

Enhancing Graduate Employability: Inculcating Soft Skills into the Tertiary Institutions' Curriculum

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Abstract

The perennial issue of graduate employability remains topical in today's turbulent labour market environment. Most graduates bear the brunt of unemployment especially in developing countries. Most qualifications offered by higher education institutions specifically focus on technical skills. With the unremitting demands of soft skills in the corporate world, there is a widespread concern and transcending need for the redesign of the curriculum to inculcate the soft skills. In dynamic environment, the tertiary institutions are required to produce highly competent graduates to bode well and meet the relentless demands of South African economy. An avalanche of diversification, globalisation, internationalisation of workplaces has a strong bearing on skill sets employees are expected to possess in South Africa. Against this backdrop, the study sought to investigate soft skills that can be inculcated into the South African's Tertiary Institutions curriculum to improve graduate employability. Using systematic review method, a total of 85 peer reviewed articles were considered as final studies for review to achieve the primary objective of this paper. From the content analysis, the findings revealed several soft skills. The paper also gave directions on how soft skills can be embedded into the university curricula to prepare graduates for the world of work.

Keywords: soft skills, generic skills, job audit, competencies, curriculum development, curriculum revision and graduate employability

1. Introduction

The overarching purpose of a higher education institution is not solely to educate students, but rather to provide a specialised educational environment that equips them with the necessary capabilities to pursue their chosen professions (Yawson & Yamoah, 2020). Nevertheless, there is a growing disparity between the soft skills that employers anticipate from graduates and the actual proficiency in soft skills possessed by these graduates (Yawson, Yamoah, Sarpong & Abban-Ampiah, 2020). Nevertheless, over and above technical skills, the employers seek to hire candidates with strong both technical and soft skills. The key two types of skills complement each other. Due to the globalisation, encroachment of multiculturalism and recent emergence of COVID-19 pandemic, the skill sets required in the labour have dramatically transformed. On top of occupation specific knowledge, employers require soft skills to gain an edge over competitors in the industry. Although some graduates who excel in educational institutions may possess adequate hard skills to enter the corporate world, due to their lacklustre response to soft skills they often face challenges which throttles their ability to adapt to the corporate environment (Jelonek & Nitkiewicz, 2020). While hard skills may help individuals progress in organisations, the absence of soft skills create a climate of uncertainty in the business and often leads to their downfall. Soft skills are inadequate for the employer to gain good performance in the current cut-throat competitive environment. Since most organisations have recognised that regardless of the profession of the candidate, the requisite to fill the gap of soft skills is critical to achieve organisational goals, as well as attracting and retaining clients (Noah & Aziz, 2020). While hard skills are essential for specific job requirements, tertiary institutions tend to focus mainly on hard skills as graduation prerequisites. This leads to a lack of soft skills

among graduates, which in turn hampers their employability (Cook, 2022). Hence, there is a need for soft skills to be integrated within the curriculum of tertiary institutions to address the issue of unemployability of graduates. There is an increasing significance of soft skills in various organisations. This emphasis on soft skills has been reinforced by Majid, Eapen, Aung and Oo (2019), who highlight that organisations place a great importance on these skills when evaluating potential employees.

Unfortunately, in South Africa academicians have not yet given full attention to the issue of soft skills despite the mounting disparity between the skills demanded by employers and the actual competencies acquired by recent graduates (Ohei & Brink, 2019; Ramnund-Mansingh & Reddy, 2021). Educational institutions, in their role as knowledge builders, bear a significant obligation to produce a proficient workforce that meets the demands of various industries. Universities are knowledge and learning production places which contribute to the provision of solutions to multi-dimensional and urgent challenges that affect workplaces. According to Daubney (2022), different from soft skills, hard skills need to be specifically aligned to the local employers' demands. In doing so, the soft skills are expected to align with indigenous knowledge and cultural capabilities. Okolie, Igwe, Nwosu, Eneje and Mlanga (2020) states that the soft skills have the likelihood of burgeoning the propensity of the graduate employability. The targeted soft skills are not only for employability but for upgrading the abilities of graduates to be productive at the workplace. Different from soft skills, all the expected hard skills are incorporated into the curriculum. It is critical that the curriculum remains current and relevant to improve the rates of graduate employment. This can be achieved when the higher education institutions identify the skills of industry and profession (Uddin, 2021). The improvement in the rates of graduate employment has the propensity to attract new students for the tertiary institution. For aligning with employability expected capabilities, the skill needs of the industry have to be inculcated in the curriculum. Although the employers appeared to be contented with discipline-specific skills and job-specific skills, there is mounting evidence that the graduates lack soft skills.

The improvement of skill development could potentially contribute to the achievement of various sustainable development goals (SDGs) 2030 which include the reduction of inequality (SDG 10), improvement of decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), end of hunger (SDG 2) and reduction of poverty (SDG 1) (Haywood, Funke, Audouin, Musvoto & Nahman, 2019). The impetus for this study is increasingly bolstered by the demands of employers and professional requirements of industry regulatory bodies. While specialists have taken a lead in the dialogue of soft skills, various learning disciplines have not yet embraced the issue of embedding them in the curriculum. The challenge is how the embedment can be accomplished (Pitan & Muller, 2020). By extending the inculcation of soft skills in the curriculum to all disciplines, the employability of graduates in different fields may increase. The curriculum changes are expected to be properly planned, organic and systematic so that all the internal stakeholders align with the curriculum (Shava, 2022; Khumalo & Utete, 2023). A proper engagement with academic staff responsible for teaching the curriculum is required for them to realise its relevance. This study makes a valuable contribution to the prevailing discourse in the field of higher education management by actively engaging students and provide them understanding of additional skills required to improve their employability. The primary aims of this study are to analyse the soft skills as a significant factor in determining employability of graduates, and to review the inculcation of soft skills in the curriculum. The objective of this study is to provide a conceptual framework for understanding the embedment of soft skills in the curriculum. Drawing on a national study, this paper interrogates curriculum development in relation to graduate employability skills. The objective of this paper is to demonstrate the heightened significance of embedding soft skills within an ever-evolving context.

1.1 Employability of Graduates in 21st Century

The contemporary era of digitalisation requires a versatile and critical thinking workforce. The ability to generate, innovate and effectively implement ideas is a fundamental expectation for those emerging from educational institutions (Pereira, Vilas-Boas & Rebelo, 2020). In South Africa, unemployment is a significant issue usually driven by factors like skill mismatches, a high proportion of unskilled labour and poor access to education. Soft skills are increasingly demanded by employers and are crucial predictors of employability in today's competitive labour market (Pitan & Muller, 2020). Despite the growing demand for competent employees, employers still struggle to fill vacancies due to the fact that most higher education graduates lack soft skills (Nabulsi, McNally & Houry, 2021). The quality of graduates and their deficiency in soft skills, which are crucial in the contemporary labour market and vital for enhancing individual employability, constitutes a highly debated and contentious topic in the existing higher education management literature. Bridgstock, Grant-Iramu and McAlpine (2019) contend that students prioritise soft abilities in a manner that differs from employers' perspectives. It has been found that only 15% of an individual's employment prospects, job retention, and career advancement can be attributed to their hard skills, while the 85% of employment success is credited to soft skills (Yao & Tuliao, 2019). Academic institutions have a responsibility to

prepare a competent workforce, but there is often an imbalance in the development of soft and hard skills. This involves understanding the industry's requirements while also recognising the limitations of educational institutions. In some cases, companies prioritise soft skills over hard skills. New graduates have been considered unemployable by employers due to their deficiency in the requisite job skills (Ferns, Dawson & Howitt, 2019). Consequently, this has led to an increased interest in exploring the relationship between employability and soft skills. Employers view soft skills as indispensable for employability and often criticise tertiary institutions for not adequately preparing graduates with the required competencies (Teng, Ma, Pahlevansharif & Turner, 2019).

1.2 The Concept of Employability

Employability relates to the likelihood of fresh graduates to be employed in the organisations (O'Shea, Bowyer & Ghalayini, 2022). The contemporary business landscape is characterised by a high degree of complexity, uncertainty and competitiveness owing to myriad of factors. Human capital is widely recognised as a critical asset for organisations across many sectors, exerting a significant influence on their performance and overall success. Fahimirad, Nair, Kotamjani, Mahdinezhad and Feng (2019) state that employers tend to prioritise the recruitment of individuals who not only possess technical knowledge and skills, but also those who demonstrate the strong soft skills. According to Abelha, Fernandes, Mesquita, Seabra & Ferreira-Oliveira (2020), there is an increasing body of evidence suggesting that soft skills possess comparable predictive power to technical and hard skills in terms of employability and earning potential. The provision of soft skills plays a crucial role in the readiness of graduates. Hence, there is a need for better alignment between graduates' perceived skills and employers' expectations.

Bierema (2019) indicates that individuals who are primarily recruited for their proficient technical abilities come to recognise the importance of acquiring essential soft skills in order to cultivate a productive, fulfilling and prosperous professional trajectory. Professionals are expected to possess a range of abilities in order to: engage in sound interactions with their colleagues; effectively convince and influence clients; negotiate with business partners; communicate with peers and superiors; collaborate and contribute to team efforts; and proficiently manage work problems (Misni, Mahmood & Jamil, 2020; Sifundza & Utete, 2023). Possessing strong technical skills may enable an individual to secure a desirable employment, whilst the possession of soft skills might facilitate the professional advancement prospects. According to Khan (2022), the effectiveness and value of hard skills relies on their level of integration with soft skills. Cotronei-Baird (2020) states that the possession of soft skills can significantly impact the quality of job performance and has the potential to improve superior outcomes for the employee. Soft skills emerge as the predominant competencies across almost all professions, even those inside intensive technical industry.

The acquisition of soft skills has consistently been recognised as a crucial factor in the pursuit of employment opportunities and sustaining a thriving organisation. In the current economic landscape, there has been a substantial change from a production-based economy to a service-driven economy (Mgaiwa, 2021). Consequently, there is an increased demand for individuals who have excellent soft skills. In addition, as a result of the phenomenon of globalisation, there has been an increased propensity for employees to engage in communication and collaboration with colleagues, clients, and business partners who possess varied cultural and societal origins (Bhatti, Alyahya, Alshiha, Qureshi, Juhari & Aldossary, 2023). In such circumstances, individuals who possess positive personal traits, attitudes, behaviour, and other soft skills would emerge as a valued resource for their respective organisations. However, a proper audit is required to detect potential discrepancies between labour market expectations and the skill levels displayed by potential employees. Mtawa, Fongwa and Wilson-Strydom (2021) states that it is advisable for employers to actively promote the development of soft skills among their entry-level employees by providing sponsorship for their participation in skill enhancement programmes.

1.3 Hard and Soft Skills

The term 'specific competences' pertains to hard skills, whereas 'generic competences' refers to soft skills (Noah & Aziz, 2020). Hard skills refer to the technical skills while soft skills relate to interpersonal and personal skills (Jelonek & Nitkiewicz, 2020). The predominant emphasis in educational institutions is placed on technical subjects, which raises the quest to provide the recognition and integration of soft skills. The technical or hard skills include the skills such as those acquired through courses in faculties of engineering, management science, humanities, arts, and similar fields which can be more defined and evaluated. According to Okolie, Nwajiuba, Binuomote, Ehiobuche, Igu and Ajoke (2020), within the field of humanities, soft skills are widely recognised as a significant determinant of employability. Soft skills are defined as behaviours expected by employers from employees when performing their assigned occupational work. For maintaining effective interactions and conducive work settings, employers look for employees with sound soft skills. Consequently, this promotes team-work. An effective team is an important asset to the employer as it facilitates collaboration and open discussion to deal with complex tasks, as well as general

improvement in communication (Yawson et al., 2020). Subsequently, this improves overall productivity in the organisation. Soft skills are integral to accomplish the organisational objectives. Hence, enhancing employability greatly relies on soft skills development. Various sectors view soft skills as important to the success of the business because graduates are future organisational leaders to be involved in decision-making and leadership activities. Employers seek employees with strong soft skills to create a conducive work environment and facilitate effective interactions with customers and other relevant stakeholders (Vezi-Magigaba & Utete, 2023; Cook, 2022).

Daubney (2022) states that while several students excel in academic institutions have the technical abilities to secure positions in the labour market, they often face termination in few months of their employment because they lack soft skills. This hinders their ability to adapt to the corporate environment. Employees progress through levels of the organisations as a result of their proficiency in hard skills, whereas their lack of soft skills often leads to their downfall. These soft skills are alternatively referred to as people skills, life skills and interpersonal skills (Pitan & Muller, 2020). Hard skills include the fundamental abilities, specialised knowledge, and technical proficiencies that someone possess within a certain field or sector. Soft skills are a valuable complement to hard skills in the development of students into successful professionals.

1.4 The Concept of Curriculum Development and the Challenges Linked to Integrating the Soft Skills into the Curriculum

The term curriculum relates to the facilities, assessment methods, supporting material, teaching methodologies, learning activities and content (Daubney, 2022). Content denotes what the lecturer teaches. It is used interchangeably with terms such as idea, concepts, knowledge and subject matter. Curriculum design comprises problem-centred, learner-centred and subject-centred (Fagan, Cooper, Chatzifragkou & Bennett, 2020). Curriculum development refers to the ways in which various aspects contributes to the adjustments in classroom activities (Fagan, Cooper, Chatzifragkou & Bennett, 2020). The revision of the curriculum is not without controversy, one of the key challenges associated with the integration of soft skills into the curriculum is that they are difficult to measure. Due to their intangible nature, it is challenging to measure soft skills. However, hard skills can be observed and measured. In addition, in an endeavour to implement the revised curriculum, the tertiary institution incurs extra costs which can be unsustainable to them. Even though assessing soft skills is challenging, it is crucial for graduates to develop these skills before entering the world of work. Furthermore, lack of available information regarding the methodology employed in the studies supporting a purported compilation of soft skills renders such lists inherently unreliable. According to Yao and Tuliao (2019), there is a contention that the development of these soft skills enables students to effectively assimilate into the organisational culture, demonstrate proactive behaviour and make valuable contributions to the overall success of the organisation. The soft skills are deemed essential due to the increasing importance of teamwork, the accelerated pace of globalisation, the ability to engage in cross-cultural dialogue and the growing necessity to retain talent within organisations. The measurement and evaluation of soft talents present challenges when compared to hard skills (Ferns et al., 2019). However, employers typically show a preference for candidates who possess both soft and hard skill. As South African organisations grapple to recover from extensive COVID-19 pandemic ravage, there is a cumulative demand for fresh graduates in different fields. Despite efforts of some organisations to hire soft skills trainers to train fresh graduates, it is expensive in the face of current harsh economic realities hence poses unparalleled and unsustainable challenge for bulk of employers especially still growing organisations. For this reason, the curriculum become an instrumental site for sustainable skilling of graduates.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the human capital theory. Based on the human capital theory, the presence of necessary skills in a graduate is essential for enhancing productivity which later brings economic advantages (Tan, 2014). The human capital theory proposes that educational accomplishment plays a crucial role in assessing the quality of human capital (Becker & Woessmann, 2009). Nevertheless, the transformations and difficulties encountered in the contemporary globalised economy necessitate the acquisition of both soft and hard skills. Therefore, it is evident that several organisations are advocating for the acquisition of soft skills due to their potential to improve competitiveness and facilitate growth. However, despite possessing a high degree of hard skills, such as technical knowledge and proficiency, graduates often lack these particular skills (Galiakberova, 2019). One prevalent and current subject of discussion in the areas of employment and unemployment pertains to the lack of soft skills which are necessary for an employee to effectively navigate the evolving landscape of labour market (Booth & Bryan, 2005). As a result, tertiary institutions are expected to prioritise the cultivation of skills of industry-ready graduates as a key institutional goal. This is driven by the thrust to adequately prepare future employees with the necessary skills. This study seeks

to assess the revision of curriculum in relation to graduate skills necessary for them to succeed in the labour market post-graduation. The study proposes potential methods for impart graduate skills inside the university environment.

1.6 Research Question Formulation

PICo strategy was used to develop the research topic (Tawfik et al., 2019). PICo involves three important concepts, namely Population, Interest and Context, which assists the authors to develop a suitable research topic for review. In this study, PICo served as a foundation of the topic as follows: Population (Graduates); Soft skills into the Tertiary Institutions' Curriculum (Interest); and South Africa (Context). The three concepts played an integral role in formulating the main research question: What are the soft skills that can be inculcated into the South African's Tertiary Institutions curriculum to improve graduate employability?

2. Method

The study conducted a systematic review to answer the research questions with the focus on providing impartial interpretation and synthesis of the results. A systematic review entails the process of identifying, selecting and synthesising research studies to give a reliable and thorough representations of the topic being investigated (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010). Currently, there is little evidence that reveal results of content analysis of articles, reports and conferences can inform curriculum development. Hence this study adopts the qualitative systematic literature review and content analysis of peer-reviewed articles and reports to synthesise the employability skills. Then, areas of variance or agreement may be identified.

2.1 Search Strategy

The study performed comprehensive literature search adhering to PRISMA. Both manual and electronic searches were conducted from Scopus and Google scholar using search terms, which include "soft skills", "generic skills", "job audit", "capabilities", "competencies", "curriculum development", "curriculum revision", "curricular", "graduate employability" and "graduate trainee" were utilised as the key words. For finding the peer reviewed reports, conferences and articles, Scopus and Google scholar were used as electronic search database.

2.2 Screening

Through the identification procedure, 153 articles retrieved successfully and would undergo screening. The term screening refers to the process of establishing the exclusion or inclusion criteria (Page et al, 2021). Moreover, in this systematic literature review, the initial criteria used was based on the past ten years, from 2013-2023. The database search revealed number of publications related to graduate employability and soft skills in South Africa. For maintain quality, the reviews only focused on peer-reviewed articles in the form of journal articles. In addition, to minimise misunderstandings, the study only considered the articles published in English. The exclusion and inclusion criteria are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Exclusion and Inclusion Criteria

Criteria	Exclusion	Inclusion
Year of Publication	Before 2013	Recent ten years (2013-2023)
Type of Publication	Not peer reviewed article	Peer-reviewed article
Type of language	Non-English	English

Articles based on reviews were excluded while peer-review articles were included. A total of 68 articles were eliminated as they did not meet the predetermined criteria, and 85 articles were left.

2.3 Data Extraction and Analysis

Excel spreadsheets were utilised to record: i) source of publications; and iii) year of publications. Two ways were utilised to analyse and synthesise the results: i) predominantly based on the sources cited; and ii) features underlying the constructs. The study adopts an extensive review of graduate employability and curriculum development. Content analysis was used to review employability skills from the final 85 articles considered in this study. Content analysis of peer-reviewed articles is an effective method that can be used to identify current soft skills required in different sectors. The revision of the curriculum is informed by reviewing articles related to graduate employability in which employers provide information regarding the soft skills required in various professions.

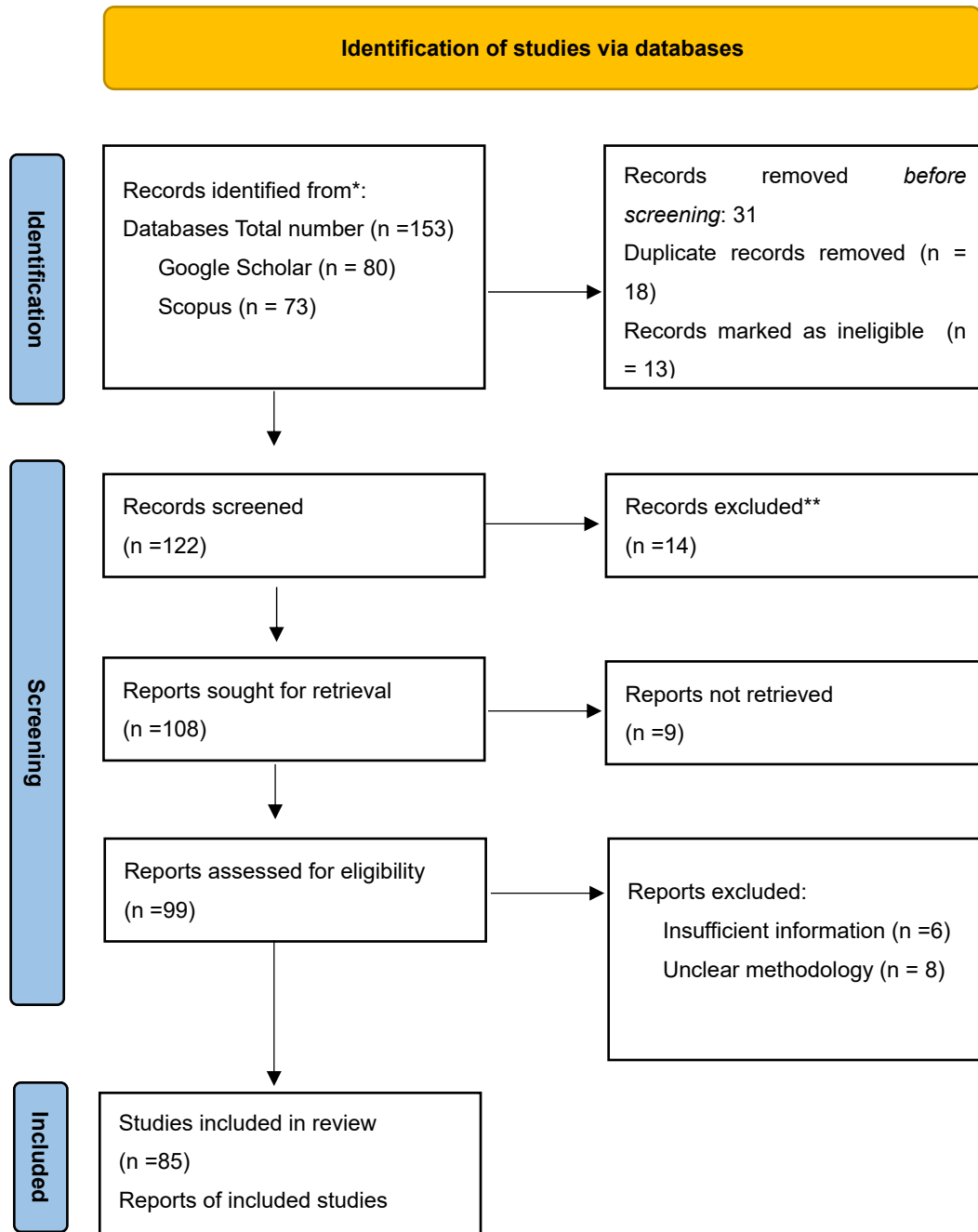


Figure 1. PRISMA

3. Results and Discussion

The findings revealed a mismatch between the competencies currently possessed by graduates and what employers expect (Yawson & Yamoah, 2020). Employers prioritises the ability to learn, problem-solving, and numeracy and quantitative literacy. The findings revealed that the majority of fresh graduates were not adequately equipped with the necessary soft skills. The study revealed that employers were particularly dissatisfied with written and oral communication, negotiation skills, and analytical and critical thinking abilities of their entry-level employees. Factors such as a poor confidence and lack of communication skills cause employers to be hesitant to hire fresh graduates. Yawson et al (2020) state that soft skills encompass the ability to effectively communicate, engage in problem-solving, demonstrate leadership qualities, exhibition of motivation, and collaborate efficiently within a team.

The prominence of soft skills, such as teamwork, communication, leadership, and critical thinking, in the hiring process is a result of various contributing factors (Jelonek & Nitkiewicz, 2020). When recruiting new employees, employers typically prioritise to select set of soft skills, such as creativity, leadership, critical thinking, communication, time management, teamwork, and problem-solving. However, the employability of an individual cannot be determined solely by a single criterion. Notably, Noah and Aziz (2020) emphasise the increasing demand for these skills among employers. Consequently, when organisations recruit new employees, the significance of these skills should be regarded on par with technical skills. The significance of these soft skills relies on recognition afforded to them as integral components of employability abilities. Familiarising oneself with the concept of each talent facilitates the acquisition process. The Table 2 shows the prominent soft skills emerged from analysis of literature. The authors were coded in this Table 2 and their citations were shown in Table 3.

Table 2. Data Codification

Primary soft skills	Authors coded in numeric
Learnability - Learnability skill	3; 8;11;12;13;14;16;18;24;25;27;35;36;42;45;50;51;61;70;71;74;83
Professionally ethical skill	8;12;18;24;25;35;36;41;42;50;56;61;74;81;83
Self-Awareness skills	2;8;9;11;12;14;15;16;17;18;20;24;25;26;29;33;35;36;38;41;42;43;44;45;48;50;51;52;56;62;66;67;69;70;71;72;74;77;80;81;82;83;85
Work-life balance skills	8;12; 24;25;35;36;42;50
Self-direction skills	2;8;9;12;13;14;15;16;17;18;20;24;25;26;35;36;37;41;42;44;45;47;48;50;51;52;56;62;64;65;66;67;69;70;71;72;74;77;80;85
Results orientation skills	8;10;12;15;17;18;24;35;36;37;41;48;50;51;56;60;61;62;65;66;83
Innovation skills	6;8;10;11;12;14;15;16;18;20;21;24;25;27;28;31;32;34;35;36;37;38;41;47;50;53;62;68;80;82;83;85
Creativity skills	1;8;10;11;12;14;15;16;18;20;21;23;24;25;26;27;30;34;35;36;37;39;41;46;48;49;50;52;56;61;62;64;66;68;71;74;75;80;82;83;85
Management skills	2;7;8;9;12;14;18;19;20;21;22;24;25;26;35;36;38;41;50;74;83
Decision-making skills	8;10;12;15;16;17;18;20;21;23;24;26;34;35;36;37;38;39;41;43;48;49;50;52;53;54;56;58;60;61;62;64;66;68;70;71;72;75;76;80;83;85
Customer/User orientation skills	7; 8;10;17;24;35;36;37;41;50;77;80;83
Continuous improvement skills	8;11;12;15;16;17;24;27;35;36;37;41;50;56;83;85
Analysis skills	4;8;12;14;15;18;20;21;24;25;26;34;35;36;37;38;41;43;50;56;62;66;67;75;80;83;85
Time management	2; 5;8;12;21;22;24;25;26;35;36;38;41;43;50;66;82;83;85
Monitoring motivation skills	8;11;12 ;15;16;18;19;20;21;23;24;25;29;35;36;38;42;44;45;50;62;64;77;82;83;85
Monitoring integrity skills	8;9;11;12;13;14;15;16;18;19;20;21;23;24;25;35;36;38;42;44;45;50;62;64;66;77;82;83;85
Monitoring attitude skills	8;10;11;12;14;15;16;18;19;20;21;23;24;25;35;36;38;41;42;44;45;50;62;64;77;82;83;85
Monitoring honesty skills	8;11;12;13;14;15;16;18;19;20;21;23;24;25;35;36;38;42;44;45;50;62;64;77;82;83;85
Monitoring trust skills	8;9;11;12;14;15;16;18;19;20;21;23;24;25;35;36;38;42;44;45;50;62;64;77;82;83;85
Adaptability to change skills	2;8;11;12;16;18;21;24;25;32;35;36;37;38;42;44;45;50;53;54;58;62;64;74;77;80;82;83;85
Culture adaptability skills	5;8;10;11;14;16;18;21;24;25;30;35;36;38;42;44;45;48;50;58;60;61;62;64;65;66;83;85
Conflict management & negotiation skills	7;8;12;14;16;17;18;19;20;22;24;25;35;36;38;41;42;44;50;62;64;65;70;73;74;82;83;84
Communication Skills	1;5;7;8;10;12;14;15;16;18;19;20;21;22;24;25;26;28;31;33;34;35;36;37;38;40;

	41;42;43;44;45;50;52;54;56;58;61;62;63;64;65;66;67;68;69;70;73;74;76;77; 78;79;81;82;83;84;85
Contact network skills	7;9;8;10;11;12;15;16;18;19;20;21;22;24;25;26;28;31;34;35;36;38;39;43;44;4 6;50;52;54;56;62;64;65;70;74;75;76;79;81;82;83;84;85
Team-work skills	2;5;8;10;11;12;14;15;16;18;19;20;21;22;24;25;28;33;35;36;37;39;44;50;51;5 2;54;56;62;64;65;66;67;69;70;71;73;74;75;76;79;79;80;81;82;83;85
Analytical skills	7;8;10;11;12;13;14;18;20;21;22;24;25;28;31;32;35;36;37;38;43;44;47;49;50; 52;53;56;61;62;65;66;69;70;71;73;74;75;76;77;78;79;80;81;83;85
Leadership skills	2;4;8;10;11;12;17;18;19;20;21;22;24;25;26;31;35;36;37;38;39;40;46;47;50;5 4;55;56;59;62;63;65;70;74;80;81;83;85
Critical thinking skills	4;7;8;10;11;12;14;15;18;21;22;23;24;25;28;31;34;35;36;37;38;40;41;43;44;4 5;47;49;50;53;54;55;56;60;62;63;65;70;71;73;75;76;77;80;81;83;85
Problem solving skills	2;4;5;8;11;12;14;15;18;19;21;24;25;26;31;33;35;36;37;39;40;41;44;49;50;51 ;55;56;59;62;65;66;70;71;73;74;75;76;82;83

3.1 Embedding Soft Skills in the Curriculum

Despite a prevailing consensus and comprehension within the area of academia and industry recognising the significance of soft skills, a lack of mutual understanding appears to persist between employers and higher education institutions. It has been found that young fresh graduates usually fail to acquire an adequate repertoire of soft skills during their collegiate education (Cook, 2022). Soft skills are considered employability abilities by employers due to their importance in fostering positive relationships with colleagues and customers. The efficient utilisation of soft skills is crucial for an employee's job performance and career success (Majid et al., 2019). The provision of soft skills in final year students is crucial for securing employment opportunities. Employers often encounter the need to get ideas for courses pertaining to essential soft skills. These lessons are intended for employment-oriented programmes that cater to individuals at the intermediate to advanced levels of proficiency. Ramnund-Mansingh and Reddy (2021) state that essential competencies in the workplace encompass a range of soft skills, including effective communication, problem-solving abilities, collaborative cooperation, sound decision-making, strong leadership qualities, critical thinking aptitude, efficient time management, and innovative creativity. However, this study grouped the key dimensions of soft skills into five classes namely, managing career, managing tasks, managing enterprise or businesses, managing others and managing self. According to Pitan and Muller (2020), enhancing soft skills is a very beneficial endeavour for graduates to undertake in order to enhance their prospects for future job success. Figure 1 below show the key dimensions of soft skills.

The new curriculum can be infused with soft skills in which soft skill module become compulsory from final year. In this case all the soft skills are expected to be delivered. The content is expected to have the same standard of content across the twenty-six (26) universities such that basic employers' needs would be met irrespective of the institution the candidate is coming from.

3.2 Inculcating Soft Skills in the Curriculum in South Africa Tertiary Institutions

From the analysis of extant literature, the issue of graduate unemployment has been heightened by inadequate level of competency among graduates which mostly which fall far below employers' expectations (Daubney, 2022). Furthermore, it has been consistently reported by employers that graduates demonstrate poor communication skills, analytical skills and critical thinking (Okolie et al., 2020). The absence of soft skills has adverse consequences on various aspects of organisational performance, including staff conduct, safety measures, levels of engagement, and overall productivity. Firms are engaged in competition by leveraging the proficiency of their employees hence soft skills is of great significance (Uddin, 2021). Pereira, Vilas-Boas and Rebelo (2020) state that in the contemporary dynamic economic landscape, individuals who have completed their education at institutions of higher learning are incapable of satisfying the expectations and job-related prerequisites set out by employers.

For accurately managing the programs in a manner that reflects the labour market demands, the process of revising the curriculum is presented (Nabulsi, McNally & Khoury, 2021). As part of the process of revising the curriculum, the anticipated key dimensions of soft skills have been examined and these include managing career, managing tasks, managing enterprise or businesses, managing others and managing self. The curriculum development model (Figure 2) is utilised for guiding the process of revising the curriculum. The soft skills matrix from the analysis forms the base on which curriculum practitioners can use to revise the courses. This can increase the required graduates with

soft skill to meet occupational demands. The re-evaluation and redesign of the curriculum is the responsibility of the educators. Figure 2 illustrates a model that can be utilised to revise the curriculum. The model encompasses current environment review and need assessment of the employers to help identify the critical soft skills (Bridgstock, Grant-Iramu & McAlpine, 2019). When the skills are identified, the resources available including equipment and faculty can be assessed.

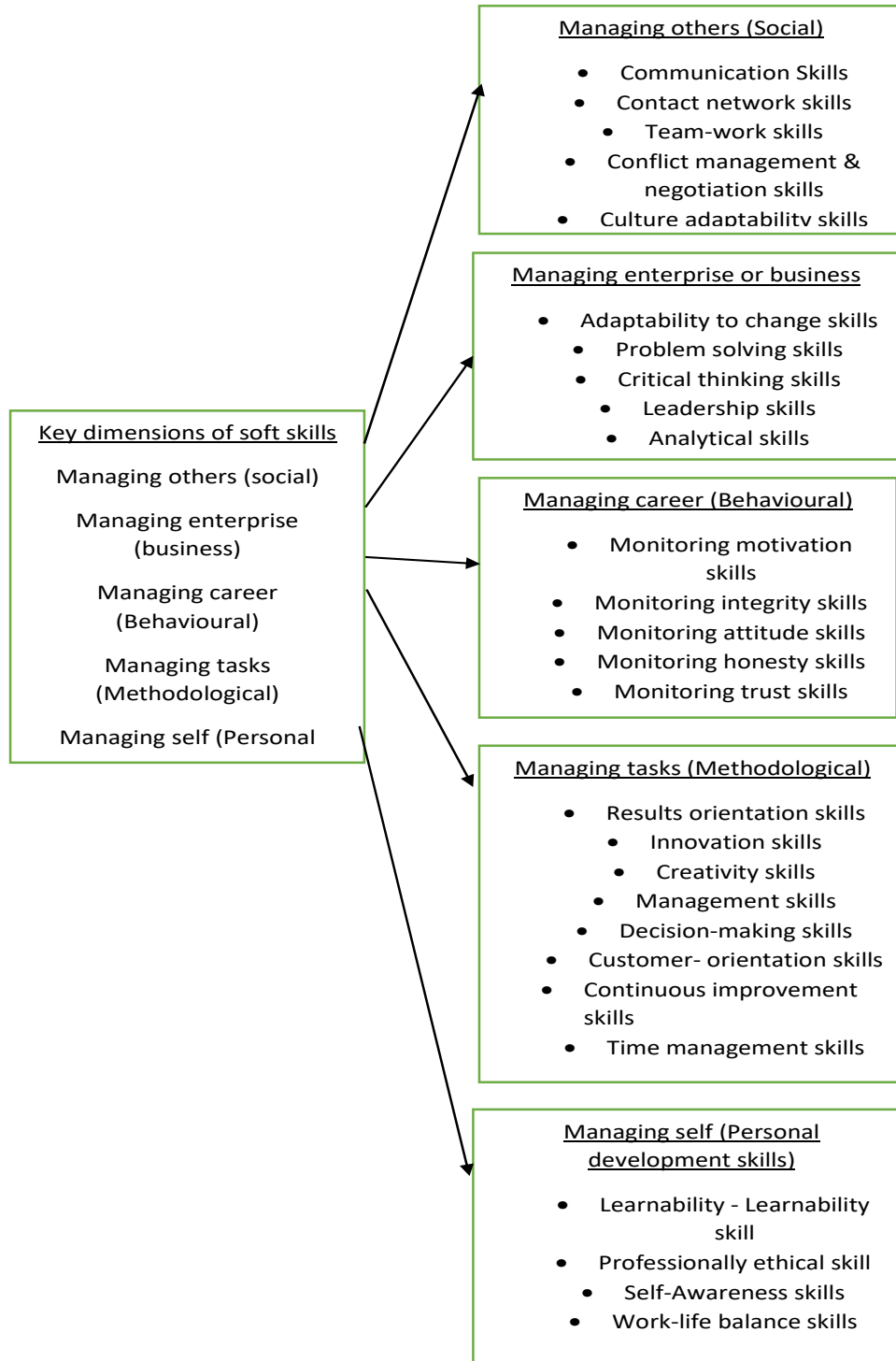


Figure 2. Key Dimensions of Soft Skills
Source: Researcher’s analysis (2023)

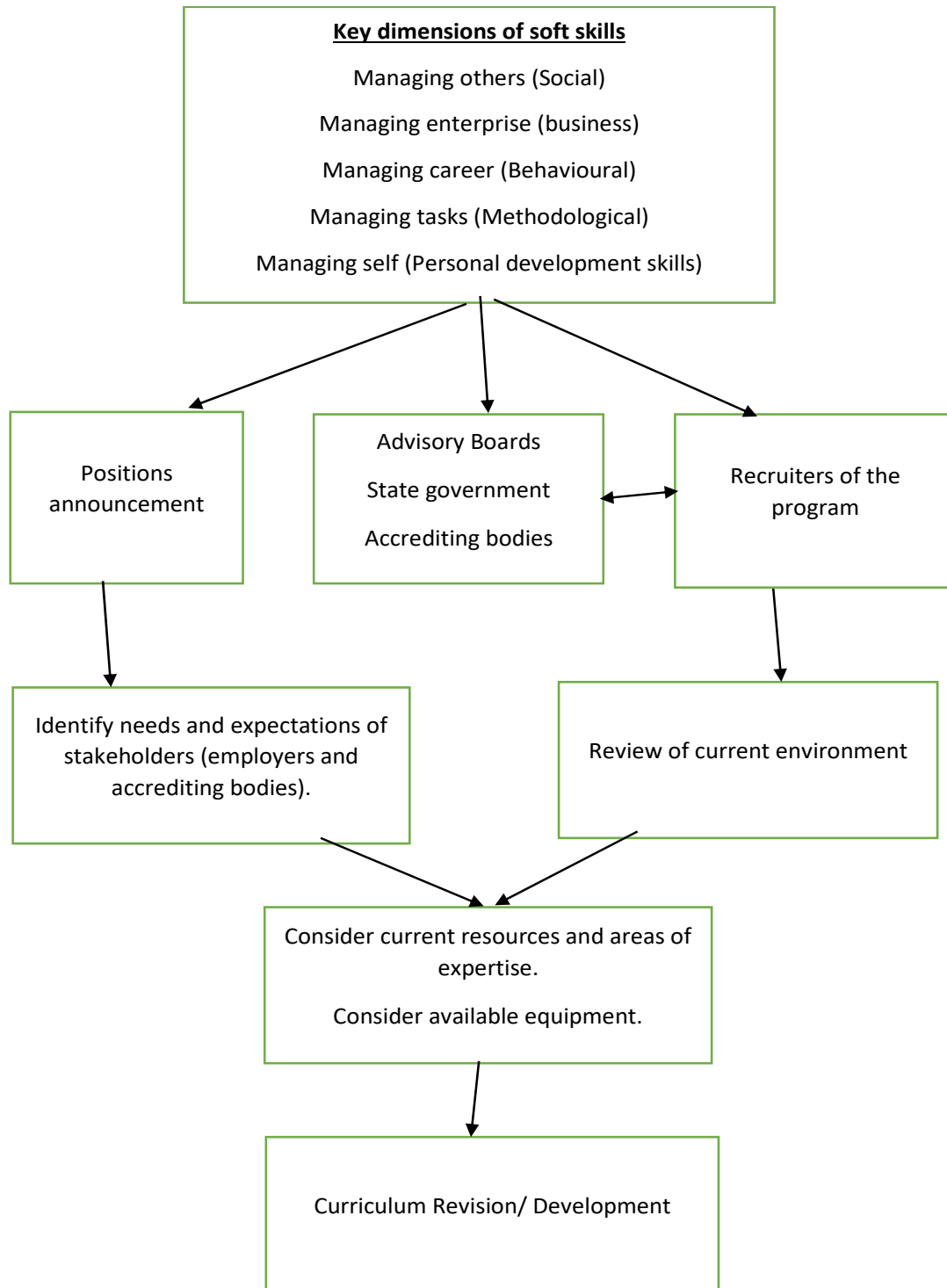


Figure 3. Curriculum Development Model
Source: Noll and Wilkins (2002). Adapted.

For inculcating the soft skills into the curriculum, the mutual-adaptation approach is recommended. Mutual-adaptation approach relates to the process of combined efforts of curriculum developers, employers and the external industry experts in adjusting the curriculum (Fagan, Cooper, Chatzifragkou & Bennett, 2020). In this case, the external industry expert team and employers advise curriculum developers the necessary modifications required

to make curriculum pertinent to contemporary work environment. In the context of this study, modifications are made by infusing soft skills into the curriculum. Then, lecturers are compelled to make adaptations to the new curriculum under the supervision of curriculum experts. External industry experts are expected to continue provide curriculum knowledge. Lecturers' role must be active in curriculum development in order to make sound improvements in curriculum change. Although it is difficult to measure the soft skills, the application of six-level taxonomy of thinking may bring excellent results (Mpuangnan & Ntombela, 2024; Athanassiou, McNett & Harvey, 2003). Knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation are the six levels of influential taxonomy (Ozola, 2014). In other words, the student is expected to have a remembrance, understanding, application, analysis, evaluation and creation of knowledge. These learning outcomes are classified into high order, medium order and lower order. The higher order includes creativity, evaluation and analysis levels. The medium order incorporates levels of application and understanding. The lower order encompasses the remembering level. Each level demands a certain cognitive change. For instance, the learning outcomes at "level of understanding" demands high processes, whereas "level of understanding" needs lower cognitive processes which includes retrieving knowledge and recalling. The learning outcomes at the "level of application" demand the use of knowledge to perform tasks in the new environment. In addition, the learning outcomes at the "level of analysis" require high cognitive changes. This include breaking down of the main part into subparts. The learning outcomes at "the level of evaluation" encompasses setting objective criteria by giving judgements regarding the validity of the phenomenon. This incorporates the assessment of anticipated outcomes, weaknesses and strengths. Until lectures draw a plan to accomplish the sets of learning outcomes at certain levels and perform the assessments of the same learning outcomes, learning and teaching are bound to fail. Misalignment occurs when students are being taught at a "level of remembering", but are assessed at creativity, evaluation, analysis, application or understanding levels. For effective teaching of soft skills, an adjustment to the variations of learning outcomes is indispensable. The Figure 3 below shows the teacher curriculum implementation continuum.

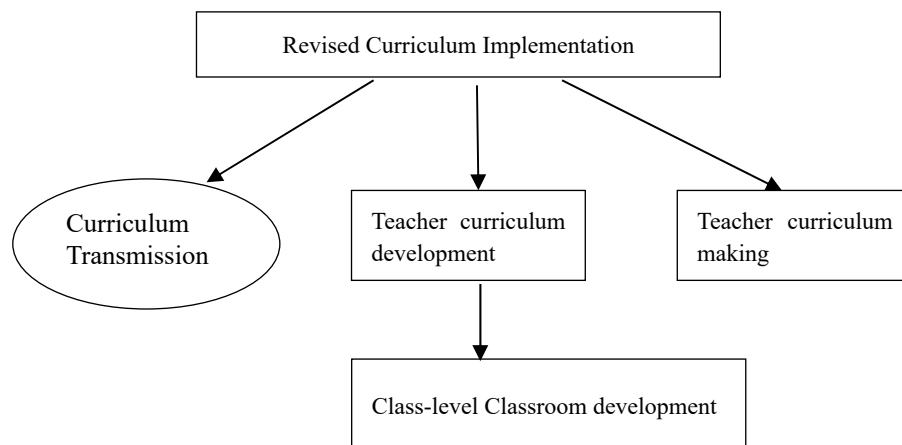


Figure 4. The Teacher Curriculum Implementation Continuum

Source: Warner (2021). Adapted.

3.3 Inculcating Soft Skills into an Academic Curriculum

The module of soft skill needs to be done at the final stage and should be treated as one of the core modules in the curriculum of the final exiting year. The course should cover topics such as key dimensions of soft skills namely, managing career, managing tasks, managing enterprise or businesses, managing others and managing self. The first topic should be "managing tasks" which should focus on results-oriented skills, innovation skill, creativity, management skills, decision-making skills, customer or user orientation skills, continuous improvement skills, analysis skills and time management. The second topic must be "managing enterprise or business" which incorporates adaptability to change skills, problem-solving, critical thinking and leadership skills. The third topic of module should be "managing others" which includes communication skills, contact network skills, team-work skills, conflict management and negotiation skills. The fourth topic of module must be "managing-self" which must incorporate learnability skill, professionally ethical skill, self-awareness skills, life balance skills and self-direction.

The fifth topic should cover “managing career” which includes motivation skill, monitoring integrity skill, monitoring attitude skill, monitoring honesty skill and monitoring trust skill. After both in-class exercises, the students may come back together as an entire group to discuss and debrief about their experiences working on these activities. Role plays and in-basket need to be incorporated in-class exercises, thereafter whole group would meet to debrief and discuss about their experiences on the practical activities.

The soft skills must be acquired by every graduate entering the corporate world, failure to do he or she can be labelled incompetent (Noah & Aziz, 2020). The change of the curricula requires a close examination of the various factors which includes faculty skills, resources, students, current curricula and institutional environment. The redesign of the curriculum must be based on need and context (Adanlawo & Chaka, 2023; Yawson & Yamoah, 2020). The current curriculum requires regular upgrade especially considering the everchanging of required soft skills at the workplace. In the mutating situation of globalisation, soft skills have become crucial than the hard skills. In developing soft skills, a great effort should be given to practical exercises than theoretical teaching of content. The training methods for soft skills may include group discussions, debates, and role plays. Furthermore, there must be sessions on interpersonal skills, group dynamics, etiquettes and body language. Finally, curriculum must serve as a helping hand to graduates to move ahead in their selected career path with confidence (Bridgstock et al, 2019). The findings of this study can be utilised by tertiary institutions to identify potential skill deficiencies and design appropriate programmes for the development of soft skills. The final year students should be afforded an opportunity to develop strategies to practise the soft skills. The focus should be on providing soft skills based on industry needs. Higher education institutions should focus on developing and accurately assessing these important soft skills to align with the demands of the job market. For achieving success in the corporate environment, it is imperative for both faculty members to demonstrate a willingness and receptiveness to develop and refine their soft skills of final year students. The Table 3 shows the final articles that were used to extract data of this study.

Table 3. Data Sources

Data Sources	
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4. Conclusion

The study provided concerted view from various studies in different fields regarding the soft skills that need to be inculcated in the curriculum to improve employability of graduates. The study revealed the strong correlation between soft skills and employability, especially for recent university graduates seeking to enter the workforce. It is evident that organisations require a workforce that possesses enhanced proficiency. Consequently, it is imperative to provide graduates with opportunities to improve soft skills. These proficiencies are crucial for facilitating a smooth transition from formal education environment to the labour market environment. Since the soft skills have been revealed in the literature, the program and course requirements would be developed in the curriculum. After the revision to the courses and programs, the stakeholders must be given the opportunity to review and provide supplementary recommendations. Special topic courses and electives would be based on employment demands and faculty expertise. As part of the continuous program improvement and curriculum development process, placement data and trends of recruitment of graduates must be incessantly monitored. Despite the context of the case being quite specific to emerging economies, the principles of guidance have widespread relevance for embedding soft skills

into the curricula. Overall, this study gave the comprehensive view of what employers look for from graduates, hence necessitates curriculum development, as well as graduate career path development.

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Authors contributions

Prof. Vezi-Magigaba and Dr. Utete were responsible for study design and revising. Prof. Vezi-Magigaba and Dr. Utete were responsible for data collection and analysis. Prof. Vezi-Magigaba and Dr. Utete drafted the manuscript and revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. The authors contributed equally to the study.

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