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Stakeholders' Perspectives on Development and Acquisition of Soft Skills among Information Technology Undergraduate Students in Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract: This study investigated stakeholders' perceptions of the development and acquisition of soft skills among IT undergraduate students among universities within the Nairobi Metropolitan area, using the mixed-methods approach. The study employed the two-stage cluster sampling procedure to select 10 out of 31 universities (five private and five public) in the Nairobi Metropolitan Region. The study selected 1,143 Information Technology undergraduate students from 3,814 enrolled students. A semi-structured questionnaire collected quantitative data, specifically capturing stakeholders' thoughts on soft skills. Data analysis encompassed quantitative techniques such as descriptive statistics and linear regression. The findings reveal a notable disparity between perceptions of stakeholders and actual development of soft skills among the IT undergraduates. Therefore, there is a need to enhance teaching methods, closely align curricula with stakeholders' expectations, and incorporate specialized modules to cultivate soft skills.

Keywords: Curriculum evaluation; IT undergraduates; soft skills; stakeholder perception; teaching methods.

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Introduction

There is a growing need for graduates who possess both cognitive and soft abilities. Heckman and Kautz (2012) defined cognitive skills as talents that facilitate thinking, learning, memory and problem solving. On the other hand, soft skills encompass a dynamic blend of cognitive and meta-cognitive abilities as well as interpersonal, intellectual, and practical skills (Kyllonen, 2013). Employers contend that the lack of soft skills, as opposed to the cognitive skills required to carry out activities in the labor market, is the reason why millions of university graduates are unemployed or underemployed (Deloitte, 2018; Qizi, 2020a). Therefore, universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) face difficulty equipping their

graduates with the soft skills required by the global economy of the twenty-first century.

Research has indicated the significance of cultivating and obtaining soft skills among graduates (Majid et al., 2019; Marzuki et al., 2024). An individual's soft skills can determine success and failure in the workplace. Educators and businesses argue that possessing the right skills is crucial for achieving successful career outcomes and fostering continuous learning (Dubey & Tiwari, 2020). Employers prefer to hire candidates who will be productive. The absence of essential soft skills among undergraduates pursuing Information and Technology degrees has resulted in elevated levels of unemployment among IT graduates. Employed individuals frequently depend on mentorship and in-service training programs to enhance their productivity in the workplace (Igwe et al., 2022a). Nevertheless, there is a dearth of research on the correlation between the acquisition and growth of soft skills in undergraduate students.

Some people have disregarded the development of soft skills with the assumption that these skills organically progress in conjunction with one's personality. Contrary to technical skills taught directly, some people perceive that students learn soft skills such as communication and leadership via life experiences. Nevertheless, recent revelations emphasize soft skills' crucial significance in achieving success in one's work (Kumar, 2014). Proficiency in communication and the capacity to adjust to different professional settings are essential for successfully navigating diverse work contexts. As a result, the incorporation of intentional soft skills into educational and business programs is now widely acknowledged as indispensable. This strategy improves individual skills, promotes collaboration and reinforces the ability of a company to adapt to changes in a globalized economy. Therefore, placing emphasis on the development of soft skills complements one's technical ability, guaranteeing comprehensive preparation for the highly competitive job market (Habecker, 2024; Igwe et al., 2022a).

A study (Kaushal, 2016) showed a widespread mismatch between the demands of the industry and the development of soft skills as a result of teachers' general indifference. Similarly, Succi and Canovi, (2020) noted that institutions need to ensure that students understand how important it is to develop and acquire soft skills. The body of research thus identified shortcomings in the current state of soft skill development and acquisition in higher education.

Studies have examined university graduates' employability in the workforce (Ahmed et al., 2012; Fulgence, 2015; Kalufya & Mwakajinga, 2016). Rather than focusing on the connection between graduates' development and acquisition of soft skills, these studies looked at employers' perceptions of graduate soft skill gaps in the labor market. Although the studies did not examine the obstacles to obtaining and developing soft skills, some focused on the teaching and learning of soft skills in higher education. Few other studies have examined integrating soft skills into universities' undergraduate curricula (David & Saeipoor, 2018) but have not measured the acquisition component. Some studies have primarily focused on the incompatibility between the skills demanded by employers and the training provided by higher education. There has been insufficient examination of the processes involved in developing soft skills and the obstacles that university students face in acquiring these skills, particularly in developing countries such as Kenya.

In Nigeria and South Africa, studies by Igwe et al. (2022a) and Schultz (2022) demonstrated the value of soft skills for graduate employment. Some studies show that since the primary goal of universities is not to ensure employability, they are responsible for putting in place programs that promote the development of soft skills (Barros & Bittencourt, 2018; Dempsey & Brennan, 2018) because the employability skills are essential in a global labor market (Schultz, 2022).

Kenya has identified soft skills as a requirement for achieving Vision 2030 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Research indicates that developing soft skills increases the professional competence of university graduates (Igwe et al., 2022b; Schultz, 2022). A study conducted in Malaysia investigated the correlation between the enhancement of soft skills and the workforce's productivity. The findings revealed that the improvement of soft skills benefits employees and business performance (Bee-Lan Lok et al., 2021).

This study considered the Bachelor of IT course for two main reasons. Firstly, it was a common course offered by nearly all universities within the Nairobi Metropolitan area, apart from the Bachelor of

Education program. Secondly, the IT course is widely applicable in all sectors of the economy and thus requires both technical and generic competencies among graduates (Sipin et al., 2014). Furthermore, IT courses are central to the emerging digital economy and can take many forms, including dynamic problem-solving, creativity, imagination and simulation in emerging markets (Vy, 2021).

This study relied on the taxonomy, which focuses on the cultivation of soft skills, specifically identifying the various components and categories of soft skills that universities should prioritize in their curriculum, ensuring undergraduates learn these abilities during their higher education. Twelve categories encompassed in this study include communication skills, professionalism, critical thinking ability, teamwork and collaboration skills, stress management skills, productivity, conflict resolution and negotiation skills, ethics, workplace diversity, planning skills, self-intelligence skills and social intelligence skills (Mahasneh & Thabet, 2016). The taxonomy is vital as it enables the recognition of the fundamental soft skills incorporated into the IT curricula of universities.

Although soft skills are crucial, there is a dearth of research on the relationship between their acquisition and growth among undergraduate students. This study investigated the correlation between the growth and attainment of soft skills in undergraduate students who pursue Bachelor of Information Technology (IT) courses in Nairobi, Kenya. The study also highlighted the correlation between the development and acquisition of soft skills, as soft skills are commonly perceived as behavioral characteristics and are generally lacking in several universities.

Literature Review

This section examines existing research regarding stakeholders' perceptions of the acquisition of soft skills. The theoretical framework centers on Vygotsky's social constructivism, which highlights the significance of social interactions in the process of learning. Empirical studies investigate the perceptions of educators, employers, and students regarding the significance and incorporation of soft skills in both education and the professional environment.

Theoretical Framework

Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism posits that individuals actively develop their knowledge and understanding. The theory posits that as active learners, humans generate their knowledge. It emphasizes the importance of an integrated curriculum, where students explore a subject from multiple perspectives. Additionally, constructivists emphasize learner-centered teaching approaches (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978). The study utilizes the Vygotsky's social constructivism as a theoretical framework to comprehend soft skills development and acquisition among IT undergraduates in Nairobi Metropolitan universities. According to Vygotsky, individuals engage in social interactions and cultural situations to actively build their knowledge. This viewpoint emphasizes the study's concentration on how stakeholders perceive things and how they affect soft skills development.

Empirical Literature Review

Universities face the demand to generate highly proficient graduates equipped with diverse skills to meet the constantly evolving and dynamic job market (Succi & Canovi, 2020). Consequently, it is imperative for higher education institutions to incorporate both soft and technical abilities into their undergraduate curricula to provide a comprehensive education. Therefore, it is vital for the course curriculum to clearly outline the methodology for teaching soft skills, the estimated time needed to acquire them and the specific aspects of soft skills that undergraduates will gain at each stage of the learning process (Ivory et al., 2024). However, most academic programs at higher education institutions prioritize the teaching of technical skills and knowledge in specific subjects, disregarding the growing need for the development of soft skills in the job market (Cheng et al., 2021; Gruzdev et al., 2018; Quintans-Júnior et al., 2023).

The Association of American Colleges and Universities assessed the job skills of 400 employers in the United States with a minimum of 25 employees and undertook a survey. In the Hart Research Associates (2015) study, 613 college students participated. Among them, 455 seniors were attending four-year colleges (304 at public universities and 151 at private colleges) and 158 community college students who planned to either get an associate degree or transfer to a four-year university within the next 12 months. The results show that employers widely support the idea that acquiring a wide range of knowledge and skills is the most effective way to prepare for long-term job success. They advocate for the inclusion of comprehensive education as a standard

requirement in college, irrespective of students' chosen discipline or area of study.

A study conducted by Washor (2015) revealed that 63% of graduates do not possess the necessary skills that are vital for success in the global economy. The study indicated that the insufficient development of soft skills in graduates can be attributed to the inadequate incorporation of soft skills into the educational curricula (Washor, 2015).

In Europe, soft skills development among undergraduates has been identified as the key to transforming the global economy (Succi & Canovi, 2020). The project "Skills4Employability" has recently been undertaken by five European countries: Romania, Belgium, Lithuania, Italy and Spain. The objective of this initiative was to incorporate soft skills into the educational curricula and to realign the courses with the requirements of the job market (Conexx-Europe ASBL, 2020). The study's main objective was to provide guidance to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) throughout Europe. This was achieved by assessing the present state of the labor market from a Pan-European viewpoint.

Stevens and Norman (2016) conducted an investigation in Wellington, New Zealand, examining the industry's expectations regarding IT graduates' soft skills. Using the grounded theory, they focused on 543 IT job advertisements and interviewed 26 industry participants, the majority having 20 years of industry experience. Their examination of job advertisements established that 60% of the advertisements for technical staff expressed interest in soft skills, which was lacking among IT graduates. All the interviewees emphasized that soft skills such as creativity and teamwork brought commercial benefits to organizations. Therefore, IT undergraduates must be made aware of the relevance of soft skills.

Studies conducted in Africa show the need to integrate soft skills into education curricula (Busaka et al., 2022; Fulgence, 2015). In general, soft skills, such as collaboration, critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and creativity, are essential for university undergraduates and should be included in all academic programs offered by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Chu et al., 2017). Acquiring these soft skills will improve the calibre of IT graduates in the job market.

Debates on developing soft skills in universities in developing nations have cantered on two schools of thought (Fulgence, 2015; Munishi, 2022; Qizi, 2020b). Some researchers believe that soft skills can be taught independently of the rest of the learning content (Munishi, 2022; Tevdovska, 2015). Others recommend integrating soft skills into the subject content and curricula (Glaittli, 2018; Qizi, 2020b). The latter believe that soft skills are effectively transmitted when integrated into teaching hard (technical) skills or through the curriculum (Ahmed et al., 2012). However, for the former, lecturers have a special obligation to develop soft skills among students regardless of whether they are integrated into the curricula. Furthermore, this school of thought believes that soft skills can be acquired through experience and extra-curricular activities (Munishi, 2022).

A study in South Africa on stakeholders' perceptions of soft skills development established that soft skills were not adequately integrated into the curricula (Taylor, 2016). The researchers utilised an open-ended questionnaire and conducted a qualitative analysis of the responses to ascertain the necessity of incorporating soft skills into the technical training curriculum for students to gain these skills.

Lack of integration of soft skills into the curriculum of colleges and universities in Tanzania has been identified as one of the causes that contribute to the deficiency of soft skills among graduates from universities and colleges. In his study, Munishi (2022) concluded that the lack of soft skills among undergraduates is largely attributable to an inadequate curriculum. The study revealed that soft skills were excluded from the national education and development frameworks and policies. Nonetheless, employers constantly complain that university graduates lack the soft skills essential to make them competent in the job market. Other factors that the author highlighted were ineffective policies, poorly trained faculty, large classes, negative attitudes to soft skills training by stakeholders and poor teaching and learning methods.

Few studies have examined the incorporation of soft skills into program-specific curricula in Higher Education Institutions in Kenya. Recent research by Ondieki et al. (2019a) focused on incorporating soft skills into the Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) academic programs but failed to include university education. The study targeted 10 TVET institutions across the country. It included Kilgoris, Kangemi, Kiplabai, Magemo, and Migwani,

with a sample size of 286 students. The control group included Nduluku, Mkongani, Sero, Wakiaga, and Eiden, with a sample size of 302 students. The findings support the integration of life skills into TVET curriculums to improve learning and livelihood results.

Another study in Nairobi, Kenya, used a mixed-methods approach, gathering information from 174 participants using questionnaires and interview guides. The study reported that employers preferred graduates who were consistent, dependable and effective communicators. Consequently, the study recommended that soft skills be integrated into Kenya's higher education curriculum to break the vicious cycle of unemployment (Assan & Nalutaaya, 2018).

While employers are keen to employ graduates with soft skills, studies show that the skills included in the curriculum are rare (Busaka et al., 2022; Ondieki et al., 2019b; Qizi, 2020a). Given the importance that employers place on soft skills in the workplace, institutions of higher learning should consider incorporating skills into the curriculum to ensure that students acquire the necessary skills for success in their careers.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design. The quantitative part captures student perspectives on the development and acquisition of soft skills among IT graduates. The qualitative research component captured lecturers' and IT technicians' views.

Population and Sampling

The study employed a two-stage cluster sampling methodology to choose ten private and public universities out of the 31 universities located in the Nairobi Metropolitan Region. In the study, 1,143 undergraduate IT students participated using a simple random sampling technique from the pool of 3,814 students enrolled in IT courses across the ten universities. The data collection in this study utilized a semi-structured questionnaire to gather quantitative insights.

Table 1: Response rate

No	University Name	Total (no. of students)	Sample size required	Responses	Response Rate
1	Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology	361	108	108	100%
2	Machakos University	135	41	41	100%
3	Multimedia University	392	118	118	100%
4	Technical University of Kenya	267	80	80	100%
5	Kenyatta University	424	127	127	100%
6	Strathmore University	300	90	89	98.89%
7	African International University	184	55	55	100%
8	Zetech University	602	181	181	100%
9	Mt. Kenya University	891	267	267	100%
10	St. Paul's University	258	77	77	100%
	Total	3814	1144	1143	99.91%

Results and Discussions

Response Rate

Error! Reference source not found. indicates the response rate for ten universities within Nairobi Metropolitan, selected for this study. Notably, nine out of the ten universities exhibited a 100% response rate. These were Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Machakos University, Multimedia University, Technical University of Kenya, Kenyatta University, Africa International University, Zetech University, Mt. Kenya University and St. Paul's University. Strathmore University exhibited 98.89%.

Collectively, out of the potential 1144 respondents across these universities, 1143 students participated, resulting in an impressive total response rate of 99.91%, which is a very high response rate.

Research Question 1: How do students perceive the development of essential soft skills in their educational programs?

Most of the students (53.77%) expressed disagreement with the claim that communication skills are insufficiently covered in the curricula, suggesting that they believe these skills are adequately addressed. In the same vein, 54.51% of students expressed their disagreement with the idea that decision-making abilities are not integrated while 56.09% expressed the view that creativity skills are addressed. The inclusion of leadership abilities seems to be satisfactory as 55.57% of students express their disagreement with the notion that these qualities are absent from their education. Regarding interpersonal skills, 53.99% of students expressed their disagreement with the notion that these skills are not effectively addressed.

Table 2 Student's perceptions of soft skills development and acquisition

Perception Indicators on Curricula	Disagree	Undecided	Agree
There is a lack of communication skills aspects in the curricula	53.77%	23.38%	22.85%
There is a lack of decision-making skills aspects in the curricula	54.51%	25.42%	20.07%
There is a lack of creativity skills aspects in the curricula	56.09%	20.16%	23.75%
There is a lack of leadership skills aspects in the curricula	55.57%	20.51%	23.93%
There is a lack of interpersonal skills aspects in the curricula	53.99%	23.40%	22.61%
There is a lack of problem -solving skills aspects in the curricula	60.47%	20.60%	18.93%
There is a lack of innovative skills aspects in the curricula	59.16%	21.56%	19.28%
There is a lack of adaptability skills aspects in the curricula	55.13%	23.05%	21.82%
There is a lack of teamwork skills aspects in the curricula	66.26%	18.40%	15.34%
There is a lack of work ethic skills aspects in the curricula	60.12%	21.56%	18.32%

Table 4: Regression Estimates for Stakeholders' Perceptions of Soft Skills Development and Acquisition

Term	Estimate	Std. error	Statistic	p-value
(Intercept)	-0.0067	0.0316	-0.2130	0.8314
Stakeholder perception	-0.2945	0.0335	-8.7904	0.0000
R. squared	0.0883			
Adj. R. squared	0.0871			
p. value	0.0000			

Furthermore, 60.47% of students reported that their problem-solving skills were adequately addressed, whilst 59.16% disagreed with the notion that their courses lacked innovative skills. Moreover, 55.13% of the students believed that adaptability was adequately addressed. Teamwork skills had the highest agreement rate, with 66.26% of students disagreeing that there is a lack of teamwork skills aspects in the curricula. Finally, a majority of 60.12% expressed their disagreement with the notion that work ethic skills are inadequately addressed. The integration of soft skills into educational curricula is important for enhancing students' employability, as evidenced by other studies. Assan and Nalutaaya (2018) highlight a significant gap in the sense that while many students express interest in acquiring soft skills, they often struggle to express such skills in the job market. This disconnect suggests the necessity of embedding employability programs within Kenya's secondary and tertiary education systems to address persistent unemployment issues. Similarly, Almeida and and Morais (2023) emphasized the limited number of subjects dedicated to soft skills. Nevertheless, they noted an increasing trend towards incorporating these skills into pedagogical and evaluative methodologies across various courses. This trend reflects a growing recognition of the importance of soft skills in education.

Research question 2: How do regression estimates reveal the stakeholders' perceptions of soft skills development and soft skills acquisition?

Error! Reference source not found. presents estimate for a regression model that examines the correlation between stakeholder perceptions of soft skills development and the acquisition of these skills among university IT undergraduates in universities. The intercept (-0.0067) represents the estimated value of soft skills development when stakeholder perception is zero. The intercept of -0.0067 in the regression analysis indicates the initial degree of soft skills development when stakeholder perception is at a neutral point (zero). The presence of this negative intercept indicates a fundamental lack in the cultivation of soft skills within the existing

educational structure, highlighting the necessity for proactive actions to enhance and address this issue.

The coefficient (-0.2945) indicates that a one-unit increase in stakeholder perception is associated with a 0.295-unit decrease in soft skills acquisition among IT undergraduates. The negative correlation indicates that while stakeholders' perceptions of soft skills development improve or become more favorable, there is a corresponding decline in the actual learning of these soft skills among IT undergraduates. This paradoxical correlation suggests that although stakeholders may view initiatives aimed at improving soft skills development positively, these impressions do not correspond to measurable enhancements in students' acquisition of these skills. This discovery emphasizes a possible disparity between how things are perceived and how they are in terms of educational results. It highlights the importance of closely studying the formation of perceptions and their true influence on educational methods and student achievement.

The p-value of 0.0000 suggests a statistically significant association between stakeholders' perception of soft skills development and the actual learning of these skills. Therefore, alterations in stakeholders' perception of including soft skills in education consistently align with changes in students' capacity to acquire these abilities. The outcome emphasizes the dependability of this connection and emphasizes the significance of stakeholder perspectives in shaping educational results. The statement implies that improving stakeholder views regarding soft skills development could significantly influence the efficiency of educational initiatives that cultivate these critical qualities in students. The R-squared value of 0.0883 suggests that about 8.83% of the variation in soft skills learning among IT students depends on stakeholders' opinions of soft skills development. The adjusted R-squared value in this scenario confirms that stakeholder perception continues to be a significant component, even after accounting for the complexity of the model.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the findings and subsequent discussions, the study concludes that the IT curriculum entailed and incorporated soft skills. However, regression estimates revealed that while stakeholders' perceptions of soft skills were positive, there was a corresponding decline in the actual soft skills learning among the IT undergraduates. The study recommends that although the IT curriculum contains soft skills, and the stakeholders hold a positive attitude toward integrating soft skills, implementers of soft skills need to increase the integration pace. The increased integration pace will help to curb the gap between the perceived and actual integration of the intended soft skills.

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