not give that opportunity for many students to deal with that successfully.

Interview 7

We basically take a learn-by-doing approach. If you're doing it in an online environment, we're trying to provide what we call proving grounds - demonstration projects where you can practice and demonstrate that you can do the skill, but in small bites as opposed to vague projects where you're doing it with a group, and maybe you're learning this thing, and maybe you're not.

Interview 8

Students sign up for pro bono consulting projects where students are staffed on to three-month consulting gigs with real clients, creating real deliverables with a team of students. They're gaining hard skills, practicing soft skills, and developing soft skills on those projects altogether. It's pro bono, and it's not attached to a classroom. It's not for credit. However, the students are very dedicated and committed to it, and the demand is high because students know that they're getting the experience they need.

Code 2: Incentivize and Engage Internal and External Stakeholders

- Incentivize faculty and employers to see the value of soft skill development, experiential learning, and stakeholder dialogue to promote soft skills development—to themselves, their students, business, and academic program.
- Stakeholder engagement is key to program development— engaging the office of career services, recruiters, career coaches, program directors, and understanding the needs of employers.
- Employers engage universities in different ways: recruiting, alumni interactions, adjunct teaching, coaching, academic projects.
- Deliberate dialogue and interaction is often needed to understand and clarify the needs of employers fully. At the same time, businesses should invest long-term into scholarship, mentoring, volunteering to be part of students' networks.
- Getting agreement among different faculty from different disciplines to reflect meaningfully and synergistically on soft skills goals and assessments across a program is challenging.
- Universities struggle with employer engagement. However, there is a high demand from students to engage employers. Creating experiential learning opportunities is an effective process for creating mutual value. Because student consulting work is a free service, there is a high demand among employers for students to whom they offer an opportunity for work experience. Employers see the value of being involved in students' development as they benefit from the contributions of students’ pro bono work. They can hire talent they have vetted, trained, observed,

and integrated into their company. However, some employers are hesitant to engage in experiential learning if the outcomes they hope for are not clear or achieved.

- An experiential program requires a robust team, leadership within the school, and championing from the dean.
- Employers should make explicit to faculty the value of enduring human skills as both vital career skills and life skills.
- Faculty can help scale VR technology use and application in the classroom, so students have greater opportunities to practice applying soft skills.
- The soft skills gap can be traced to two issues: the supply side (higher education) and the demand side (industry). On the demand side, employers' articulation of soft skills needed in the workplace tends to be difficult to measure, vague to capture on a resume, and generic. Terms often used on job descriptions, such as attention to detail, resilience, initiative, and self-starter, as required skills can be difficult for educators to codify in a program (learning objectives), teach (learning strategies), or assess (tools and artifacts). A T-profile, based on the concept of the T-shaped learner, is used in a mapping exercise to engage employers and college designers to understand their perspectives on what skills are needed for particular job roles in high demand, deconstruct and define each skill into subcompetencies, and create a learning pathway or a micro-pathway for each role. For example, 21st-century skills such as creative problem solving and initiative will have subcompetencies defined and prioritized for a learner to master to get hired. In many cases, employers prioritize and are more concerned about soft skills over technical skills

since they can provide technical training on the job. These mapping exercises may be used in an advisory board when the university has specific micro-pathways it wants to develop. Employers on the advisory board will speak more theoretically about what they are looking for. They are doing a public service because the particular students may not necessarily be hired by their firms.

23 Quotations:

Interview 2

So, finding those professors that are leading those things and having us learn from each other, I think, is helpful. I guess having administrators who say we care about this and think it is a good way to learn and trying to get incentives for professors to try new things. It often takes more work to rely on outside partners and make those things happen. So having some kind of incentive is probably useful.

Interview 3

I work very closely with is the director of our office of career services. And so, I actually have quite a bit of interaction with employers, and I talk with our recruiters and talk with our career coaches and listen to what they say. I don't know that faculty actually get that, but I think it's very important when you're thinking about overall curriculum design to see that you're meeting employers' needs. It's kind of tricky because I've been in these forums where we ask them what we could do differently.

Interview 3

We had an employer forum a few years ago to talk about our undergraduate major, and they liked what we were teaching. And then, once we started teasing it out and doing some brainstorming sessions, one thing rose to the forefront where they wanted us to prepare students to work in diverse work environments. And when we teased that out further, it was less about what we might think of, like ethnic diversity or racial diversity. It turned out to be more like generational diversity because a problem that they see is that college-educated students who are younger get hired and are managing older employees, and they don't know how to navigate those differences. But I do not know how to teach that in the classroom. I could do a simulation that might get at it.

Interview 3

I'm trying to design the capstone experience right now to include more of that so that they can come in and reflect on their growth and make a plan kind of forward. But it's hard because you're trying to corral a bunch of different faculty from a bunch of different disciplines. Getting everyone to reflect meaningfully and in a synergistic way where they're bringing all the things together is a bit challenging

Interview 3

I think businesses can provide those experiential opportunities. That's something that I try to do and try to cultivate. Sometimes there's a lot of like red tape.

Interview 3

It's kind of a long-term investment—scholarships, mentoring, volunteering to be part of these students' networks.

Interview 4

I think a lot of what consulting is about is these enduring human skills.

Interview 5

We do it for recruiting. We also do it for alumni who go back and speak. And we have a lot of adjunct professors in the firm who teach at colleges and help students. I coach students who are coming in or looking to come in. We also hire universities to do a study on things that we're not capable of doing the work on. It doesn't make sense for us to do it. It makes more sense coming out of a university.

Interview 5

Virtual reality can help faculty scale their messaging because of the democratization of the content.

Interview 7

I think the gap exists for two big reasons—one on the supply side and one on the demand side. On the demand side of the employers—the way they articulate the soft skills they need are often reflected in ways that are either hard to measure, hard to identify off a resume, or hard to narrow, and faculty don’t know what employers mean by—'attention to detail’ or ‘resilience,’ ‘initiative,’ ‘self-starter’ often found on a job description.

Interview 7

I think the gap really is around knowledge on both sides of what are the competencies that make up those soft skills—creative problem solving, collaboration, initiative, resilience—what are the actual skills that could be taught or asked for by an employer?

Interview 7

You put an employer and a college designer together and use the T profile—the T shape learner. We actually sit with the employer and the college and work through creating a pathway for this role. What soft skills would you be looking for? And because they're not that familiar with what's underneath 'creative problem solving' or 'initiative,' we have the four subcompetencies listed right there. So, it helps them think, oh yeah, that's important. Oh, not so much. And so, we force them to rank order the 21st-century skills, and then they list the technical skills that the learner must have to get hired. And what's so interesting is on so many jobs, you find that the employer ends up saying, you know, if they have these skills at the top, we can teach them the rest. Obviously, they need certain basic skills, but they're more concerned about top-level skills than the technical ones in many cases—not all cases. And so that's been really interesting, sort of eureka for a lot of us sitting in those design sessions with the employer and the school.

Interview 7

Once the college identifies the job roles with their state or their region that are high demand and lead to a living wage, then we bring in the employers and sit

down and say, okay, what absolutely needs to be in this pathway for you to be excited to hire these people?

Interview 7

When we do it with specific pathways where we're calling together employers around a particular pathway that the school is going to develop. Sometimes we'll just ask employers on an advisory board to come in and speak more theoretically about what they're looking for. They're doing a public service because the particular students aren't necessarily going to end up in there.

Interview 8

When the students are done with this consulting, we know that they get offers from companies—they get jobs. The companies see that the gap is being filled, and they're getting talent.

Interview 8

And every single one of those universities struggles with employer engagement or engagement of these companies in order to support our students

Interview 8

I have a passion for supporting our students. I know that it's the employers they want most—it's the experts out on the field they want most."

Interview 8

It's a free service to them that we're doing through this experiential learning. So, they really line up outside the door for this experiential program.

Interview 8

We'd like all faculty to use it to be more experiential because students are screaming out for it.

Interview 8

The client provides a statement of work. They have needs for deliverables. It would have to meet the needs of the classroom. So right now, I get a pile of clients, staff, and students on to these projects. I flip that a bit when working with the classroom to talk with the faculty and ask what they need next semester. Give me a heads up, give me a semester to pull together a client for you, but tell me what you need for your classroom.

Interview 8

I just know how universities work. The change happens slowly within. Ideally, it would need a robust team with a solid budget and leadership within the school, including the Dean and the leadership underneath the Dean, to always champion and fully support this experiential initiative.

Interview 8

Because of the creativity and the professionalism of students, we have off-the-charts communication from employers who come back for second projects and a phase two, but then these clients have to hire our students, so we see the reaction from these clients who then hire the student teams to be a full-time hire for them.

Interview 8

And I think it's what the employers are screaming out for.

Code 3: Promote Experiential Learning

- Kolb's learning styles and experiential learning cycle—learning is the process in which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Experiential learning involves creating ambiguous, complex experiences for students to engage in.
- Experiential learning must go hand-in-hand with self-reflection. Self-reflection allows for meaningful insights and connections to be made about one's experience and one's growth. Students can get a good grade and not learn anything.
- Experiential learning can prepare them for difficult challenges they will face in their future work context.
- The demand for experiential learning is high because students know that they are getting the experience they need to be prepared for the challenges of work.
- To promote experiential learning is not to discard traditional approaches such as lecturing. (lecture + experiential learning + self-reflection). An effective lecture on ethical decision-making, for example, may include examining different ethical models and blind spots, identifying the skills and the attitudes associated with ethical decision-making, and having students slot typical business behavior on an ethical continuum. However, faculty should not always expect skills to change based on sharing knowledge in a lecture or even that knowledge taught may be used.

15 Quotations:

Interview 2

In most of my classes, I have the Kolb experiential learning process, ensuring that there's a lot of reflection in the classes. That's what I've opted for a lot more over the last ten years of my teaching—that experiential learning only works when there's that later step of not just having the experience but reflecting on it. And I think you need at the front end to have some goals of what you're trying to get out of it. And also, something that you can measure yourself against at the end.

Interview 2

Developing soft skills involves real experiences that are not just within the bounds of the classroom—something that interacts with the real world and that you are learning from**.**

Interview 2

The capstone involves a consulting project. We have internships that I'd say are another way of experiential learning. And we have students interview leaders of nonprofit organizations.

Interview 3

Creating ambiguous, complex experiences for students to engage within a safe setting in the classroom is sort of one pillar. The next piece is lecturing them about a problem-solving method or different types of emotional intelligence. Then you give them some information but also give them a chance to experience it. I tend to do experiential activities where they have to get their classmates to

organize something, and some artificial barriers are set up. There are also use cases and simulations that I've used.

Interview 3

I think self-reflection is essential, and it's the only place that learning takes place, but sometimes students, especially if they're not self-aware, don't recognize its benefit. When you self-reflect, you're trying new behaviors based on the self-reflection. Having experience divorced from self-reflection doesn't work. Just reflecting on a lecture doesn’t help—you have to have a meaningful experience. If you don't have a real meaningful, complex experience, then reflection doesn't work. And then I think the other challenging piece is that sometimes it's not until a year later or 2 years later that the actual realizations start to come in, as you have more experiences.

Interview 3

I give them a consulting project to work on where they interact with a client—that I think is where I see most of the learning take place.

Interview 3

Sometimes even the lecturing is not as important as the experience and the reflection. I think we have to give them experiences and create a safe context in which they can have those experiences. And then give them the opportunity to reflect on that meaningfully and divorce that from the grades, because, at the end of the day, you can get a good grade and not learn anything. It's more about—if

you go on that job interview or end up in that tough situation with a client or customer, can you then execute whatever strategy you learned?

Interview 3

Businesses can provide those experiential opportunities.

Interview 6

Ineffective is expecting skills to change based on sharing knowledge and expecting skills to even be used.

Interview 8

We're providing co-curricular experiential learning that gives the students the tools and skills they need in a particular industry to be successful on day one upon hire.

Interview 8

Students sign up for pro bono consulting projects where students are staffed on to three-month consulting gigs with real clients, creating real deliverables with a team of students. They're gaining hard skills and practicing soft skills and developing soft skills on those projects altogether. It's pro bono, and it's not attached to a classroom. It's not for credit. However, the students are very dedicated and committed to it, and the demand is high because students know that they're getting the experience they need.

Interview 8

The client provides a statement of work. They have needs for deliverables. It would have to meet the needs of the classroom. So right now, I get a pile of

clients, staff, and students on to these projects. I flip that a bit when working with the classroom to talk with the faculty and ask what they need next semester. Give me a heads up, give me a semester to pull together a client for you, but tell me what you need for your classroom.

Interview 8

I have pages and pages of testimonials from students and employers. The feedback I get is hugely positive. It is off the charts. It absolutely fills my heart. It is rewarding—testimonial after testimonial from these companies and the students who say that this is working. These companies get to see our students firsthand put their brains together to create solutions to these problems, and the students are creating things that are really relevant and don't sit on a shelf.

Interview 8

I think experiential learning is critical at universities. It's what the students are screaming out for.

Interview 8

And I think it's what the employers are screaming out for.

Codes: Recommended Approaches to Soft Skills Development

Code 4: Assessments and Challenges Assessing Soft Skills

- Some assessments used include the use of goal setting and SMART goals; NEO Personality Inventory; ITP Metrics; assessments on five personality dimensions; DISC assessment; StrengthsFinder; StrengthsQuest; 360-degree reviews.
- Evaluations are often conducted at the semester's beginning, middle, and end. They include self-evaluations, peer evaluations, team reflections, coaching evaluations, and capstone assessments.
- Portfolios enable faculty to track students' development over the duration of their program.
- Faculty find it difficult to assess students' soft skills with large classes. Faculty are challenged with creating assessments that are fair to all students, given that students are at different stages of development, have different learning needs and goals, and grow emotionally at their own pace.
- The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation requires assurance learning, which involves institutions demonstrating that learners achieve learning competencies.
- In the case of experiential learning in which students work at companies on projects, employers' assessment of students comes as job offers and requests to work on future projects. Employers assess candidates through the recruiting/interview process.

- Often, assessments are built around knowledge and content—not around how well students collaborate or problem solve. If students are provided a rubric describing the expectations regarding soft skills behavior, they may be more inclined to demonstrate those behaviors in class, but that behavior is often tied to getting higher grades.
- Online assessments are often used as a starting point for reflecting on the components of EI and evaluating one's strengths and areas for growth.
- Faculty are not often aware of validated, reliable, scientific, free soft skills assessments available for their use.
- For VR training, learners are given assessments at three points: prior to their VR training for a baseline assessment, immediately after their training to understand how much they learned during the simulation, and then 30 days after to determine how much they retained in the short-term.

17 Quotations:

Interview 2

We have peer evaluations, an unstructured one at the middle of the semester, and then a structured one at the end of the semester.

Interview 2

They often start out with a 360-degree review and a personal assessment.

Interview 3

It's hard sometimes even to assess soft skills. I have large classes, so it’s hard to tease out whether or not people have soft skills or not, and so it's hard to know whether or not you teach them.

Interview 3

Soft skills have become more difficult to assess because there's so much of a focus teaching to the test. So, they just want to know how they can get a good grade, and there's very little focus on personal skills.

Interview 3

They set their own goals, and then I have them assess themselves. There's definitely a chunk of very good students who will assess themselves and do it honestly, where there's a level of self-awareness, but some of their assessments are so superficial that it's clear that the students are just trying to get the grade.

Interview 3

The gap starts with the fact that it's just so hard to really assess where I see the soft skills.

Interview 3

So, I have three assignments integrated into most of my classes where it's a goal setting, and they set their SMART goals. So, I teach in that framework of their own goals. I also rely heavily on the big five personality dimensions, mostly because they are based on research. There's Neo PI and ITP metrics—that's more of a peer evaluation. I ask them to complete the peer evaluation and then reflect

on the feedback and their final self-evaluation. I've also used the DISC analysis, loosely based on the big five. They use StrengthsFinder and StrengthsQuest.

Interview 3

Because students have different levels of experience, you've got to differentiate the instruction to where they're at. So, an assessment at the beginning to figure out where they're at and then ensure they're learning at their own pace is really tricky to create.

Interview 3

We have AACSB as our accreditation agency, and we have 'assurance of learning' built into different parts of the program.

Interview 4

The kind of question that we ask in interviews—I think many people ask a question like this—take 5 minutes and teach me something about something that you know about that I would not expect that you know about?

Interview 5

We give the same survey, quiz, test, or multiple choice prior. We have them repeat the same test after, and then in 30 days, we have them repeat the same test a third time. We do mix up the answers and responses so they're not mechanically embedded in their head. And they are rephrased. So, it's the same question, just phrased in a different way to see how they respond. In other words, how much did you learn during the presentation or the simulation, and then how much did you retain 30 days later? So that is the way we test at scale.

Interview 6

Our assessments are built around knowledge and content. It's not built around how well they collaborate or problem solve.

Interview 6

When teams have had challenging experiences, one or two team members bubble to the top of really trying to be problem solvers and mediators. I give them extra points, and I don't announce this in advance. I'll give them extra points and explain what I observed and why I gave them those extra points in addition to whatever the team grade was.

Interview 6

They do an online self-assessment to see where their emotional intelligence is according to this online, very unscientific assessment. But what I asked them to do is use that as a jumping-off point to reflect on the various components of their emotional intelligence, their strengths, and the areas they need to work on. What are some ways they can work on that, both in and outside of the class? I do a lot of disclaimers. This is not validated or reliable. This is simply a jumping-off point. I look for things that are free on the internet that give quick and dirty temperature checks

Interview 8

We don't assess their soft and hard skills at the start. The student determines whether they want to do a project, and they self-select in. They're asking for these projects to give them a leg up. It's not attached to a classroom. The demand is

really high. When the students are done with this consulting, we know that they get offers from companies—they get jobs. The companies see that the gap is being filled, and they're getting talent.

Interview 8

There’s such a wide range of students with so many kinds of skills that I'm allowing them to choose what they feel they need most. And then having the employers determine whether they're getting what they need.

Interview 8

They have an evaluation at the beginning and end of every project. We have debriefings after every client meeting, so there is a lot of reflection that happens. So, there's tons of feedback that happens all the way through and is folded back into the program for continuous improvement, but mainly for the benefit of the students.

Code 5: Challenges Creating a Safe and Equitable Environment for Soft Skills Development

- Universities are challenged with creating a safe learning environment (online and face-to-face) that engenders participation and prepares students for real challenges they will face in the workplace yet protects their vulnerabilities and treats everyone with equity.
- Faculty are challenged with creating an equitable environment for soft skills development, given that students are at different stages of development, have different needs and goals, and grow at their own pace. Since students come into the

class with different proficiencies in soft skills, would the goal of their program or course be to nudge them along the continuum and acknowledge the variety of baselines or to demonstrate equal standards of the soft skill?

- Employees take classroom and e-learning courses, but they may not be able to be coached on what is appropriate to say and how something should be said; furthermore, they may not feel safe saying certain things within a classroom or e-learning course. Employees often feel that if they say anything contrary to prevailing perspectives on certain issues, such as sexual harassment or diversity and inclusion, they will conflict with management, and their careers may be in jeopardy. They cannot contribute openly in an environment that can potentially harm their careers. Soft skill development requires open dialogue, vulnerability, willingness to share areas for growth, and willingness to change in an environment where one should not expect negative repercussions.

6 Quotations:

Interview 2

We want to have the same bar for all students. We also realize that some things are easier for students than others. We don't want to put them in uncomfortable situations where they can't learn. If you're in an organization and you have a staff meeting, and you don't feel comfortable enough to bring a concern forward, are we doing right by our students if we're not trying to encourage that? We want to help them understand how important it is, what good participation looks like, different ways to participate. And one of the ways we have is by grading them on

it. We're not allowed to mandate students have their cameras on. When we're online, I have certain students who never talk, so I have to cold call on them, and that's not something to make a supportive learning environment. So, I think this idea of participation needs to be really thought out, and how we can create safe spaces in the classroom. It is important students don't just think talking more means better participation—it can just be annoying for the people around them. Learning how to participate well and be a valuable contributor to the conversation is what students need to learn.

Interview 3

Because students have different levels of experience, you've got to differentiate the instruction based on where they're at. So, an assessment at the beginning to figure out where they're at and then ensure they're learning at their own pace is really tricky to create.

Interview 5

So, everybody goes through one or two classroom courses and a couple of e-learning courses, but they're missing that ability to be coached on—what should I say? How should I say it? Am I saying it the correct way? And most importantly, do I feel safe saying it to you that way?

Interview 5

One of the big requirements in training nowadays is diversity and inclusion and sexual harassment. These are mandated required courses every employee needs to take. You sit in the classroom, watch some videos, and the teacher lectures and

asks questions. Any executive or employee with any self-awareness says absolutely nothing—because it's not safe. If I disagree with anybody and express a different point of view, and it's not the correct point of view, you create conflict. If it's not managed appropriately, it could be the end of your career. But if you say absolutely nothing, you're completely safe—nothing ever happens.

Interview 5

It doesn't really make it safe in a classroom experience.

Interview 6

We have many first-generation students who haven't necessarily had some modeling of some of these soft skills. So, are we trying to have everyone reach a certain bar, or are we acknowledging the variety of baselines and nudging them along the continuum? Regarding how we structure the course and philosophically, it's more the nudge than expecting them to demonstrate the full components of a particular skill. The goal is to have everyone increase their skillset regardless of their baseline because not everyone is going to meet the standard.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Introductory Protocol

Once the participant has logged on to Zoom, the researcher will complete the following steps.

1. Confirm the participant is comfortable and the audio and video quality is suitable for both the participant and the researcher.
2. Review the purpose of the study and the purpose of the interview with the participant. (Interview questions would have been provided before the interview.)
3. Remind the participant that the researcher has received IRB approval from Walden University. Thank the participant for signing the consent form, and recall the content of the consent form.
4. Remind the participant of the voluntary nature of participating, including not answering specific questions or parts of questions, and that the participant can terminate the interview at any time without consequence.
5. Reiterate the confidentiality of the information shared and the measures the researcher will undertake to ensure the privacy of the participant and organization and to secure the Zoom file and transcript.
6. Remind the participant the interview will be recorded via Zoom and that handwritten notes will also be taken. Confirm permission to record the interview.
7. Confirm the expected length of the interview is about 30-45 minutes.
8. Outline the process for this semistructured interview, namely, that one question will be asked at a time. After each response, there may be brief follow-up probing

questions to get clarity or dive deeper into the content of the response. The participant can revisit questions as needed.

9. Reiterate the need for accuracy in participant responses to strengthen the credibility of the study. Underlie that there are no right or wrong or preferred or less preferred answers but a need for honest reflection.
10. Ask if the participant has any questions before the interview begins.
11. Get verbal consent from the participant to begin the interview and begin recording.

Once the introductory steps have been completed, the researcher will confirm a shared understanding of the key term—soft skills—with the participant.

Interview Questions: Alignment With Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of business faculty and employers of factors that contribute to the soft skills gap of recently graduated management consultants?

1. In what ways have you observed students/employees lack proficiency in soft skills (such as creativity, collaboration, problem-solving, leadership, ethical decision-making, communication) required for their (future) roles in the workplace?
2. In what ways have you observed students/employees lack self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social skills/relationship management (the dimensions of EI) required for their future roles in the workplace?
3. What factors do you think contribute to the soft skills gap in students/employees?

4. Many initiatives have been put in place to reduce the soft skills gap (e.g., adding soft skills training, internships), yet the gap persists. Why might this be?
5. What constraints do you encounter in developing soft skills for students /employees? What constraints have you observed in those who seek to develop students'/employees' soft skills?

Research Question 2: What are the recommendations of faculty and employers to improve soft skills needed by management consultants?

6. What approaches do you utilize (or have observed others utilize) to promote learners' development of soft skills?
7. What soft skill development approaches have you found to be most effective and least effective, and how do you determine if they are effective or ineffective?
8. How do you assess (or have observed others assess) students'/employees' soft-skill proficiency?
9. What additional learning approaches and learning experiences do you think are needed to ensure greater soft skills proficiency in the workplace?
10. What other practical and innovative solutions can be implemented to improve soft skills development efforts?
11. How might university departments and businesses collaborate to improve graduates' soft skills?
12. In what ways can student internships in the workplace strengthen students' / future employees' soft skills?

13. In what ways can business/academic advisory boards improve soft skills development among students and employees?
14. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the priority for soft skill development and the processes to support soft skill development?

Closing Protocol

At the end of the interview, the researcher will complete the following steps.

1. Set expectations with the participant for follow-up response and communication, including providing a summary of the interview within a few days to enable the participant to review for accuracy and clarity.
2. Find out if the participant would be willing to participate in additional email communication, if necessary, for clarification or amplification of responses.
3. Ask if the participant has any questions.
4. Thank the participant for his or her time and participation.

Appendix C: Invitation to Participate in Research

Customizable Letter to Employers and Faculty Members

RE: Request for an Interview from Doctoral Student

Hello [title and name],

I am a doctoral (EdD) student at Walden University (School of Education), completing research for my dissertation. I came across your work on [description and personalization of the participant's work and expertise] on the [participant's institution] website. Given your experience in these areas, I wanted to reach out to you since my research topic is on soft skills development—what contributes to the soft skills gap in the workforce and what can be done to improve soft skill development (such as in creativity, leadership, critical thinking, collaboration, ethical decision-making, and problem-solving) in the workplace.

Would you be please consider participating in my study—I would need about 30-45 minutes of your time for a confidential Zoom interview with me. The interview will be part of my data collection to understand your perspectives and experiences regarding soft skill development. For example, what are your thoughts on improving soft skill development among students and within the workforce? What have you observed are effective approaches that strengthen soft skills development among students as they prepare for their future work context / internally in your institution or among clients?

Approval: I have already received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University to reach out to potential participants.

Note: I am not using [participant's institution] as a local site for my study, so this interview will be in your personal capacity as a practitioner and not part of a general study on the work of [participant's institution].

If you're interested:

- I'll email more details on the nature of the study, the interview questions, and the interview process. *I'll also outline the steps I'll take to guarantee full confidentiality and protect your and your institution's privacy.*
- I'll ask you to review an *Informed Consent Form* from Walden University.

Also, to show my appreciation for your time participating in my doctoral study, I'll be happy to email you an Amazon gift card of $25.

Thank you for your consideration,

Naveen Ramnanan

LinkedIn profile link