

University of Strathclyde
Department of Work, Employment and Organisation

**An exploratory study of key stakeholders' perspectives on
soft skills development for employability: A multiple case
study of Sri Lankan public universities**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Nagarajah Agilan

2023

Declaration of Authenticity and Author's Rights

This thesis is the result of the author's original research. It has been composed by the author and has not been previously submitted for examination which has led to the award of a degree.

The copyright of this thesis belongs to the author under the terms of the United Kingdom Copyright Acts as qualified by University of Strathclyde Regulation 3.50. Due acknowledgement must always be made of the use of any material contained in, or derived from, this thesis.

Signed: N. Agilan

Date: September 28, 2023

Abstract

Higher education institutions (HEI) are under increasing pressure to produce work-ready or employable graduates to meet the needs of the contemporary world of work. However, little is known about how soft skills are developed in specific HEI contexts, including the non-western context. Against this backdrop, this thesis explores soft skills development in undergraduate business education in the public universities of Sri Lanka, drawing on the theory of stakeholder identification and salience, stakeholder theory and regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive pillars. Informed by the interpretive approach, qualitative research using a case study strategy was undertaken, focusing on two regional business schools (Alpha and Beta), and comprising interviews (n=71) and a focus group (n=1). The findings suggest that academics, business undergraduates and industry experts were identified as highly salient in relation to soft skills development. Moreover, although a heterogeneous array of labels was used to frame soft skills, attributes and non-technical skills were commonly used. Further, communication and teamwork were also identified across stakeholders as required soft skills. Furthermore, regarding the stakeholders' role in soft skills development, there appeared to be consensus concerning business undergraduates, academics and industry in the form of active participants, facilitator and supporter, respectively. Regarding the barriers to soft skills development, the cultural-cognitive barrier of undergraduates' mindset was dominant over regulative and normative barriers. The theoretical contributions of thesis comprise the development of a unique conceptual framework, drawing on the key dimensions of initiation, design, delivery and assessment of soft skills, and the integration of the theory of stakeholder salience, stakeholder theory and institutional pillars to explore the development of such skills. The empirical contribution of the thesis is centred on investigating soft skills development in a developing country context, along with giving a voice to both demand-side (employers) and supply-side (academics, decision-makers, and business undergraduates) stakeholders.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the Commonwealth Commission of Scholarship in the United Kingdom for funding this research through the Commonwealth Scholarship for developing countries. This research journey would not have been possible without funding from the Commonwealth Commission.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisors Professor Dora Scholarios and Professor Ian Cunningham for their constant support throughout the doctoral research journey.

I would like to thank Dr Pauline Anderson for providing constructive feedback during the mock viva.

I would like to also thank the two case study institutions and participants who shared their insights and perspectives on soft skills development.

A special thanks go to my fiancée Girannu, daughter Madurikaa and son Raahul for their patience and unwavering support throughout the degree programme.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Higher education and graduate employability	2
1.3 The theoretical and empirical gaps	3
1.4 Thesis aims	5
1.5 Country context and methodological approach	6
1.6 Structure of the thesis	7

CHAPTER 2: EMPLOYABILITY AND SOFT SKILLS IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

2.1 Introduction.....	10
2.2 The utility of soft skills.....	11
2.3 The skills discourse: Conceptual ambiguity, and divergent perspectives.....	14
2.4 Soft skills and perspectives of graduate employability.....	17
2.5 Graduate employability models.....	21
2.5.1 The USEM model.....	22
2.5.2 The CareerEDGE model.....	23
2.5.3 The career management for employability model.....	24
2.6 The case for soft skills as an integrated component of graduate employability	25
2.7 Chapter conclusion.....	26

CHAPTER 3: THEORISING THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

STAKEHOLDERS IN SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR EMPLOYABILITY

3.1 Introduction.....	27
3.2 Identifying key stakeholders.....	28
3.3 Using the lens of stakeholder theory.....	33
3.4 Higher education stakeholders and their role in enhancing soft skills for employability.....	36
3.5 Barriers to soft skills development through the lens of institutional theory.....	43
3.6 Chapter conclusion.....	44

CHAPTER 4: CONCEPTUALISING SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT PROCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

4.1 Introduction.....	46
4.2 Operationalising soft skills development in HEIs.....	46
4.2.1 Initiation.....	47
4.2.2 Soft skills design: The curriculum.....	57
4.2.3 Soft skills delivery.....	59
4.2.4 Soft skills assessment.....	61
4.3 Barriers to soft skills development.....	62
4.3.1 Institutional barriers.....	63
4.3.2 Stakeholder-related barriers.....	65
4.3.3 Contextual barriers.....	66
4.4 Conceptual framework and research questions.....	68
4.5 Chapter conclusion.....	72

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 Introduction.....	73
5.2 Philosophical perspective: An interpretivist approach to understanding soft skills development in HEIs.....	74
5.3 Research design.....	76
5.3.1 The choice of a case study approach.....	79
5.3.2 Multiple case study design.....	80
5.4 The empirical context: Country context, and selection of cases.....	81
5.5 Fieldwork: Overall process and challenges.....	86
5.6 Research participants.....	87
5.7 Data collection methods.....	89
5.8 Data analysis method.....	95
5.9 Evaluating the quality of qualitative research.....	98
5.10 Personal reflexive account.....	101
5.11 Ethical issues and considerations.....	103
5.12 Chapter conclusion.....	105

CHAPTER 6: SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN BUSINESS SCHOOL ALPHA

6.1 Introduction.....	106
6.2 The context of the case study Alpha.....	106
6.3 Identification of salient stakeholders connected to soft skills development.....	107
6.4 Key drivers of soft skills development.....	110
6.5 Initiation.....	110
6.6 The role of stakeholders in soft skills development.....	116
6.6.1 Business undergraduates as active participants.....	116
6.6.2 Academics as facilitators.....	118
6.6.3 The supportive role of industry.....	120
6.7 Design: The curriculum.....	124
6.8 Delivery of soft skills.....	126
6.9 Assessment of soft skills.....	131
6.10 Barriers to soft skills development.....	134
6.11 Chapter conclusion.....	142

CHAPTER 7: SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN BUSINESS SCHOOL BETA

7.1 Introduction.....	143
7.2 The context of the case study Beta.....	143
7.3 Identification of salient stakeholders connected to soft skills development.....	144
7.4 Key drivers of soft skills development.....	147
7.5 Initiation.....	147
7.6 The role of stakeholders in soft skills development.....	154
7.6.1 Business undergraduates as active participants.....	154
7.6.2 Academics as facilitators.....	156
7.6.3 The supportive role of industry.....	159
7.7 Design: The curriculum.....	163
7.8 Delivery of soft skills.....	164
7.9 Assessment of soft skills.....	167
7.10 Barriers to soft skills development.....	171
7.11 Chapter conclusion.....	177

CHAPTER 8: A CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS OF ALPHA AND BETA

8.1 Introduction.....	178
8.2 Setting the stage: Case study contexts.....	178
8.3 Stakeholder identification and prioritisation.....	179
8.4 Initiation: Conceptualisation and identification of soft skills.....	179
8.5 The role of stakeholders in soft skills development.....	180
8.6 Soft skills design: The curriculum.....	181
8.7 Soft skills delivery.....	182
8.8 Soft skills assessment.....	184
8.9 Barriers to soft skills development.....	184
8.10 Broad inferences on the development of soft skills in Alpha and Beta.....	186
8.11 Chapter conclusion.....	187

CHAPTER 9: DISCUSSION

9.1 Introduction.....	189
9.2 Revisiting the research questions: Key empirical findings.....	189
9.3 Theoretical contributions.....	190
9.3.1 Overview.....	190
9.3.2 The identification and role of stakeholders in soft skills development.....	194
9.3.3 Soft skills development cycle.....	196
9.3.4 Barriers to developing soft skills: Developing country context.....	201
9.4 Empirical contributions.....	206
9.5 Chapter conclusion.....	208

CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION

10.1 Introduction.....	209
10.2 Implications for policy and practice.....	210
10.3 Limitations of the study.....	213
10.4 Avenues for future research.....	216
10.5 Conclusion.....	217

REFERENCES.....	218-261
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: A survey for decision-makers of Business School.....	262-263
Appendix B: Profile of key informants of Alpha and Beta.....	264-266
Appendix C: Interview guides of decision-makers, academics, industry experts and business undergraduates.....	267-271
Appendix D: Focus group agenda.....	272
Appendix E: Summary of comparisons of Alpha and Beta: The salient stakeholders' perspectives.....	273-274

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Differences between hard and soft skills.....	14
Table 2: Comparison of employability dimensions.....	26
Table 3: Description of stakeholder classification.....	31
Table 4: The unique characteristics of qualitative research design.....	78
Table 5: Stakeholder-based breakdown of key informants.....	89
Table 6: Key themes and the interview questions.....	93
Table 7: The thematic analytical process.....	96
Table 8: Criteria to assess the quality of case study research.....	99
Table 9: Identification of primary stakeholders.....	107
Table 10: Prioritisation of primary stakeholders.....	108
Table 11: Stakeholder salience based on power, legitimacy, and urgency.....	109
Table 12: Summary of interviews and focus group.....	110
Table 13: Key phrases used by stakeholders to indicate their own and others' roles....	123
Table 14: Soft skills development methods used – Academics' perspective.....	128
Table 15: Soft skills development interventions – Industry's perspective.....	131
Table 16: Identification of primary stakeholders.....	144
Table 17: Prioritisation of primary stakeholders.....	145
Table 18: Stakeholder salience based on power, legitimacy, and urgency.....	146
Table 19: Summary of semi-structured interviews.....	147
Table 20: Key phrases used by stakeholders to indicate their own and others' roles....	162
Table 21: Approaches to soft skills development – Academics' perspective.....	165
Table 22: Soft skills development interventions – Industry's perspective.....	169

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: The USEM model of graduate employability.....	22
Figure 2: The CareerEDGE model.....	23
Figure 3: The career management employability model.....	24
Figure 4: The conceptual framework.....	71
Figure 5: Industry's interventions in soft skills development for Alpha and Beta.....	183

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations	Meaning
AC	Academics
AHEAD	Accelerating Higher Education Expansion and Development
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DM	Decision-maker
FG	Focus group
FMCG	Fast Moving Consumer Goods
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HETC	Higher Education for Twenty-first Century
IE	Industry expert
IRQUE	Improving Relevance and Quality in Higher Education
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
UG	Undergraduate

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This thesis explores the salient stakeholders' perspectives on soft skills development within the Sri Lankan context, using undergraduate business education as a case sector. Graduate employability in general, and soft skills development in particular, has become a dominant agenda in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the recent past (Tomlinson, 2012; Succi and Canovi, 2020; Winterton and Turner, 2019). Particularly, the key dimensions of soft skills development in terms of initiation (identification and prioritisation of soft skill components), the design aspect (integrating soft skills into the curriculum), delivery (pedagogical interventions) and assessment of soft skills have been extensively examined in the mainstream literature. However, a significant gap in the literature, as will be discussed later in this thesis, is that such dimensions are not integrated into an overarching framework but, rather, treated as isolated components. Moreover, despite its major limitations of neglecting contextual factors and the overriding focus on the supply-side perspective of HEIs, the dominant theoretical framing in the graduate employability literature appears to be around human capital theory (Suleman, 2021), thus neglecting alternative theoretical lenses. Empirically, the graduate employability literature highlights that the Anglo-Saxon countries have been the major focus of research on the development of soft skills in HEIs (Tran, 2018; Okolie et al., 2020a; Winterton and Turner, 2019), leading to overlooking emerging and developing economies. Thus, this thesis addresses the contextual imbalance by exploring soft skills development in a developing country context. The empirical context of the study is Sri Lanka, which is subject to the recent higher education reforms, including the adoption of outcome-based education, embedding of soft skills in curricula, and execution of quality assurance mechanisms (Bandara, 2021).

The first section of this chapter outlines the theoretical debates and the empirical context of the thesis by drawing on the literature base regarding soft skills development. The second section presents the empirical and conceptual gaps. The research aims are outlined in the third section. The fourth section provides a brief account of methodological considerations. The final section outlines the thesis structure by giving a brief narrative of the content of each chapter.

1.2 Higher education and graduate employability

HEIs have been under increased pressure to equip graduates with the requisite capabilities to respond to the changing nature of the contemporary world of work (Benati, Lindsay and Fischer, 2021; Cheng et al., 2022; Ressler and Shaw, 2022). As the significance of the graduate employability agenda has grown, the role and utility of hard and soft skills in enhancing employability prospects have been widely scrutinised (Bui and Porter, 2010; Heckman and Kautz, 2012; Rebele and Pierre, 2019). The scholarly literature and practitioner discourse have demonstrated that to become ‘work-ready’, graduates are expected or required to possess soft skills to uniquely position themselves in a crowded and competitive labour market (Bui and Porter, 2010; Cavanagh et al., 2015; Hora, Benbow and Smolarek, 2018; Verma *et al.*, 2018). Whilst HEIs seem to heed calls for addressing the perceived ‘skills gap’ of graduates through undertaking pragmatic initiatives in the form of work-integrated learning, curriculum revision, university-industry collaboration and adoption of innovative pedagogies (Anthony and Garner, 2016; Jackson, 2015; Oliver, 2013; Yusof *et al.*, 2020), there remain perceptions about the persistent skills gap in graduates from stakeholders’ perspectives (Anderson and Sanga, 2019; Moore and Morton, 2017; Robles, 2012).

Specifically, the demand for soft skills as a complementary, value-adding, differentiating component has increased due to their portability and transferability across diverse contexts (Finch et al., 2013; Kinsella and Waite, 2021; Singh and Jaykumar, 2019). Despite the issues surrounding the conceptualisation, development and assessment of soft skills (Grugulis, 2007; Grugulis and Vincent, 2009; Matteson, Anderson and Boyden, 2016), the significance of the perceived contribution of soft skills to graduate employability has shown an increased momentum across disciplinary boundaries in higher education, such as science, education, engineering and business management (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Green, Hammer and Star, 2009; Kinsella and Waite, 2021; Schull *et al.*, 2021). Particularly, given the semi-vocational nature of business education (Wilton, 2011), greater focus has been placed on business graduates’ soft skills across developed and developing country contexts (Jackson, 2009; Jackson and Chapman, 2012; Okolie *et al.*, 2020a; Succi and Canovi, 2020). However, it has been argued that soft skills development in undergraduate business education is relatively under-researched (Azevedo, Apfelthaler and Hurst, 2012). Considering the broader context of graduate employability discourse, the present thesis is positioned within the soft skills development and employability domain, specifically situated in a developing country context.

1.3 Theoretical and empirical gaps

A review of graduate employability literature suggests the existence of both theoretical and empirical gaps. Regarding the first theoretical gap, conceptually, despite the presence of substantial scholarly literature on graduate employability, there seems to be fragmentation in soft skills development literature, particularly regarding key dimensions. In other words, the key dimensions of the soft skills development cycle, such as initiation, design, delivery and assessment of soft skills, have been treated superficially and piecemeal in the literature instead of providing a holistic perspective by integrating all four dimensions. For instance, the critical literature on individual dimensions includes desired soft skills (e.g., Andrews and Higson, 2008; Baird and Parayitam, 2019; Chan et al., 2017; Robles, 2012; Verma et al., 2018), the role of the curriculum as part of the design (e.g., Cranmer, 2006; Longley and Kensington-Miller, 2020; MacVaugh, Jones and Auty, 2014), soft skills delivery methods (e.g., Clements and Cord, 2013; Groves et al., 2018; Sousa and Rocha, 2019) and soft skills assessment (e.g., Adachi, Tai and Dawson, 2018; Crisostomo and Chauhan, 2019; Yusof et al., 2020). Although individual dimensions of soft skills development could offer insights into how each component adds value to soft skills development, they provide little perspective on how soft skills are developed given the interplay and interdependence of four dimensions of initiation, design, delivery and assessment of soft skills.

Regarding the second theoretical gap, first, much of the graduate employability literature in general, and the soft skills component in particular draws on human capital theory (e.g., Andrews and Higson, 2008; Jackling and De Lange, 2009; Jackson and Chapman, 2012; Okolie et al., 2020a; Robles, 2012). However, human capital theory has come under criticism for its proposition of universal application, thus failing to consider contextual conditions, such as the influence of social and cultural capital on graduate employability (Kalfa and Taksa, 2015; Suleman, 2021). Moreover, Marginson (2019) argues that, despite the major limitation of assuming a linear pathway between investment in education and the resultant earnings, human capital theory has been the dominant theoretical framing in empirical studies, thus overlooking possible insights that could be offered by alternative theories. Further, Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2003, p.110) emphasise how both demand and supply side conditions, known as ‘duality of employability’, influence labour market outcomes. Despite this, Brown, Lauder and Cheung (2020) argue that considering human capital theory, the exclusive focus on the concept of labour scarcity at the supply level ignores the existence of job scarcity at the demand level. As a result, addressing

skills deficiencies is given priority under the labour scarcity perspective while ignoring the impact of labour market conditions, such as technological and socioeconomic changes on labour market opportunities (Brown, Lauder and Cheung, 2020). In this backdrop, there has been a growing interest in applying stakeholder theory in the higher education context, particularly in the areas of curriculum, quality assurance, and stakeholder identification (Benneworth and Jongbloed, 2010; Chapleo and Simms, 2010; Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno, 2008). However, the particular use of stakeholder theory in investigating soft skills development is scarce as only a handful of recent studies have used this theoretical framing in empirical studies, particularly in developing country contexts (Olo, Correia and Rego, 2022; Nwajiuba et al., 2020; Otache, 2022). Secondly, it has been argued that the use of a single theoretical tool to understand the complex phenomenon of graduate employability is inadequate given the influence of multiple factors (Suleman, 2021). However, there seems to be a lacuna in the literature as only a handful of studies integrate multiple theoretical lenses to investigate soft skills development (e.g., Baird and Parayitam, 2019; Igwe, Lock and Rugara, 2022).

Regarding the first empirical gap, broadly speaking, although a substantial number of studies have focused on identifying desired soft skills and prioritising their relative salience, there has been insufficient research that explores how soft skills are developed in practice (Fettes, Evans and Kashefpakdel, 2020), particularly in developing country contexts (Tran *et al.*, 2022). Specifically, a substantial corpus of literature has focused on identifying various soft skills types expected from business graduates and assessing the relative salience of such skills from diverse stakeholders' perspectives in developed country contexts, including employers (Baird and Parayitam, 2019; Barbosa and Freire, 2019; McMurray *et al.*, 2016; Robles, 2012), business undergraduates (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Jackson, 2013b; Nikitina and Furuoka, 2012; Tran, 2013; Wilton, 2008) and academics (Jackson and Chapman, 2012; Osmani, Weerakkody and Hindi, 2017; Riley and Simons, 2016; Verma *et al.*, 2018; Wesley, Jackson and Lee, 2017). Whilst the taxonomies of soft skills identified can shed light on what soft skills are valued or expected, they pose a significant limitation in treating soft skills in a decontextualised manner (Bridgstock, 2009). In this context, it has been argued that how soft skills are developed in country-specific contexts, particularly in developing country contexts, is under-researched (Winterton and Turner, 2019; Nwajiuba *et al.*, 2020; Okolie *et al.*, 2020a) despite the suggestions that the soft skill gap and employability challenges in developing economies appear to have broader social, political

and economic implications (Damoah, Peprah and Brefo, 2021; Mgaiwa, 2021; Phan, Yapa and Nguyen, 2020; Pitan, 2016).

Regarding the second empirical gap, despite the fact that stakeholders representing the supply and the demand sides appear to have an influence on soft skills development, a substantial number of studies have relied on either drawing perspectives from supply-side stakeholders such as academics (Douglas and Gammie, 2019; Jones, 2009; Jackson and Chapman, 2012) and students (Chavan and Carter, 2018; Tran, 2013; Tymon, 2013; Wilton, 2008) or the demand-side stakeholder of employers (Barbosa and Freire, 2019; Crowley and Jeske, 2020; Finch et al, 2013; Robles, 2012). However, only a handful of studies integrate stakeholder perspectives from both the demand and supply sides of the employability equation to explore soft skills development in developed country contexts (e.g., Andrews and Higson, 2008; Verma et al., 2018).

1.4 Thesis aims

Given the fragmented nature of the literature on soft skills development and calls for more integrated skills frameworks to address graduate employability issues (Mahajan, Gupta and Misra, 2022; Tymon, 2013), the first aim of the thesis is to propose an overarching conceptual framework which integrates the key dimensions of, and barriers to, soft skills development. Particularly, the inclusion of the key dimensions of initiation, design, delivery and assessment in the framework provides an analytical lens for understanding the process of soft skills development.

The second main aim of the thesis is to understand how contextual factors shape soft skills development. The thesis explores how contextual dynamics, including a range of institutional, structural, socio-economic and cultural factors, influence the soft skills development process (Mgaiwa, 2021; Okolie et al., 2020a; Tran et al., 2022). This analysis draws on concepts from the theory of stakeholder identification and salience, stakeholder theory and institutional theory. Such integration of multiple theoretical lenses offers a unique contribution to understanding the development of soft skills in undergraduate education. In particular, while the theory of stakeholder salience enables the identification of key stakeholders, stakeholder theory assists in exploring key stakeholders' roles in soft skills development. The three institutional pillars of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive

dimensions provide a lens to identify possible supports and barriers to soft skills development.

1.5 Country context and methodological approach

The conceptual framework and the voice of key stakeholders are explored using two case studies of higher education institutions engaged in undergraduate business education in the context of Sri Lankan public universities. Empirically, given the under-researched and under-explored phenomenon, investigating soft skills development in a developing country context using multiple stakeholders' voices offers new insights into the process through which soft skills are developed. Further, another empirical contribution is the focus on stakeholders from the supply side (decision-makers, undergraduates, academics) and demand side (employers), thus integrating two sides of the graduate employability perspective.

The methodological approach adopted in this thesis is guided by the philosophical approach of the interpretive/constructivist paradigm which advocates for socially constructed realities, thereby leading to multiple interpretations (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011). Given that key stakeholders may have varying perspectives regarding soft skills development and such perspectives are grounded in context, an interpretive/constructivist worldview enables investigating the soft skills development phenomenon in its own context (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Thus, the interpretive/constructivist paradigm informs and guides this empirical study's subsequent phases of research design, data collection and analysis.

The country context chosen for the empirical study is Sri Lanka, which is a developing economy located in the South Asian region. Considering the case sector, in addition to providing free undergraduate education, the public university sector in Sri Lanka has been subject to educational reforms in the areas of curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment during the last two decades (Bandara, 2021). Specifically, as part of the educational transformation process, the World Bank funded projects of IRQUE and AHEAD, quality assurance frameworks, and outcome-based education have been implemented. Regarding the choice of two specific cases, given the selected two Business Schools represent context-bound, idiosyncratic characteristics, the in-depth exploration allows for gaining insights into how soft skills are developed in two different contexts. In line with the tenets of the interpretive/constructivist paradigm, a qualitative multiple case study (Stake, 1995;

Merriam, 1998) was chosen as an appropriate research strategy as it allows for exploring the phenomenon of soft skills development within its real-life context using the voice of key stakeholders. Moreover, informed by the philosophical assumptions and the methodological choice of the qualitative approach, data collection involved interviews and focus group with key stakeholders and documentary review.

1.6 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into ten chapters. Chapter 2 positions the research problem of salient stakeholders' perspectives of soft skills development in undergraduate business education drawing on literature from the broad discourse around soft skills and employability. Accordingly, after discussing the emerging world of work realities and the broader challenges faced by HEIs, this chapter discusses the concept of skill and then connects it with the conceptualisation of soft skills. Then, the debate surrounding the relative significance of soft skills in enhancing graduate employability is examined within the HE context, followed by the issues associated with conceptualising, operationalising and assessing soft skills. After that, given the argument of the contribution made by soft skills in uplifting employability prospects, the position of soft skills in graduate employability is examined by reviewing the key employability models of 'USEM', 'CareerEDGE', and 'the career management for employability', which are widely used in scholarly research across diverse disciplines. Overall, Chapter 2 portrays the ongoing contentions within the literature about the conceptualisation and role of soft skills and the position of soft skills in graduate employability models.

Chapter 3 begins by introducing a range of higher education stakeholders based on their relationship to the organisation, and then identifying key stakeholders involved in soft skills development. Then, Mitchell, Agle and Wood's (1997) theory of stakeholder identification and salience is discussed as this theory provides a framework to identify key stakeholders. Thereafter, the chapter evaluates Freeman's (1984) general stakeholder theory in terms of its properties and application. After that, using this theory as a foundation, the roles and responsibilities of the key stakeholders of HEIs, academics, undergraduates and industry are scrutinised. Finally, Scott's (2014) three pillars of institutional theory in the form of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive dimensions are discussed given its relevance to exploring the barriers to soft skills development. Considering the multifaceted nature of soft skills development and the inherent limitation of overlooking contextual conditions in the

dominant theoretical framing of human capital theory in the literature, this chapter makes the case for combining these theories to better understand the phenomenon of soft skills development.

Chapter 4 draws from the arguments presented in Chapters 2 and 3 to develop the conceptual framework which guides the present thesis. First, Chapter 4 operationalises the concept of soft skills development, followed by a detailed elaboration of each dimension. Specifically, the conceptualisation and identification of soft skills in initiation, curriculum and pedagogy in design, soft skills interventions in delivery and assessment methods in the assessment are scrutinised in detail. Then, three major types of institutional, stakeholder-related and contextual barriers, which cause a negative impact on soft skills development, are examined. The final section provides a series of research questions, followed by the conceptual framework.

Chapter 5 provides the rationale for and justification of the methodological choice regarding the present study. Initially, the chapter elaborates and justifies the chosen interpretive/constructivism paradigm that underpins the present empirical inquiry. Then, the choice of qualitative research design and the underlying rationale for such choice is elaborated upon. The subsequent section justifies the selection of a multiple qualitative case study in light of the research questions and purpose of the study. Then, the next section provides a detailed account of the country's context, research setting, and the rationale for the selection of cases. Thereafter, the process of the fieldwork undertaken is explained, followed by a detailed account of data collection methods of semi-structured interviews and a focus group with key stakeholders. After that, the thematic analysis process that guides the data analysis is outlined. The subsequent sections focus on the criteria to evaluate the empirical study with appropriate justifications on how the credibility criteria are met, the researcher's self-reflection in the form of a personal reflexive account and the ethical concerns and measures taken by the researcher to address expected ethical challenges.

Chapters 6 and 7 present the findings of the two case studies of Alpha and Beta in relation to soft skills development. Each chapter begins with a brief description of the context of the cases. Then, in line with the analytical framework of initiation, design, delivery and assessment of soft skills, both chapters provide a thematic description of stakeholders' perspectives gathered through semi-structured interviews about soft skills development. In both chapters, findings are presented with participant quotes to support the key themes. Also,

findings derived from the documentary review are integrated and presented with stakeholders' perspectives whenever possible.

Chapter 8 presents a cross-case analysis by way of comparing the findings derived from Chapters 6 and 7. Particularly, considering that the four soft skills development dimensions of initiation, design, delivery and assessment and barriers to soft skills development guided the analysis of empirical findings in stand-alone cases, the cross-case analysis is framed around these key dimensions. Accordingly, commonalities and differences in soft skills development across the case studies of Alpha and Beta are presented. The final section offers some broad inferences derived from cross-case analysis of Alpha and Beta.

Chapter 9 revisits research questions and summarises key empirical findings before elaborating on the theoretical and empirical contribution of the thesis. This chapter argues that this thesis contributes in three ways to the graduate employability literature. The first theoretical contribution is the development of an overarching conceptual framework by way of drawing on four dimensions of initiation, design, delivery and assessment of soft skills. The second theoretical contribution centres on the use of multiple theoretical lenses of the theory of stakeholder identification and salience, stakeholder theory and institutional theory to explore the concept of soft skills development. The third distinct contribution of this thesis is investigating soft skills development in an under-researched, developing country context and incorporating key stakeholders representing both the demand and supply sides. Further, the findings of Chapters 6 and 7 are discussed in light of the existing scholarly literature reviewed in Chapters 2 and 4. Particularly, by situating the findings within the broader soft skills development literature, this chapter provides a rich picture of commonalities and differences between the extant literature and the findings outlined in Chapters 6 and 7.

Chapter 10 revisits the research aims, which were set out in the beginning. The subsequent section outlines the policy and practical implications for key stakeholders. Particularly, this thesis considers the need for a broader policy agenda to address the English language proficiency issues and expand access to soft skills development opportunities, such as internships to mitigate the impact of students' socio-economic status. Also, considering the practical implications, having a systematic, strategic approach to soft skills development throughout the business education programme is emphasised. The final section outlines limitations and possible avenues for future research.

Chapter 2

Employability and soft skills in the higher education context

2.1 Introduction

The accelerated pace and degree of change in the business environment have created unique challenges for contemporary organisations (Daft and Marcic, 2012) as the new workplace realities increasingly require collaborative relationships, empowered employees, flexible work practices and team-based projects to remain competitive (Lawler III, 2017; van Harten *et al.*, 2020). Lawler III (2017, p.1) asserts that ‘work, workers, and organisations are changing in significant ways, and at an ever-increasing rate, and there is every reason to believe that both the degree and the rate of change will continue to increase’. In this context, the current fourth industrial revolution has altered the nature of contemporary work and has broader implications on workforce skill requirements (Rotatori, Lee and Sleeva, 2020; Teng *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, given the prominence of the ‘knowledge worker’ (Drucker, 1999) in the twenty-first century, human capital is viewed as the potential source of competitive advantage over other resources due to its unique characteristics of adding value, rareness, inimitability, and organisation with other systems and processes (Barney and Wright, 1998).

HEIs have come under increased scrutiny and pressure regarding the development of work-ready or employable graduates (McCowan, 2015; Tymon, 2013; Verma *et al.*, 2018; Winterton and Turner, 2019). In addition, the magnitude of changes in the form of policymakers’ agenda on graduate employability, the massification of HEIs, labour market dynamics, employers’ expectations of competent graduates, the emergence of the student-as-customer model, and an emphasis on stakeholder engagement, have contributed to added complexity in terms of the direction and functioning of HEIs (Alves and Tomlinson, 2021; McArthur, 2011; Bunce, Baird and Jones, 2017; Tomlinson, 2012). In this context, the concepts of the skills gap, skills mismatch, graduate work-readiness, skills agenda, and graduate employability have become part of the dominant discourse in both academic and practitioner literature (Atkins, 1999; Bui and Porter, 2010; Cavanagh *et al.*, 2015; Moore and Morton, 2017; Hora, Benbow and Smolarek, 2018; Prikshat *et al.*, 2020).

The notion of the graduate skills gap implies the perceived difference between the expectations of employers in terms of the required skill sets of graduates and the output of

HEIs, particularly in the area of soft skills (Anderson and Sanga, 2019; Moore and Morton, 2017; Tran, 2018). From the employers' vantage point, as the traditional marketable currency of degree credentials has become a threshold or baseline criteria in the hiring process (Finch *et al.*, 2013; Tomlinson, 2008; Tomlinson and Anderson, 2021), employers appear to place a premium on soft skills to differentiate a pool of graduates in the hiring process (Andrews and Higson, 2008; McMurray *et al.*, 2016; Robles, 2012). As employers demand work-ready graduates with the required attributes to fill entry-level graduate positions, HEIs are expected to be involved in and develop graduates' desired capabilities to remedy the soft skills gap in order to enhance employability prospects (Okolie, Nwosu and Mlanga, 2019; Rae, 2007; Verma *et al.*, 2018). Despite the pragmatic interventions undertaken by HEIs in the recent past to address the above challenge, it appears that there remain concerns about the sufficiency and relevance of soft skills developed in HEIs to fulfil labour market requirements (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Jackling and De Lange, 2009; Nankervis, Prikshat and Dhakal, 2018).

First, this chapter describes the broader context of the changing world of work, higher education and the emergence of skills narrative, followed by the utility of soft skills. Then, this chapter examines conceptual ambiguities surrounding the conceptualisation, measurement and assessment of soft skills. After that, the multifaceted concept of employability is introduced, followed by emergent conceptualisations on employability. Thereafter, the significance and interconnectedness of soft skills are examined using the 'USEM', 'CareerEDGE', and 'career management' employability models, which have been extensively deployed in graduate employability literature. Finally, the case for soft skills as an integrated component is examined using the above three employability models.

2.2 The utility of soft skills

The discourse on skills and skills-based approaches has become ubiquitous in the management lexicon since Katz (1955) coined the term 'skills' in the seminal article on 'skills of an effective administrator'. According to Katz, concentration on the innate personality traits or qualities of a person offers a distorted picture (what a manager has or possesses); instead, skills can only be observed when managers exhibit or display them whenever carrying out job-related tasks. For instance, Phillips and Gully (2012, p.97) define skills as 'the capability to perform tasks accurately and with ease', and Parlamis and Monnot (2019, p.227) view it as 'the extent to which a person is able to exhibit proficiency in a

particular domain’. Similarly, Peterson and Van Fleet (2004, p.1298) believe skills to be ‘the ability whether to perform some specific behavioural task or the ability to perform some specific cognitive process that is functionally related to some particular task’. In this context, skills are considered, to a great extent, learnable and both accumulated experience and practice appear to influence the degree of proficiency of skills (Beenen and Pichler, 2016). Moreover, the embodiment of skills can often be observed through the execution of actions leading to specific outcomes (Whetten and Cameron, 2011). However, it has been argued that the use of different labels such as attributes and qualities to denote skills contributes to conceptual confusion (Payne, 2000). Also, another complexity regarding conceptualisation and measurement of skills, according to Grugulis and Stoyanova, (2011, p.519), is that ‘skill is a multifaceted construct that is difficult to define and even harder to establish satisfactory proxies for.’

Katz (1955) classifies skills into three broad types: technical, conceptual and human skills. While technical skills focus on specialised expertise in handling methods, processes and techniques of a discipline, conceptual skills require a holistic understanding of how various systems and subcomponents are integrated and work together (Katz, 1955). Katz emphasises that human skills in communication, working effectively in a team, and interpersonal skills to manage intergroup and intragroup dynamics are vital at all hierarchical levels. It has been argued that the label ‘human skills’ is foundational to the development of the concept of soft skills (Matteson, Anderson and Boyden, 2016).

The debate on the role of skill domains in enhancing an individual’s performance has become contested in the literature (Gardner, 1999; Grugulis and Vincent, 2009; Payne, 2000). It has been argued that ‘cognitive intelligence’ alone is insufficient and other factors, including social skills, influence a person’s effective performance to a large extent (Goleman, 1995); particularly, the ‘personal qualities’ of an individual act as a differentiating factor over academic ability in hiring (Goleman, 1998). Goleman (1995) coined the term ‘emotional intelligence’ as a cluster of competencies, which consist of interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions and which influence a person’s success. Whilst the debate on the role of cognitive intelligence in an individual’s success is ongoing, Gardner (1999, 2011) argues that ‘multiple intelligences’ not ‘a single intelligence’ generally known as general intelligence (“g”) often shape a person’s success in life. For instance, apart from linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence, ‘personal intelligence’ in the form of interpersonal and intrapersonal

intelligence, is also significant for an individual to progress and succeed (Gardner, 2011). Moreover, based on the empirical study, Heckman and Kautz (2012, p.451) argue that ‘achievement tests miss, or more accurately, do not adequately capture soft skills [...]’.

Despite the contested perspective on their relative value, it is suggested that both hard and soft skills are necessary to enhance graduate employability (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Gale *et al.*, 2017; Grugulis, 2017; O’Leary, 2013). In the broadest sense, whilst hard skills are defined as cognitive, subject-specific or domain-specific, and technical (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Beenen and Pichler, 2016; Davis and Muir, 2004; Griffiths *et al.*, 2017), soft skills are conceptualised as generic, transferrable, non-technical and employability-enhancing components (AbuJbara and Worley, 2018; Hirsch, 2017; Rao, 2014; Robles, 2012; Weber *et al.*, 2009). More precisely, whereas hard skills focus on acquiring a body of technical or specialised knowledge to perform a specific job role or set of tasks as defined in the job description (Davis and Muir, 2004), soft skills as transferable competence facilitate the application or use of non-technical skills in a range of situations or contexts (Hurrell, Scholarios and Thompson, 2013). Literature suggests that the demand for, and the role of, soft skills have increasingly gained momentum in the contemporary world of work as they are perceived to be both value-adding and differentiating components from the perspective of employers in graduate recruitment (Finch *et al.*, 2013; Kinsella and Waite, 2021; Singh and Jaykumar, 2019).

Regarding the utility of soft skills, it is argued that the possession of generic skills as a complement to hard skills (Schulz, 2008) allows better utilisation of hard skills, resulting in improved performance on the job (Wesley, Jackson and Lee, 2017) and their transferability in a range of situations (Barbosa and Freire, 2019). Moreover, from the employers’ perspective, as the possession of soft skills signals the levels of preparedness of graduates to enter into the world of work during recruitment and selection (Bhaerman and Spill, 1988; Tomlinson and Anderson, 2021), employers appear to place more significance on the soft skills component (Finch *et al.*, 2013). Further, due to the massification of higher education, given the widespread prevalence of degree credentials, having a degree is no longer viewed as competitive enough in the labour market (Tomlinson, 2008), and soft skills are what employers seem to rely on to gauge the work-readiness of graduates (Verma *et al.*, 2018). By synthesising the literature on soft and hard skills, Table 1 summarises the differences between hard and soft skills based on aim, focus, application, content, assessment and utility

Table 1. Differences between hard and soft skills

Dimensions	Hard skills	Soft skills
Overall aim	Develop specialised, job-specific expertise	Improve portable skills for the job market and personal success
Focus	Domain-specific (Technical knowledge)	Generic (Used in a wide range of jobs)
Application	Narrow (Tied to a specific area)	Broad (Transferable to many contexts)
Content	Highly technical (Systems, processes, theories)	Non-technical (Domain-independent set of skills)
Assessment	Relatively straightforward (Standardised criteria and rules)	Elusive and subjective (Vary person to person)
Utility	Essential to performing a job role (Defined in the job description)	Complementary to hard skills (Value-enhancing component)
Examples	Discipline-specific knowledge in accounting	Communication, teamwork, interpersonal skills

Sources: Beenen and Pichler (2016), Hora, Benbow and Smolarek (2018), Matteson, Anderson and Boyden (2016)

2.3 Soft skills discourse: Conceptual ambiguity and divergent perspectives

Despite the prominence of soft skills in scholarly research and employer rhetoric, it has been argued that there remain ambiguities surrounding the conceptualisation, identification, development and assessment of such skills (Grugulis, 2007; Grugulis and Vincent, 2009; Matteson, Anderson and Boyden, 2016; Tight, 2021). Thus, the primary challenge associated with soft skills comprises definitional problems at the broad level due to a lack of conceptual clarity as these skills are conceptualised along with various perspectives. For instance, the extant literature has shown that a range of labels such as ‘graduate attributes’ (Allen and Simpson, 2019; Belwal, Priyadarshi and Al Fazari, 2017, Barrie, 2007), ‘generic skills’ (Bunney, Sharplin and Howitt, 2015; Crebert *et al.*, 2004), ‘employability skills’ (Suleman, 2016; Wilton, 2011), ‘emotional intelligence’ (Jameson *et al.*, 2016; Tucker *et al.*, 2000), ‘non-technical skills’ (Douglas and Gammie, 2019; Jackson and Hancock, 2010), ‘transferable skills’ (Bennett, 2002; Shah, 2013), ‘graduate competencies’ (Gawrycka, Kujawska and Tomczak, 2019; Pang *et al.*, 2019), ‘pervasive skills’ (Viviers, Fouche and

Reitsma, 2016; Keevy, 2016), ‘generic attributes’ (Jones, 2010; Tempone *et al.*, 2012), ‘twenty-first century skills’ (Dean, 2019; Saavedra and Opfer, 2012), ‘graduate capabilities’ (Mtawa, Fongwa and Wilson-Strydom, 2021; Spencer, Riddle and Knewstubb, 2012), ‘workplace skills’ (Eisner, 2010), ‘core skills’ (Wesley, Jackson and Lee, 2017; Woollard, 1995), ‘professional skills’ (Tan and Laswad, 2018) and ‘socio-emotional competencies’ (Casado, Lopez and Lapuerta, 2016) have been used interchangeably to refer to soft skills across diverse disciplinary contexts.

The use of an array of labels has created complexities in arriving at a commonly agreed-upon definition because such labels imply a range of concepts, including attitudes, behaviour, values, beliefs, qualities and capabilities (Tight, 2021). First, given the use of various labels, there is a practical difficulty in comparing the findings of empirical studies (Matteson, Anderson and Boyden, 2016). Second, given the liberal use of descriptions, defining the scope of the concept in terms of boundaries seems challenging (Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2011). For instance, the linguistic inaccuracies inherent in divergent conceptions impede arriving at a workable definition and undermine the subsequent operationalisation and measurement of such skills (Grugulis, 2007). Third, the plethora of labels is likely to lead to a situation where the interpretation and understanding of the concepts differ across contexts and stakeholders, leading to competing and contested claims (Matteson, Anderson and Boyden, 2016). For instance, with regard to the use of traits as skills, Lafer (2004, pp. 117-118) argues that ‘traits such as discipline, loyalty and punctuality are not skills that one either possesses or lacks; they are measures of commitment that one chooses to give or withhold based on the conditions of the work offered’. Despite the debate about whether attitudes and appearances are new forms of (soft) skills (Grugulis, Warhurst and Keep, 2004), research evidence suggests that employers, particularly in the service sector, perceive the concept of soft skills broadly, emphasising aesthetic labour, which includes attitude and appearance (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). Accordingly, to better use employees’ emotions for organisational benefits, employers not only seek personal qualities, such as sociability when hiring, but also actively groom employees through training and supervision to perform emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983).

Due to ambiguities and complexities surrounding the concept of soft skills, there are challenges in identifying, developing and assessing such skills (Matteson, Anderson and Boyden, 2016). It seems that because of the subjective nature of soft skills, their assessment

seems challenging, in part because soft skills predominantly reside ‘in the eyes of the beholder’ (Grugulis, 2012, p.190). In the case of labelling attributes, attitudes, and other qualities as soft skills, Grugulis and Vincent (2009, p.599) caution that such conceptions could lead to ‘legitimised discrimination’ through ‘gendered and racial assumptions’ in the labour market due to the subjectivity in assessing such concepts. For example, evidence suggests that employers’ racial and other stereotypes regarding soft skills placed black men in a disadvantaged position in the labour market (Moss and Tilly, 1996). Moreover, since a particular skill or competence needs to be both observable and assessable in order to qualify its label (Martin and Pope, 2008), given that traits are innate and stable (Matteson, Anderson and Boyden, 2016), the inclusion of traits as soft skills are questionable and also misleading when it comes to identification, development and measurement of them. Overall, Green, Hammer and Star (2009, p.18) succinctly summarise the complexities of graduate attributes (soft skills) in the HEI context:

... there appears to be considerable confusion over how graduate attributes should be defined, what these attributes look like within each discipline, how they should be taught, assessed and evaluated and how their adoption should ultimately shape teaching practices in higher education.

The concept of soft skills has come under criticism for having a narrow focus due to the influence of human capital theory (Wheelahan, Moodie and Doughney, 2022), and ignoring the role of other variables, such as forms of capital (Tomlinson, 2017), in framing graduate employability. For example, given the shifting and transforming nature of the contemporary world of work, Parlamis and Monnot (2019) argue that the term ‘soft skills’ requires replacement as the term lacks legitimacy due to terminological inexactitude. The authors proposed a comprehensive perspective to reflect the contemporary reality known as ‘Competence in Organisational and Relational Effectiveness’ (CORE), which covers relational and organisational skills. Similarly, Hora, Benbow and Smolarek (2018, p.31) argue that the soft skills paradigm overlooks the contextual dynamics, particularly ‘structural, cultural, and socio-economic forces’ that appear to influence the development of such skills. They propose an alternative paradigm coined as ‘the cultural capital paradigm’, which acknowledges the influence of variables, such as context, culture, and power relations in competence development. Moreover, Urciuoli (2008, p.212) argues that due to the emergence of the neoliberal agenda and the influence of corporations in shaping skills discourses, skills have become commodities in the form of ‘self-commodification’, thereby making skill development initiatives as a marketable and profitable business for organisations.

Furthermore, Atkins (1999) criticises the over-emphasis on employability skills in HEIs as ill-conceived and misleading as employers are reluctant to afford the cost to develop graduates' skills, but demand 'oven-ready' graduates. Another notable criticism against soft skills has centred on the premise that such skills can be nurtured elsewhere, and HEIs may not be the best place to develop soft skills because HEIs are expected to serve a broader purpose of expanding student learning experiences (McCowan, 2015; Tran, 2015).

2.4 Soft skills and perspectives of graduate employability

The concept of employability, in general, is viewed from two perspectives: worker and graduate employability (Akkermans *et al.*, 2024a). While worker employability refers to the process that individual workers in the workplace undertake to enhance their career prospects, graduate employability is concerned with how graduates, by utilising their capabilities, are likely to secure employment (Akkermans *et al.*, 2024a). In this context, the concept of graduate employability, a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, is viewed as an evolving phenomenon as variables are added from time to time to reflect the changing nature of the world of work (Small, Shacklock and Marchant, 2018). It is suggested that, whilst employers frame graduate employability through the prism of 'work-readiness' (Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2009), scholars conceptualise it by drawing on their disciplinary perspectives (Clarke, 2018). There appear to be divergent conceptualisations of graduate employability in the literature as both stakeholders' perspectives and contextual dimensions influence its framing (Williams *et al.*, 2016; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). For instance, Hillage and Pollard (1998, p.xi) offer a broader perspective by incorporating supply-side (human capital) and demand-side factors (labour market and personal contexts) in framing employability:

Employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment. For the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they seek to work.

However, Yorke (2006, p.8) defines employability at an individual level as:

A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.

In addition to emphasising the role of skills, and attributes (human capital), Yorke believes that becoming successful and applying human capital to benefit a broad spectrum of stakeholders are the hallmarks of graduate employability. However, while accepting Yorke's

(2006) framing of employability, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) argue that individuals be 'satisfied' with the chosen occupation in addition to becoming 'successful'. Accordingly, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007, p.280) define employability as 'having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful'. Further, by incorporating the concepts of self-reliance, adaptability and situational awareness in applying human capital, Small, Shacklock and Marchant (2018, p.151) conceptualise employability as:

The capacity to be self-reliant in navigating the labour market, utilising knowledge, individual skills and attributes, and adapting them to the employment context, showcasing them to employers, while considering external and other constraints.

In sum, it is apparent that, while the definitions presented above diverge in terms of outcomes (narrow or broad), they conceive graduate employability through the prism of skills and attributes. As a result, HEIs have come under pressure to focus on skills development to enhance employability prospects for graduates (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006).

The concept of graduate employability has been subject to the criticisms of narrow focus (Bridgstock, 2009), simplistic perspective (Hora *et al.*, 2020), and a slippery concept (Christie, 2017), because of the lack of a unifying theoretical framework that integrates different strands of the employability literature (Romgens, Scoupe and Beusaert, 2020). Nevertheless, in general, the literature suggests that graduate employability has been framed around the skills and attributes of individuals, which are believed to enhance the potential of individuals to become employable (Harvey, 2001; Mgaiwa, 2021). However, despite the multifaceted nature of the concept of employability, the dominant conceptualising of employability via skills and attributes has come under criticism (Behle, 2020). In this context, McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) advocate for a holistic, broader perspective in framing graduate employability as various factors shape the likelihood of securing a job. Accordingly, the interplay between individual factors, personal circumstances and external factors collectively determines the nature of employability (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). By expanding the interactive framework of McQuaid and Lindsay (2005), Behle (2020) proposes a holistic framework applicable to the HEI context, where the external factors in the interactive framework are divided into 'enabling support systems' and 'labour market' while preserving the other two dimensions of individuals factor and circumstances in the new model. Further, Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2004) emphasise that, despite the concept of graduate employability being influenced by supply and demand sides, more focus has been placed on

how individuals' possession of capabilities translates into employability prospects (absolute dimension). Thus, they argue a broader conceptualisation of employability, incorporating both absolute and relative dimensions (labour market conditions), is needed to acknowledge the duality of employability. While acknowledging the influence of labour market conditions on graduate employability, in this thesis, the working definition adopted for graduate employability is an individual's capability to obtain and maintain employment through a series of occupations chosen by him/her (e.g., Bridgstock, 2009; Hillage and Pollard, 1998).

Considering the criticism levelled against the dominant framing of graduate employability via human capital perspective, the graduate employability literature has shown the emergence of alternative conceptualisations of employability. A notable development in the graduate employability literature has been the shift toward concepts, such as graduate identity formation, dynamic capabilities and the role of various forms of capital to enhance employability (Daniels and Brooker, 2014; Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011; Holmes, 2001). Specific focus has emerged on concepts of competing perspectives on employability (Holmes, 2013), pre-professional identity (Jackson, 2016a), dynamic capabilities (Finch *et al.*, 2016) and graduate capital (Tomlinson, 2017).

One example is Holmes (2013) who argues that graduate employability in higher education could be viewed through the lenses of possessional, positional and processual perspectives. The possessional element emphasises acquiring the needed skills and attributes for later usage. The possessional perspective can be observed in HEIs where curriculum-based methods are deployed to embed skills to improve graduate employability prospects (Holmes, 2013). Accordingly, despite the portrayal of a fixed or static view, increased attention has been given to the possession of human capital, particularly skills in the form of subject-specific and generic to enhance employability (Clarke, 2018). The positional view of employability highlights 'social positioning and status' (Holmes, 2013, p.540). Consequently, the social class of graduates in the form of privileged or disadvantaged backgrounds seems to, directly and indirectly, affect employability prospects (Clarke, 2018). Employability, when seen as processual, advocates the process-oriented view of forming a graduate identity by undertaking a series of continued interactions and engagements to position graduates in the labour market (Divan *et al.*, 2019). Accordingly, by showcasing the skills and capabilities gained in the degree programme to employers (Clarke, 2018), 'an agreed identity' (Holmes,

2013, p.50) could be formed when employers' expected identity is congruent with graduates' displayed identity.

A second perspective in the graduate employability literature is offered by the identity perspective of employability. Here, the focus has been on profiling an ideal graduate in relation to employability (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011). Particularly, an emerging concept in the literature regarding graduate employability is the formation of pre-professional identity (Jackson, 2016a). As the shortcomings existing in skills-based perspectives on employability, mainly the narrow focus on a set of employability skills, impede arriving at a broader perspective of employability, Jackson (2016a, p.926) defines pre-professional identity as 'an understanding of and connection with the skills, qualities, conduct, culture and ideology of a student's intended profession'. As a result, students develop a clear understanding of their professional self during the degree programme by examining external cues and internal qualities by engaging with a wide range of communities such as employers, professionals, careers service, and student societies (Jackson, 2016a; 2017). Accordingly, though students are expected to play a decisive role in constructing such an identity, the process is considered a shared responsibility (Jackson, 2017). Nevertheless, although it is graduates who develop and frame their identities initially, employers appear to have more leverage in shaping such identities 'by virtue of economic power' (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011, p.565).

A third emerging view on graduate employability is centred on developing the dynamic capabilities of students to meet the dynamic, volatile, and uncertain labour market (Finch *et al.*, 2016). In the strategic management literature, while 'dynamic' refers to 'the capacity to renew competencies to achieve congruence with the changing business environment', 'capabilities' implies 'appropriately adapting, integrating, reconfiguring internal and external organisational skills, resources, and functional competencies to match the requirements of the changing environment' (Teece, Pisano and Shuen, 1997, p.515). According to Teece and Leih (2016), uncertainty forces organisations to shift their thinking from the static view of capabilities to more fluid dynamic capabilities to respond to numerous challenges, including hyper-competition. Finch *et al.* (2016) argue that current graduate employability could be viewed through the lens of dynamic capabilities as the changes in the business environment are unprecedented and dynamic, requiring an integrated set of resources. In contrast to the static view of matching skills to labour market conditions, the

dynamic capability view advocates that graduates are expected to be proactive in developing capabilities to face the rapid changes in the business environment (Finch *et al.*, 2016).

The final contemporary employability perspective is centred on identifying and harnessing various forms of graduate capital to enhance graduate employability. To avoid the micro interpretations of employability through the prism of skills-based approaches, Tomlinson (2017) proposes a broad-based graduate capital model consisting of identity, cultural, social, psychological and human capitals. Tomlinson *et al.* (2017, p.28) define graduate capital as ‘key resources that confer benefits and advantages onto individuals, enabling them to be more equipped and ready to negotiate the challenges of entering the labour market’. The interactive nature of the five forms of capital as an integrated system implies that graduate employability needs to be viewed from a long-term perspective (Tomlinson, 2017). While human capital encompasses skills and knowledge in the form of subject-specific technical knowledge coupled with career-building skills, social capital refers to the networks and relationships built through graduate-employer engagement (Tomlinson, 2017). Moreover, identity capital reflects the magnitude of investment made by graduates to shape their personal narrative to enhance employability prospects, and psychological capital provides resources for graduates in the form of increasing self-efficacy, resilience and adaptability (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2017). Finally, cultural capital supports cultural knowledge and skills acquisition while having awareness and confidence to adapt to organisations (Tomlinson, 2017).

2.5 Graduate employability models

The previous section reviewed the alternative conceptualisations of graduate employability, but such conceptualisations focus on a narrow concept, such as pre-professional identity and provide a descriptive account, such as dynamic capabilities. Thus, this section examines the models of graduate employability to demonstrate the positioning of soft skills in these models. Given the abstract, evolving and multifaceted phenomenon of graduate employability, various employability models have been proposed to advance theory and practice (Behle, 2020). Although a number of models have been proposed, such as ‘the USEM model’ (Knight and Yorke, 2002), ‘the career management for employability model’ (Bridgstock, 2009), ‘the CareerEDGE model’ (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007), and ‘the processual employability model’ (Krouwel, Van Luijn and Zweekhorst, 2020), three of the most widely cited models are examined below. While the USEM model was chosen because

of its scientific or academic focus and wider acceptance, the rationale for choosing the CareerEDGE framework was due to the practical utility and accessibility of the model to higher education stakeholders. Further, the career management for employability model was incorporated given its unique focus on career management skills which are overlooked in other employability models.

2.5.1 The USEM model

Instead of viewing employability through a skills prism, Knight and Yorke (2003, p.7) observe that employability needs to be conceptualised as ‘skills plus’. In this regard, the integrated model proposed by Knight and Yorke (2002), known as the USEM model, is intended to capture these skills plus perspectives. In this model, the acronym USEM stands for U (Understanding of the subject), S (Skills – subject-specific and generic), E (Efficacy beliefs), and M (Metacognition). Accordingly, Knight and Yorke (2003) advocate that employability results from the collective functioning of the four interrelated components rather than a single component alone. Knight and Yorke (2002) posit that attention is often paid to subject matter understanding and discipline-specific and generic skills in higher education curricula without considering essential variables of efficacy beliefs and metacognition. Hence, the inclusion of self-theories, particularly self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) and the mindset (Dweck, 2017) and metacognition in the form of ‘knowledge about the self’, ‘regulation of cognition’, and ‘metacognitive experiences’ (Wagener, 2013, p.850) are considered unique features in this model (see Figure 1). However, despite the acceptance and use of the USEM model in scholarly research, it has been argued that, due to its complexity, the model has lacked widespread discourse among other constituents, including graduates and parents, who are non-experts, but important stakeholders (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007; Dacre Pool, Qualter and Sewell, 2014).

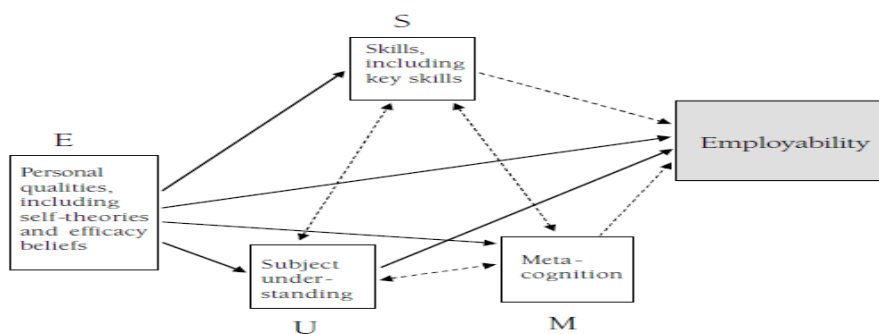


Figure 1. The USEM model of graduate employability (Source: Knight and Yorke, 2002, p.265)

2.5.2 The CareerEDGE model

The CareerEDGE model, proposed by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), captures the essential components of employability and is believed to be a practical value for scholars and practitioners due to its clarity and simplicity (Small, Shacklock and Marchant, 2018). According to the model (see Figure 2), the components in the bottom tier are ‘Career’, ‘Experience’, ‘Degree’, ‘Generic skills’, and ‘Emotional intelligence’. Mastering or developing the bottom five components is essential before moving on to the higher-order tenets of self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-esteem. Although having the much-needed knowledge and skills is necessary, they are insufficient in the absence of opportunities for critical reflection and evaluation in order for students to understand their journey towards employability and the future course of actions required (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). According to Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), the distinct aspect of this model is that once the lower-order components, including generic skills, are satisfied, with the interplay of the inter-related components of self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-esteem, graduate employability can be realised in the end.

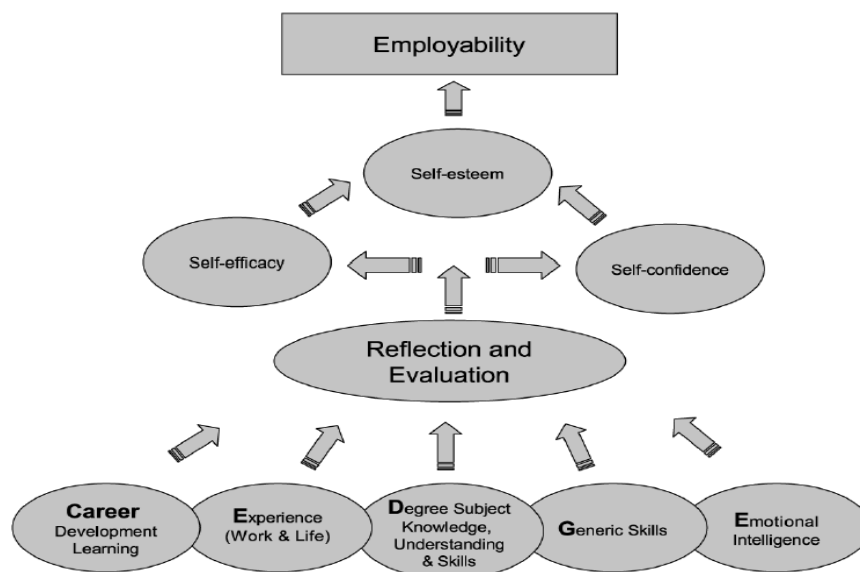


Figure 2. The CareerEDGE model (Source: Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, p.280)

Sewell and Dacre Pool (2010) suggest that, to actualise employability, institutional support and students’ participation are needed to develop the five elements at the bottom level, followed by higher-order components of reflection and evaluation. Even though the model has been praised for its clarity, simplicity and capture of the relevant variables of employability, the exclusion of the component of ‘interpersonal qualities’, despite its

contemporary significance, is considered a drawback of the model (Small, Shacklock and Marchant, 2018). Also, the model has been criticised on the grounds that the espoused employability outcomes in this model are rather abstract and, despite the identification of distinct dimensions facilitating employability, there remain questions about such dimensions' suitability within different educational situations (Krouwel, Van Luijn and Zweekhorst, 2020).

2.5.3 The career management for employability model

It has been argued that the over-emphasis on human capital in the employability literature fails to consider career management skills (Clarke, 2018; Bridgstock, 2009). According to Bridgstock (2009), the career management for employability model is intended to address this omission in the existing employability frameworks. The model consists of career management skills (self-management skills plus career-building skills), traits and dispositions of an individual, discipline-specific skills, and generic skills that contribute to graduate employability (see Figure 3). Career management skills are defined as 'the abilities required to proactively navigate the working world and successfully manage the career building process, based on attributes such as lifelong learning and adaptability [...]' (Bridgstock, 2009, p.34). Accordingly, given the influence of antecedents of traits and dispositions, building self-management skills through objective self-appraisal (self-management skills) along with using a deliberate strategy to acquire and utilise information to further the career goals of an individual (career-building skills) lead to the acquisition, display and use of discipline-specific and generic skills, resulting in enhanced employability (Bridgstock, 2009).

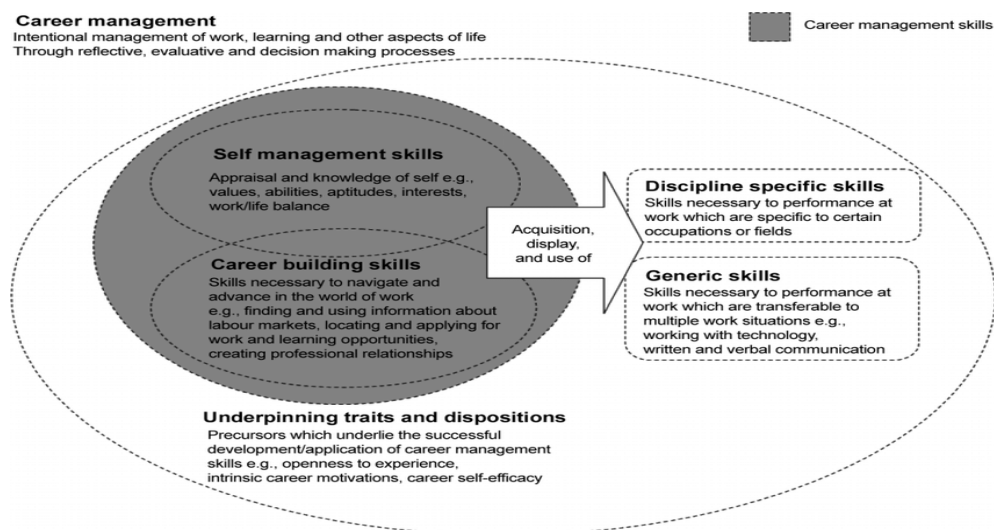


Figure 3. The career management employability model (Source: Bridgstock, 2009, p.36)

Overall, when comparing the above models of graduate employability, it is evident that the USEM, the CareerEDGE and the career management employability models share the common dimensions of hard skills, generic (soft) skills, traits and efficacy beliefs and other higher-order skills (metacognition, self-management and reflection). However, the CareerEDGE and the career management models incorporate career (management) competencies as one of the key dimensions. Notably, the graduate employability literature also suggests that career competencies appear to enhance individuals' perceived employability (Healy, Hammer and McIlveen, 2022; Small, Shacklock and Marchant, 2018). Finally, the CareerEDGE model only includes emotional intelligence as a separate dimension, which comprises intrapersonal (e.g., critical thinking) and interpersonal (e.g., communication skills) competencies.

2.6 The case for soft skills as an integrated component of graduate employability

The review of the above three employability models and perspectives in this chapter demonstrates that soft skills are one of the fundamental employability factors shaping graduate employability. For instance, research evidence has shown that managers place soft skills above an institution's academic reputation when identifying the determinants of employability (Finch *et al.*, 2013). Further, employers have consistently expressed reservations about graduates' work-readiness due to their lack of soft skills (Bui and Porter, 2010, Moore and Morton, 2017). Similarly, given that academic credentials (hard skills) have become threshold requirements (Tomlinson and Anderson, 2021; Tomlinson, 2008), higher education stakeholders increasingly emphasise the significance of soft skills in light of employability concerns (Rao, 2014). Finally, considering the argument that personality traits are relatively stable (Lafer, 2004), and skills are learnable (Beenen and Pichler, 2016), soft skills have become one of the salient dimensions in the employability equation. Based on a review of employability models related to the higher education context, Romgens, Scoupe and Beusaert (2020) identify generic skills as one of the critical dimensions of employability. Considering that soft and generic skill labels are used interchangeably in the literature, Table 2 shows that generic skills occupy a prominent position along with other employability dimensions in all three frameworks of USEM, CareerEDGE, and the career management employability models.

Table 2. Comparison of employability dimensions

Yorke and Knight (2006)	Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007)	Bridgstock (2009)
Understanding	Knowledge, understanding and skills	Discipline-specific skills
Skilful practices	Generic skills	Generic skills
Metacognition	Reflection and evaluation	Self-management skills
Efficacy beliefs	Self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem	Underpinning traits and dispositions
	Emotional intelligence	
	Career development and learning	Career building skills

Source: Romgens, Scoupe and Beusaert (2020, p.2597)

2.7 Chapter conclusion

This chapter positioned the research problematic within broader discourses around soft skills and graduate employability perspectives. Notwithstanding the ambiguities surrounding the notion of skills, possession of soft or generic skills has been viewed as advantageous from the stakeholders' point of view as it allows graduates to uniquely position themselves (positional advantage) in the labour market over other graduates. The discussion in this chapter has shown that, despite the growing significance of soft skills in policy, practice and research agenda, there remain tensions regarding the conceptualisation, operationalisation and assessment of soft skills. Particularly, it seems that there is little consensus on what is meant by 'soft skills', given the liberal use of cognate labels to denote soft skills. Regarding graduate employability, the review of the concept has revealed that although graduate employability is considered a complex and messy terrain, human capital in the form of knowledge, skills, and attributes is dominant in framing graduate employability. Moreover, it is evident from the review of the USEM, the CareerEDGE and the career management employability models that soft skills are positioned as one of the key dimensions in these models. The next chapter discusses the theoretical lenses that underpin the present empirical investigation.

Chapter 3

Theorising the role of higher education stakeholders in soft skills development for employability

3.1 Introduction

Having reviewed the case for soft skills as an integral part of graduate employability in Chapter 2, this chapter discusses the theory of stakeholder identification and salience, stakeholder theory and institutional pillars. The justification for selecting the three theoretical lenses is threefold. Firstly, the rationale for choosing the theory of stakeholder identification and salience (Mitchell, Agle and Wood, 1997) is that it is often used to identify salient stakeholder groups (Wood et al., 2021). Thus, this theory enables to identify salient stakeholder groups connected to soft skills development based on the attributes of power, legitimacy and urgency. Secondly, stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) is often deployed to explore stakeholder expectations, demands and relationships from the decision-making perspective. In this thesis, this theory offers a lens to explore key stakeholders' expectations regarding soft skills development, particularly in the design, delivery and assessment of soft skills. Thirdly, the regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive pillars (Scott, 2014) assist in examining likely barriers which have an impact on soft skills development. Considering that the use of a single theoretical lens is likely to provide a partial explanation of the process of soft skills development, integrating these three theoretical perspectives offers a better understanding of the concepts related to the development of soft skills.

In this chapter, after introducing higher education stakeholders, followed by their classification, the theoretical lens of stakeholder identification and salience is discussed in light of its utility in identifying salient stakeholder groups from the decision-makers' perspective. Then, the stakeholder theory is evaluated, followed by the debate surrounding the role of primary stakeholders of undergraduates, employers, academics and higher education institutions in enhancing soft skills. Thereafter, the three pillars of institutional theory are presented as it offers a unique perspective to examine the potential barriers affecting soft skills development in undergraduate business education.

3.2 Identifying key stakeholders

The literature suggests that understanding stakeholder influence and devising strategies based on stakeholders' perceived threats and areas for cooperation is essential for stakeholder management (Savage *et al.*, 1991). It has been argued that classifying stakeholders is imperative for organisations to effectively manage stakeholder groups (Ackermann and Eden, 2011). Considering the commercial sector, Clarkson (1995) proposes primary and secondary stakeholders as two broad ranges of stakeholder groups influencing the organisation, believing that it is the primary stakeholder group whose contribution ensures the sustained functioning and survival of the organisation. The primary stakeholder group appears to have more leverage compared to the secondary stakeholder group in influencing the organisation because of the 'higher level of interdependence' between the corporation and the primary stakeholder group (Clarkson, 1995, p.106). On the contrary, even though secondary stakeholder groups can influence the organisation or be subject to the organisation's influence, they are not fundamental in determining an organisation's survival (Clarkson, 1995).

Although stakeholder identification, classification and analysis have focused on corporations, the concept of stakeholder analysis is considered vital for public sector organisations, as well, due to the fact that a range of stakeholders is involved in producing 'public value' (Bryson, 2004, p.25). In the context of higher education, the scholarly literature suggests that stakeholders can be classified into categories based on their relationship to the organisation, role and function (Benneworth and Jongbloed, 2010; Nankervis, Prikshat and Dhakal, 2018). Generally, in the higher education system, the stakeholder groups consist of academics, students, employers, professional associations, quality assurance agencies, alumni, families, support staff, and student unions (Hughes and Barrie, 2010; Mainardes, Alves and Raposo, 2012). However, Burrows (1999), arguing the existing stakeholder classification in HEIs is narrow and misleading, provides a comprehensive profile of stakeholder categories connected to the HEI including government entities, administration, employees, clientele, suppliers, competitors, donors, communities, government and non-government regulators, financial intermediaries and joint venture partners. Empirical evidence suggests that academics, students, employers, policymakers, government, and relevant ministry and professional bodies are considered primary stakeholders in the higher education context (Mainardes, Alves and Raposo, 2010, 2012).

In relation to soft skills development and graduate employability, given the divergent perspectives of stakeholders with regard to promoting graduate employability in the higher education system, aligning the different views of multiple stakeholders is imperative to minimise the expectations gap (Cheong, Leong and Hill, 2021). Regarding soft skills development in HEIs, the extant literature suggests that, despite the prevalence of a variety of stakeholder groups, the primary stakeholders of academics, students, employers and policymakers appear to have more influence in the process (Ayoubi, Alzarif and Khalifa, 2017; Cheng et al., 2022; Kinash *et al.*, 2016; Small, Shacklock and Marchant, 2018; Verma *et al.*, 2018). Regarding the relative salience of stakeholders, the research evidence suggests that while students and academics were perceived as highly salient in Chapleo and Simms's (2010) study in a university in the UK, Mainardes, Alves and Raposo (2012) found senior university administrators and government as highly salient in Portuguese public universities.

The theory of stakeholder identification and salience developed by Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) has been considered a significant development in identifying the key stakeholders and evaluating their relative importance from the managerial decision-making point of view (Mainardes, Alves and Raposo, 2012). Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997, p.854) define stakeholder salience as 'the degree to which managers give priority to competing stakeholder claims'. Moreover, Mitchell and co-authors assert that stakeholder salience as a dynamic model intends to capture managers' perception of how different stakeholders can be prioritised using three attributes: power, legitimacy, and urgency. Accordingly, it is hypothesised that stakeholders fall into varying categories of salience based on their possession of the attributes of power, legitimacy and urgency. Accordingly, whereas 'high salience' occurs when a particular stakeholder is perceived to be in possession of all three attributes, having only two attributes is considered 'medium salience'. Importantly, managers would assign 'low salience' when they perceive a stakeholder possesses only one attribute.

Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) describe the core tenets of the stakeholder salience model based on the three attributes (power, legitimacy and urgency) and identify seven significant classes of stakeholders (see Table 3). The first tenet is that power, legitimacy, and urgency are variables. For instance, people may gain or lose power over time because of the transitory nature of power. Another aspect is that the possession of each attribute is viewed as a simple binary of 'presence' or 'absence'. Another assertion made by Mitchell and co-authors is that managers' perception of the existence of the attributes is socially constructed

than objective reality. In other words, it is the diverse perceptions of managers finally determining the status of each attribute instead of any form of objective appraisal. The last aspect is that stakeholders may not even be conscious of having one or more attributes in their possession.

The attribute of power refers to ‘the ability to make someone do something that would not otherwise have been done’ (Mainardes, Alves and Raposo, 2011, p.236). Since power has an influence on decision-making at various levels of an organisation (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1974), the bases of power can be in the form of coercive, normative and utilitarian (Mitchell, Agle and Wood, 1997). While coercive power, in general, relies on the use of force, threat, or violence, the normative power base consists of ‘symbolic resources’, and the utilitarian base focuses on ‘material or financial resources’ (Mitchell, Agle and Wood, 1997, p.865). Legitimacy is defined as ‘a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions’ (Suchman, 1995, p.574). Finally, urgency is all about ‘the degree to which stakeholder claims call for immediate attention’ (Mitchell, Agle and Wood, 1997, p.867). The urgency attribute, according to Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997), is dependent upon time sensitivity (the necessity for quicker response) and criticality (the vitality of the request or relationship to the stakeholder).

The stakeholder salience model has come under criticism for its assumptions, particularly conceptualising the stakeholder attributes and their subsequent measurement (Friedman and Miles, 2002). Since the theory of stakeholder salience is attribute-based, Mitchell and colleagues (1997) posit that the possession of cumulative attributes (power, legitimacy, urgency) determines the degree of stakeholder salience. In this regard, Friedman and Miles (2002) argue that the failure to explore the basis on which the decision on the possession of stakeholder attributes, the process of transition of stakeholder salience over time, and managers’ behaviour about stakeholder possession of a varied combination of attributes can be considered as limitations. Moreover, measuring the possession of attributes in binary terms, attributing salience for an attribute even if the level of power, legitimacy or urgency is low, and lack of measures to differentiate stakeholders when managers perceive a large number of stakeholders fall under the same category, lack of instrument and scale validation to measure stakeholder salience are viewed as additional limitations (Mainardes, Alves and Raposo, 2012). Despite the above criticisms, the theory of stakeholder salience

remains an important model with widespread application across disciplinary boundaries (See., Wood *et al.*, 2021).

Table 3. Description of stakeholder classification

Stakeholder type	Stakeholder attributes	Stakeholder classification	Stakeholder salience
Latent stakeholder	Possession of only one attribute (Power, legitimacy or urgency)	Dormant – Groups and individuals who possess only power, but not legitimacy and urgency. In the absence of the other two attributes, possession of power has little utility. However, managers need to be vigilant as this stakeholder can enhance the salience by acquiring one of the other attributes	Low
		Discretionary – Groups and individuals who possess only legitimacy but not power or urgency. As a result, there is no compulsion for managers to engage with this type of stakeholder	
		Demanding – Groups and individuals who possess only urgency but no power or legitimacy. Unless they acquire other attributes, this stakeholder is considered as only a nuisance rather than posing any danger to the firm	

Expectant Stakeholder	Possession of any two attributes out of three attributes (Power and legitimacy; power and urgency; or, urgency and legitimacy)	Dominant – Groups and individuals who have power and legitimacy. This stakeholder draws management’s attention as they have not only legitimate claims but also the ability to enforce such claims through building coalitions	Moderate
		Dangerous – Groups and individuals who possess power and urgency. Given the absence of legitimacy, this stakeholder is considered dangerous as they rely on coercion and may engage in violence, thus posing a threat to a firm.	
		Dependent- Groups and individuals who have urgency and legitimacy. Because of the absence of a power base, this stakeholder has to depend on others to execute their intentions	
Definitive stakeholder	Possession of all three attributes (Power, legitimacy and urgency)	Definitive – Groups and individuals who have all three attributes. Managers should pay immediate attention to their claims and respond quickly	High

Source: Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997, pp.874-879)

3.3 Using the lens of stakeholder theory

Stakeholder theory has emerged as an alternative to the traditional shareholder approach, advocating for a broader perspective in identifying and managing stakeholders of a firm from the vantage point of strategic decision-making (Freeman, 1984). Although the concept ‘stakeholder’ was initially mentioned in an internal document of Stanford Research Institute in the 1960s, stakeholder theory has gained both momentum and prominence in scholarly research, and practitioner discourse (For a review, see Parmar *et al.*, 2010) since Freeman (1984) published the seminal book on *strategic management: a stakeholder approach*. At the heart of stakeholder theory is the concept of ‘stakeholders’ Although the stakeholder concept can be conceptualised through broad or narrow perspectives, Freeman and Reed (1983) believe that it is the broad definition that can capture the influence of a range of stakeholders on a firm’s objectives in strategic decision-making in organisations. Accordingly, Freeman (1984, p.46) defines stakeholders as ‘any group or individual who can affect or is affected by achieving the organization’s objectives’. In a graphical representation of the stakeholder framework, Freeman (1984) places the organisation in the centre of the diagram surrounded by diverse stakeholders. The unique feature of the framework is that it portrays a picture of a dyadic, symmetric relationship between the firm and the stakeholders.

It is important to note that stakeholder theory is based on core assumptions like any other theory. The key assumptions comprise focusing on managerial decision-making (Donaldson and Preston, 1995), creating value for all stakeholders through stakeholder engagement (Freeman, Phillips and Sisodia, 2020), consideration to each stakeholder as ‘the interests of all stakeholders are of intrinsic value’ (Donaldson and Preston, 1995, p.67), emphasising ‘value maximisation’ (Phillips, Freeman and Wicks, 2003, p.486) by taking into account of all stakeholders’ interests, and managing stakeholder relationships and outcomes for the benefit of the organisation and stakeholders (Jones and Wicks, 1999).

Stakeholder theory has been subject to expansion during the last three decades as new genres of this theory have been added (Parmar *et al.*, 2010). For instance, Freeman, Phillips and Sisodia (2020) observe that the period of the 1990s where scholarly research relating to stakeholder theory gained momentum as a series of publications of seminal articles contributed to the expansion and refinement of the theory. For instance, Donaldson and Preston’s (1995) work on descriptive, instrumental, and normative aspects of stakeholder

theory, Mitchell, Agle and Wood's (1997) development of stakeholder identification and salience theory, Jones and Wicks's (1999) proposal on convergent stakeholder theory, Rowley's (1997) contribution of network theory of stakeholder influence, Frooman's (1999) framework on stakeholder influence strategies, Clarkson's (1995) classification of primary and secondary stakeholder groups, and Phillips's (1997) integration of fairness-based approach to stakeholder theory are considered as significant contributions in advancing the theory in new directions. Given that stakeholder theory is relatively new and has broader disciplinary applicability, Freeman, Phillips and Sisodia (2020) argue that the theory is subject to more scrutiny in terms of conceptual and empirical grounds.

Despite its prominence in scholarly research, stakeholder research has been subject to criticisms about its theoretical foundations (Fassin, 2009; Friedman and Miles, 2002; Key, 1999; Mitchell, Agle and Wood, 1997). Barney and Harrison (2020, p.209) succinctly summarise the state of the stakeholder theory as '...many questions, challenges, and competing perspectives, with few answers'. For instance, Fassin (2009) argue that, despite the theory's prominence, there remains a lack of clarity concerning the concepts of 'stake' and 'stakeholder' in the literature. Further, Key (1999) argues that Freeman's stakeholder theory can only be considered as a 'technique' rather than a 'theory' because it only provides a descriptive account of the interrelationship between a firm and the stakeholders, thereby failing to provide a theoretical basis. Similarly, Trevino and Weaver (1999, p.224) argue that, in the case of stakeholder theory, since the theoretical integration by way of unifying different theoretical strands is yet to take place, the appropriate label is 'stakeholder research tradition' instead of stakeholder theory.

Another significant criticism regarding stakeholder theory is that, although the theory portrays a dyadic relationship between a firm and its stakeholders, it fails to acknowledge and capture the potential linkages between stakeholder groups (Key, 1999). In other words, as Friedman and Miles (2002, p.3) note, since the central focus of the theory is on identifying and assessing stakeholders from an organization's vantage point, there remains less emphasis on analysing 'stakeholders in their own right'. Moreover, the theory's failure to take into consideration the process perspective of how stakeholder-firm relationships shift over a while (Friedman and Miles, 2002), and the assumption of the environment as static rather than dynamic (Key, 1999), can be viewed as other valid concerns in respect of the theory. Further, Mainardes, Alves and Raposo (2011) point out that, in the case of Freeman's framework of

stakeholder theory, all relationships between a firm and its stakeholders are viewed as equal. However, such an assumption goes against reality as those relationships can vary depending on a multitude of factors, including managers' perception of stakeholder salience (Mitchell, Agle and Wood, 1997). As a result, there remain more unanswered questions about 'who and what really matters' regarding stakeholder identification and relationship in Freeman's stakeholder framework (Mitchell, Agle and Wood, 1997).

Notwithstanding the advocates and critics of stakeholder theory, the theory itself has undergone substantial variations as new strands of stakeholder theories have been proposed, leading to what Freeman, Phillips and Sisodia (2020, p.215) labels 'rediscovery' of the theory. More specifically, to address the criticisms of dyadic relationships exhibited in the initial framework of Freeman (1984), Rowley (1997) proposes a network theory of stakeholder influences in which multiple forms of stakeholder interdependence can be captured. According to Rowley, a firm's stakeholders may have a relationship with each other instead of only a dyadic relationship with the firm, leading to a 'network of influences' shaping stakeholder relationships. Moreover, given the criticism of the lack of explanation on identifying stakeholders and their relative importance for managerial decision-making in stakeholder theory, Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) propose a theory of stakeholder salience which is a descriptive theory focusing on the three stakeholder attributes of power, legitimacy and urgency to determine the relative salience of each stakeholder for decision-making purposes at the managerial level. Furthermore, Frooman's (1999) model of stakeholder influence strategies counter the critics' concern about the lack of focus on stakeholders' perspectives. Frooman (1999) identifies a typology of influence strategies available to stakeholders, namely withholding, usage, direct and indirect strategies. Recently, Freeman, Phillips and Sisodia (2020, p.218) have argued that, given the lack of common consensus on the makeup of a theory in general, tensions and debates surrounding whether stakeholder theory is a theory or merely a perspective have been 'more apparent than real'. In addressing the criticisms, Parmar *et al.* (2010, p.406) argue that, given the stakeholder theory's widespread application in diverse disciplines, from a pragmatist standpoint, viewing stakeholder theory as a 'framework' may be a solution as it implies 'a set of ideas from which a number of theories can be derived'.

3.4 Higher education stakeholders and their role in enhancing soft skills for employability

Having reviewed the stakeholder theory in the previous section, this section focuses on examining the role and responsibilities of key stakeholders in soft skills development in HEIs. Although there seems to be a consensus on the significance of soft skills for employability, the continued and contested debate has been around identifying the role of various stakeholder/s responsible for formulating and executing employability strategies (Succi and Wieandt, 2019). While the ownership and responsibility to develop employability skills appear to rest with the primary stakeholders comprising employers, faculty, and graduates (Rosenberg, Heimler and Morote, 2012), there has been little agreement on the relative role of each constituent in promoting employability, resulting in the continued ‘blame game’ to shift the ownership of skills enhancement from one stakeholder to another (Succi and Canovi, 2020; Tran, 2018). In the context of the continued debate around the role and responsibility of developing soft skills and ensuring graduate employability, the discourse has been primarily centred around the primary stakeholders of HEIs, employers and graduates (Sin, Tavares and Amaral, 2019).

The role of HEIs and academics

Although the debate surrounding the role and the function of HEIs has been in the public discourse for an extended period (O’Byrne and Bond, 2014), the renewed interest and focus on HEIs have become apparent since the proliferation of the concept of graduate employability (McCowan, 2015). The paradoxical situation within which HEIs operate is how to preserve the higher purpose of providing broad perspectives and experiences (Daniel, 2017) while preparing graduates to meet the narrowly defined labour market needs (McCowan, 2015). As Tomlinson and Kelly (2018) argue, given the policy makers’ market-driven agenda of focusing on employability and students’ expectations of economic outcomes of a degree programme, including value for money of educational investment, HEIs increasingly come under pressure to balance both liberal agenda and vocational orientation simultaneously (Tomlinson, 2018). Notably, the notion of the university as a place of higher learning, scholarship and research as part of intellectual discourse has been challenged due to the emergence of the consumerist paradigm (O’Byrne and Bond, 2014). Moreover, the rankings of academic institutions through league tables, intense competition among institutions to attract students, employer-driven agenda of graduate profiles, and the shifting

narrative of policymakers concerning the role of universities based on labour market conditions have all added more complexities in defining and redefining the role of HEIs (McCowan, 2015). Specifically, in the recent past, the role and purpose of business schools have also come under scrutiny (Clarke, 2008; Starkey, Hatchuel and Tempest, 2004). They have been criticised for their lack of responsiveness to the changing world of work in the twenty-first century (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002), including failure to develop the competencies of future leaders, adherence to a traditional curriculum, and the limited dissemination of applied and practical knowledge for the benefit of practitioners and the society (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Datar, Garvin and Cullen, 2010). Importantly, evidence suggests that business schools have been criticised for the lack of preparation of graduates to meet the requirements of employers (David, David and David, 2011), mainly focusing too much on analytical techniques at the expense of skills orientation (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002).

Expecting HEIs to accept the burden in terms of addressing graduate employability seems problematic for a number of reasons. For instance, given that the employability equation is balanced by both the demand-side labour market conditions and supply-side factor of graduates produced (Iyer and Dave, 2015), the motive of expecting HEIs as a supply-side factor alone to focus on enhancing graduate employability in a dynamic and uncertain labour market seems questionable (James *et al.*, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012). For instance, because the skills development of a graduate is an ongoing process and often shaped by a range of factors, including socio, economic and cultural factors, a university is not the only place where soft skills can effectively be developed (McCowan, 2015). Also, identifying the determinants of employability is both subjective and generic, as different employers' definition of employability content often varies from employer to employer in a dynamic labour market (Boden and Nedeva, 2010). For instance, empirical evidence suggests that, in addition to subjectivity surrounding employers' selection criteria, there appeared to be a lack of clarity in articulating requisite graduate attributes by employers when hiring graduates (Wilton, 2014). Thus, when it comes to soft skills, there may be situations in which what HEIs deemed necessary are not those employers demanded or expected (Jones, 2010). Further, James *et al* (2013) argue that, while 'graduate skills' implies the skills being acquired at HEIs, 'the skills of graduates' reflect a broad spectrum of places, including home, school workplaces (e.g., part-time employment) and HEI where (soft) skills are nurtured. Thus, expecting HEIs on the supply side to bear more responsibility for developing (soft) skills of graduates is questionable (James *et al.*, 2013).

Given the restricted time and congested curriculum (Speight, Lackovic and Cooker, 2013), even if HEIs and academics attempt to include all desirable generic skills, academics may not be able to teach those skills at an optimum level; also, employers are less likely to appreciate those skills in the absence of their contextual value (Wald and Harland, 2019). Despite this, even if HEIs address the skills desired by employers, the challenge is that, as Fettes, Evans and Kashefpakdel (2020, p.187) argue, ‘the problem may not always be lack of skills, but with skills not being fully articulated and recognised during recruitment processes, and then used effectively in the workplace’. Furthermore, it has been argued that the development of generic skills is context-dependent, and disciplinary differences often shape the soft skills required to be mastered (Jones, 2010). For example, Jones (2009), based on an empirical study in Australian universities, reports that, whilst problem-solving was prioritised in physics and economics, critical thinking, problem-solving and communication were valued at varying degrees in the disciplines of medicine, law and history. Thus, contextual dynamics, including disciplinary norms exert influence on the conceptualisation, teaching and assessment of soft skills (Jones, 2010).

Academics are considered as one of the critical stakeholders in enhancing graduate employability along with students, policymakers and employers (Sin and Neave, 2016). Notwithstanding the criticisms and challenges faced by HEIs, it appears that academics have undertaken numerous initiatives to address the graduate employability issues, including embedding employability skills into the curriculum, offering work-integrated learning to develop soft skills, inviting practitioners to deliver guest lectures and speeches, obtaining inputs from employers in curriculum design, and engaging with employers through specialised projects (Cotronei-Baird, 2020; Nghia, 2018a; Sin and Amaral, 2017). In addition, the shift in focus towards student-centred learning and outcomes-based education initiatives (Hannon, McBride and Burns, 2004; O’Brien, Wittmer and Ebrahimi, 2017; Stanley and Marsden, 2012) are intended to facilitate the development of soft skills to enhance graduate employability. For instance, recent empirical evidence suggests that academics’ support in enhancing graduate work-readiness has a positive effect on graduates’ perceived employability (Petruzzello *et al.*, 2023). However, it has been argued that, in addition to the opportunity cost incurred by focusing on soft skills at the expense of hard skills, neither the HEIs nor academics are suitable to undertake employability skills development, because academics may not have the required expertise to teach generic skills (Rebele and Pierre, 2019).

The role of employers

The competition to attract graduate talent to fill entry-level graduate positions and the importance of screening and selecting ‘work-ready’ graduates with the required knowledge and skills have prompted employers to engage in graduate employability through various forms (Ayoubi, Alzarif and Khalifa, 2017; Yusof *et al.*, 2020). However, it has been argued that employers’ active engagement in the employability agenda is somewhat limited compared to their rhetoric, particularly in the area of skills development (Atkins, 1999). Employers increasingly view that ‘graduate talent’ can be acquired cost-effectively because it is the HEI that invests in graduate development to enable them to be employable in the graduate labour market (Atkins, 1999). Moreover, Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote (2012) believe that the challenges in preparing graduates in HEIs, in part, is due to employers’ consistent failure to articulate their expectations about graduate attributes clearly and timely. For example, employers’ wish list of wide-ranging and exhaustive soft skills (Wilton, 2011) and their demand for a range of attributes, characteristics and attitudes under the label of ‘soft skills or generic skills’ contribute to more complexity (Matteson, Anderson and Boyden, 2016).

One of the reasons why employers appear to be reluctant to invest in the skill development of employees in general and demanding ‘work-ready’ graduates with required skills could be attributed to the contemporary workplace reality where life-long employment is replaced by what is known as a ‘boundaryless career’ (Arthur, 1994; Sullivan and Arthur, 2006) and ‘protean career’ (Hall, 1996). Hall (1996, p.8) describes the protean career as ‘a career that is driven by the person, not the organisation, and that will be reinvented by the person from time to time, as the person and the environment change’. As articulated by Arthur (1994, p.304), the contemporary reality is ‘identities less dependent on the firm, and employment contracts more transactional than relational, each shift the locus of responsibility to the career actor’. Accordingly, whilst individuals take career-related decisions to enhance the prospects of psychological success and continuous learning in a protean career (Hall, 1996), a boundaryless career enables an individual to experience greater career mobility instead of relying on one organisation (Arthur, 1994). Given the above scenario, employers seem less enthusiastic to invest in graduate employability, and expect other key stakeholders to bear substantial responsibility (Atkins, 1999).

Despite the concerns relating to employers' limited and somewhat passive role in skills development, the most visible form of participation of employers in enhancing employability is through the provision of work-integrated learning for graduates to enable them to get 'real-world exposure' through the application of skills learned in HEIs and develop much-needed competencies before entering the labour market (Silva *et al.*, 2016). Empirical evidence also suggests that employers perceived that provision of internships is the significant contribution made by them to enhance graduate employability compared to other approaches, such as engaging in curricular review and quality assurance activities (Sin and Amaral, 2017). Given that experience gained through workplace learning translates into employability prospects (Helyer and Lee, 2014), the empirical evidence suggests that whilst internships provide opportunities for soft skills development in the areas of communication, team working, problem-solving and interpersonal skills, they also facilitate shaping graduate attributes such as integrity, commitment, work ethic and career management skills (Gribble, Blackmore and Rahimi, 2015; McManus and Rook, 2021; Jackson and Wilton, 2016; Hynie *et al.*, 2011). Apart from internships, employers have engaged in other forms such as providing inputs in curriculum design, sharing expertise through visiting and guest lectures, assisting in skills development through designing case studies and workplace projects and field trips and arranging careers fairs (Samkin and Keevy, 2019; Yusof *et al.*, 2020).

It is important to note that there are uncontrollable factors that appear to impede employers from engaging in soft skills development at HEIs. For instance, the literature suggests that various constraints such as limited supervision, language proficiency, and lack of structure in monitoring and evaluating the programme have undermined the efficacy of work-integrated learning (McNamara, 2013). Furthermore, it is argued that a range of both personal factors such as demographic characteristics and the motivation level of students coupled with organisational factors such as culture, resource availability and other support mechanisms affect the development of generic skills (Rodzalan and Saat, 2012). Further, despite the employers' initiatives to support soft skills development, students' attitudes towards soft skills development activities appear to play a role in fostering soft skills (O'Connor and Bodicoat, 2017). For instance, research evidence suggests that internship may not be an effective vehicle to hone all graduates' soft skills as, while 'engagers' perceived them as opportunities to learn skills, 'disengagers' perceived them as employers' tools to exploit them (O'Connor and Bodicoat, 2017).

The role of students

Given that soft skills are considered a differentiating factor in the labour market regarding graduate recruitment and selection, it has been argued that graduates need to identify their skill deficiencies demanded in the labour market (Leong and Kavanagh, 2013), develop strategies to acquire them, including career management skills (Bridgstock, 2009), and developing and demonstrating those skills to enhance employability (Tran, 2015). Although demand-side factors in the form of labour market dynamics and personal circumstances such as personal responsibilities and access to resources may not be within the control of students and graduates, the development of personal competencies, particularly initiative, assertiveness and proactivity and attributes in the form of honesty and integrity, work ethic, and reliability rest with students (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). Also, to enhance employability prospects, it is incumbent upon students to take responsibility for self-development by identifying learning attributes relevant for their success and pursue them (Su, 2014). Simply put, to enhance employability prospects, individuals are expected 'to take initiative, continuously update and improve their knowledge and skills, and be flexible and adaptable' (Small, Shacklock and Marchant, 2018, p.152). However, empirical evidence suggests that students place more responsibility on universities for soft skills development instead of engaging in an active role in the process (Tran, 2015).

In the learning process, it is argued that learner characteristics, learning environment, and instructor characteristics play a decisive role in shaping the expected outcomes (Jackson, 2013a; Longenecker and Ariss, 2002). In the case of learner characteristics, including in skills development, a person's self-efficacy plays a decisive role in influencing the performance outcomes of that individual (Lyons and Bandura, 2019). It has been argued that whereas people with higher levels of self-efficacy, when facing challenging tasks, appeared to enjoy higher levels of performance, people with low self-efficacy are prone to lower accomplishment due to perceiving complex tasks as personal threats (Bandura, 1993). As Bandura (1977, p.194) notes 'efficacy expectations determine how much effort people will expend and how long people will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences. The stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the more active the efforts.' In other words, students, who have firm self-efficacy beliefs, may approach the learning of soft skills with greater commitment and, most probably, end up with mastery of the needed skill sets. Dweck (2017) also argues that students' mindset in 'fixed' and 'growth' forms often influences learning and growth. For instance, students who possess a growth mindset can confidently

face setbacks and challenges whenever approaching tasks because of their learning orientation (Rattan *et al.*, 2015). However, those who appear to have a fixed mindset display withdrawal when confronting challenging tasks and show low performance when facing adversity (Yeager and Dweck, 2012). Nevertheless, the fundamental challenge when it comes to learning and teaching in the context of higher education, including skill development is, as Yorke and Knight (2004, p.30) argue, ‘the match or mismatch between teacher and student positions in respect of fixedness/malleability is likely to exert an influence (positive or negative) on the latter’s development’.

It is argued that graduate employability cannot be achieved without a substantial contribution on the part of the undergraduate (Bridgstock, 2009). As an important stakeholder, students’ role in soft skills development requires a proactive approach to crafting personal development plans, including career self-management (Clarke, 2018, Scott *et al.*, 2019) and engaging in self-regulated learning (Fettes, Evans and Kashefpakdel, 2020) in order to continuously develop the required skills. However, it has been argued that since most of the graduate attribute development is based on ‘the system-based approach’ where desirable graduate attributes are imposed on students through a top-down fashion, it is doubtful whether students embrace those attributes wholeheartedly unless a holistic person-based approach is undertaken (Su, 2014). Moreover, Valencia (1997, p.2) argues that whenever stakeholders perceive students lack the required capabilities, it leads to ‘deficit thinking’. Accordingly, despite the negative impact of external factors, such as socioeconomic status on students’ performance, the deficit perspective makes an internal attribution in the form of holding students solely responsible for deficiencies in performance (Valencia, 1997). Consequently, considering deficient conception, while key stakeholders abdicate their responsibilities in nurturing students’ capabilities, they engage in ‘blaming the victim’ for students’ lack of progress and achievement (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2003; Valencia, 1997). Thus, expecting students to take ownership of employability skills development fails to take into consideration factors such as labour market changes and socioeconomic constraints, which are beyond the control of students (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). Another challenge is, as Hughes and Barrie (2010, p.331) highlight, the problem is that ‘graduate attributes are often assessed for rather than with students’, reflecting the lack of inclusion of students’ voices in teaching and assessment of graduate attributes.

3.5 Barriers to soft skills development through the lens of institutional theory

Having reviewed stakeholder identification using the theory of stakeholder salience, and the role of key stakeholders using stakeholder theory in the previous sections, this section discusses the three institutional pillars of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive components (Scott, 2014) in the context of identifying the barriers to soft skills development. Scott (2010) observes that institutional theory is considered an appropriate theoretical lens to investigate institutional pressures at varying macro and micro levels. At the heart of institutional theory is the concept of ‘organization’. Scott (2014, p.56) defines organisations as ‘institutions comprise regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life’. The core elements in the definition are the ‘three interdependent pillars’ of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive aspects that provide the basis for institutional theorists to engage in various analytical levels and their functioning. Thus, more specifically, the institutional context consists of rules, policies, norms, values and taken-for-granted assumptions that stipulate appropriate patterns of behaviours in a given context (Scott, 2014). It has been argued that, although all three pillars can exert influence independently or collectively, there are situations in which one specific component can be predominant over others (Scott, 2010). In this thesis, these three institutional pillars are used as an analytical lens to identify barriers impacting soft skills development.

According to Scott (2010, p.6), the regulative components are ‘more formalized, more explicit, more easily planned and strategically manipulated’; the role of the regulative element in shaping the behaviour through what Scott (2014, p.59) labels as ‘rule-setting, monitoring and sanctioning activities’. In this context, to influence behaviour, Scott (2014) notes that the regulatory pillar emphasises the formulation of rules and policies, ensuring their conformity and administering appropriate sanctions in the form of rewards and punishments for compliance and non-compliance. Underpinned by instrumental rationality, the regulative pillar suggests that rules and policies are crafted by individuals to serve their interests and actors comply with such rules and policies either to avoid punishments or receive rewards (Scott, 2014). In this context, the regulative pillar reflects the coercive dimension, where conformity to rules, policies, and regulations is required (Palthe, 2014).

Thus, the emphasis on compliance with regard to rules and policies, is what Palthe (2014, p.61) labels as ‘have to’, which influences behavioural reasoning.

In normative elements, Scott (2014) asserts that the emphasis is on values and norms. Moreover, under normative aspects, actors in organisations are perceived as, what Scott (2010, p.6) referred to as ‘social persons’. Scott (2014, p.6) believes that the normative pillar provides ‘a prescriptive, evaluative, and obligatory dimension into social life’. Whereas values as part of one of the constituents of the normative pillar focus on ‘the conceptions of the preferred or the desirable’ along with the formation of standards to evaluate behaviour, norms stipulate how things should be undertaken in organisations (Scott, 2014, p.64). Scott (2014) views that, while promoting social relations, normative aspects set limitations on social behaviour. Unlike the regulative pillar, which stipulates legal obligation, the normative dimension sets out appropriate values and norms as part of the social obligation (Palthe, 2014). This aspect is what Palthe (2014, p.61) terms the ‘ought to’ dimension of moral obligation.

According to Scott (2014, p.67), the focus of the cultural-cognitive pillar is ‘the shared conceptions that constitute the nature of social reality and create the frames through which meaning is made’. In this context, the behavioural pattern of actors is dictated through more taken-for-granted assumptions commonly held (Scott, 2014) instead of legal or moral obligations, which can be observed in regulative and normative aspects, respectively (Palthe, 2014). Notably, the cultural-cognitive dimension reflects the shared understanding in the form of subjective perspectives and assumptions of key actors in organisations, which are deeply embedded in the organisation’s fabric, thereby becoming taken-for-granted. According to Palthe (2014, p.61) the rationale for actors to embrace shared understanding is centred more on the ‘want to’ dimension than the other two.

3.6 Chapter conclusion

Considering the limitation of the generic definition of stakeholders as ‘any group or individual who can affect or is affected by an organisation’s objectives’ (Freeman, 1984, p.46), stakeholders need to be classified to understand their relative significance from the decision-making perspective. As primary/key stakeholders in the higher education sector influence graduate employability initiatives through their direct and indirect engagement, the

theoretical lens of the theory of stakeholder identification and salience is used to identify key higher education stakeholders connected to soft skills development and assess their relative salience. Further, given that the role of each stakeholder in enhancing soft skills is highly contested in the graduate employability literature, leading to multiple and conflicting narratives, stakeholder theory was applied in this chapter to explore the role and responsibilities of key stakeholders in soft skills development along with their perspectives on the key dimensions of the soft skills development process (initiation, design, delivery and assessment). Finally, because a magnitude of factors appears to impact negatively on soft skills development, the institutional theory, particularly the three pillars of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive dimensions are used to explore a range of barriers. The next chapter presents the conceptual framework by building on the theoretical concepts discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Chapter 4

Conceptualising the soft skills development process in higher education institutions

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide a conceptual framework that captures the concepts and theories, which explain soft skills development. While Chapter 2 made the case for soft skills by reviewing graduate employability literature, Chapter 3 discussed the relevant theoretical lenses of the theory of stakeholder identification and salience, general stakeholder theory and institutional pillars. Particularly, given the overemphasis on human capital theory and underplaying of stakeholder and institutional theories in framing and investigating the soft skills development phenomenon in the literature, the thesis aims to integrate multiple theoretical perspectives to theorise the research problem. Because the key dimensions of soft skills development have not been examined yet, this chapter elaborates on the key dimensions of the analytical framework, which include initiation, design, delivery and assessment of soft skills in detail. The refined conceptual framework consists of key drivers of soft skills development, identification of key stakeholders based on their salience, soft skills development in terms of initiation, design, delivery and assessment, and regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive forms of barriers affecting soft skills development. First, the concept of soft skills development is operationalised. Then, each component of the analytical framework is explained in detail. Finally, a series of research questions are developed, followed by the graphical depiction of the conceptual framework.

4.2 Operationalising soft skills development in HEIs

Soft skill development at HEIs focuses on providing employability enhancement activities to address the expectation–reality gap between what the labour market demands and what HEIs currently offer (Bui and Porter, 2010; Prikshat *et al.*, 2020). More precisely, in the case of HEIs, as the supplier of graduate talent, the phases of provision, assessment, and evaluation of soft skills development are critical in order to address the potential soft skills gap (Beard, Schwieger and Surendran, 2008) Moreover, it has been argued that, in order to be effective, stakeholders’ involvement and engagement through a ‘shared understanding’ is imperative in designing and implementing the process of soft skills development at HEIs (Ayoubi, Alzarif

and Khalifa, 2017; Rosenberg, Heimler and Morote, 2012; Succi and Wieandt, 2019; Verma *et al.*, 2018). As highlighted in Chapter 1, the key dimensions of soft skills development in terms of initiation (conceptualisation and identification of soft skills), design (curriculum), delivery (teaching of soft skills, pedagogies) and assessment (assessment methods, feedback) of soft skills are treated superficially and in a piecemeal manner, rather than integrating them into one overarching concept. Thus, in this thesis, the concept of soft skills development is operationalised as a systematic process of initiation, design, delivery and assessment of soft skills to develop key employability skills in a specific context. Accordingly, the subsequent sections elaborate on each dimension of soft skills development in detail.

4.2.1 Initiation

The conceptualisation of soft skills

As highlighted in Chapter 2 (Section 2.3), in framing soft skills, there remain greater variations as scholars conceptualise the concept through various lenses of attributes, dispositions, qualities, and capabilities, leading to a lack of consensus around the meaning of the concept (Matteson, Anderson and Boyden, 2016). The notable element to be considered in framing soft skills is the ‘contextual dimension’ within which soft skills are developed and applied (Hurrell, Scholarios and Thompson, 2013). In this thesis, soft skills are viewed in line with the definition put forward by Hurrell, Scholarios and Thompson (2013, p.62) as ‘non-technical and not reliant on abstract reasoning, involving interpersonal (e.g., problem-solving) and intrapersonal (e.g., critical thinking) abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular contexts’.

Identification of desired soft skills: A review of multiple stakeholders’ perspectives

Since the prerequisite for developing soft skills is identifying the type of skills required to enhance employability, it is imperative that stakeholders have a shared view on which soft skills are valued for employability. A lack of shared understanding may impact the subsequent soft skills development process. However, it is apparent that the expectations of various stakeholders regarding soft skills are not only diverse but also incongruent (Ayoubi, Alzarif and Khalifa, 2017; Rosenberg, Heimler and Morote, 2012; Succi and Canovi, 2020). Nevertheless, the literature has shown that there has been near consensus across different disciplinary contexts that communication, teamwork and interpersonal skills are vital in order to secure entry-level graduate positions in organisations (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Tymon and Mackay, 2016; Singh and Jaykumar, 2019). In this section, the soft skills expected by

key stakeholders (employers, academics and business undergraduates) are reviewed in turn. The review shows that despite agreement between stakeholders that soft skills such as communication, teamworking, problem-solving and interpersonal skills are vital because of their utility in the contemporary world of work, disparities exist when it comes to the relative significance of each component of the above skills.

Employers' perspectives

(a) Communication skills

The value employers place on communication skills has been consistently apparent in academic literature. For instance, Longenecker, Neubert and Fink (2007), in a comprehensive study of managers across manufacturing and service organisations in the United States, found 'ineffective communication skill' was the number one reason for managerial failure. In Robles's (2012) research to identify business executives' perception of demanded soft skills in the contemporary workplace, communication was placed as the second most sought soft skill after integrity. Further, in Portugal, based on the interviews with human resource practitioners, Suleman and Lanranjeiro (2018) report that employers viewed the graduate skill gap in the areas of personal traits and relational skills, particularly the communication and behavioural component of relational skills. Similarly, Barbosa and Freire (2019), exploring employers' perceptions of management undergraduates' transferable competencies in Portugal, found that employers valued integrated transferable competencies consisting of cognitive, emotional, and social competencies, including spoken and written communication skills. It is important to note that the vitality of communication skills is valued across all sectors, including public service. For instance, Kinsella and Waite (2021) report that, in the United States, employers in public service value oral and written communication in new hires, particularly communicating with various actors effectively.

In the context of the UK, when examining employer expectations of graduates as emerging leaders, Tymon and Mackay (2016) found that employers expect work-ready graduates with required competencies, particularly focusing more on soft skills such as communication skills, teamwork, and analytical thinking. Moreover, in Canada, in a qualitative study to identify the factors affecting the employability of university graduates, Finch *et al.* (2013) report that employers valued the utility of soft skills, particularly communication and professionalism, in graduate selection. In a study to determine the employers' demand from business graduates in the form of skills requirements in the UK,

McMurray *et al.* (2016) found that employers reported that communication, along with trustworthiness, reliability, motivation and willingness to learn are essential when recruiting business graduates.

In a qualitative study to identify employer expectations regarding the generic attributes of accounting graduates in Australia, Tempone *et al.* (2012) found that accounting employers perceived communication, teamwork and self-management skills required for accounting graduates to succeed. Similarly, in an exploratory study to identify the expectation-performance gap of accounting graduates in New Zealand, Bui and Porter (2010) report that the top competencies all employers expected in accounting graduates are communication and teamwork skills. Likewise, when Jackling and Natoli (2015) examined the perception of internship providers of international accounting graduates in Australia regarding employability skills, most employers believed that interns lacked the needed oral and written communication skills relevant to the accounting work environment. A study by Poon (2012) on employability skills of real estate graduates in the UK showed that human resource professionals perceived the expectation-reality gap as graduates failed to demonstrate vital soft skills such as communication, writing, presentation, and client care. Regarding communication skills, the employer sample in the study of Lim *et al.* (2016) in Malaysia also ranked oral and written communication as the number one employability skill desired from entry-level auditors.

Within the literature, it can be observed that several studies identify business graduates' competencies undertaken in multiple countries, thereby allowing comparisons to be made across the countries on the significance of different types of soft skills. For example, Andrews and Higson (2008), in their study of business graduates' employability in the UK, Austria, Slovenia and Romania deploying the grounded theory approach, found employers placed more emphasis on soft skills, especially written and oral communication skills, as part of a graduate portfolio for employability. Similarly, in a mixed-method study to identify the importance of soft skills from business students and employers in Italy and Germany, Succi and Canovi (2020) found that communication skills were ranked as the number one soft skill by employers. In the Asia-Pacific region of Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia, when Verma *et al.* (2018) explored the graduates' work-readiness challenges from multiple stakeholders, they found that issues of English language and communication skills were what graduates lacked in Malaysia and Australia, respectively. When Chen *et al.* (2018) examined the

employability skills requirements of maritime graduates in Australia, Canada, and the United States, the findings, in general, revealed that communication, along with other soft skills were considered vital for maritime graduates, particularly the necessity of having communication skills, which covers oral and written communication, listening, and empathy.

Many studies have been undertaken to separate employers' most sought-after soft skills through the content analysis of job advertisements, observation, and the Delphi technique. For instance, in the UK, by analysing 1000 job advertisements to identify the transferable skills of graduates, Bennett (2002) found 'communication' was mentioned most frequently at 420 times. Likewise, Osmani *et al.* (2019), comparing the skills mentioned in the job sites with the soft skills list derived from the systematic literature, found consistency in communication. When Tan and Laswad (2018) analysed the job advertisements published in Australia and New Zealand regarding the employability skills demanded from accountants, they found communication skills in the form of the ability to present, discuss, and defend perspectives topped the list as second occurrences in both countries. Likewise, McArthur *et al.* (2017), based on the content analysis to identify marketing graduates' work-readiness in job advertisements in Australia, reported that motivation, written communication, time management and oral communication were the employers' most expected skills. In a quasi-ethnography undertaken at the six advertising agencies in the United States to identify the most valuable skills in the industry, Windels, Mallia and Broyles (2013) found that soft skills, particularly critical thinking, interpersonal communication, and presentation skills played critical roles in serving the needs of the clients in the industry. By using the Delphi technique, when Mayburry and Swanger (2011) collected the viewpoints of experts in the hospitality industry on the industrial requirements of hospitality graduates in the United States, the findings revealed that experts agreed that oral communication was the most important skill required in the industry.

With regard to specific components of communication skills valued at the workplace, Coffelt, Baker and Corey (2016) identified that employers ranked oral communication highly over others, such as written and visual forms. Concerning specific dimensions of oral communication desired in fresh accounting graduates in New Zealand, Gray (2010) found that professional accountants prioritised attentiveness to listening and listening responsiveness as the most valued competencies expected from accounting graduates. Moreover, when Ortiz, Region-Sebest and MacDermott (2016) looked at the dimensions of

oral communication skills expected in new recruits, the evidence suggests that employers believe proper grammar, communication in a team, conversational skills ability and participation in meetings, are significant for organisational success. However, findings of a study undertaken by Moore and Morton (2017) on the writing abilities of graduates in Australia revealed that practising managers and supervisors opined that the standards relating to writing are on the decline; particularly, this is evident in sentence formation grammar and spelling. Similarly, the findings of the study of Clokie and Fourie (2016) show that, with regard to writing skills, while employers in New Zealand acknowledged spelling, grammar and punctuation are essential for entry-level graduate positions, half of the respondents believed graduates lack the writing skills required for entry-level roles. Likewise, research conducted by Hastings *et al.* (2020) in the United States found that employers believed that quality of writing conveys a person's professional identity and they were concerned about typographical errors of employees.

(b) Teamworking skills

Employers have often prioritised teamwork next to communication skills in their preferred skillsets (Tymon and Mackay, 2016). From the employers' point of view, given the contemporary work environment, graduates are expected to possess competencies to work in a team and contribute to a team's success (Paguio and Jackling, 2016, Tempone *et al.*, 2012). For example, in a study to explore employers' expectations about accounting graduates' team working skills, Paguio and Jackling (2016) found that not only did Australian employers place added significance on team working but also identified the contribution of a team working for an organization in producing satisfactory results, delivering cost-effective service, and maintaining effective client relationships. Likewise, in a comprehensive study identifying the generic attributes of accounting graduates in all sectors in Australia, Tempone *et al.* (2012) reported that while differences of opinions were prevalent regarding the conception of teamwork across different sectors, in general, employers emphasised the importance of team working to build client relationships and trust. Also, in an exploratory study in the context of New Zealand, the findings of Bui and Porter (2010) showed that accounting practice firms viewed teamwork skills as fundamental for accounting graduates and expecting students' involvement in honing these skills.

It is important to note that there seems to be a consensus on the vitality of teamwork across multiple sectors or industries and countries. For instance, in an exploratory study to

identify soft skills for entry-level graduate positions in the hospitality industry in the United States, Weber *et al.* (2009) found that human resource professionals highly rated working effectively with diverse stakeholders over other competencies. Similarly, the empirical evidence showed that, in the case of Andrews and Higson's (2008) multi-country study, apart from communication skills, employers stressed the significance of teamwork skills in all four countries. Similarly, Succi and Canovi (2020), in their study on business students' competencies in Italy and Germany, employers ranked teamwork as the third most critical soft skills expected from business graduates. Likewise, in the case of content analysis of advertisements, research evidence suggests that teamwork skills often appeared as the most sought skills, along with or followed by communication (Bennett, 2002, Osmani *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, in a non-western context, Pang *et al.* (2019) reported that, in the case of competency requirements of fresh graduates, business executives in Hong Kong cited teamwork and cooperation as the second most desired skills next to ability and willingness to learn. Moreover, in the South Asian context, the results of a multiple stakeholder study undertaken by Singh and Jaykumar (2019) in India revealed that employers placed more importance on work ethics and teamwork next to communication when it comes to skill requirements of entry-level roles in the hospitality industry.

(c) Interpersonal skills

Managers view interpersonal skills as a key determinant of managerial success, and poor interpersonal skills, including ineffective working relationships, contribute to managerial failure (Longenecker, Neubert and Fink, 2007). Amongst employers' preferences, interpersonal skills have consistently been identified among the most cited soft skills (Robles, 2012, Wellman, 2010, Crowley and Jeske, 2020). For instance, when job advertisements in Australia and New Zealand were analysed to identify skills demanded from accountants, interpersonal skills in the form of collaborating with co-workers, and ability to present, discuss and defend perspectives emerged as first and second priorities from the employers' point of view in both countries (Tan and Laswad, 2018). Moreover, in a longitudinal study of investigating practitioners' perspectives on design interns' soft skills, Gale *et al.* (2017) reported that employers not only identified interpersonal skills along with other dimensions as interns' strengths but also their desire to hire was centred on work ethic, interpersonal skills and professionalism. Similarly, in a quasi-ethnography study focusing on advertising agencies, Windels, Mallia, and Broyles (2013) found interpersonal skills play a decisive role in serving the clients' needs effectively in the advertising industry. Based on the results of

two discrete choice experiments of selection for a job interview and subsequent selection, Humburg and Van der Velden (2015) report that, at a broad level, even though employers differed in specifying the skills requirements of graduates, they placed more emphasis on professional expertise and interpersonal skills in the actual selection decision.

Students' and graduates' perspectives

(a) Communication skills

It appears that, although students place significant value on communication skills for employability, there is considerable variation in terms of its relative position among other soft skills across countries. In a comprehensive study of management graduates of 38 HEIs in the UK, Wilton (2008) reported that, noticeably, oral communication, which was ranked as the number one soft skill used in the workplace, was perceived fifth when it comes to the development of this skill in the university by students. Further, the findings of Andrews and Higson's (2008) study in four European countries revealed that graduates perceived they acquired competencies in written communication at university but not oral presentation skills. Also, when investigating business students' perception of soft skills provision in a degree programme in Australia, Jackson (2013b) reported that students, apart from appreciating employability skills, placed more weight on working effectively with others and communicating effectively over other competencies. In addition, students had an inflated perception of their possession of soft skills in almost all dimensions of oral communication. Similarly, Tymon (2013) report that undergraduates in the business management discipline of a university in the UK mentioned communication and teamwork mostly along with other skills and attributes.

In the non-western contexts, Nikitina and Furuoka (2012) found that Malaysian students prioritised communication in the category of soft skills. Further, students and graduates in Tran's (2013) study in Vietnam, while accepting the increased prominence given to soft skills in the labour market, viewed a range of skills, including communication, as vital for employability. They mainly believed that to access and secure an interview for a job, the most important skills required are communication because it facilitates the understanding of employers' requirements and enables students to respond appropriately. It can also be observed that in the non-western, developing context, since employers demand competency in the English language, lack of proficiency appears to be an impediment for the acquisition of soft skills and subsequent employability (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2019).

(b) Teamworking skills

In an exploratory case study to understand final year Australian business undergraduate students' employability, Cavanagh *et al.* (2015) reported that, in addition to graduates' lack of awareness of what is valued in terms of capabilities in the job market, they had a negative observation when it comes to teamworking. Similarly, when McCorkle *et al.* (1999) investigated the usefulness of team projects and the associated challenges from the perspective of marketing undergraduates in one of the universities in the United States while acknowledging the benefits of teamwork, students reported that unequal participation and freeloading negatively influenced opportunities for skills development. However, in the context of the UK, the findings of Ballantine and Larres (2007) showed that not only students had favourable views regarding group-based assessment but also felt skills development was important in the areas of interpersonal, communication and problem-solving skills due to the team working experience. Empirical evidence has demonstrated that compared to the final year students, students in the first and second year had insufficient knowledge of employers' expectations with regard to team working but acknowledged the efforts made by the university to build teamwork through group work (Tymon, 2013).

Chavan and Carter (2018), using focus groups to identify first-year management undergraduates' expectations in an Australian university, found that management undergraduates felt their expectation regarding enhancement of soft skills was not met, particularly teamwork, engaging with and getting feedback from lecturers. In a longitudinal study of assessing students' perceptions of soft skills development at various points during the study period, work placement and employment in an Australian University, Crebert *et al.* (2004) found that even though students perceived the significance of teamwork skills in all three contexts along with other skills, they believed opportunities to develop such a skill in the university context is somewhat limited.

(c) Interpersonal and problem-solving skills

Research evidence has shown that graduates emphasise interpersonal skills and other soft skills because of their contribution to employability prospects (Rosenberg, Heimler and Morote, 2012). For instance, in a study of business graduates in the United States, Rosenberg and co-authors identified that graduates valued interpersonal skills highly next to leadership and work ethic among the eight employability skills. Similarly, in an exploratory study of Greek business graduates' work readiness after completing an internship, Kapareliotis,

Voutsina and Patsiotis (2019) found that getting along with others, which reflects interpersonal skills, was placed second after team working skills. Apart from interpersonal skills, a number of studies have demonstrated that students value the role of problem-solving skills to enhance employability. For instance, in a multi-stakeholder study in Malaysia to examine the employability skills for entry-level auditors, students ranked problem-solving skills as the most important skills over others (Lim *et al.*, 2016). Also, when examining accounting graduates' perception of soft skills provision in the degree programme in two Australian universities, De Lange, Jackling, and Gut (2006) found that problem solving, analysis, application and adaptability were perceived as most important with communication skills.

Academics' perspectives

(a) Communication skills

Although academics valued the vitality of communication skills for employability (Mitchell, Skinner and White, 2010, Singh and Jaykumar, 2019), their relative emphasis on communication over other soft skill components differs across contexts. For example, in an explorative study to identify the relative significance of non-technical skills in two academic institutions in the UK and Australia, Jackson and Chapman (2012) found that both academics from Australia and the UK placed oral communication skills fifth in the list of skills below problem-solving and decision management. Moreover, Riley and Simons (2016) examined the significance of written communication skills for entry-level accountants in the United States, especially focusing on the specific writing errors which both academics and practitioners were concerned about. The results showed that almost 72 per cent of academics perceived accounting students' written communication skills as problematic; they were also more concerned about errors relating to grammar and spelling, particularly double negative, subject-verb agreement and misspelling. With regard to soft skills deficiencies, in a multi-country study of graduate work-readiness, Verma *et al.* (2018) reported that while most Australian educators viewed graduates lacked communication and teamwork, both Malaysian and Indonesian educators' prioritisation of soft skill deficiencies in graduates varied. In a cross-sectional survey of multiple stakeholders, including academics in the United States, Wesley, Jackson, and Lee (2017) identified that academics and other stakeholders of tourism and retailing disciplines ranked communication as the number one soft skills required.

(b) Teamworking skills

The literature suggests that academics value teamwork skills highly (Lim *et al.*, 2016) as the curriculum often includes group work and team-based assessments to enhance graduates' ability to work with others in an effective manner (McCorkle *et al.*, 1999). For example, in Jackson and Chapman's (2012) study involving Australian and British academics, the faculty in the UK perceived team working as the most valued skill. Noticeably, empirical evidence has shown that faculty in Australia perceived competencies in self-management, teamwork, and communication skills are deficient in graduates, thereby adversely impacting their work-readiness (Priksat *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, in their study of the development of non-technical skills in accounting degree programmes in Scotland, Douglas and Gammie (2019) noticed that, out of the eleven academics interviewed, nine interviewees identified the ability to work in a team as a skill developed in an undergraduate accounting degree programme, along with other skills. Further, when Osmani, Weerakkody, and Hindi (2017) explored the academics' perception of business graduates' attributes in a public national university in Qatar, academics emphasised the importance of communication/interpersonal, teamwork and critical thinking skills.

(c) Interpersonal and problem-solving skills

From academics' perspectives, along with communication and teamwork, interpersonal and problem-solving skills appear to be on the list of preferred skill sets (Jackson and Chapman, 2012, Rosenberg, Heimler and Morote, 2012). In a study of diverse stakeholders' perspectives on the employability skills of graduates in a business school in the United States, Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote (2012) found that the faculty felt interpersonal skills is the highest priority competence for graduates' job performance. Further, research evidence suggests that academics in Australia perceived problem-solving skills in diagnosing problems and applying rational and logical reasoning to derive the correct conclusions as the essential skills required for business graduates (Jackson and Chapman, 2012). Also, research evidence suggests that educators in Indonesia perceived critical/analytical thinking/problem-solving as a significant impediment to developing the work readiness of graduates (Verma *et al.*, 2018). With regard to the work-ready skills of graduates in Australia, McManus and Rook (2021) report that academics ranked employability skills and self-management as the foremost important work-ready skills. In the case of marketing graduates, Hopkins, Raymond and Carlson's (2011) findings in a multiple-stakeholder study revealed that business educators

placed problem-solving skills as highly developed skills compared to other soft skills components.

4.2.2 Soft skills design: The curriculum

In relation to the design component of soft skills development, a curriculum, consisting of all the courses in a degree programme, is considered an essential tool in soft skills development as fast-paced changes in the labour market require corresponding adjustments in the curriculum to align graduates' competencies with occupational needs (Chan *et al.*, 2017). Also, it is argued that the mechanism of 'curriculum mapping' could be used to revisit, identify and revise soft skills whenever a perceived or real gap exists between the labour market and HEIs in terms of requisite soft skills (Robley, Whittle and Murdoch-Eaton, 2005; Sumsion and Goodfellow, 2004). As far as soft skills development is concerned, the dominant approaches seem to be either 'embedded' or 'stand-alone' methods, where the former refers to the implicit or less visible inclusion of soft skills into the curriculum and the latter advocates a separate, parallel module to enhance soft skills (Cranmer, 2006; Scott and Willison, 2021). However, it is argued that these two extreme approaches have their limitations as, in the case of a total embedded approach, students may not be aware of the presence of soft skills in the curriculum, and stand-alone modules often stay away from discipline-related courses, resulting in losing their practical value due to decontextualization (Cranmer, 2006).

The literature suggests that the embedded approach has been widely used for soft skills development (Spencer, Riddle and Knewstubb, 2012) and even the government and educators appear to embrace such an approach (Ngang and Chan, 2015; Sin, Tavares and Amaral, 2019). Empirical evidence also supports the utility of an embedded approach over stand-alone methods in regard to students' performance enhancement in soft skills (MacVaugh, Jones and Auty, 2014). Cranmer (2006) posits that a third alternative is to adopt a middle ground where the advantages of both methods can be harnessed as it provides not only visibility but also skills development in context. To make implicit graduate attributes visible in the curriculum, Longley and Kensington-Miller (2020) propose a framework known as 'SEEN', consisting of 'Specify' (S), 'Explain' (E), 'Embed' (E) and 'Nudge' (N), which can be applied in designing, teaching, learning and assessment of graduate attributes. Accordingly, first, the areas or places where graduate attribute occurs are identified, followed

by the relevant characteristics of the particular attribute. Then, such attributes are integrated for students' demonstration, thereby leading to the application of that particular attribute beyond a classroom setting.

The challenge in designing a holistic curriculum is that a range of drivers, such as regulatory requirements, stakeholder influence, and accreditation standards influence the process (Bajada, Kandlbinder and Trayler, 2019). In addition, Bajada and co-authors caution against the tendency of a small-scale and incremental approach in revising the curriculum in HEIs, resulting in a lack of innovation and compatibility with industry requirements. Further, research evidence suggests that with the inclusion of an authentic pedagogical strategy in the curriculum, where a learning environment is created to replicate the real-world experience, students could develop motivation, commitment, and transferrable skills which are deemed necessary for employability (Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough, 2009). In this context, it is apparent that the integration of work-integrated learning, particularly internships in the curriculum is intended to serve the purpose of bridging the academic and real-life work contexts, especially in the area of soft skills acquisition and demonstration in a work setting (Fleming and Haigh, 2017; Leong and Kavanagh, 2013). Specifically, empirical evidence suggests that while early industry placement appeared to offer the potential benefits of better awareness of the industry environment and shaping employability expectations (Trede and McEwen, 2015), multiple internships seemed to enhance employment prospects compared to a single internship (Silva *et al.*, 2016). Finally, it is argued that the participation of key stakeholders, particularly employers, in the curriculum design facilitates the identification and inclusion of soft skills that employers demand from graduates (Olo, Correia and Rego, 2022; Sincoff and Owen, 2004; Yusof *et al.*, 2020).

Learning outcomes, as one of the embodied components in the curriculum, generally specify what the learner is intended or supposed to learn in terms of knowledge, skills, or abilities required and include the level and depth of learning expected (Hussey and Smith, 2008). One of the purposes of setting learning outcomes is that once such outcomes are aligned with pedagogies and assessments, they could be used as a yardstick to measure the students' level of attainment in relation to a particular component of knowledge, skills, or abilities (Stanny, 2016). Also, the value of effective learning outcomes is such that they have an influence on the subsequent choice of teaching methods (Bourner, 1997). In the case of crafting learning outcomes, the practical challenge confronted by the faculty is striking a

balance between subject-specific technical knowledge and the inclusion of specific generic skills (Rebele and Pierre, 2019). Rebele and Pierre (2019) argue that a disproportionate focus on soft skills development in the curriculum may create ‘opportunity costs’ where the essential, discipline-specific knowledge cannot be imparted to students adequately. Further, the empirical evidence suggests that although well-designed learning outcomes are an important indicator of the quality of course syllabi, learning outcomes often fail to fulfil the basic criteria of specificity and measurement (Schoepp, 2019). Finally, even well-designed intended learning outcomes may lose their value unless students truly internalise their purpose and relevance, particularly in skills development. For instance, research evidence suggests that students did not apply or use skills-based intended learning outcomes to enhance skills as intended by academics (Stoner and Milner, 2010).

4.2.3 Soft skills delivery

Soft skills delivery refers to the various modalities or interventions that are implemented at the higher education institutional level to enhance the prospects of graduate employability. The extant literature suggests that HEIs deploy a range of interventions including ‘action learning’ (Groves *et al.*, 2018), ‘case study’ (Samkin and Keevy, 2019), ‘business games’ (Sousa and Rocha, 2019), ‘presentations and groupwork’ (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Cavanagh *et al.*, 2015; Kerby and Romine, 2009) ‘work placement’ and other similar forms of apprenticeships (Mihail, 2006; O’Connor and Bodicoat, 2017), ‘problem based learning’ (Tiwari *et al.*, 2006), ‘service learning’ (Mtawa, Fongwa and Wilson-Strydom, 2021), ‘conferences and competitions’ (Hill and Walkington, 2016), ‘experiential learning’ (Clements and Cord, 2013), ‘business simulation’ (Levant, Coulmont and Sandu, 2016) and ‘mentoring’ (Lechuga, 2011) to develop a range of soft skills, especially communication, teamworking, interpersonal, and problem-solving skills of undergraduates. Moreover, in addition to the HEIs efforts, students also undertake various initiatives, including part-time work, international travel, volunteering, and extra-curricular activities to enhance their graduate profile in the eyes of prospective recruiters (Roulin and Bangerter, 2013; Scarinci and Pearce, 2012; Khasanzyanova, 2017).

In the case of the efficacy of soft skills developmental methods, the literature suggests that whenever a particular developmental method shares similarities with the practical, real-world context, it is highly probable that skills acquisition and development takes place, as in the case of an internship, problem-based learning and service-learning (Halberstadt *et al.*,

2019; Kapareliotis, Voutsina and Patsiotis, 2019; Mtawa, Fongwa and Wilson-Strydom, 2021). Further, Allen, Donham, and Bernhardt (2011) emphasise that problem-based learning, as an authentic pedagogical approach, not only provides a viable context for learning by allowing students to question their knowledge base, sharing perspectives in a team to solve problems but, also, facilitates soft skills development, particularly in the areas of teamwork, negotiation, communication and research skills. Notably, improving the effectiveness of soft skills teaching can be attained by training academics to develop better competencies in teaching and learning approaches (Okolie *et al.*, 2020b) than having the highest academic credentials alone.

Despite the widespread usage of soft skills development interventions, there remain additional challenges in relation to each method. For instance, even though the case study is widely used as a learning tool to develop problem-solving, teamwork and analytical skills in the classroom, it is argued that the usefulness of such a method is limited as it lacks real-life complexity and often reflects the views of the developer and facilitator with little self-reflection from learners (Gosling and Mintzberg, 2006). In the case of action learning, even though it provides opportunities for collaborative learning and skills development (Groves *et al.*, 2018), the approach has come under criticism for lacking substance as Gosling and Mintzberg (2006, p.423) note ‘it has emerged as a lot more action than learning’. Moreover, Gosling and Mintzberg (2006, p.423) argue that to ensure meaningful development occurs on the part of learners, ‘sustained and critical reflection’ is essential in a learning setting, be it a classroom or workplace. Through self-reflection, experiential learning methods are considered efficacious for mastering broad competencies because such learning acknowledges and builds on learners’ own prior experiences (Kolb and Kolb, 2005). Most importantly, as Kolb and Kolb (2005, p.207) note, experiential learning places the learner at the centre of learning (learner-centred) and valuing prior and related concrete experiences ‘allows the learner to re-examine and modify their previous sensemaking in light of the new ideas’. For instance, research evidence suggests that exposure to work-integrated learning activities as part of experiential learning enhances the work readiness of graduates through developing employability skills (Jackson and Dean, 2022).

4.2.4 Soft skills assessment

The forms of assessments undertaken in HEIs fall into two categories of formative and summative components (Harlen and James, 1997). The literature suggests that, in the case of formative assessment, a range of mechanisms, including peer assessment, self-assessment, practitioner-led assessment, and lecturer-centred assessment, are used to measure the extent of skills acquisition of students in HEIs (Adachi, Tai and Dawson, 2018; Murillo-Zamorano and Montanero, 2018; Nghia, 2018b; Tran, 2018; Treleaven and Voola, 2008; Yusof et al., 2020) using soft skills metrics, rubrics and templates (Devedzic *et al.*, 2018; Crisostomo and Chauhan, 2019). Moreover, the literature indicates that student portfolios, including electronic learning portfolios (Bodle, Malin and Wynhoven, 2017), have been used to complement other forms of assessment and feedback (Hoo, Tan and Deneen, 2020). However, unlike technical skills with standardised measurement criteria, assessment of soft skills is considered challenging because of subjectivity and, also, academics may not possess adequate competencies in identifying, measuring and assessing soft skills because of their lack of prior training or exposure to teaching and assessing soft skills (Rebele and Pierre, 2019). Moreover, it is argued that in the case of graduate attributes, given that a well-designed strategy may have a low impact during execution, the rationale and the underlying logic behind each assessment need to be scrutinised during implementation (Hughes and Barrie, 2010). Recent empirical evidence suggests that, given academics' autonomy in terms of choosing types of formative assessments, there seemed to be inconsistency and contradictions across courses (Fernandes and Flores, 2022). Additionally, Fernandes and Flores (2022) also found there appeared to be a tendency to embrace more summative assessments despite the use of formative assessment components. Whereas formative assessment focuses on assessment for learning with the intention of improving students' performance, summative assessment refers to how assessment of learning concentrates on producing grades at the end of the course for the purpose of certification (Sadler, 1989). Similarly, in a developing country context, research evidence suggests that there seemed to be a tendency to give more importance to assessing technical skills than soft skills (Tran, 2018).

It has been argued that soft skills assessment should reflect real-work scenarios in order to facilitate skill transfer from the classroom to the workplace (Benati, Lindsay and Fischer, 2021). In this context, the concept of transfer of training refers to the extent to which what a trainee learns in a training setting in terms of knowledge, skills, and abilities can

effectively be applied to a work setting, preferably in a job (Baldwin and Ford, 1988). Due to the differences between academic and real-work contexts, there appears to be a challenge in the transfer of soft skills back to entry-level graduate positions in the HEI context (Jackson, 2013a). In general, Baldwin and Ford (1988) note that trainee characteristics such as ability, personality, and motivation, factors relating to training design such as training content and the use of learning theories, and the work environment in terms of opportunities, resources, and support available, have an influence in the transfer and retention of learning. Moreover, in identifying the causes for the failure of generic attributes development in business schools, Jackson (2009) argues that there is a misconception that the transfer of training from the classroom to the workplace is somewhat smooth or less challenging, resulting in overlooking the complexities of the transfer process. Jackson (2009) raises a pertinent question when emphasising the significance of the transfer of training as, even though curriculum design, syllabi, learning outcomes and assessment are congruent with employers' expectations, HEIs may not be able to realise the end goal if employers are not satisfied because of graduates' low levels of transfer of learning of generic attributes. In this context, it has been argued that authentic pedagogical interventions appear to bridge the theory-practice divide, thereby facilitating the better transfer of learning (Ornellas, Falkner, and Stalbrandt, 2019)

4.3 Barriers to soft skills development

Having reviewed the key dimensions of initiation, design, delivery and assessment of soft skills in the previous sections, this section focuses on examining the barriers, which cause a negative impact on soft skills development. External pressures on HEIs exercised by employers and policymakers, as well as academics' ideologies and competence, and students' level of engagement, structure, systems, and staffing practices of HEIs, all pose challenges to graduates' skills development (Green, Hammer and Star, 2009; Okolie *et al.*, 2020a; Star and Hammer, 2008; Tran, 2018). These broad challenges and obstacles impacting soft skills development can be viewed through institutional, stakeholder-related and contextual factors (Clarke, 2018). While institutional barriers include resource limitations, structural constraints, and policy problems, stakeholder-related obstacles cover issues concerned with academics, industry and students. Contextual factors refer to a range of country-specific factors, including social mobility, culture, and other variables such as the government's higher education policies influencing the process.

4.3.1 Institutional barriers

It has been argued that a range of institutional barriers in the form of policies, practices, and processes in relation to learning, teaching, and assessment along with institutional culture appear to act as impediments in the case of soft skills development (Brew *et al.*, 2022; Bui and Porter, 2010; Chan *et al.*, 2017; Mgaiwa, 2021). In the case of institutional factors, one of the critical factors, which underpin soft skills development, is related to staff development. Okolie *et al.* (2020a) emphasise that a well-designed staff development programme can enhance the faculty's competence in designing curriculum and pedagogy and delivering modules, including soft skills modules. For instance, in the developing country context, Okolie, Nwosu, and Mlanga (2019) found that prospects for graduate employability may not be realised when incompetent faculty members are involved in curriculum design and implementation. In the absence of staff development, difficulties may arise when the faculty fails to see the bigger picture regarding how individual modules, where soft skills are embedded, are aligned with the degree programme (Jorre de St Jorre and Oliver, 2018). It is important to note that 'university traditions' appear to influence the teaching, learning, and assessment of graduate attributes, particularly about the choice types of assessment tasks (Hughes and Barrie, 2010). This means that long-established discipline-specific practices such as reliance on a particular form of assessment are often 'unquestioned' and 'unchallenged' (Hughes and Barrie, 2010, p.330).

The massification of HE and the perspective of students as consumers (Tomlinson, 2016; 2018) pose additional barriers as this view appears to shape institutional policies and practices. For instance, recent empirical evidence in Australian universities suggests that accounting academics view institutional pressure due to adopting the student-as-customer model as affecting the quality of work and well-being (Steenkamp and Roberts, 2020). In the same study, the findings also revealed a range of factors such as increased workload, pressure to publish, execute non-academic tasks, teach soft skills, engage in developing materials for online teaching, and respond to students' queries impact on academics' role in HEIs. Further, Bui and Porter (2010) also identify that apart from the lack of resources, tenure and promotion criteria adopted in HEIs act as a major institutional constraint in developing graduates' competencies. Furthermore, given that academics develop the curriculum, if they lack the exposure to industry or practical experience, it creates a disconnect between what the real world demands and what students are exposed to (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005).

Furthermore, Green, Hammer and Star (2009) argue that the use of casual staff for tutorial teaching appears to have a negative impact on the development of graduate attributes because of staff turnover, lack of commitment and ownership, and shortage of institutional support available, including the absence of any tangible development programme for casual staff.

Moreover, the literature suggests that the reliance on traditional teaching methods and theoretical content, lack of teacher-student interactions, large class size and lack of infrastructure facilities and learning environment are also the contributory factors impeding soft skills development, especially in developing countries (Igwe, Lock and Rugara, 2022; Igwe *et al.*, 2021; Ito and Takeuchi, 2021, Tran, 2013). For instance, Green, Hammer and Star (2009) argue that given the significance of the first year of undergraduate study where self-awareness and the process of attribute development are inculcated, large cohorts often impede the development process due to the lack of interaction and participation of students. Recent empirical evidence in the Nigerian context suggests that large class size tends to undermine effective teaching, learning, and assessment, thereby undermining the quality of the degree programme (Igwe *et al.*, 2021). Further, resource constraints in the form of a lack of funding at the departmental and faculty level to respond to market changes also affect soft skills development (Chan *et al.*, 2017). Given the institutional culture of enhanced incentives of tenure positions and promotions for research and publication in HEIs (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005), the skills development agenda seems to occupy less priority (Green, Hammer and Star, 2009). In addition, in line with the various impediments outlined earlier, recent research evidence also suggests that system-related barriers, particularly issues relating to communication, coordination, policy implementation, faculty promotion, and enforcement of laws relating to academics' performance have a negative impact on developing soft skills in accounting (Asonitou, 2022).

University-industry partnership or collaboration is suggested to be critical to developing soft skills at HEIs given the existence of the theory-practice gap (Ishengoma and Vaaland, 2016; Minocha, Reynolds and Hristov, 2017; Suleman, 2016). Although a proactive engagement between the industry and university is considered necessary to develop soft skills, it has been argued that the lack of university-industry collaboration or partnership at an institutional level act as an impediment to develop soft skills of graduates, particularly in developing country contexts (Mgaiwa, 2021; Nghia, 2018a; Nwajiuba *et al.*, 2020; Otache, 2022). Given the benefits of university-industry partnership in various forms and

manifestations, including its strategic value in providing mutual benefits (see, Ankrah and Omar, 2015) as in the case of various forms of work-integrated learning (Jackson, 2015), potential barriers in the form of bureaucratic policies and lack of institutional support appear to pose barriers (Ha, 2022).

4.3.2 Stakeholder-related barriers

In the case of stakeholder-related factors, aspects relating to students of HEIs influence the extent to which students demonstrate awareness, willingness, and engagement in the soft skills development process. One of the potential barriers appeared to be students' narrow instrumental perspective. For instance, research evidence suggests that graduates appear to approach the degree programme through an instrumental lens, where academic credentials were given more prominence (Tomlinson, 2007, 2008; Tandika and Ndiujye, 2022; Tran, 2013). Another form of impediment to generic skills development is how students perceive tasks or assignments, which are given with the intention of developing soft skills. For example, empirical evidence suggests that students perceived assessments through the instrumental lens rather than as tools for soft skills building, thereby exhibiting a lack of engagement in skills development (Stoner and Milner, 2010).

In addition to the instrumental focus, it is argued that university students' lack of soft skills, particularly in communication, can be attributed to 'virtual socialising' rather than face-to-face interaction (Andreas, 2018). Because social capital refers to the networks and relationships people build over time to enhance employability prospects (Tomlinson et al, 2017), due to virtual socialisation, students miss the opportunities to build such capital through building rich human interaction with various constituents. As Andreas (2018, p.54) notes, 'the individual student, not the college, has control over his/her willingness and ability to build social capital', students are expected to be proactive in developing a graduate profile, including developing soft skills and managing their careers (Bridgstock, 2009; Jackson, 2016b). Another potential barrier appearing to have a negative impact on soft skills development in non-western context is the lack of English language competence and students' lower proficiency levels in the English language which have been identified as limiting factors, particularly in oral and written communications (Rose *et al.*, 2020; Zainuddin *et al.*, 2019). For instance, recent empirical evidence has shown that lack of English language proficiency, particularly limited use of lexical resources by candidates led

to the situation of either being rejected or wait-listed at interviews (Krishnan, Jan and Zainuddin, 2021). Further, Yao *et al.* (2022) have found that, in addition to instructors' lack of linguistic capability, mastering discipline-specific terminology, comprehending lectures and adapting to the English medium instruction environment are the major challenges perceived by Vietnamese students at transnational universities.

In the case of personal factors relating to the faculty members, the level of expertise to design and deliver soft skills programmes, deeply held values of the academic community on academic freedom, autonomy and scholarship, and individual self-efficacy and motivation of academic staff seem to impact the soft skills development programmes (Myyry *et al.*, 2022; Pitan, 2016). In addition, the literature suggests that lecturers' perception of the relevance and importance of generic competencies and their receptivity to incorporate them influence the design and execution of the curriculum (Chan *et al.*, 2017). Importantly, academic staff's beliefs, willingness, and confidence levels seem to impact the teaching and assessment of graduate attributes (de La Harpe and David, 2012). Furthermore, academics are confronted with 'personal dilemmas' with regard to preparing students solely to fulfil job requirements or develop the broad-based capabilities of students (Foley, 1999). Also, since academics are often recruited based on theoretical soundness or disciplinary knowledge (Bajada, Kandlbinder and Trayler, 2019) rather than industry-relevant experience, possession of expertise in designing and executing skills-based teaching may be well beyond their capabilities (Rebele and Pierre, 2019). Recent empirical evidence also points to the fact that the dilemma surrounding soft skills versus academic knowledge, resistance to reforms, faculty attitude, and lack of professional development appears to have a negative impact on soft skills development (Asonitou, 2022).

4.3.3 Contextual barriers

In the case of contextual factors, a broad range of variables, notably country-specific contextual factors, seem to have an impact on soft skills development (Winterton and Turner, 2019), particularly in teaching, learning, and assessment (Thanh-Pham, 2011). Because employability skills development is context-dependent, what might be feasible and relevant in a developed country context, notably Anglo-Saxon countries may not fit in a developing country context (Winterton and Turner, 2019). For example, Igwe, Lock and Rugara (2022) report that societal and cultural attitudes in the Nigerian higher education context placed more value on having a degree credential than developing employability skills. Also, given

the high-power distance in Asian countries (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010), hierarchical structures, obedience to authority and passive learning pose barriers to reforms in teaching and learning in higher education (Thanh-Pham, 2011). For instance, as Chan *et al.* (2017, p.6) note, ‘the longstanding and rigid sentiment in Asia that academic knowledge is the most important outcome of education’ may reinforce the notion that academic excellence alone is sufficient for personal and professional development. In the case of developed countries also, Saito and Pham (2021, p.1094) identify that Australian and Japanese universities’ approaches to and deployment of employability strategies differ markedly, as Australian universities focus on ‘potential maximisation’ while Japanese universities rely on ‘results maximisation’ to address employability concerns. Accordingly, whereas the potential maximisation approach advocates for providing knowledge and skills to enhance employability prospects, the results maximisation perspective is concerned with ensuring permanent employment (Saito and Pham, 2021).

The literature also suggests that social mobility factors in the form of sociocultural factors such as social connectivity, family background, institutional reputation, and regionalism influence skills acquisition and employability (Hossain *et al.*, 2020; Macmillan, Tyler and Vignoles, 2015). For instance, in empirical research in Bangladesh, Hossain *et al.* (2020) found that social mobility factors also positively influence graduates' employability in addition to both soft and hard skills. Similarly, in an empirical study in the UK, Parutis and Howson (2020) have found that students with better socioeconomic status appear to possess crucial social and psychological capital in the form of quality social networks, self-confidence, persistence and optimism, along with other forms of capital, compared to students with low socioeconomic status. Moreover, recent empirical evidence in relation to internships suggests that upper-middle-class students appeared to have an edge not only in securing high-quality internships but also accessing multiple internships due to their access to various forms of capital over working-class and middle-class students (Wright and Mulvey, 2021). Likewise, based on their empirical investigation, Macmillan, Tyler and Vignoles (2015) also suggest that graduates with better socioeconomic status, due to their access to capital, could position themselves well at selection interviews.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on soft skills development, particularly in the context of management education (Brammer and Clark, 2020) as business schools were forced to switch to online modes of learning, thereby causing

transitional challenges (Rana *et al.*, 2022), including in the areas of pedagogy, assessment and soft skills development in both developed and developing country contexts (see, e.g., Sangster, Stoner, and Flood, 2020). However, it has been argued that the absence of richness of human interaction along with lack of opportunities to engage in soft skills development have a detrimental effect on enhancing soft skills (Mali and Lim, 2021; Powell and McGuigan, 2021). Particularly, it has been suggested that the disruption caused by COVID-19 may have additional indirect effects such as inequity due to access to facilities (Daniel, 2020). For instance, academics' accounts in developing countries suggest that low internet connectivity, access to equipment, availability of power supply and lack of a proper study environment have an impact on students' engagement in learning, particularly poor internet connectivity forcing students to switch off cameras and, thereby affecting active learning (Sangster, Stoner, and Flood, 2020).

4.4 Conceptual framework and research questions

Chapter 3 discussed the theoretical lenses that underpin the present empirical study. Particularly, drawing on the theory of stakeholder identification and salience, stakeholder theory and regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive institutional pillars, Chapter 3 argued that the use of three theories provides a better understanding of the complex phenomenon of soft skills development. Up to this point, this chapter (Chapter 4) has reviewed the key dimensions of initiation, design, delivery and assessment of soft skills given that these dimensions have not been integrated, but rather treated in a piecemeal manner in the literature (See Chapter 1, Section 1.3). The conceptual framework (see Figure 4) includes theories and concepts that explain soft skills development. The next section presents a series of research questions that are drawn from the review of the literature.

HEI stakeholders and the process of developing undergraduates' soft skills

One of the main neglected areas in graduate employability literature in general, and soft skills development in particular, is the empirical identification of key stakeholders in HEIs, who are connected to the development of soft skills. The literature on soft skills development has shown that researchers' own preferences of who should be included as stakeholders often take precedence and often one, or several stakeholders representing employers, academics, policymakers and students are chosen to inquire into employability skills development (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Ayoubi, Alzarif and Khalifa, 2017; Kinsella and Waite, 2021; Succi and Canovi, 2020; Verma *et al.*, 2018). Considering the fact that soft skills development

is context-dependent, rather than empirically deriving salient stakeholders, selecting stakeholders based on researchers' own convictions poses a limitation as chosen stakeholder/s may not be the most salient in a given context. Redressing this limitation, the first set of research questions explored in this thesis is directed towards identifying primary stakeholders in HEI and, specifically, undergraduate business education, and how these stakeholders view the development of soft skills to enhance employability. As an initial contribution, the thesis attempts to identify empirically who these stakeholders are, drawing from the theory of stakeholder identification and salience, which postulates the cumulative number of attributes of power, legitimacy and urgency possessed by stakeholder groups determines stakeholders' level of salience. This leads to the following research question:

RQ 1: Who are the salient stakeholder groups connected to soft skills development in HEIs and, specifically, undergraduate business education?

Second, the literature has shown the existence of diverse and often contradictory conceptualisations of soft skills as stakeholders frame soft skills according to their particular perspectives (Grugulis and Vincent, 2009; Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2011; Lafer, 2004). The thesis, therefore, explores how key stakeholders define or frame soft skills, focusing on comparing key stakeholders' viewpoints of the required soft skill types. Generally, although the literature on soft skills has revealed communication, teamworking, problem-solving and interpersonal skills are desired, there are varied perspectives from diverse stakeholders on what skills are valued (e.g., Finch et al, 2013; Jackson and Chapman, 2012; Singh and Jaykumar, 2019; Crebert et al, 2004). Thus, it is relevant to investigate whether there is a consensus or disconnect among stakeholders' preferred soft skill types. This leads to the following research question:

RQ 2: How are soft skills conceptualised by primary stakeholders; and, is there any convergence or divergence between these stakeholders in expected soft skills?

Third, the literature revealed an ongoing blame game among stakeholders about accepting responsibility for the development of soft skills (Cheong, Leong and Hill, 2021; Succi and Canovi, 2020; Tran, 2018). For instance, while HEIs have come under criticism for failing to produce employable graduates (Tomlinson, 2012), employers have been blamed for their lack of engagement in soft skills development activities, rather focusing on absorbing graduate talent without investing in it (Atkins, 1999). This thesis aims to identify the

perceived role of each salient stakeholder to consider the extent to which there is a shared understanding regarding roles and responsibilities. Moreover, it is also important to explore the dimensions of design, teaching and assessment of soft skills from the stakeholders' vantage point as these dimensions are an integral part of the soft skills development process.

RQ 3: How do primary stakeholders perceive their role in the development of soft skills in terms of: (i) design of programmes; (ii) teaching; and, (iii) assessment of soft skills?

Understanding barriers to soft skills development through institutional theory

The second theme addressed in this thesis relates to the potential barriers to soft skills development in HEIs. As argued in Chapter 4, the literature on graduate employability has suggested that a complex set of barriers in the form of institutional, stakeholder-related and contextual barriers combine to impact soft skills development (e.g., Asonitou, 2022; Mgaiwa, 2021; Okolie et al, 2020a; Pitan, 2016). Using Scott's (2014) three dimensions of institutional theory (Chapter 3, Section 3.5) as an analytical framework, the thesis identifies the existence of different types of barriers and their relative significance. While regulative barriers focus on rules, policies and laws governing soft skills development, normative barriers include the negative impact of values and norms on soft skills initiatives. The cultural-cognitive barriers imply the existence of shared conceptions, including mindset, which are commonly shared and taken-for-granted, adversely affect soft skills development. The fourth research question explored in the thesis uses these three dimensions to identify barriers to soft skills development in HEI.

RQ 4: To what extent and in what way do regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive factors impact soft skills development?

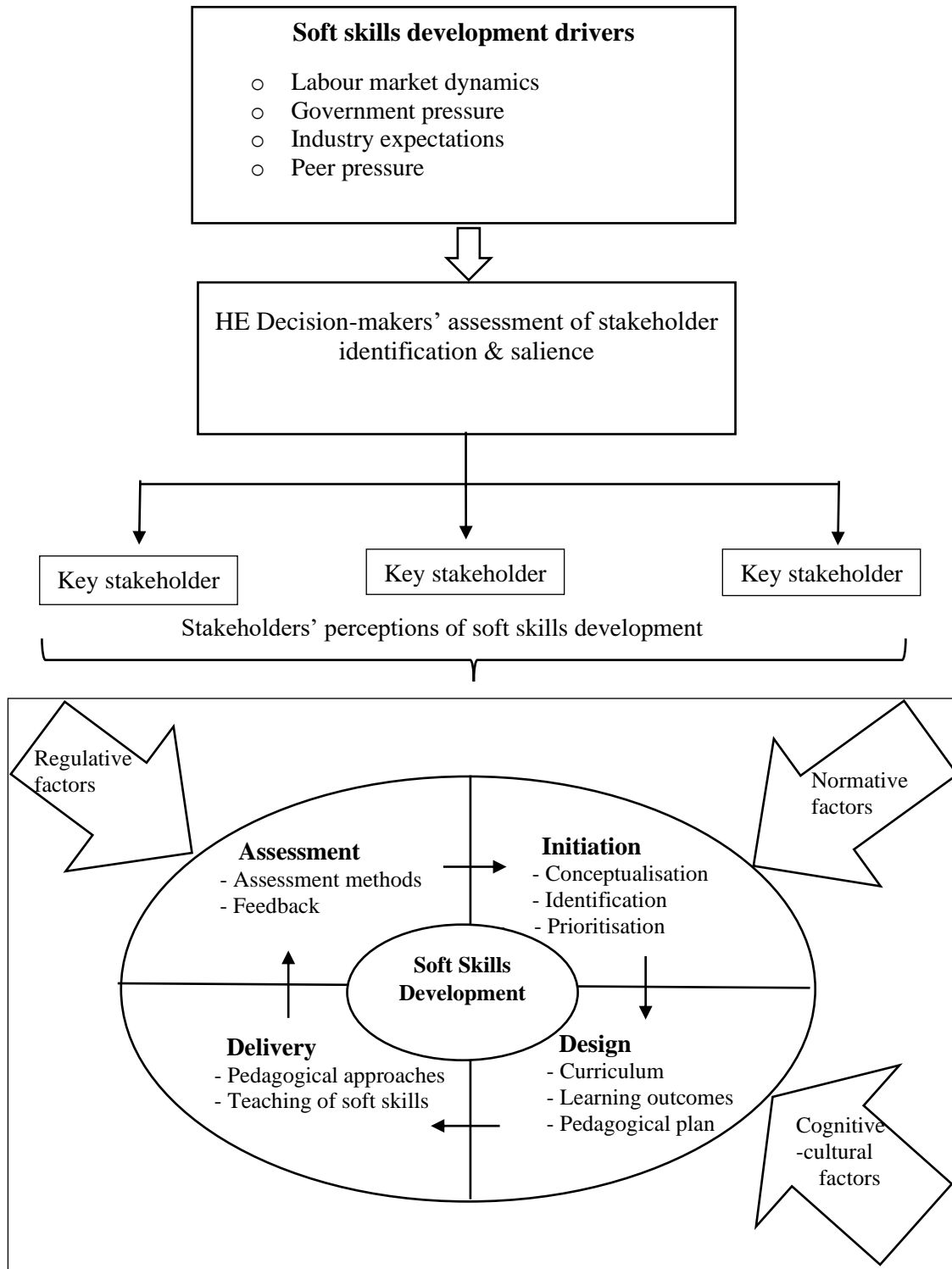


Figure 4. Conceptual framework

4.5 Chapter conclusion

In the present study, the conceptual framework was used to explore and understand the phenomenon of soft skills development in undergraduate business education. Accordingly, drawing on insights derived from the review of literature in Chapters 2 and 3, an analytical framework of initiation, design, delivery and assessment is built. Whereas the concept of initiation consists of conceptualisation, identification and prioritisation of soft skills, curriculum, and learning outcomes are the key areas covered under the concept of design. The concept of delivery includes the teaching of soft skills, pedagogical approaches, and a learning environment, and assessment methods and feedback are included as part of the assessment concept. The soft skills development cycle of initiation, design, delivery and assessment provides a reference point for subsequent phases of design, data collection and analysis, and presentation and interpretation of findings. The theoretical lenses of the theory of stakeholder salience, general stakeholder theory and three pillars of institutional theory provide the perspectives to explore the soft skills development cycle described earlier. Specifically, whilst the theory of stakeholder salience facilitates the identification of key stakeholders (academics, business undergraduates, and industry experts/employers), general stakeholder theory enables analysis of the soft skills development process from the viewpoint of the above key stakeholders. The three institutional pillars assist in identifying barriers affecting the soft skills development process. Thus, the conceptual framework elaborated in this chapter is a holistic depiction derived from a blending of analytic framework and theoretical perspectives with respect to soft skills development. The next chapter outlines the methodological approach used in this thesis to explore soft skills development.

Chapter 5

Research methodology

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the underlying research philosophy and methodological choices, including research design, data collection methods and analysis. Chapter 4 outlined the four main research questions that guide this empirical study. Broadly, the research questions focus on ‘how’ salient stakeholders perceive the development of soft skills and ‘what’ the barriers are which impact soft skills development. Further, Chapter 3 provided an appraisal of the theoretical perspectives of the theory of stakeholder salience, the stakeholder theory and the institutional pillars which were used to investigate soft skills development. The theoretical lenses of the theory of stakeholder salience and the stakeholder theory postulate that the subjective views of stakeholders influence how social realities are defined. Chapter 4 discussed the conceptual framework, which depicts the process view of soft skills development, embodying initiation, design, delivery, and assessment of soft skills along with theoretical concepts. Considering the ‘how’ and ‘what’ type of research questions mentioned earlier, the process view of soft skills development and the need for exploring soft skills development in its own context, a multiple qualitative research design is chosen. The presupposition of stakeholders constructs social realities based on their perceptions justifies the choice of interpretive/constructivist paradigm, which governs the choices involved in how the research process is undertaken.

First, this chapter justifies the researcher’s stance on the chosen philosophy of the interpretivist approach. In the next section, in light of the chosen philosophy, the rationale for and justification of the choice of case study are discussed. The subsequent section provides a description of the higher education context in Sri Lanka, research setting, and the two case studies. Thereafter, the process of undertaking fieldwork is explained. Then, data collection tools of semi-structured interviews and focus group and their congruence with research questions are discussed. The next section provides the analytical approach of thematic analysis used to analyse data, followed by the criteria used to assess the quality of the empirical study. The final section offers a personal reflexive account of the researcher and elaborates upon the handling of ethical aspects during the design, data collection and analysis phases.

5.2 Philosophical perspective: An interpretivist approach to understanding soft skills development in HEIs

The empirical study designed to address the research questions is positioned within the paradigm of interpretivism/constructivism, which asserts that realities are socially constructed as social actors may perceive the same phenomenon in different ways (Crotty, 1998). More precisely, as Denzin and Lincoln (1994, pp.13-14) elaborate:

The constructivist paradigm assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and subject create understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures.

As a researcher, because I embrace the view that realities are socially constructed and it is the social actors along with the researcher who creates both meaning and interpretations through interactions (Ponterotto, 2005), I believe that my ontological and epistemological positions are grounded in an ‘interpretive/constructivist paradigm’ (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011; Robson and McCartan, 2016; Tracy, 2013). Particularly, as discussed earlier, the research questions, and the nature of theoretical concepts incorporated in the empirical inquiry are more aligned with this paradigm. Specifically, as the research questions explored the process-oriented perspective of ‘how’ soft skills are developed from key stakeholders’ voices, and the theoretical lenses chosen for the study postulate the constructed nature of social realities (e.g., the theory of stakeholder salience and stakeholder theory), the interpretivist/constructivism paradigm was deemed appropriate. Moreover, considering the fact that the core phenomenon of ‘soft skills development in undergraduate business education’ is context-dependent, the choice of interpretivist approach is justified as this paradigm dictates the need to investigate a phenomenon in its natural context (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994), thereby facilitating ‘contextualisation, understanding and interpretation’ (Glesne, 2016, p.10) of the phenomenon of soft skills development. Considering the above rationales, there are inherent limitations if realist ontology and positivist epistemology are embraced in the proposed empirical study. The positivist paradigm advocates for a single, discoverable truth (Berryman, 2019), known as context-independent reality (Rubin and Rubin, 2012), the use of principles of natural laws, context-free generalisation, researcher detachment/neutrality, and focuses on a few variables (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). As positivism assumes the existence of a single, objective reality that is independent of human knowledge, it emphasises identifying regularities and causal relationships through empirical verification (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). However, considering the core

phenomenon of soft skills development is process-oriented and grounded in context, gaining insights into the subjective views and experiences of stakeholders requires the intimate involvement of the researcher in terms of engaging with study participants to understand how they perceive and interpret social realities. Thus, given the incompatibility of paradigmatic assumptions of positivism in relation to the research questions, theoretical choice, and the need for contextual understanding, the interpretivism/constructivism was chosen as the appropriate perspective.

Given that the nature of empirical inquiry focuses on exploring and understanding the phenomenon of soft skills development from the perspective of multiple stakeholders, what is possible is the emergence of ‘multiple realities’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) or ‘multiple mental constructions’ (Mertens, 2020, p.18) due to the fact that ‘it is possible to make sense of the same reality in quite different ways’ (Crotty, 1998, p.10). Therefore, it is plausible that the phenomenon of soft skills development can be subject to a variety of meanings, depending on how key stakeholders make meanings (Crotty, 1998). In the present study, the major stakeholders of HEIs such as decision-makers, employers, students and academics may share diverse perspectives on the soft skills development process, and the subjective and constructed nature of realities means that stakeholders may have ‘different perceptions’ (Mertens, 2020) based on how they view the phenomenon of soft skills development in undergraduate business education, resulting in ‘multiple realities’ (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) as opposed to a single objective reality (Durdella, 2019). An interpretivist approach is all about understanding and making sense of realities which are multiple and socially constructed. Because decisions relating to research design are paradigm-driven (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), considering an interpretivist approach assumes a relativist ontology of the existence of multiple perceptions of reality and an interactive link between the researcher and participants to understand the phenomenon of interest. Thus, an interpretivist approach was chosen for the present study. The implication of embracing interpretivism is that, as this paradigm advocates for uncovering, understanding, and interpreting the stakeholders’ multiple perspectives of soft skills development, the methodological choice of a qualitative research design influenced subsequent decisions about research settings (case study organisations), study participants (key stakeholders), data collection methods (interviews) and analysis.

5.3 Research design

Research design (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed) is informed by the ontological and epistemological assumptions (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). For instance, Creswell and Creswell (2018) note, generally, while the realist-positivist philosophy leans towards a quantitative design, the constructivist-interpretivist philosophy favours a qualitative research design. In this context, the design phase of a research project is viewed as critical because, as a roadmap or a blueprint, it shows the integration of various components of a study and provides a general structure on how a study can be undertaken (Creswell, 2013). Denzin and Lincoln (2017, p.10) provide a generic definition of qualitative research as:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

My choice of a qualitative research design is in line with Maxwell's (2020) assertion of the uniqueness of qualitative research in terms of meaning, context, and process. Firstly, by embracing the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, I conceive that because realities are socially constructed through the actions, interactions, and participation of social actors, there is the possible existence of multiple interpretations of the same social phenomenon (Lee and Saunders, 2017). Thus, understanding and interpreting what key stakeholders attribute to soft skills in a specific natural setting or context favours qualitative research. Secondly, as Bogdan and Biklen (1998) observe, that qualitative inquiries focus more on the process instead of outcomes, the choice of qualitative research is necessitated and, in part, an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of soft skills development requires a process-oriented perspective. Third, the nature of 'what' and 'how' research questions outlined at the beginning of this chapter implies that qualitative research is more appropriate because exploring multiple stakeholder perspectives necessitates an understanding of the different subjective meanings and interpretations of stakeholders. Finally, as the context or setting in which skills development takes place influence and shape the process, I believe that gaining

an in-depth understanding of the contextual factors or variables and the impact they have on skills development can be better met by a qualitative design. As Newman (2011, p.177) argues, ‘if we strip social context from an event, social action or conversation, it is easy to distort its meaning and alter its social significance’. Qualitative design embodies a set of unique characteristics, which are summarised along with the description of relevant empirical activities (see Table 4).

Table 4. The unique characteristics of qualitative research design

Characteristics	Activities undertaken in the empirical study
Fieldwork in a natural setting	The phenomenon of soft skills development was explored via two case studies of Business Schools in public universities, intensively, for a period of nine months.
Dynamic nature	The research design was modified because COVID-19 and the economic crisis in Sri Lanka posed challenges in recruiting and interviewing study participants.
Researcher as instrument	I engaged in self-reflexivity throughout the research journey by writing analytic memos, questioning any preconceptions, and adopting rigorous quality standards.
Inductive logic	Although I had a set of priori codes derived from the literature and the conceptual framework, I was open to emergent, data-driven themes, particularly in relation to the role of stakeholders and the barriers to soft skills development.
A thick, rich, and detailed description of the phenomenon	In addition to providing a description of the country's higher education context and cases, stakeholders' perspectives on soft skills development were interpreted, and their voices were represented in the form of direct quotations under relevant themes.
Multiple perspectives of the phenomenon	The inclusion of study participants representing decision-makers, academics, students and industry experts offered varied perspectives on soft skills development. Also, the use of multiple theoretical perspectives in the form of the theory of stakeholder salience, stakeholder theory and the institutional pillars offered a holistic picture of soft skills development.
Contextual sensitivity	Given the two different contexts (regional and metropolitan), where the two case study institutions are located, I was aware of the influence of contextual dynamics, particularly structural constraints, such as resource limitations, on soft skills development.

Sources: Creswell (2015), Creswell and Creswell (2018), and Lichtman (2012)

5.3.1 The choice of a case study approach

As one of the qualitative genres, case study research emphasises studying a social phenomenon in its natural context to gain a detailed and deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell *et al.*, 2007). In addition, it has a ‘transparadigmatic’ and ‘transdisciplinary’ orientation because it can be fit into different paradigms and applied in a range of disciplines (VanWynsberghe and Khan, 2007, p.80). Stake (2006, pp.2-3) summarises the features of a typical case succinctly as ‘a specific entity’ with ‘bounded and dynamic nature’ and functioning in ‘real time’. Specifically, when identifying a case, Patton (2002, p.55) states ‘a case can be a person, an event, a programme, an organization, a time period, a critical incident, or a community’. A unique advantage of using case study is that it enables, in studying single or multiple cases in real-life or a natural context, to holistically understand a complex and bounded phenomenon of interest (Denscombe, 2010). Considering the purpose of the present study, I embraced the position that a case study as a strategy (Verschuren, 2003; Yin, 1981b) is appropriate because I intend to explore and understand how soft skills are developed in undergraduate business education in its own context (Yin, 2018).

The rationale for choosing case study over other strategies in the present study is the complexity of the phenomenon and the influence of contextual dynamics on the phenomenon of soft skills development. According to Yin (1981b, p.59), the necessity to deploy a case study arises when a study attempts to investigate ‘a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context and the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident’. The merits associated with a case study over other research strategies, such as experiments and surveys, are the incorporation of context into investigation and the focus on a contemporary phenomenon (Yin, 1981a). Furthermore, when discussing the limitations of other research tools over a case study, Merriam (1985, p.204) states, ‘some situations cannot be adequately understood or explained by merely describing relationships within the problem area or by isolating and manipulating particular variables’. Thus, unlike investigating many variables devoid of context through a survey or manipulating variables in a contrived setting, like in experiments, a case study investigates the phenomenon under study in its real-life context by trading-off ‘breadth’ for ‘depth’ (Denscombe, 2010). Also, because a case study is context-dependent, it can provide additional insights into the influence of contextual dynamics on the phenomenon under investigation (Crowe *et al.*, 2011).

5.3.2 Multiple case study design

Since the uniqueness of qualitative research is to understand and interpret a particular social phenomenon in its natural context (Ketokivi and Choi, 2014; Tracy, 2013), qualitative case studies focus on investigating a phenomenon intensively to gain insights and interpretations to understand the phenomenon of interest (Merriam, 1998). It has been suggested that, in general, whilst different methods can be deployed in a case study, it leans more towards a qualitative approach in practice (Denscombe, 2010; Richards and Morse, 2013; Tsang, 2014). Anthony and Jack (2009, p.1172) define qualitative case study as ‘a research methodology grounded in an interpretive, constructivist paradigm, which guides an empirical inquiry of contemporary phenomena within inseparable real-life contexts’. Similarly, Gammelgaard (2017) also suggests the appropriateness of undertaking qualitative case study under the interpretive/constructivist paradigm due to its emphasis on socially constructed meanings and interpretations. Further, Creswell *et al.* (2007, p.245) provide an all-encompassing definition of qualitative case study as:

A qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual materials, and documents and reports) and reports a case description and case-based themes’.

A collective case study, also labelled as multiple case-study (Yin, 2018) involves investigating a number of instrumental cases concurrently with the view that ‘understanding them will lead to better understanding, and perhaps better theorizing’ of chosen cases (Stake, 2008, p.123). Yin (1981a, p.101) suggests a multiple case study is relevant ‘when the same phenomenon is thought to exist in a variety of situations’, leading to opportunities for replication in other settings. I chose a multiple case study to explore and describe the phenomenon of soft skills development as the purpose of the inquiry is to better understand how soft skills are developed in two undergraduate business education contexts. Specifically, given the unique contextual idiosyncrasies surrounding each case, and key stakeholders’ diverse perspectives on the phenomenon under study, a multiple case study has the potential to offer new insights, along with a rich description of soft skills development (e.g., Merriam, 1998). With regard to the unit of analysis of the present case study, each case is analysed holistically or as stand-alone cases as opposed to the embedded perspective, where sub-cases are scrutinised in a chosen case/s (Yin, 2012). Further, in line with Patton’s (2002, p.447)

assertion that ‘cases are units of analysis’, soft skills development in the business administration degree programme is treated as both case and unit of analysis.

Despite the strengths outlined earlier, the inherent constraints appearing to impact case study strategy need to be acknowledged. The first challenge is resource constraints, particularly the availability of time and money to engage in intensive inquiry (Merriam, 1998) considering the laborious process of data collection and analysis (Darke, Shanks and Broadbent, 1998). Another issue is the dilemma a qualitative researcher faces about the choice of single or multiple cases; for instance, if a multiple-case study is chosen, despite the merit of possible ‘theory building’ from multiple cases (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Creswell (2013) argues that the difficulty of undertaking an in-depth analysis in all cases might arise, thereby diminishing the opportunities to gain an in-depth and holistic picture of each case. In contrast, if the researcher chooses a single-case study for in-depth exploration and analysis, there remain concerns and criticisms regarding the lack of generalisability (Yin, 2012) and the limitations for theory building or development compared to multiple cases (Eisenhardt, 1991).

5.4 The empirical context: Country context, and selection of cases

Country context

Sri Lanka, having a population of nearly 21 million, enjoys the highest literacy rate of 91% in the South Asian region (Wickramasinghe, 2018). It is argued that, like other Asian countries, due to the influence of cultural values towards knowledge acquisition, teacher-centred learning, student passivity, and rote learning were widespread in the Sri Lankan education system (Edgar et al., 2020; Somaratne, 2022). Further, because Sri Lanka was colonised by the Portuguese, Dutch and British from 1505 to 1948, the country’s primary, secondary and tertiary education were shaped by the colonial rulers (Bandara, 2021). Given that Britain colonised the country from 1796 to 1948, the education system in general was designed to mimic the British higher education system (Wickramasinghe, 2018). With the ending of 30 year civil war in 2009 and the increased investment in economic activities led to sectoral reforms, including in higher education (Wickramasinghe, 2018). Higher education provision in Sri Lankan public universities is state-funded, and state universities do not levy tuition fees for undergraduate degree programmes (Wickramasinghe, 2018). There are 15 state universities operating in Sri Lanka and the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Ministry of Higher Education are responsible for governing these state universities

(Wickramasinghe, 2018). It is argued that the constraints, such as lack of space, infrastructure, and other facilities in state universities leads to a situation where only a fraction (2 per cent) out of all eligible students are enrolled to degree programmes in state universities annually (Wickramasinghe, 2018). Securing placements for undergraduate degrees at one of the fifteen state universities is highly competitive as students have to sit a national competitive examination - General Certificate in Education (Advanced Level), and allocation of students to state universities is made based on standardised test scores (known as z-score) using a merit and quota system (De Silva, Gothama, and Premakumara, 2021). Accordingly, while about 40 per cent of the available places for a course is allocated based on merit, 55 per cent is allotted based on a district quota system and the remaining five per cent is allocated for students who come from educationally disadvantaged districts (University Grants Commission, 2022). Although the government makes efforts to expand student access to state university education, there remain challenges regarding access to the higher education system in state universities (The Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2021).

The Sri Lankan higher education system has been subject to several transformations in the last two decades in line with the market-driven approach (Wickramasinghe, 2018). As government-owned providers of free undergraduate education, many state universities in the recent past have adopted innovative practices in curriculum, teaching, learning, assessment and research (Bandara, 2021). Further, it seems that the employer-driven agenda of soft skill requirements influences policymaking in Sri Lanka as the government perceives that higher education policies need to be reformed to develop more competitive graduates (Daily Mirror, 2020; National Education Commission, 2022). It could be argued that the rationale behind imposing a soft skills agenda on HEIs is the perception that supply-side interventions alone can address skills mismatch (e.g., Wickramasinghe, 2018). In this context, the government of Sri Lanka has undertaken a set of projects with the support of the World Bank, such as Improving Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education (IRQUE) in 2003, Higher Education for Twentieth Century (HETC) in 2011 and Accelerating Higher Education Expansion and Development (AHEAD) in 2020 to promote the quality of higher education, including soft skills development of undergraduates of state universities (AHEAD, 2022; Wickramasinghe, 2018). Considering the developments described earlier, it seems that the government is keen to implement the best practices adopted in HEIs of Anglo-Saxon countries, such as student-centred learning, quality assurance mechanisms and institutional review into the Sri Lankan higher education system (Bandara, 2021). It could be argued that

embracing the above best practices for the purpose of maintaining legitimacy and confronting environmental (market) pressures (Wickramasinghe, 2018) leads to ‘institutional isomorphism’ (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), in which all HEIs in Sri Lanka become homogeneous by incorporating such best practices into teaching, learning and assessment.

Despite the reforms and introduction of innovative approaches, concerns have been raised about the quality and relevance of the provision of higher education in state universities to meet labour market requirements (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2013; World Bank, 2016; Wickramasinghe, 2018). Specifically, the World Bank (2016, p.47) highlights the shortage of technical and professional skills in Sri Lanka as ‘the mismatch between the skills being demanded and the education of the workforce is also reflected in declining returns of education’. It has been argued that one of the critical factors that cause graduate employability challenges in the context of humanities and social sciences in Sri Lanka is the ‘skills mismatch’ between graduates produced by HEIs and the labour market requirements (Daily Mirror, 2020; Dayaratna-Banda and Dharmadasa, 2022). For example, a recent study report on student engagement in quality assurance in Sri Lankan state universities identified a perceived skills gap and mismatch in terms of labour market requirements and skills possessed by graduates (Edgar *et al.*, 2020). Further, it appears that the problems associated with a lack of soft skills are more prevalent in the degree programmes in humanities and social science disciplines than in other fields in Sri Lanka (National Education Commission, 2019). Regarding the employability of management graduates of state universities of Sri Lanka, a tracer study conducted in 2018 revealed that around 72 per cent (71.8%) of management undergraduates, who graduated between 2014 and 2015, were employed (University Grants Commission, Sri Lanka, 2018). However, the above study’s findings also showed that, in terms of employment status, management graduates were placed far below those from other disciplines, such as engineering, computer science, architecture, law, and agriculture. Particularly, in the same tracer study, although employers placed more premium on communication and teamwork, they raised serious concerns about the lack of the above soft skills in graduates (University Grants Commission, Sri Lanka 2018). For instance, in this study, only 28 per cent of industry experts expressed satisfaction regarding the level of possession of communication skills of graduates.

Given the social and economic challenges associated with higher graduate unemployment in Sri Lanka (Wickramasinghe and Perera, 2010), it has been argued that

enhancing graduate attributes or soft skills on the supply side is of significance along with structural changes on the demand side (Dayaratna-Banda and Dharmadasa, 2022). In this context, there has been a shift in policy agenda by way of embracing innovative approaches in teaching, learning and assessment with a focus on developing required skills (Bandara, 2021). Specifically, considering the Sri Lankan context, the existing empirical studies, though limited, have focused on measuring stakeholders' perceptions of the relative significance of generic skills in specific disciplines, such as accounting (Abayadeera and Watty, 2014, 2016) and computer science (Wickramasinghe and Perera, 2010). Moreover, although two recent empirical studies in the Sri Lankan context have focused on outcome-based education (Gunarathne, Senaratne, and Senanayake, 2020) and soft skills gap analysis in management education (Gunarathne, Senaratne, and Herath, 2021), both studies have focused on a narrow disciplinary area in the form of eliciting stakeholders' voices in the accounting discipline. Based on the above analysis, it seems clear that there is a necessity to explore how soft skills are developed in undergraduate business education of Sri Lanka's public universities from key stakeholders' perspectives, given that the focus of many studies on soft skills in the graduate employability context is prescriptive (Wickramasinghe and Perera, 2010).

Research setting

I chose two case studies, Alpha and Beta, based on the following criteria. First, I chose business schools of public universities that offer a similar degree programme, including specialisation areas to ensure comparability. In this context, the flagship degree programme of both chosen business schools is the Bachelor of Business Administration although both offered a smaller scale programme of Bachelor of Commerce. Second, I selected the business schools that secured the competitive World Bank funded project of AHEAD which focuses on the development of socio-emotional skills of business undergraduates. Third, to ensure variation in sample cases (Lee and Saunders, 2017), I decided to include business schools located in different regions of Sri Lanka as they differ in terms of idiosyncratic characteristics, such as size, period of existence and other location-specific factors.

The selection of cases

Alpha is one of the oldest universities, located in the central province of Sri Lanka. Management education in Alpha started in 1962 under the faculty of Arts and has been subject to transformation since then. Initially, it offered a degree in Bachelor of Commerce and later in 2009, offered a new degree programme in Business Administration. It became a

fully-fledged faculty of management in 2014 and offered degree programmes in Business Administration and Commerce. However, the Business Administration degree programme, which was the focus of this study on soft skills development, is considered the flagship programme, given the fact that students are directly chosen based on their standardised score in the competitive general certificate of education (advanced level) examination in the Commerce stream. The five specialisation pathways of a Bachelor of Business Administration include Business Finance, Operations Management, Marketing Management, Human Resource Management, and Management Studies. Currently, the business school embraces the vision of enriching potential via management education and currently accommodates six hundred and thirty-nine students and employs forty-two tenured academic staff. Because Sri Lanka adopts a merit and district-based quota system in allocating students to state universities based on national competitive examination, Alpha, being located in a metropolitan area, attracts a substantial number of merit-based students.

Beta is in the northern province of Sri Lanka and was established in 1999 as a fully-fledged business school. However, the three-decades-long civil war in the country, particularly in the region in which the business school is located, had an adverse impact on the business school, particularly in the areas of infrastructure development, retention of academics, and access to industries. The business school offers degree programmes in Business Administration and Commerce. Like Alpha, the degree programme in Business Administration, which is the focus of the present study of soft skills development, is the leading degree programme enrolling around five hundred students annually, based on the standardised score obtained in the general certificate of education (advanced level examination) in the Commerce stream. It offers four specialisation areas as part of the Business Administration degree programme, including Accounting, Financial Management, Human Resource Management, and Marketing. The case study Beta adopts a degree structure of two-year common courses, followed by a two-year specialisation area in one of the four areas mentioned earlier. Further, the business school embraces the vision of being the leading centre of excellence in teaching, learning and research. Currently, the total number of students enrolled on the business administration degree programme is one thousand five hundred and seventy-six and the business school employs fifty-three tenured academic staff. As the district where Beta is located is classified as an ‘educationally disadvantaged district’ (University Grants Commission, 2022), a substantial number of low socio-economic status students are enrolled in the degree programme.

5.5 The fieldwork: Overall process and challenges

I first obtained written approval from the vice-chancellors (gatekeepers) of universities Alpha and Beta after furnishing details pertaining to the study and commenced the fieldwork with the case study Alpha during the first week of August 2021. First, I piloted the interview guide with three key informants representing the stakeholder groups of business undergraduates, academics and industry experts. During the pilot testing, at the end of each interview, each respondent was given an opportunity to discuss their observations, opinions and suggestions for further improvement. Based on the inputs from respondents, minor changes such as the wording of questions and, in some instances, the sequencing of questions were made. The pilot testing was completed in the middle of August 2021. In line with the predefined protocol, first, decision-makers of Alpha representing both senior and middle-level positions were invited for the study. Because the first part of the research question one was to identify and prioritise key stakeholders, as part of data gathering, a brief survey (see Appendix A) consisting of three questions was administered before having the interview with each decision-maker in Alpha. While the first survey question focused on identifying a broad range of stakeholders involved in soft skills development, the second and third questions were dedicated to assessing their relative salience. Thereafter, I had interviews with each decision-maker virtually. As survey results showed academics, business undergraduates and industry experts were highly salient in soft skills development in undergraduate business education, I had subsequent interviews and a focus group with key informants representing these stakeholder groups. However, in the midst of fieldwork, as I contracted COVID-19 during the third week of August 2021, I had to postpone the fieldwork for a period of two weeks. Upon recovering completely, I continued the fieldwork and completed data collection in January 2022.

After completing the fieldwork of case study Alpha, I moved to case study Beta in early February 2022 by following the same process of administering a brief survey to decision-makers, followed by interviews with each key stakeholder identified in the survey. Unexpectedly, as the country (Sri Lanka) experienced an economic crisis during the second week of February 2022, the government implemented a power rationing system across the country resulting in eight to twelve hours of power cuts across the board. In effect, arranging virtual interviews was challenging because various zones (groups of cities) experienced power cuts at different time intervals, leading to a situation where either the researcher or key

informant often experienced power cuts at the time of interviewing. However, after obtaining consent from the decision-makers, I conducted all interviews with decision-makers face-to-face at the university premises, by adhering to COVID-19 rules, and recorded the interviews with a digital recorder. Like the process adopted for case study Alpha, based on the survey results, academics, business undergraduates and industry experts were identified as highly salient, and the subsequent interviews were held with key informants representing these stakeholder groups.

Unlike in the case study of Alpha, given the adverse impact of power cuts, I conducted a mixture of face-to-face and virtual interviews in Beta. I conducted nearly one-third of the interviews face-to-face, and the rest were carried out virtually. Moreover, as the country's economic crisis worsened in late March 2022 and the inflation shot up to more than fifty per cent, I faced difficulties in recruiting study participants from the stakeholder group of business undergraduates. A total number of three final-year undergraduates agreed to be interviewed in Beta as opposed to the twelve undergraduates in Alpha. The reluctance shown by final-year undergraduates at Beta was primarily due to the economic crisis and the social unrest that escalated in April/May 2022. Also, given that my spouse was diagnosed with a critical illness during the first week of April 2022 and her subsequent recovery process took a month, I halted the fieldwork for a month. As a result, I completed the fieldwork for the second case study of Beta during the second week of June 2022. Amidst all the challenges, I completed the fieldwork in Beta with a total of 31 interviews with key stakeholder groups. Nevertheless, due to the extraordinary circumstances, I was subject to, I had to spend nine months on fieldwork though the initial expectation was around six months of fieldwork.

5.6 Research participants

The primary data sources were the stakeholders within the case studies which included decision-makers, business undergraduates, employers and academics (see Table 5). For example, the final year students were included as one of the data sources in Alpha and Beta because of their unique position in terms of their prolonged exposure to soft skills development in the degree programme and their current status of preparing for transition to the workplace. In the case of academics, academics representing different levels, including senior, junior, and teaching associates were chosen due to the possibility that each group may hold different perspectives regarding the development of soft skills. Particularly, since it is the academics who conceptualise, design, and deliver soft skills programmes to enhance the

employability prospects of graduates, their beliefs, perspectives, and expectations need to be probed. Finally, in the case of employers, given that it is the industry that finally absorbs graduates into their workforce and often advocates the notion of work-ready graduates, industry experts representing diverse sectors were included in both case studies of Alpha and Beta. Apart from the primary data sources, secondary data sources, such as the curriculum, student handbook, and websites of the respective business schools were scrutinised as part of the documentary analysis.

Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) stipulates the selection of sample elements to fulfil a purpose, mainly based on their 'unique position' in terms of knowledge and/or expertise relevant to the topic under exploration (Check and Schutt, 2012). Accordingly, I selected study participants, representing decision-makers, academics, business undergraduates, and industry experts (see Appendix B for the detailed profile of key informants). In both case studies, with regard to identifying industry experts, in addition to using my personal contacts, I identified key informants through LinkedIn, and industry associations as well. In some instances, I relied on participants' referrals to identify key informants in specific industries. Considering industry experts, to ensure maximum variation, practitioners were deliberately chosen to have sectoral-specific differences. Thus, practitioners were drawn from diverse industries, such as pharmaceuticals, telecommunication, fast-moving consumer goods, dairy, beverages, banking, insurance, entrepreneurship and apparel. Similarly, regarding the recruitment of business undergraduates in Alpha, I used the LinkedIn profiles of students, and in some instances, I relied on referrals made by other participants. I chose undergraduates representing different functional areas, socio-economic backgrounds and gender. Moreover, undergraduates in their final year, only, were chosen due to their unique position as they were on an internship at the time of data collection. However, in Beta, although I chose undergraduates who are in their final year of the degree programme, they were about to undergo internship unlike their counterparts in Alpha, who were nearing the completion of an internship. Further, it should be acknowledged that the undergraduate sample in Beta is underrepresented compared to the same sample group in Alpha due to the impact of uncontrollable factors. Finally, to identify academics and decision-makers, I referred to the respective websites of the business schools and made personal contacts with them. Academics were chosen based on their level, and role in the business school. In both case studies, I selected decision-makers representing various

hierarchical levels, such as the deputy vice-chancellor (only in Alpha), deans of the business school, and heads of the departments.

In the beginning, although data saturation is one of the key criteria to decide the number of interviews needed, to have a provisional estimation of number of participants required for the present study, I relied on both scholars’ suggestions and the literature on graduate employability. For instance, Saunders and Townsend (2016), based on the extensive review in organisation and workplace research, suggested that 30 to 50 key informants from single or multiple organisations seemed sufficient. Similarly, Marshall et al. (2013) shared the view that a single case study is likely to have 15 to 30 interviews. Prior empirical studies on graduate employability skills, using the multiple case study design, have shown that the total number of participants recruited varied from 17-69 (e.g., Farenga and Quinlan, 2016; Nghia, 2017; Nghia, 2018a). Considering the researchers’ suggestions and the evidence from prior empirical studies, as a rough estimate, it was expected at the beginning of the study that a minimum of 60 key informants from Alpha and Beta were needed, considering the inclusion of multiple stakeholders in the study.

Table 5. Stakeholder-based breakdown of study participants

Institution	Decision-makers (DM)	Academics (AC)	Industry Experts (IE)	Undergraduates (UG)	Total
Alpha	06	09 03*	14	12	44
Beta	04	14	10	03	31
Total	10	26	24	15	75

* Teaching associates/assistant lecturers on contract

5.7 Data collection methods

It has been suggested that an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm, in general, relies on the qualitative data collection methods of interviews, observation, and document reviews (Mertens, 2020). The primary data collection method was undertaken through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders of business schools. Given the nature of the research problem and the research questions elaborated in Chapters 1 and 4, semi-structured interviews are deemed more appropriate as participants’ perceptions regarding soft skills development

require an in-depth exploration to obtain a holistic picture. In addition, in the case of secondary data, document analysis was undertaken to examine the specific policies relating to soft skills development. As mentioned in the previous section, interview guides were piloted to ‘test and refine’ (Yin, 2015, p.39) questions and the insights derived from piloting led to the designing of the final interview protocol used for each stakeholder group.

Semi-structured interviews

Interviews enable capturing the ‘experiences and viewpoints’ (Turner III, 2010, p.754) of participants, particularly exploring a phenomenon of interest in-depth to ‘understand the interviewee’s subjective perspective of a phenomenon’ (McGrath, Palmgren and Liljedahl, 2019, p.1002). Specifically, the peculiarity of a qualitative interview is that it allows a researcher to understand ‘how people construct their realities – how they view, define, and experience the world’ (Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault, 2016, p.118). Therefore, it is suggested that the initial step involved in conducting qualitative interviews is choosing the type of interview (Rabionet, 2011) which is best suited to the nature of inquiry and research questions (Kallio *et al.*, 2016). Based on the structure and purpose, in general, interviews can be classified into structured, unstructured, and semi-structured interviews (Robson and McCarten, 2016). Whereas unstructured interviews have inbuilt flexibility to explore participants’ perspectives and stimulate discussion, leading to emergent insights, structured interviews adopt a rigid approach where interview questions follow the same order and wording in line with the interview schedule (Tracy, 2013). However, while having a tentative but not rigid structure regarding a limited number of questions and providing room for additional probing and exploration through follow-up questions (Rubin and Rubin, 2012), semi-structured interviews are considered more compatible for case study research (Hancock and Algozzine, 2006).

Semi-structured interviews as a form of conversation in qualitative research enable a researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of study participants’ perceptions, experiences, and perspectives regarding the research topic (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Brinkmann and Kvale (2015, p.4) emphasise that the highly rich data generated through interaction between the interviewer and interviewee contributes to ‘knowledge production’. The purpose of using semi-structured interviews is to produce ‘a body of knowledge’ (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006, p.314) based on participants’ interpretations of social realities. Moreover, semi-structured interviews allow researchers to access the study participants’ world and

understand their perspective by asking questions, listening to their responses, and probing and following up with additional questions (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Morris (2015, p.5) succinctly highlights the efficacy of in-depth interviews as:

The interview gives the researcher access to interviewees' thoughts, reflections, motives, experiences, memories, understandings, interpretations and perceptions of the topic under consideration. It gives the researcher the opportunity to establish why people construct the world in particular ways and think the way they do.

Semi-structured interviews, by way of positioning somewhat in-between structured and unstructured interviews along a continuum (Knox and Burkard, 2009), while providing flexibility in the form of opportunities for improvisation (Myers and Newman, 2007), also ensure the intended themes in the interview guide are covered during the interview.

The rationale for choosing semi-structured interviews in the present research was that the interpretive approach focuses on how social actors experience, understand and interpret the social phenomenon, and the researcher viewed interviews as an appropriate tool to elicit participants' account of multiple interpretations by engaging in conversation with them (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019). Put differently, because my ontological position of realities is socially constructed, and the epistemological stance of legitimate knowledge is acquired through interpreting social actors' multiple and diverse perspectives (Schwandt, 1998), interactive exchange with stakeholders using semi-structured interviews enabled me to explore the phenomenon of 'soft skills development' from the perspectives of employers, undergraduates and academics to gain rich, detailed and in-depth pictures of how different stakeholders construct and ascribe meaning to the phenomenon under study. Moreover, given the 'what' and 'how' forms of research questions formed in the present study, answering those questions requires in-depth exploration of diverse perspectives. In this context, a semi-structured interview is better suited to extract rich, detailed, insightful views from stakeholders to answer research questions.

As a consequence of the COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the government, a total of 41 interviews with the key stakeholders of decision-makers, academics, business undergraduates and industry experts in case study Alpha were conducted virtually using the Zoom platform due to its inherent benefits (see, e.g., Lobe, Morgan, and Hoffman, 2020). However, in relation to Beta, as COVID-19 restrictions were partially relaxed in February 2022, of the 31 interviews with key stakeholders, nearly half were face-to-face (see Appendix

B for profiles of the key informants). I followed the framework proposed by Kallio *et al.* (2016) to design, test and use semi-structured interviews. Accordingly, the five phases associated with the process comprise ‘identifying the prerequisites for using semi-structured interviews, retrieving and using previous knowledge, formulating the preliminary interview guide, pilot testing the guide and presenting the complete semi-structured interview guide’ (Kallio *et al.*, 2016, p.2962).

First, I prepared the interview guides based on the key concepts identified in the research questions, conceptual framework, and the literature on graduate employability. Then, all interview guides were pilot-tested and minor corrections were made based on the feedback from respondents. When designing the interview guide, I developed a funnel-like structure, where initial questions focused on exploring the meaning of the key concepts, such as the meaning of the term ‘soft skills’ from participants’ perspectives, followed by questions covering the substantive areas in accordance with the analytical framework. The closing questions in the structure address any important points left out earlier, along with opportunities to provide additional remarks. A separate interview guide was prepared for each stakeholder group based on the key themes and the concepts identified in the literature and the conceptual framework (see Table 6). Except for decision-makers, interview guides used for all other stakeholders of academics, business undergraduates and industry experts were similar except for minor variations (see Appendix C). In the case of decision-makers, in addition to questions included for other stakeholders, specific questions, such as key drivers, and the state of graduate employability were included.

All interviews with decision-makers, academics, industry experts and students were conducted in English. In general, the interviews lasted 25-45 minutes, and were either recorded in a digital recorder in the event of face-to-face interviews or on a personal computer in case of virtual mode. Finally, I put into practice the best practices in conducting interviews suggested by scholars, such as building rapport at the beginning (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015), and maintaining a balance between intensive listening and directing to avoid ‘excessive passivity’ and ‘over-direction’ (Walsham, 1995, p.78). Finally, although a number of industry experts requested rescheduling due to the impact of COVID-19 and the economic crisis, I accommodated their requests rather than pressurising them. Such empathetic understanding led industry experts to provide insightful accounts despite the possible delay in completing fieldwork as per the intended schedule.

Table 6. Interview themes and indicative questions

Key themes/concepts	Interview questions
<p><u>Initiation:</u> The conceptualisation of soft skills</p> <p>Expected soft skills</p> <p><u>The role of stakeholders:</u> Key stakeholders' role</p> <p><u>Soft skills design:</u> The curriculum</p> <p><u>Delivery of soft skills:</u> Teaching methods</p> <p><u>Assessment of soft skills:</u> Assessment methods</p> <p><u>Barriers to soft skills development:</u> Key barriers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What does the term soft skills mean to you? ○ How would you describe the significance of soft skills for business graduates? ○ Considering entry-level positions, what types of soft skills are essential for business graduates? ○ How would you describe your role in developing soft skills? ○ How would you describe the role of other key stakeholders in developing soft skills? ○ Describe the role of curriculum in developing soft skills in the degree programme. ○ What is your assessment regarding the extent of the inclusion of soft skills in the curriculum? ○ Describe the teaching methods you use to develop soft skills in the classroom? ○ Please describe the types of formative assessment you normally use in your courses to assess soft skills. ○ What are the barriers/challenges you confront when engaging in the planning, teaching, and assessment of soft skills?

Focus group with lecturers/tutors

Focus groups enables exploring the opinions, views, and perspectives of study participants of a particular phenomenon of interest through active interaction between participants (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Unlike interviews, the primary advantage of focus groups is the emergence of divergent points of view through facilitated discussion in which agreements and disagreements between study participants contribute to an in-depth understanding of the issue concerned (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2022). In the present study, although I intended to use focus groups for assistant lecturers of both case studies, due to accessibility and other practical issues, I was able to conduct one focus group with assistant lecturers of case study Alpha. The purpose of having a focus group with assistant lecturers (teaching associates) is because they may have unique insights as they conduct discussions classes with a small class size of 25-30 students, thereby having better one-to-one interactions with them.

Although semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method, it was expected that focus group could be used as a supplementary tool to obtain new perspectives on how soft skills are developed from assistant lecturers/tutors, who have close proximity in working with students. I adopted a purposeful sampling in selecting assistant lecturers/tutors and attention was paid to recruiting participants with different disciplinary backgrounds. Accordingly, three assistant lecturers representing the areas of Human Resource Management, Marketing, and English language teaching were invited to the focus group. Before having the focus group, one-to-one virtual and telephone meetings with each participant were held to brief the nature, purpose and process of the focus group, followed by clarifications or additional information based on their queries. I prepared an agenda for the focus group, consisting of an introduction, main areas/questions, and a summary (see Appendix D). Notably, the areas focused on in the focus group were similar to the interview guides used for other stakeholder groups. Before commencing the focus group, I explained the purpose and the process to be adopted to key informants and provided clarifications. As a facilitator, I managed the flow of discussion throughout the focus group which lasted forty-five minutes.

Documentary sources

In case study research, the use of multiple sources of evidence and different data collection methods is of paramount importance as such diverse sources and methods provide not only rich information about the phenomena but also facilitate various forms of triangulation

(Patton, 2014). When data are collected from various sources, and using different methods, they contribute to the enhanced understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Baxter and Jack, 2008). The term documents broadly encompass a wide range of sources in the form of ‘written, visual, digital, and physical materials’ (Merriam, 2009, p.139), which are often preserved for specific purposes prior to the research (Bryman, 2012). Case study researchers, when deciding the inclusion criteria, are advised to focus on relevance, accessibility and authenticity of documents (Hancock and Algozzine, 2006, p.52). For instance, document sources also have some inherent limitations because they are prepared and stored for other purposes than the particular research purpose (Merriam and Elizabeth, 2016), thus they may not be fit for the study’s purpose (Denscombe, 2010). In the context of the present study, as a complementary source to semi-structured interviews and focus group, I collected and reviewed documents, such as undergraduate handbooks, curriculum, brochures, and information published on the websites of the respective business schools. Importantly, because I relied primarily on semi-structured interviews with multiple stakeholders and the focus group to explore the phenomenon of soft skills development, the collection and analysis of documents as a supplementary tool in the present study was to cross-check stakeholders’ points of view and retrieve the necessary background information for the case studies concerned.

5.8 Data analysis method

In the case of the overall approach for data analysis, first, a within-case analysis was performed using thematic analysis, followed by a cross-case comparison across the cases to identify any similarities (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Braun and Clarke (2006, p.79) define thematic analysis as ‘a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ and a notable feature of this approach is that it can fit into various theoretical frameworks and different forms of qualitative data. Specifically, in relation to the case study approach, concerning the process of thematic analysis, Hancock and Algozzine (2006, p.61) describe the process as:

Each new piece of information is examined in light of a particular research question in order to construct a tentative answer to the question. Tentative answers are categorized into themes. This process continues until themes emerge that are well supported by all available information. During this process, the case study researcher may elect to refine the question if the information is disconfirming or retain the question if the information supports the question’s viability.

In the present study, regarding the analytical approach, I adopted the six-steps process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2013) involving a combination of theory-driven and data-driven hybrid approach (see Table 7). Accordingly, in this hybrid approach, in addition to the identification of a set of initial codes based on the conceptual framework, and research questions, codes were also developed inductively considering the emergence of new perspectives.

Table 7. The thematic analytical process

Phase	Description and key points
1. Familiarising with data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The most important foundational phase for the rest of the phases ○ Total ‘immersion’ in the data through repeated, active reading of transcripts line by line ○ Formation of initial ideas for coding and write down notes
2. Generating initial codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Forming initial codes from the data in a systematic manner focusing on the entire data set ○ Pay full & equal attention to each data item
3. Searching for themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ After having a long list of different codes obtained in phase two, sort the different codes into potential themes ○ ‘Collating codes into potential themes’
4. Reviewing themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Refining the themes by checking the coherent relationship between themes and coded extracts ○ Formation of ‘a thematic map’
5. Defining and naming themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Identify the core meaning of each theme ○ Based on the analysis, identify ‘the story for each theme’ ○ Labelling and defining each theme clearly
6. Producing the report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Present ‘a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story’ ○ Connecting the analysis to research questions & the literature

Source: Braun and Clarke (2006, pp.87-93)

First, I transcribed all recorded interviews verbatim immediately after conducting them before proceeding to the subsequent analysis. Although I used the transcription software to assist in the process, each interviewed transcript was compared with the recorded interview to ensure accuracy. Then, I read and reread each transcribed interview to obtain the overall gist and recorded the observations in an analytic memo. At this stage, the purpose was to become familiarised with the data and scan for specific portions of data, which are relevant to the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Particularly, during the first stage, I analysed the first four sets of interview transcripts of each stakeholder group before proceeding to the rest of the interviews with the view to include additional questions based on any emerging or novel pattern of responses. Also, this approach allowed me to examine where redundancy of information occurred, thereby terminating interviews once data saturation was reached.

In the case of data saturation, I considered the methodologists' suggestions as heuristic along with my own observation of the data set based on the analysis of interview transcripts. For instance, based on their empirical investigation, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) observe that higher-order themes occurred in the sixth interview and saturation was reached in the twelfth interview. As I undertook a detailed analysis after completing four interviews in each stakeholder group before proceeding, I could conclude when data saturation occurred. In the case of business undergraduates in Alpha, I observed the redundancy of information after reaching the tenth interview. Nevertheless, I conducted two additional interviews to ensure the veracity of the decision arrived at earlier. Similarly, in the case of academics, although higher-order themes were observed after having eight interviews, I conducted one additional interview in addition to one focus group. Likewise, regarding industry experts, despite noticing redundancy of information at the twelfth interview, I conducted an additional two interviews. However, with regard to the stakeholder group of decision-makers in Alpha, the number of decision-makers chosen for interviews, though relatively small, was based on availability as I chose six out of seven decision-makers connected to the decision-making of soft skills development.

In the case of case study Beta, given the economic crisis, social unrest, closure of the university, and extended power cuts prevalent in February and March 2022, recruiting key informants from business undergraduates proved challenging. After a series of postponements and cancellations on the part of undergraduates, I was able to conduct only three interviews and the data saturation was not the criteria to terminate with three interviews.

Moreover, in the case of decision-makers, given the small sample size, I interviewed four decision-makers out of six, thus data saturation was not the key factor to terminate at the fourth interview. However, in the case of academics, it was observed that the higher-order themes occurred at the twelfth interview, but I proceeded up to the fourteenth interview to reach a decision. Finally, in the case of industry experts in Beta, I stopped the process at the tenth interview after identifying that there was less occurrence of rich information at the completion of the ninth interview.

Regarding the third step, with respect to the deductive approach, based on a set of priori codes, I conducted coding across the entire dataset. The key concepts identified in the conceptual framework guided the coding process. For instance, I looked for portions of data that correspond with the initial codes of key drivers of soft skills development, the conceptualisation of soft skills, soft skill types, the role of stakeholders, curriculum, soft skills delivery, soft skills assessment, and barriers to soft skills development. In addition to this deductive approach, given the emergent and unexpected responses from stakeholders in the dataset, an inductive approach to coding was used across the full dataset to capture participants' perspectives. Particularly, I did not have specific priori codes with regard to the roles of key stakeholders and barriers to soft skills development. Thus, themes were identified inductively to the above areas based on key informants' responses. It is important to note that, in relation to this step of coding the dataset, and the subsequent analysis, a combination of both manual coding, and NVivo 12 were used. In the fourth step, while keeping in mind the research questions, I looked specifically for patterns in the dataset. For this, similar codes were collated and grouped to identify a theme. In the subsequent steps, identified and labelled themes were reviewed again to check whether they contributed to answering the research questions. Finally, all themes derived connected to present the overarching perspective in relation to soft skills development.

5.9 Evaluating the quality of qualitative research

The assumptions underpinning the chosen paradigm have implications regarding the criteria used to evaluate the trustworthiness or rigour of qualitative inquiry (Morrow, 2005). Given the paradigmatic differences (Golafshani, 2003; Fossey *et al.*, 2002), applying the same criteria of the positivist paradigm is considered inappropriate in the naturalistic inquiry (Guba and Lincoln, 1982). Whilst Guba (1981) emphasises that the criteria to judge the quality of qualitative research include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability,

methodologists Eisenhardt (1989), Lee (1989), and Yin (2018), who embrace a positivistic orientation, believe that the standards widely applied to evaluate the rigour of a quantitative study, such as construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability apply to qualitative studies. Given the nature of qualitative research, where multiple realities and divergent interpretations of such realities are embraced, the criteria proposed by qualitative researchers often diverge (e.g., Creswell and Miller, 2000; Patton, 2002; Tracy, 2010). Given the present empirical study is grounded in the interpretive/constructivist paradigm, I followed the naturalists’ criteria of ensuring quality (see Table 8).

Table 8. Criteria to assess the quality of case study research

Aspect	Positivist’s criteria -Yin (2018)	Naturalist’s criteria -Guba (1981)
Trustworthiness	Internal validity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Pattern matching ○ Explanation building ○ Rival explanations ○ Use of logic models 	Credibility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Prolonged engagement ○ Persistent observation ○ Triangulation ○ Member checks
Generalisability	External validity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Use theory in single-case studies ○ Use replication logic in multiple-case studies 	Transferability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Thick description ○ Theoretical/purposive sampling
Consistency	Reliability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Use case-study protocol ○ Case study database ○ Chain of evidence 	Dependability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Use overlap methods ○ Stepwise replication ○ Leave audit trail
Researcher’s stance	Emphasis on objectivity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Logical sequencing ○ Careful design ○ Positioning of theory 	Confirmability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Triangulation ○ Researcher reflexivity
Identification of correct operational measures	Construct validity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Multiple sources of evidence ○ Key informants review 	Not explicitly addressed

Sources: Guba (1981, p.83) and Yin (2018, pp.42-46)

Considering the criteria advocated by Guba (1981) for the constructivist/interpretivist researcher, credibility refers to the critical question of ‘how we ensure rigour in the research process and how we communicate to others that we have done so’ (Gasson, 2004, p.95). Thus, participants and readers place confidence and belief in the findings of an inquiry, and, consequently, the trustworthiness of a study is enhanced (Guba and Lincoln, 1982). A range of strategies, including intense fieldwork, triangulation, peer debriefing, member validation, and a detailed description of the phenomenon, can increase credibility (Korstjens and Moser, 2018; Shenton, 2004). In the present study, due to COVID-19, although I could not engage physically in the field in the form of prolonged engagement and observation of the phenomenon, during the data collection phase, the use of multiple sources of evidence (academics, undergraduates, and industry experts), and multiple methods (semi-structured interviews and focus group) enabled triangulation of findings. As multiple methods compensate the individual limitation of each method (Guba, 1981), gathering multiple perspectives provides rich insights of a phenomenon under study from diverse angles (Malterud, 2001). Moreover, as part of ‘member checks’, I provided the transcribed interviews to key informants to review and comment on the information transcribed.

Transferability refers to the extent of the application of the findings of the naturalistic inquiry to other contexts (Guba, 1981). Since qualitative research is context-dependent, where a researcher investigates several variables in-depth in specific contexts using purposive sampling (Patton, 2002), the extent of the application of findings in other contexts is of less significance than gaining a detailed, rich understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Petty, Thomson and Stew, 2012). Nevertheless, there remain possibilities for what Yin (2009) refers to as ‘analytical or theoretical generalization’ or Stake’s (1978) ‘naturalistic generalization’. Since it is the reader who makes the ‘transferability judgment’ (Korstjens and Moser, 2018, p.122), by presenting a thick description on context, research process, researcher, and participants, an informed judgment can be made about the extent of transferability of findings (Guba and Lincoln, 1982). In relation to transferability, in the present study, I provided rich information from the perspective of key informants with direct quotes whenever possible along with contextual information (thick description).

Dependability is concerned with ‘the way in which study is conducted should be consistent across time, researchers and analysis techniques’ (Gasson, 2004, p.94). Although the acceptance of multiple realities and the researcher as data collection instrument invariably

lead to variations in qualitative research, ensuring ‘trackable variance’ (Guba, 1981, p.81) by way of having an audit trail where all activities, procedures, and processes relating to the study design and implementation are maintained can address concerns about repeatability of the study (Petty, Thomson and Stew, 2012). A researcher is expected to adopt established standards relevant to the specific research design to ensure consistency (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). In the present study, I maintained a case study database that consists of all relevant information, including interview guides, participant information, interview transcripts, analytical tools and findings to enhance the trustworthiness of the process adopted.

Confirmability as ‘the qualitative investigator’s comparable concern to objectivity’ (Shenton, 2004, p.72) advocates that ‘findings should represent, as far as is (humanly) possible, the situation being researched, rather than the beliefs, pet theories or biases of the researcher’ (Gasson, 2004, p.93). Strategies, such as engaging in self-reflexivity, doing triangulation and providing detailed descriptions of the fieldwork, including the audit trail, can enhance the research process and findings (Guba, 1981, Morrow, 2005). In relation to the present study, in addition to triangulation, I engaged in personal reflexivity throughout the research journey by way of producing analytic memos at regular intervals along with maintaining a research logbook to record critical events. Moreover, as part of personal reflexivity, I also set aside preconceptions, values, perspectives, and biases by self-questioning throughout the research journey.

5.10 Personal reflexive account

Given that, in qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Patton, 2002), the researcher's background and role have an influence on the research process (Ormston *et al.*, 2014). Ravitch and Carl (2020, p.13) define reflexivity as ‘the systematic assessment of your identity, positionality, biases, assumptions, values and subjectivities’. From a qualitative researcher’s point of view, as Creswell (2013) suggests, being explicit about the process of self-reflection in the form of being conscious of how his/her personal background, such as prior education, experience, biases, values, and training shape the research process is both necessary and appropriate. Similarly, Richardson (2000, p.254) also asserts that one of the criteria of reflexivity is ‘is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the (author’s) point of view?’. As an ongoing process, in addition to being attentive to the influence of personal biases and subjectivities through self-reflection (Korstjens and Moser, 2018), qualitative researchers are

expected to assess and reassess any alterations of the above elements throughout the whole research process to address their impact (Ravitch and Carl, 2020). In short, reflexivity as ‘the knower’s mirror’ (Malterud, 2001, p.484) reflects the effects of a researcher on the research process and advocates researcher’s ‘conscious self-reflection (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011, p.19) of such effects throughout the research process.

As a researcher, I believe that in addition to accepting and acknowledging how my background, experience, and preconceptions play a role in shaping the research process, being explicit about potential sources of biases and subjectivities is essential in qualitative inquiry (Lune and Berg, 2017). In this context, before undertaking this Doctor of Philosophy programme, I gained valuable experience in academia and industry, spanning over thirteen years. First, after completing a degree in business administration, specialising in human resource management, I worked as a human resources officer in an international not-for-profit organisation in Sri Lanka. I was primarily responsible for overseeing the execution of operational human resource management activities, including recruitment and selection. Then, on completion of postgraduate degrees in human resource management and business administration in Ireland and the UK under an international scholarship programme, I joined as a full-time academic at a state university in Sri Lanka and have remained in the same position until now.

My initial curiosity about soft skills was the result of being part of interview panels at the not-for-profit organisation, where more prominence was given to soft skills than academic credentials. Subsequently, upon joining as an academic, I was given an opportunity to be part of a team responsible for executing a World Bank funded project known as ‘Higher Education for Twentieth Century’ (HETC), which intended to address the soft skills deficiency of undergraduates as one of the core objectives. Having opportunities to take part in seminars, brainstorming sessions, and workshops as part of the project inevitably led to many probing questions, including the role of each stakeholder in soft skills development, and how such skills can be developed better in an academic environment. These insights gained in industrial and academic contexts laid the initial foundation for me to engage in this research journey.

Although I had initial preconceptions regarding the type of soft skills that are valued in the industry and how such skills could be developed effectively, I approached the inquiry with an open mind by ‘setting aside or bracketing’ (Saldana, 2015, p.4) my personal

viewpoints and experiences. Considering the fact that I currently work as an academic at one of the case study organisations (Alpha) and, also, as per the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, I questioned my assumptions and opinions at each stage of the research process, thereby engaging in deliberate self-reflection. This was achieved, in part, by maintaining a reflexive journal, where I recorded initial thoughts, observations, contradictions and self-reflection frequently throughout the research journey. Also, I periodically recorded the initial hunches, personal challenges, and suggestions for improvement in a personal research logbook. Further, as Lichtman (2012, p.27) suggests, I always raised the question ‘how have my background, concerns and interests affected the project at its various stages?’ throughout the research process. Being sensitive to personal biases and subjective viewpoints and aware of their implications through a reflexive approach, including collecting and presenting contradictory accounts of study respondents (Patton, 2014), I ensured the study findings were not clouded with misinterpretations and omissions. Finally, having put in place a set of measures to ensure the quality and rigour of the present research, I believe that the subjectivity and personal biases were minimised to a large extent.

5.11 Ethical issues and considerations

In general, researchers have ethical responsibilities to fulfil in all phases of the research process because ethical issues, incidents and concerns can undermine a study’s credibility and legitimacy (Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden, 2001). Given that, in qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the primary instrument in collecting and analysing data, ethical issues are likely to impact research (Creswell, 2013). The ethical issues surrounding the present study and the measures taken by me are examined under three main areas: design and gaining access, data collection, and data analysis and presentation phases.

In the case of ethical considerations involved during the design and gaining access, Creswell (2013) points out that the ethical responsibilities of the research commence with securing necessary approvals from institutional review bodies by way of disclosing all pertinent information transparently, followed by securing access to research settings by providing all needed information including, study purpose, participants and the process. Also, it is suggested that researchers often confront ‘grey areas’ regarding ethical issues, particularly relating to the chosen organisation/s, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and reporting findings (Walsham, 2006). Moreover, full disclosure of information on the researcher's part enhances trust and facilitates identification of any ethical dilemmas in

advance (Creswell, 2013). Accordingly, I obtained ethical approval from the ethics committee of the University of Strathclyde by furnishing all relevant information about the proposed study. In relation to access to the case study institutions in Sri Lanka, initially, a request letter along with the supervisor's support letter was sent to the vice-chancellors of both institutions in addition to the provision of details of the proposed study. After securing the approvals from the vice-chancellors of both institutions, approvals were also obtained from the deans of the respective business schools.

Regarding the ethical issues during data collection, as the interviews were the primary data collection method used in this study, I contacted each interviewee via email or phone first and provided a detailed explanation of the proposed study and its scope. Moreover, it has been suggested that obtaining 'informed consent' from participants, avoiding 'deceptive tactics', ensuring 'anonymity and confidentiality', and adopting 'no harm' principles at all times, including not to pressurise participants to disclose information are the hallmarks of the ethical conduct of a qualitative researcher (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998; Patton, 2014; Rubin and Rubin, 2012). In line with the above best practices, key informants were given opportunities to discuss any clarifications or concerns before commencing the interview. I ensured transparency by providing clarifications to key informants' queries whenever they raised them. The participants were informed of their 'right to withdraw' from the study at any point if they wished to do so (Morris, 2015). Further, I assured interviewees of the protection of the confidentiality of information, particularly the use of pseudonyms in reporting findings.

In the case of ethical issues in data analysis, Saldana (2015, p.37) emphasises that being 'rigorously ethical' is expected from the researcher during the data analysis phase. For example, avoid removing or omitting passages and display the highest level of integrity in data analysis by maintaining 'scholarly integrity' are expected. In the present research, I maintained ethical standards, particularly ensuring anonymity using pseudonyms when presenting the direct quotes of participants. Further, fully transcribed interview transcripts were returned to study participants to check and verify the information provided (member check or participant validation). Finally, in presenting the findings, I incorporated contradictory viewpoints in addition to the perspectives supportive of key themes to offer a rounded perspective.

5.12 Chapter conclusion

This chapter provided a detailed description of the philosophical assumptions, research design, data collection and analysis. Based on the research questions and the researcher's worldview, an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, where multiple social realities and different interpretations of participants are embraced, was adopted. Because soft skills development and the context in which it takes place are inseparable, a qualitative multiple case-study research focusing on two public sector business schools was chosen. Within each case, by way of using a purposive sampling approach, study participants for interviews were chosen. Considering that this study is driven by an interpretivist approach, the primary data collection methods were semi-structured interviews, focus group and, in addition, relevant documents were also reviewed as part of secondary data. Thus, the chosen research methods are fit for the purpose of the study given the 'how' and 'what' types of research questions. Moreover, interviews with multiple stakeholders of decision-makers, academics, business undergraduates and industry experts in two case studies not only provided rich data but also allowed for triangulation of findings. Using the thematic analytical approach advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006), both within-case and cross-case analysis was undertaken. Furthermore, a reflexive account of the researcher in terms of identity and positioning and ethical issues and remedial measures were addressed. The next chapter presents the findings of the stand-alone case Alpha.

Chapter 6

Soft skills development in Business School Alpha

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the case study Business School Alpha. The first section briefly describes the background of the Business School, Alpha, in the context of soft skills development. The next section provides the results of the brief survey in terms of identifying the primary stakeholders and their salience in soft skills development from the point of view of decision-makers. The subsequent section explores and assesses the initiation, design, delivery, and assessment of soft skills from the perspective of stakeholders of academics, business undergraduates, and industry experts, who were identified as key stakeholders by decision-makers. The final section highlights the key barriers that have an impact on the development of soft skills.

6.2 The context of the case study Alpha

Having completed nearly six years in existence, in the context of Sri Lankan higher education in general, and management education in particular, Alpha is considered one of the youngest faculties. The faculty's flagship undergraduate degree programme is in business administration with five specialisation areas, namely business finance, human resource management, marketing, operations management, and management studies. Apart from having a separate department responsible for each specialisation area, the business school has a separate English language teaching unit that offers language improvement courses on a non-credit basis. As a four-year degree programme, business undergraduates follow a set of common courses in the first two years and then move on to specialise in their chosen areas for the rest of the period with the internship component in the final year. However, the recent curriculum revision has changed this pathway into one-year common courses followed by three years of specialisation in all five specialisation areas along with two internships: one interim internship in the second year, followed by another in the final year. The annual intake of students for the business administration degree programme is roughly one hundred and seventy-five, which is modest compared to the intake of other leading business schools in the country.

The Business School's website reveals that it has undertaken a range of initiatives to enhance the employability skills of graduates in the form of entering into MOUs with

industry, revising curricula, offering stand-alone soft skill development activities, and other co-curricular activities. The Business School won a competitive project AHEAD awarded by the World Bank in 2018. Among the three core areas covered under the project, one result area focuses on enhancing undergraduates' socio-emotional skills and promoting contemporary teaching and learning approaches. The faculty website describes the activities undertaken through the AHEAD project including the establishment of a Centre for Skills for Life, the Management Education & Research Centre, and the Business Incubation Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Services for the purpose of developing the capabilities of business undergraduates. Further, the Business School's degree programme in business administration was awarded an A grade for complying with quality assurance standards based on the independent programme review undertaken by the University Grants Commission in 2018.

6.3 Identification of salient stakeholders connected to soft skills development

For the purpose of identifying key stakeholders engaged in soft skills development, a brief survey consisting of three questions was administered to decision-makers (Deputy vice-chancellor, Dean of the Business School, and four Heads of Departments) before having interviews (see Appendix A). In the first question, decision-makers were asked to identify key stakeholders, who are connected to soft skills development. The findings of the first question of a brief survey indicated the identification of a wide range of primary stakeholder groups by decision-makers of Alpha. Accordingly, the highest occurrence of identification of stakeholder groups were academics, industry experts and students (see Table 9).

Table 9. Identification of primary stakeholders

Stakeholder group	Tally (n = 6)
Academics	06
Industry experts	06
Students	05
Support staff	03
Alumni	03
Administrators	02
Parents	01
Policymakers	01
Community	01
Career guidance unit	01

In the second question of the survey, considering the stakeholder groups identified in the first question, decision-makers were asked to identify each stakeholder group's relative significance by assigning a numerical value ranging from one to five. Accordingly, whereas a score of five denotes the highest importance, the lowest prioritised stakeholder group receives a score of one. The findings provided a tentative indication of how decision-makers perceived each stakeholder group in relation to others in soft skills enhancement. Table 10 presents the amalgamated score of each stakeholder group, leading to the prioritisation of their standing in soft skills development.

Table 10. Prioritisation of primary stakeholders

Stakeholder group	Total score
Academics	27
Students	24
Industry experts	22.5
Support staff	10
Alumni	09
Administrators	08
Career guidance unit	05
Policymakers	03
Community	03
Parents	03

Given that the findings of survey question two provide a general indication of stakeholders' standing in soft skills development, there is a need to investigate the decision-makers' perception of the relative salience of each stakeholder group based on the stakeholder attributes of power, legitimacy, and urgency. Thus, the third question in the survey asked the respondents to identify the salience of each stakeholder group based on the above-mentioned three attributes. The theory of stakeholder salience postulates that cumulative number of stakeholder attributes determine the degree of salience of a stakeholder group. Accordingly, high salience occurs whenever a stakeholder group is perceived as in possession of all three attributes and medium salience can be identified if a stakeholder possesses any two attributes. In case a stakeholder only has one attribute, it is considered as having a low level of salience. Accordingly, decision-makers assigned 'yes', if they perceive a particular attribute is prevalent and 'no' if the attribute is absent. By counting the number of times 'yes' was mentioned in relation to each attribute for each stakeholder, an indicator of stakeholder salience was provided (see Table 11).

Table 11. Decision-makers' assignment of stakeholder salience based on power, legitimacy and urgency

Stakeholder	One attribute	Any two attributes	All three attributes
Academics		01	05
Industry experts		02	04
Students		03	02
Administrators			02
Support staff		01	01
Alumni		02	
Career guidance unit		02	
Community		01	
Policymakers		01	
Parents	01		

With regard to soft skills development, decision-makers perceived academics as highly salient in relation to others; five decision-makers identified academics as possessing all three attributes. Similarly, industry experts were placed next to academics as four out of six decision-makers believed that they belong to the high salient group. In the case of students, three decision-makers placed them under the category of the medium salient group, two decision-makers felt that they belonged to high salience. The overall picture emerging out of the stakeholder salience analysis is that whilst academics and industry experts can be viewed as highly salient, the medium-to-high salience is the better label to describe the stakeholder group of students. Put differently, decision-makers perceived the three stakeholder groups of academics, industry experts and students as salient when it comes to the decision-making process involving soft skills development.

Interviews and focus group

As decision-makers identified academics, industry experts and students are the salient stakeholder groups in soft skills development, interviews with each stakeholder group were undertaken to explore their perspectives on soft skills development (see Table 12). In addition, one focus group with teaching associates was carried out given their close proximity to undergraduates in terms of delivering small group tutorials.

Table 12. Summary of interviews and focus group

Stakeholder group	Interviews	Focus group	Total key informants
Decision-makers	06		06
Industry experts	14		14
Academics	09		09
Academics		01	03
Undergraduates	12		12
			44

6.4 Key drivers of soft skills development

Although decision-makers mentioned both external and internal drivers, external drivers in the form of industry expectations, government policies, and competitive pressure from other universities were dominant in their responses. While three out of six decision-makers believed industry expectation is the key driver, only one decision-maker remarked that academics' intrinsic motivation was one of the internal drivers in taking steps to develop soft skills. One decision-maker summed up the drivers in the following manner:

...as far as external factors are concerned, I would say that market pressure is one of the important pressures that bring our attention to soft skills development. We have also looked at the pressure in terms of how leading benchmark faculties of management work and how they produce graduates...also, if you look at the recent developments in government policies, for example, there are concerns raised about enhancing graduate employability levels... (DM 3, Dean)

6.5 Initiation

The conceptualisation of soft skills

Overall, in conceptualising soft skills, all stakeholder groups used a range of labels to denote soft skills. It is important to note that, whereas some interviewees perceived soft skills via the lens of skills such as generic skills, life skills, and basic skills, others defined them broadly as attributes, characteristics, and non-technical skills. Generally speaking, it appeared that the concept of attributes was widely used by academics, industry experts and undergraduates. However, decision-makers viewed soft skills in the form of essential skills. Notably, non-technical skills were the second most used label by academics and industry experts followed by attributes. While it can be observed that there is a plurality of labels used to refer to soft skills, there appeared to be a commonality in defining soft skills across stakeholder groups by

using the label of attributes. The following quote from an undergraduate captures the essence of soft skills succinctly:

Soft skills are what is opposed to hard skills, that is anything that does not belong to the category of technical skills or functional-based skills. Further, soft skills can be inner and outer skills. Whereas inner skills reflect the inner strength of a person in terms of analytical thinking, critical thinking, and problem-solving, outer skills focus on how you interact and collaborate with others, such as teamwork, leadership, and communication. In my understanding, when these two skill sets are put together, they can be considered soft skills. (UG 3, Business Finance)

Despite the different perceptions of the underlying meaning of the term soft skills, it seems that all stakeholder groups recognised and acknowledged the utility of soft skills as a conduit for facilitating effective interaction with people at various levels and optimising task performance. For instance, decision-makers believed that possession of soft skills enables building and maintaining better interactions with a range of stakeholders and enhances job performance. The following quotes summarise the decision-makers' assertion regarding the value of soft skills:

Essential skills that students should possess to perform tasks relevant to a certain job position efficiently and effectively. (DM 3, Dean)

It is individual characteristics or personal attributes that enable anybody to interact with others. (DM 5, Head)

To highlight the significance of soft skills, a number of industry professionals remarked about graduates' apparent lack of work-readiness. Most of the practitioners acknowledged that business graduates of state universities are proficient at hard skills or theoretical knowledge but deficient in required soft skills. Some drew attention to the distinction between graduates of state and private universities, saying that while the former possesses higher levels of theoretical acumen and relatively underdeveloped soft skills, the latter have better developed soft skills but relatively weak hard skills. However, there was a general perception that although hard skills are perceived to be foundational, the industry appeared to place more prominence on soft skills. The following quote captures the industry's perspectives on the state of work-readiness of business graduates of state universities:

...there's a big gap between industry requirements and the current graduates, especially from those coming out from the government university... actually, their technical knowledge or their conceptual understanding is very high, but that is the

minimum requirement for me to be an employable graduate in a private sector organisation.’ (IE 8, General Manager)

When articulating the value of soft skills, like decision-makers, industry experts also appeared to concur with the perception of the necessity of having soft skills for better interaction with stakeholders and delivery of expected results. The following direct quotes support the assertion made by different stakeholders regarding the value of soft skills.

They (business graduates) have to demonstrate those soft skills so that they can connect, can align with customers, and other collaborators, like suppliers.
(IE 12, Senior Manager – HR)

...you need soft skills to collaborate and interact with people.
(IE 10, Chief Executive Officer)

When looking at the academics’ conceptualisation of the significance of soft skills, the overarching consensus reflected in their account is that soft skills are needed for effective interaction at various levels. For instance, while one academic commented on the broader utility of soft skills, another member highlighted the realities of the contemporary work environment to emphasise the case for soft skills.

I think this is a kind of or a group of skills which are useful to interact with a group of people or which are essential to link with the people who are in the society.
(AC 3, Senior lecturer)

So, if we take basically the undergraduate scenario, so their environment is the business environment or the place that they are working. So, the skills that are with them intangibly are needed in order to interact with other people.
(AC 9, Senior lecturer)

Based on the interviews, nearly all undergraduates noted the utility of soft skills for effective interaction with multiple constituents. Moreover, based on their experience in the internship selection process, undergraduates observed that higher value is placed by employers on soft skills than hard skills during the selection, particularly at interviews and assessment centres. They also acknowledged that the degree credentials have increasingly become a threshold or baseline requirement and it is the soft skills that can distinguish between highly competent and ordinary graduates during the selection process, thereby enhancing employability prospects. Even some undergraduates believed that, in certain instances, the desirability of soft skills supersede hard skills due to the demands of the contemporary workplace, particularly when applying theoretical concepts to practical, real-

life scenarios. Generally, all undergraduates recognised the value of soft skills for getting things done at the workplace through collaborating with others in different settings:

...these are the skills that you need every day when you're interacting with people.
(UG 9, Management Studies)

...soft skills are like personal attributes. It differs from person to person, and they are mainly about how a person interacts with others... (UG 1, Marketing)

...soft skills are essential to cope with the business world because they have to work with other people to achieve a common goal. And also, as employees in businesses, we have to deal with people from different layers and different departments and different fronts. (UG 2, Business Finance)

In sum, it was evident that although key stakeholders conceptualised soft skills through narrow and broad perspectives using a range of labels, the broader framing of soft skills via attributes and non-technical skills was apparent. Also, there appeared to be consensus on the value of soft skills in terms of facilitating effective interactions with people at various levels both within and outside the organisation to optimise task performance in a given context.

Identification of soft skills: Desired soft skill types

All stakeholder groups perceived an array of soft skill types that are expected or required for entry-level positions. Nevertheless, there appears to be consensus when it comes to the importance of communication and teamworking skills. In the case of decision-makers, all of them identified communication as one of the critical skills needed to secure entry-level positions. In addition to communication and teamwork, decision-making and leadership were also prioritised as desired soft skills for entry-level positions. Decision-makers stated that communication skills are essential to enter the world of work and to build interpersonal relationships.

To secure a position actually, they have to face an interview, and they should be able to perform well in an interview. They should have good communication skills and mannerisms. Also, they should be able to express themselves very well and convince their resourcefulness to the people at the interview board.
(DM 4, Deputy vice-chancellor)

I think communication skills are a must because no matter how good you are at your technical skills it is all about whether you can easily convey the message in a way others can understand. For instance, suppose you need to get to work with a customer, so maybe you have better sales knowledge or like other things, but what is important is how you are communicating the message when delivering service to the particular customer. (DM 2, Head)

Industry experts also placed more value on both communication and teamwork. All industry experts identified communication skills as one of the expected soft skills for entry-level positions. Further, ten out of fourteen experts mentioned teamwork next to communication. Notably, nine industry experts singled out emotional intelligence as a desired soft skill next to communication and teamwork. When commenting on emotional intelligence, industry professionals emphasised the need for self-management in addition to managing relationships with others. Particularly, they highlighted the components of self-awareness and empathy as essential qualities expected from employees to operate in modern environments. Notably, it is the stakeholder group of industry experts who highlighted the soft skills of emotional intelligence as opposed to other stakeholder groups. The following quotes provide insights into how industry professionals conceived the value of communication:

...how good you can hold a meaningful conversation or meaningful dialogue with another person because it includes actually how able you are to communicate something that is in your mind to another person as well as like, on the other hand, how good you are at understanding what the other person is saying.
(IE 1, Merchandising manager)

...in any industry, what we look for from a graduate is communication. You know, perhaps, it is the number one skill we expect in terms of how he/she can relate to people, communicate with people, and listen to people, while being empathetic, and succinct in what you can say... (IE 14, Head – Talent management)

Generally, industry experts emphasised the value of teamwork on the ground that the contemporary work environment demands increased interdependency in executing complex tasks. Also, several experts placed more premium on teamwork compared to academic achievement citing the reason that academic credentials reinforce individual achievement, while the workplace demands collaborative engagement.

Because when you come to a working environment, it is not about individual work, rather it is always teamwork. There could be even students who have got first-class and all that, but when you come to a workplace, what would be important is how you understand each other and how you collaboratively work, right? So, in order to do that, you should be able to empathise with each other and understand others' situations and then be able to build up effective relationships. (IE 4, Senior HR partner)

Academics also prioritised communication and teamwork as the most required soft skills to satisfy the demands of entry-level positions. It is important to note that, unlike all

other stakeholders, academics highlighted adaptability as the most valued soft skill next to communication and teamwork.

When it comes to looking at the most important soft skills needed for the entry-level position, I think one of the main soft skills they need is adaptability. Because when it comes to these graduates, they are freshly joining the industry from university. So, they need to be able to adapt to a new environment, manage their time effectively and efficiently, and control their stress levels. (AC 6, Senior lecturer)

Several academics emphasised the value of communication skills in light of the recruitment criteria applied for entry-level jobs by organisations. Particularly, they pointed out that, for a graduate to interact effectively at multiple levels, communication skills are more important than hard skills. The following quote sheds light on academics' conception of the need for communication skills:

...another most important soft skill is communication skill, which I see lacking nowadays very much in our graduates because students are very good on paper; they are very good at their technical skills, but when it comes to expressing themselves in oral or written form, they still lack both forms of these communication skills. So, when it comes to these entry-level positions, communication skills also matter a lot because no matter how much a graduate acquired knowledge, if he or she cannot communicate that to the organisation, if the person cannot properly tell or express his/her views in certain situations, then there will be no point. (AC 6, Senior lecturer)

Business undergraduates also identified communication and teamwork as the most prominent soft skills expected for entry-level positions in organisations. Some undergraduates perceived both communication and teamwork as fundamental skills as they are invariably connected to most of the tasks in an organisational setting. Given that undergraduates were on an internship while interviewing, their narratives seemed to indicate that they grasped the vitality of communication and teamwork from first-hand experience at the workplace:

...and also, communication skills, I would say it's very easy to communicate when the communication line is clear in terms of role clarity, which specifies what you have to do. The significance of communication is that, when you're not clear about what you have to do, you need to know how to ask the right questions and derive clarity from those answers. (UG 11, Human Resource)

...the team working is very important because basically organisations' systems are designed around teamwork. For instance, if you take brand promotion, there is a separate team assigned for that. This team includes a limited number of people, and we have to work within that team and also across other departments. (UG 1, Marketing)

Particularly, all key stakeholders cited communication and teamwork more than other soft skill types, and problem-solving skills were also identified as key soft skills across the board.

Overall, regarding the identification of soft skill types, all stakeholders highlighted the significance of communication and teamwork as prominent soft skill dimensions over others. Drawing on the modern workplace requirements, such as interacting with diverse constituents and the possible interdependence in task execution, they justified their choice of communication and teamwork as desired soft skill types. Notably, by justifying the necessity to have self-awareness and empathy, industry experts placed more or less equal prominence on emotional intelligence along with communication and teamwork.

6.6 The role of stakeholders in soft skills development

The key stakeholders comprising business undergraduates, academics, and industry experts, who were identified by the decision-makers as salient groups, were asked about their own perception of their role in soft skills development and also their perspectives of other stakeholders' potential roles as well. As a result, it was expected that insights obtained could shed light on whether there is a convergence or divergence with regard to each stakeholder group's own assessment of its role and others' roles. After analysing all stakeholders' perspectives, it was apparent that there is near consensus in terms of each stakeholder's own evaluation of their role and other stakeholders' assessment of the particular stakeholder's role in soft skills development.

6.6.1 Business undergraduates as active participants

In general, all stakeholders believed that business undergraduates are supposed to take more responsibility in developing soft skills compared to other stakeholder groups. All decision-makers stressed the vitality of students' responsibility by using phrases such as 'key players', 'drivers', 'understand the significance of soft skills', 'taking initiative', and 'personal ownership'. They argued that, although opportunities, resources and support systems are available, it is the students' discretion to make use of them as they are the ultimate beneficiary of developed soft skills in the labour market. For instance, one decision-maker remarked about the students' role in the following account:

...so, they also have a big role to play because ultimately no matter what kind of things we organise, if they are not passionate, and if they are not, like, willing to participate... anyway, we cannot force them rather we just can inspire and motivate

them. So, a student's one hundred per cent involvement is really important. And, they have to take responsibility because it is about their future. (DM 2 Head)

Nearly all undergraduates emphasised that students should be the key drivers and also active participants in the process. Moreover, they believed that students need to have personal ownership by seeking and exploiting opportunities to develop the required soft skills. This, in turn, requires self-motivation and willpower on the part of undergraduates to make use of the available or given opportunities for personal development. For example, the following quotes highlight the undergraduates' assessment of their role in soft skills development:

The faculty or any organisation can organise or do anything to develop the soft skills of undergraduates but, at the end of the day, it does come finally to each undergraduate to improve themselves. Self-motivation should be there to improve themselves. If an undergraduate thinks like, I am the same after completing four years of university education, then I do not think that it is the fault of the faculty or university. It is the fault of the individual undergraduate. At the end of the day, it comes down to each individual person to self-motivate, find the courage and interest to learn and develop themselves. (UG 1, Marketing)

If we take responsibility percentage-wise, eighty per cent (80%) rests with the undergraduate themselves, I think. Even though sometimes we don't get opportunities to develop soft skills, we have to seek opportunities. Even though faculty provides the opportunities, you know, through clubs of the university and your friends may also ask you to join and develop your soft skills, if the particular undergraduate does not feel the need and doesn't have the willingness, no number of opportunities will help to develop soft skills. (UG 10, Marketing)

When describing the undergraduates' role, academics also emphasised the need for active engagement and participation on the part of undergraduates to enhance soft skills. A range of phrases were used by academics to highlight their roles, such as personal interest, self-motivation, self-initiative, and opportunity-seeking behaviour in view of increasing the stock of soft skills to build a better graduate profile. Interestingly, nearly all academics shared the view that, ultimately, it is the responsibility of undergraduates to learn and develop soft skills because they do have a better awareness of their own needs. Also, they highlighted the need for students to be self-starters by actively engaging in soft skills initiatives in the form of showing enthusiasm, interest, and commitment. According to academics, given that undergraduates are adult learners, there needs to be more self-reliance rather than expecting other stakeholders to step into their soft skills development process.

...so, I think students need to, like, I don't know how to do this, but it's up to the students to do this (engaging in soft skills development), because we can advise them,

we can guide them, but at the end of the day, if they are not interested, what can we do. You need to have some kind of passion within yourselves. So, I think students have to put a lot from their side too in order to achieve something because nothing would be served to them on a tray. So, they have to go find it themselves because the future world will be very challenging. (FG, AC 10, Assistant lecturer)

When inquired about the role of undergraduates from the point of view of industry experts, nearly all industry professionals opined that, since students harvest the benefits of soft skills development initiatives at the end of the day, substantial responsibility rests with business undergraduates. Moreover, it was highlighted that having an open mindset along with a less dependent mentality is what undergraduates need to enhance soft skills:

So, I strongly believe it is definitely the students' responsibility for soft skill development. Because as I mentioned before, regardless of how talented, how good your lecturers are, and even your friends are, if you are not in the right mindset, nothing will get into you. So, you should first have an open mind, and you need to have that thirst to improve your skills and become a better person with each passing day. (IE 1, Merchandising manager)

6.6.2 Academics as facilitators

When asked about the role of academics, decision-makers perceived their role through two lenses of awareness building and provision of support along with engagement in the design and execution of soft skills. Accordingly, there was consensus that academics, while providing opportunities, could educate, motivate and guide students. Also, decision-makers believed that since academics are involved in curriculum design and implementation, their role in embedding soft skills along with the use of authentic pedagogy is of significance. One decision-maker summed up their role in the form of building awareness and provision of opportunities:

...academics should actually make the students aware of these soft skills and the importance of developing these soft skills. So along with the knowledge, subject-based knowledge, they should make the students aware of the soft skill. Um...they should give opportunities to students to develop these soft skills.
(DM 4, Deputy vice-chancellor)

When elaborating on their role, all academics felt that their role in soft skills development centres on providing opportunities, advice and guidance while building students' awareness and understanding of the value of soft skills for personal and career success. For instance, one academic noted the dual role played by her in this regard, one being a facilitator and the other a mentor. In short, academics' narratives about their role

revealed that, although they do expect students to be at the forefront in skills development, their role is geared more towards shaping soft skills development via playing the role of facilitator:

I would describe myself as having two main roles to improve soft skills: mentor and facilitator. I would say that I am currently doing four major roles under that. First, I always show the importance of soft skills and educate them on the gravity of improving soft skills. Then, during the fifteen weeks of lectures, I try to assess the students' soft skills. The classroom activities, discussions, and assignments are focused on soft skills improvement. As a third step, I try to develop them. Finally, I give them feedback to improve their soft skills. So, as a mentor and facilitator, I am currently engaging in these four roles. (AC 9, Senior lecturer)

Also, a number of academics opined that their chosen approach to soft skills development depends on the particular study year of the undergraduates. One academic elaborates on his approach as:

I generally teach quantitative-related courses in the faculty. Basically, when I am teaching first-year courses, I focus on developing their writing ability or communication skills to interpret results which are obtained from a mathematical or statistical test to a wider audience, and then I build on further. When it comes to the second year, I tend to send students to the industry. So, they have to discuss with industry people and conduct certain projects. In the case of the third and final year, I ask them (undergraduates) to do certain practical projects in the industries... (AC 1, Senior lecturer)

It appears that business undergraduates also believed the role of academics as facilitators or enablers in the process. For instance, one undergraduate used the term 'booster' and 'enabler' to denote how academics can extend their support by providing platforms to enhance soft skills. In addition, it was also apparent from undergraduates' accounts that stimulating self-awareness is what academics could do to educate students about the value of soft skills in the contemporary world of work:

So, I think the biggest role the lecturers play is to sort of put the foundation for students by way of building that awareness. And from that, students will have to pick it up and go forward. I think because lecturers do have exposure and experience, by just putting a good foundation, you know, making them (undergraduates) realise how different it actually is when you want to step into the corporate world. (UG 11, Human Resources)

A majority of industry professionals stressed that, although undergraduates should drive the process through active engagement in skills development, academics could extend their support through awareness-building and soliciting assistance from industry in terms of educating students on the vitality of soft skills. Notably, a few industry experts perceived the

role of academics as ‘activators’ in addition to ‘facilitators’. According to them, academics are expected to set high standards, monitor progress, and offer candid feedback. One industry expert highlighted the dual roles of being a facilitator and activator:

...you need to be sort of driving the students on a handheld, on a very closely monitored programme. And also, you need to have some industry experts enlightening them (undergraduates) on some of the trends that are happening in the particular industries, and some of the transformations that are taking place in certain industries, then also educate students on how to cope with the VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) environment that we are seeing today. So, these are some of the key things that the supervisors or the mentors need to get in and drive, apart from the official platform that the university is building. So, the mentors’ role should be a very significant thing if you want to really drive a very good career planning programme for students. (IE 9, Senior manager)

Considering the facilitator role, the majority of industry experts indicated the advisory and educative role of academics in the skill-building process:

I think it would be the academics' responsibility, the lecturers' responsibility to tell students, “Look what I teach you in the classroom might help to a certain extent, but the application part is what really matters in a practical situation. So, you have to always apply what you have learned”. And then if they can encourage discussions within the classrooms, within the lecture halls for students to discuss, encourage them to put their ideas out there, and, then I think, students would also learn a lot... (IE 5, Operations Manager)

6.6.3 The supportive role of the industry

When asked about the role of industry in developing soft skills, decision-makers conceived the industry’s role through the forms of direct and indirect engagement. Accordingly, while providing internships, and engaging in awareness-building activities were highlighted as direct engagement, indirect forms included providing inputs for curriculum design. The rationale behind the decision-makers’ arguments regarding the industry’s role is that, since the industry is the ultimate consumer of graduate talent, the responsibility to invest in developing soft skills is expected. As described by one decision-maker:

I think the university, the academics, the management, and the students on one end, and if you take the other end, like, the responsible party would be the employers because the undergraduates will be the future workforce. So, employers should understand that they should invest in developing these undergraduates because they are future leaders. So, their involvement in developing soft skills is also really important because they (employers) have some level of expectation. So, we should actually try to minimise the gap between the university and the industry because we as the university groom people to be more employable. So, on the other end, without the undergraduates, they (employers) will not have a future workforce. (DM 2, Head)

When describing their role in soft skills development, it appears that industry professionals recognised the fact that, in the end, they will be the ‘consumer’ of the university’s products (undergraduates). In view of sourcing graduate talent from universities, they acknowledged that their role is significant, too:

Employers are, at the end of the day, the beneficiaries of these graduates' contributions. So, they also have an interest to get the best future employees into their organisation. Because of that interest, it would be also the interest of the employers to get the graduates geared up with the necessary soft skills. So, I think they can also have a role in developing soft skills because sometimes without getting exposed to the work environment, you can't really emulate the conditions where your soft skills can be demonstrated or understood. So, in an academic setup, it's not that easy to emulate that situation. So, therefore, I think it can be much easier if employers get involved.
(IE 12, Senior Manager)

Further, many industry experts described various ways in which the industry often extends its support to soft skills development, such as offering internships, sharing insights on industry requirements, providing inputs in curriculum design, and rendering services as resource personnel for workshops, seminars and guest lectures. Another salient point raised by the industry experts was the necessity of having university-industry partnerships or collaboration in driving the soft skills development process:

So, there could be different ways that we (industry) can intervene. So, one way would be through guest lectures or workshops, or guest speaker series and all. In this way, we can work with the universities in providing that knowledge. Secondly, the in-plant traineeships or internships are training programmes that we do in terms of giving that opportunity, but of course, right now even companies are going through a tough time, right? That is, not being able to recruit a lot of people. Also, a company and a university can get together and come up with a project that is mutually beneficial for both parties, and then students can get to learn and get the experience as well. And so that could be another intervention. Thirdly, I think, if industry experts can get more involved in terms of preparing the curriculum for undergraduates, at least to develop a very practical curriculum towards their final years, I think that is another intervention that we can do in order to reiterate the importance of soft skills.
(IE 4, Senior HR business partner)

Academics conceptualised the industry’s role as more or less adding value to soft skills development initiatives by extending a supportive role. Given the practical limitations encountered in teaching and learning soft skills via in-class activities, academics were of the view that drawing on industry expertise and insights could strengthen the process:

In the recent past, most academic institutions, mostly state universities, have identified the importance of soft skills development. As a result of that, they have extended their hands to get connected with industrial partners. This is a very much important thing because the extent to which we can provide students opportunities to

develop soft skills within the faculty, while the teaching and learning process is going on, is limited. I think, if we can go for the kind of collaboration with industrial partners, it will be a good opportunity for students. In the classroom, for instance, when we discuss a case study, we are in an imaginative situation. If we can sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with industry partners and allow our students to get exposed to some kind of projects, I think that it will be a great opportunity to develop soft skills. (AC 8, Junior lecturer)

In general, business undergraduates valued the expertise and competence possessed by industry practitioners and expected their involvement in uplifting soft skills development in undergraduate business education. It seems that undergraduates realised the fact that it is the industry that sets the standards and requirements in terms of what soft skills are essential, conveying their ideas could add more credibility in the eyes of the students than academics:

So, I think industry experts can conduct like seminar series, and workshops in developing undergraduate business education as employers are the people who recruit personnel to their companies, and they are the people who know what the soft skills are a person has to possess to compete with other competitors. (UG 4, Operations)

Using the key phrases used in the interviews, when each stakeholder's perceived role in soft skills development was compared with other stakeholders' views of the particular stakeholder's role, a similar pattern was observed (see Table 13). As shown in the table, while the first row shows how business undergraduates, academics and industry experts perceived their role in soft skills development in the degree programme, each column shows how each stakeholder perceived the role of other stakeholders in developing soft skills. In sum, regarding the role of stakeholders in soft skills development, the accounts of key stakeholders of academics, industry experts and undergraduates suggest that, while undergraduates were perceived to be active participants, the academics' role was conceived more as facilitators in terms of providing opportunities and extending support through advice and guidance. In regard to the industry's role, stakeholders perceived the role to be more of supporting or enabling.

Table 13. Key phrases used by stakeholders to indicate their own and others' roles

Undergraduates	Academics	Industry experts
<p><i>Their role:</i></p> <p>Showing active involvement/active participation, taking individual responsibility, having self-awareness, seeking opportunities, taking self-initiative, self-motivation, getting help from others</p> <p>'Key driver/active participant'</p>	<p><i>Their role:</i></p> <p>Being a facilitator, offering practical projects, use of a variety of methodologies, embedding soft skills, guiding/motivating students, encouraging active participation, providing counselling, being a mentor, showing the significance of soft skills</p> <p>'Facilitator role'</p>	<p><i>Their role:</i></p> <p>Sharing experience/expertise, having mock interviews for students, providing internships, inputs to curriculum design, enhancing students' awareness, setting expectations, engaging with practical projects, sharing insights with academics, engaging continuously</p> <p>'Supportive role'</p>
<p><i>Academics' role:</i></p> <p>Act as a booster, advise, guide and motivate students, close interaction as internship mentor, build awareness, facilitator role, provide opportunities, create a supportive environment, provide diverse teaching & learning</p> <p>'Facilitator role of lecturers'</p>	<p><i>Undergraduates' role:</i></p> <p>Taking primary responsibility, having self-awareness, understanding the value of soft skills, the need for self-reflection, taking personal responsibility, learning by imitation, the value of self-learning, showing a personal commitment</p> <p>'Key driver/active participant'</p>	<p><i>Undergraduates' role:</i></p> <p>Major responsibility, having an open/positive mindset, need to invest, individual responsibility, proactivity of individuals, having self-awareness, pushing themselves, knowing strengths and weaknesses, willing to acquire soft skills</p> <p>'Key driver/active participant'</p>
<p><i>Industry experts' role:</i></p> <p>Provide exposure, build awareness, share information via workshops, provide internships, enrich undergraduates' minds, specify industry expectations, Faculty-industry collaboration, share individual experiences</p> <p>'Supportive role'</p>	<p><i>Industry experts' role:</i></p> <p>Provide internships, workshops & training, provision of quality internships, faculty-industry collaboration, information sharing, and education for students</p> <p>'Supportive role'</p>	<p><i>Academics' role:</i></p> <p>The supportive role, build awareness, enhance awareness, encourage discussion, provide a platform/opportunity, drive students, incorporate soft skills in the curriculum, and facilitator role'</p> <p>Facilitator role'</p>

6.7 Design: The curriculum

Based on the stakeholders' responses, it appears that the design aspect of soft skills development leans more towards the curriculum. Nearly all industry experts highlighted the shortcomings in the curriculum for the lack of work-readiness of business undergraduates. They were of the view that systematic curriculum revision is of the essence to ensure industry requirements are well incorporated into the curriculum to meet the demands of soft skills. Particularly, heavily theoretical-oriented and sometimes outdated curricula act as an impediment to giving due consideration to the soft skills dimension, according to industry professionals. As a potential solution to overcome the expectation-reality gap, industry professionals suggested having them on board when developing the curriculum as they could provide valuable inputs and share insights on industry expectations and requirements:

...we need to evaluate our curriculum because we need people who have analytical skills, we need to have people who have leadership skills, and we need to have people who have emotional intelligence. So, we need to relook at our curriculum and develop a proper management degree programme. (IE 2, Senior partner)

...exactly a huge mismatch (between curriculum and industry requirements). I think number one is the very outdated curriculum that does not comply with the current industry requirements. As an example, if I am talking about a theory, let us say Maslow's theory, any student or any kid can go to Google and find all about it. Do you think we should teach those things? I think the biggest problem is that in academia in universities, we are teaching them concepts and theories, but they must have a real understanding, we must talk about the application of theory. That is the problem. Once we get the human resource graduates for our organisation, you know, they are so conversant in explaining theories, but they cannot apply theories to real-life situations. (IE 8, General manager)

Moreover, several industry experts expressed reservations about having one internship component in the final year because students do not have opportunities to engage in self-reflection due to the limited time period assigned for placement. They argued that the provision of internships at multiple points of the degree programme, preferably an interim internship in the second or third year followed by the final internship in the final year would be beneficial to acquiring soft skills. Also, they were of the opinion that the incorporation of multiple internships allows students to undertake corrective measures early on rather than waiting till the end of the final year to experience workplace requirements:

Rather than, you know, giving the students an internship at the end of the semester, I would recommend that you should provide this internship, somewhere in year three so that students can learn the practical environment and come back, resulting in more reflection on what they have learned. So, this has to be looked at in a more scientific way, rather than just you know, finishing the coursework and then, you know, you are

sending them for two to three months internship, which is really not going to help much for students. (IE 9, Senior manager)

...I think the universities can consider giving out opportunities for their students to go out for early internships, like maybe in the first semester of the second year. You know, I am not advocating for a full internship...If we can offer an internship for a short period, maybe for three months, like, you know, you just go out to the industry, have a feel of it and come back. Then, they get an idea and also have, like, time to prepare. (IE 5, Operations manager)

Decision-makers also acknowledged the value of an interim internship in addition to the internship that is provided in the final year. They pointed out the features of the new, revised curriculum, where the component of an interim internship is incorporated. Accordingly, students would be released to the industry, preferably in the second year of the degree programme for an interim internship:

...we are now in the process of proposing an interim internship, allowing students to get the initial industry flavour early on in their undergraduate level studies, rather than waiting until the final year because I think, if they go to the industry in the early stage, like maybe in the second year, or the third year, so then they will get to know what is happening... So, they will get to know in an early stage, maybe four to eight weeks of interim internship, like what we have in the Western world, summer internships to provide them with some set of skills. After completing the interim internship, they will be back at the university. So, then, whatever the things they saw in the industry, and then they will be more motivated, and inspired to like, and work accordingly. And maybe they have some time to change accordingly. (DM 2, Head)

In the case of the design aspect, accounts of the academics revealed that they perceived that both embedding or integrating soft skills in the curriculum or teaching soft skills separately are useful for developing soft skills. However, it is important to note that, although academics acknowledged the value of both embedded and stand-alone approaches in soft skills development, many academics seemed to place more value on the embedded perspective in contrast to stand-alone methods. Their arguments are centred on being able to align different components into the curriculum, such as intended learning outcomes, teaching and assessment and to enable students to engage in soft skills development in a sustained manner throughout the degree programme as opposed to stand-alone methods. Moreover, concerns were raised about the lack of attendance and/or participation on the part of students when it comes to the stand-alone approach:

I think both are important, but the first one (embedded approach) is far more important than the second one (stand-alone approaches). From my experience, I can actually see that students are not keen on enhancing soft skills separately if we

arrange something outside of the curriculum. For example, if we take our faculty, we are conducting, arranging and organising different kinds of workshops, which are not compulsory. What we can observe is that attendance is poor. (AC 5, Senior lecturer)

Particularly, academics believed that embedding soft skills in the curriculum gives the added advantage of providing structure and consistency over the four-year degree programme. The following quotes capture the shared perspective of academics on the vitality of the embedded approach:

Both have their effectiveness in different ways. If I move to the integrated approach, its effectiveness comes throughout the fifteen weeks as we can assess students, give comments and improve students throughout the fifteen weeks. We can improve a student in a continuous and systematic way on soft skills. If we take separate workshops or other activities that focus on soft skills, yes, they will focus only on soft skills. If we take teaching plus soft skills in an integrated approach, knowledge, skills, attitudes and everything will be in class... In my view, if we want to improve the soft skills of a student from the first year to the second year and thereafter, having an integrated approach is much more practical. (AC 9, Senior lecturer)

I think when we compare these two approaches, as I feel, I think including soft skills in the curriculum is much more effective than conducting separate training or workshops, because like, if we conduct a separate workshop or a separate training programme, that is limited for that particular time period. Now, when it comes to students, they have the tendency to forget the most important things after they have been taught. So, if we can incorporate these soft skills in the curriculum itself, that will be sustained for the whole duration of the degree programme. Because of that, I think we have to incorporate soft skill components into the curriculum where students from time to time can develop their soft skills from an initial level to a somewhat advanced level throughout these four years... (AC 6, Senior lecturer)

Overall, generally, industry experts believed the existence of a possible gap between curriculum and industry requirements. Despite the use of embedded and stand-alone approaches, academics seemed to favour the embedded approach due to its inherent advantages of continuity and consistency.

6.8 Delivery of soft skills

In teaching or delivering soft skills, it is apparent from academics' descriptions that, although they used a range of interventions to enhance soft skills, oral presentations and group work/projects are predominant in in-class activities. They believed that, by using the above methods, the vital soft skills of communication and teamwork could be developed to a great extent. Notably, it was evident that many academics integrated presentations and teamwork as part of a wider assignment, such as case studies. However, teaching associates of the

English language teaching unit seemed to adopt stand-alone presentations to nurture oral presentation skills. The following direct quotes illustrate the approaches used by academics to develop soft skills:

...basically, the most commonly used approach is presentations within the class. Even in the case of assignments given beyond in-class activity, teamwork, and presentations are given much more consideration. And then, I am giving kind of case studies and problem-solving tasks. In addition to presentations and case studies, I give teamwork activities to enhance discussion among students. (AC 9, Senior lecturer)

...usually, I conduct presentations, and after the presentations, I ask questions to them (undergraduates). So basically, if they claim something, they have to defend those things when I ask a question. So, when defending, they will try to develop their soft skills. (AC 7, Junior lecturer)

Apart from those approaches, it could be observed that there are instances where authentic pedagogy in the form of service-learning, practical projects, and case studies was used to offer a flavour of real-life scenarios (see Table 14). Moreover, academics perceived that the use of authentic approaches stimulates active student participation and the development of a range of additional soft skills of problem-solving, decision-making, and critical thinking in addition to communication and teamwork. Although there are some inherent limitations in imitating a real-work environment inside the classroom, it seemed that academics have taken steps to ensure the assignment given reflects the dimensions of practical, workplace reality:

...in the case of financial reporting and taxation courses, students have to meet an industry expert and they have to interview that expert based on a given topic. Then, they have to live stream through the Zoom platform, followed by publishing it on the official YouTube channel. So, using this method, I think that students can definitely improve their communication and teamwork skills. Apart from these skills, they can also learn professionalism and ethics while building their confidence in public speaking skills. (AC 4, Junior lecturer)

...in the third and final years, I ask them (undergraduates) to do certain projects in the industries or within the organisation setups. I ask them to collect data and there will be certain presentations, and certain reports prepared. Even in forming the groups, I do not let the students get into groups based on their preferences. So, I purposefully assign students to groups according to my wish so that they would be able to work with people whom they may not like even. (AC 1, Senior lecturer)

Table 14. Soft skills development methods used – Academics’ perspectives

Soft skills development methods	Number of academics mentioned (n =12)
Presentations	07
Group work/project	07
Case study (in exams/in-class discussion)	06
Roleplay	04
Practical project/assignment	03
Meet the expert assignment	02
Mock interviews	02
Debates	02
Exhibitions	02
Authentic assignments	02
Publish findings on YouTube	02
Programmes via skills for life centre	02

Some academics noted that, instead of embracing common approaches to develop soft skills for all years, they adopt a varying approach in line with students’ years of undergraduate study. They argued that, since soft skills development is a gradual process and students may face initial challenges in the first year, the chosen approaches need to reflect this reality as well. In other words, by implementing a simple-to-complex approach from year one to year four, higher-order soft skills could be developed later, while basic soft skills could be introduced during the first year:

...when it comes to the first year, actually, I think that we are aware that the language ability and the presentation skills of students are inadequate, but when they move towards the final year, there is a gradual development. For example, in the final year, when I teach a particular course, I use some methods, such as case studies to enhance their critical thinking and analytical thinking skills. However, If I am supposed to teach the first year, we cannot use such kinds of methods because of students’ lack of skills. Thus, I am using some presentations, individual assignments, and small group assignments for the first year. Likewise, based on the year and the nature of the course, I am changing the teaching styles and assessment methods.
(AC 5, Senior lecturer)

To concur with academics’ accounts of the use of presentations and teamwork as two major methods to develop soft skills, almost all business undergraduates expressed that they, also,

had experienced some form of presentations and group work throughout the business education programme:

...when we talk about soft skills development in our academic programme, my mind always goes to the presentations that we are required to do for the courses. Those presentations are very effective, I should say. Even it (the presentation) is for the academic requirement, we still prepare ourselves like how we are going to present, and what we are going to present. So, it really makes us develop ourselves to be a good presenter. (UG 1, Marketing)

...we had group assignments, where we would have to collaborate with a bunch of our batch mates and to deliver a presentation of some case, or to come up with solutions and to present. Also, we had field visits that enhanced our ability to look at an organisation from a different perspective to understand the organisational issues, and then creatively finding solutions as a team. (UG 3, Business finance)

In addition, they also concurred that they got exposure to some innovative approaches in the form of service-learning, case study, role play, drama, debates, and competitions, which facilitate the enhancement of various types of soft skills. Particularly, it appeared that a number of business undergraduates recalled the positive aspects of the service-learning encountered as part of the project management course, particularly being exposed to unconventional challenges and opportunities to develop soft skills:

And also, I should mention that I had a really favourite project, a favourite assignment that we did in the project management subject. We were divided into groups, and we had to do a project, actual project. So, for that, there were like eight members in the group. We did a nice project in the faculty, which was an appreciation programme for the non-academic staff. It was a huge success, but it was not very easy. We had to make quick decisions, and we had to work as a team. So, the team was only one boy and seven girls. And even though in our faculty, in my experience, we didn't have that much of a chance for girls to lead. So, in that project, we did it very well. It was not a very easy project, but it was a really good experience and a very successful project. I appreciate for giving that kind of interactive assignment for us, which was really helpful for us to develop soft skills. (UG 5, Operations)

Importantly, all eleven undergraduates on internship stressed the utility of internship in increasing their stock of soft skills. They believed that internship as a vehicle provided an opportunity to embark on a reality-checking mission, where industry requirements in terms of soft skills and corporate culture could be explored during the period. Notably, although the degree programme provides only one internship in the final year for a period of six months, several undergraduates periodically underwent multiple internships on their own throughout the four years to sharpen their skills and become familiarised with the industry. The direct

quote, below, provides a clear description of the value of an internship from the perspective of an undergraduate, who undergo an internship at a multinational corporation:

There have been a lot of learning opportunities. So, from the first day onwards, we have been pushed to learn, learn from whatever we do. And although we are interns, the jobs we get are very vast. We don't get to do like literally a few tasks, but we get to handle our own projects, where we drive it from end to end. And it's not just one project we get to when you are in a certain function. And when you are in a certain team, you are getting involved in everything that the team does. There are no things like, "Okay, this is what the manager does, and this is what the intern does", there's nothing like that. It is just when you are working in a team, although it doesn't matter if you are an intern, or you are a manager there, you work as a team...
(UG 11, Human Resources)

Industry professionals opined that the ways in which they extended their support to develop soft skills in undergraduate business education covered a range of activities (see Table 15). The majority of them singled out and highlighted internship/industrial placement as an effective approach to developing soft skills. Accordingly, they believed that a systematic internship offered by the industry not only provides insights into industry dynamics but also shapes students' soft skills via exposure to workplace realities. However, one industry expert signalled the challenges in providing adequate internship opportunities due to the COVID pandemic. Also, a number of industry experts cautioned about the internship programmes that tend to exploit potential interns or offer insufficient coverage of areas needed to develop soft skills. The following direct quote indicates the shortcomings and opportunities inherent in internships:

...It (an internship) does help. However, the quality of internship programmes is not consistent. It depends on the type of organisation as well. And the idea probably is to get a flavour of, you know, what the work looks like. It is not acquired only by the work given to the student but by a student observing how others are working within those organisations. Nevertheless, there are a lot of accusations that students are used rather than trained in organizations when they go for internships. But in some organisations, they really put the students on to challenging assignments and provide very useful training or exposure. I think it is a great tool, a great opportunity for students to learn, especially soft skills, as well as industry-specific skills. (IE 12, Senior manager)

In addition to the internship, and awareness-building through workshops, seminars and guest lectures, industry experts also highlighted the value of using authentic soft skills development methods to reflect the real world of work (see Table 15). For instance, some industry experts stressed the importance of having practical projects (authentic pedagogical approaches) in

collaboration with the industry to create a win-win situation for both students and the organisation concerned:

I have spoken on this at a few other forums as well. The students who are in the second year, third year, and final year do a lot of projects...and many of them, if not everything, are directly related to the industry. And the particular lecturer can select, say, the best two or best three projects, contact the relevant industry and request that this particular project can be viewed, or assessed in the industry...what I say is, if you have a few students with projects, you call me and say, okay, now, we have these projects, and these are the projects prioritised as number one and two...if you like these projects, would you be able to give us a chance? So, the students can come to our organisation, and you know, the whole team can make a presentation on that particular project. Then we can have a very fruitful discussion with those students, and give them perhaps some time, maybe two weeks, three weeks to try and apply that project. So, you know, that will give them a lot of exposure.
(IE 14, Head – Talent development)

Table 15. Soft skills development interventions – Industry’s perspectives

Soft skills development interventions	Number of industry experts mentioned* (n=14)
Internship	11
Building students’ awareness	05
Workshops and seminars	04
Student mentoring programme	04
Ongoing dialogue with university/faculty	04
Inputs for curriculum development	03
Visiting and guest lectures	03
Memorandum of understanding	03

* Only three and above are reported

In sum, regarding soft skills development methods, whilst academics relied mostly on presentations, teamwork and case study to develop required soft skills, industry experts highlighted internships and awareness-building initiatives as widely used interventions to support soft skills development.

6.9 The assessment of soft skills

An examination of the curriculum of the business administration degree programme reveals that, in general, forty per cent (40%) of the total assessment is allocated for continuous assessment (formative assessment) and the rest of sixty per cent (60%) is allocated for end-

semester examination (summative assessment). Thus, it is apparent that most of the soft skills development activities/assessments are undertaken as part of forty per cent allocated for the continuous assessment. The majority of the academics agreed that, in general, the existing forty-sixty percentage structure is a limitation to developing soft skills as this structure failed to take into consideration the nature of the course and its requirements:

...in some courses, I think 60-40 combination (60% for summative and 40% for formative assessment) should be the other way around because we want to give more emphasis on soft skills development. For example, in accounting, we are teaching how to prepare financial statements but, today, we have systems that can auto-generate financial statements. So, in this case, students or graduates need to communicate the things that they have got from the systems. In our assessment, allocating sixty per cent to prepare financial statements is not the way...
(AC 4, Junior lecturer)

In describing the assessment of soft skills, an academic portrayed a picture in terms of the dilemma he faced because of the assessment structure. He argued that, from the students' perspective, seeing substantial weighting is allocated for summative assessment communicates an implicit message that what is valued is theoretical or hard skills rather than soft skills. Also, although policy documents, such as quality assurance policy, advocate for outcome-based, student-centred learning, the ground reality is such that more weight is given to the summative assessment, thereby creating contradictions between aspirational goals and structural limitations. Put simply, according to him, though what is expected from academics is more of a facilitator role, because of the assessment structure, they are encouraged to play the instructor-led role:

...so, the central argument from my side is that if we need to improve the soft skills of students, then we need to improve our system that can leverage student-centric teaching methods. Even the curriculum focuses more on student-centric approaches, but if we use a 60-40 structure (60% for summative and 40% for formative assessment), then that will not reflect a student-centric approach. Thus, we cannot be a facilitator in a situation of 60-40 structure, rather we will be more towards encouraging a teacher-centric approach. (AC 2, Junior lecturer)

However, a contradictory view was expressed by another academic, who believed that what is of importance is the competence of the academic in designing and evaluating assessment rather than the structural impediments. The particular academic stressed the point that, even in summative assessment, well-thought-out questions could facilitate the testing and development of soft skills, such as critical thinking and problem-solving:

...the compulsory case study questions appearing in my question paper stimulate critical thinking, problem-solving and creativity. As we refer to real-world scenarios, it would let students relate to theories and models and present their solutions in a way to achieve the given objectives of the question. So, I believe that the composition of 60-40 (60% for formative and 40% for summative assessment) is basically in the hands of a person who plans the course structure and evaluation. If the particular academic has the potential or the ability to plan it in a way that would maximise opportunities for students for both soft and hard skills development, I believe that will be a good structure. (AC 8, Junior lecturer)

In addition, some industry experts raised red flags regarding the nature and forms of assessment undertaken in courses. They believed that it is the teacher-centred, theory-focused, examination-based assessment that adds little to the development of soft skills. This means that they observed that the existing system in the university is theory-driven, heavily drawing on examination-based assessment, rather than providing a practical, real-world authentic scenario.

Let's take the employee resourcing module. After completing the module, we do the evaluation, we do a written exam. We ask what do you mean by human resource; what do you mean by assessment centre; And, what are the factors you need to consider when you are organising an interview? No. I propose, that at the end of the employee resourcing module, you need to have a discussion with an expert based on the guidelines. Right, you may ask the expert about how you conduct an interview. We must create a hypothetical environment and ask students to conduct an interview. I think assessment now is all about measuring the level of understanding and memorising capacity. Now, we should go beyond that. That is one of the biggest problems I saw in the evaluation system in our country. (IE 8, General manager)

The responses from academics implied that most of the soft skills assessments are lecturer-led and there was no indication of other forms of assessments, such as peer and self-assessments. Further, it seems that academics provide immediate feedback to students, particularly in the case of group/individual presentations. Business undergraduates also acknowledged the provision of feedback in the case of presentations. However, one undergraduate raised the point of lack of systematic monitoring of students' progress throughout the degree programme. In addition, in the case of the first two years of the programme, large cohorts appeared to pose challenges in providing individual feedback. However, when students move to the third and final year after choosing their respective specialisation areas, due to small class sizes, there seemed to be better interaction and support, including feedback from academics. The following remark from an undergraduate captures the state of feedback provision:

And when it comes to lecturers, I think because there are many students, they cannot give individual attention. So, we got less feedback or individual feedback from them but when it comes to this internship programme, there are separate lecturers, who were appointed as supervisors. So, we can deal closely (with them), not like in first year or second year. (UG 2, Business Finance)

Overall, regarding the soft skills assessment, it seemed that more weight is given to summative assessment, indicating the prominence given to theoretical knowledge. Soft skills components are mostly assessed via various methods as part of the forty per cent allocated for formative assessment.

6.10 Barriers to soft skills development

Considering the theoretical framing of barriers in the form of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive factors, based on the stakeholder groups' narratives, it appeared that the cultural-cognitive barrier was dominant compared to the other two forms of regulative and normative dimensions. Particularly, there seemed to be a common belief that the cognitive barrier of 'student mindset' was the dominant factor affecting soft skills development. Accordingly, under the students' mindset, failure to have a holistic idea about the future regarding career progression, being subject to complacency, and adopting an instrumental focus on grades and marks were highlighted as key impediments to enhancing soft skills. Many stakeholders identified the students' instrumental perspective as a hindrance, given its narrow focus on marks/grades:

So, as soon as they (undergraduates) enter university, the biggest goal that they have in their life is already achieved. So, from there, they kind of lose track. So, they are very satisfied and very happy about their achievement (having secured a place at university through a highly competitive examination), but then they just forget the bigger purpose. (IE 1, Merchandising manager)

When it comes to grade five students or university students in terms of the way they study, there may be a small difference, but it all depends on how you do improve your Grade Point Average (GPA). At the end of the day, the areas that the students can get exposed to will also depend on their GPA. And so naturally, the students would drive to improve their test scores. So that mindset is not going to really help in acquiring soft skills. It will definitely improve the test skills of the students, but then we are talking about a better balance (of soft and hard skills). (IE 13, HR Manager)

Moreover, though it is difficult to generalise, one industry expert raised concern about students' attitudes towards learning, particularly demonstrating initiative, self-motivation, and engagement rather than viewing the opportunities taken for granted. Also, by citing the example of viewing assignments as a burden rather than learning moments, another expert

pointed out that students tend to develop unfavourable attitudes while doing the degree programme, and such inherited attitudes stay with them longer:

I was part of one of the universities' mentorship programmes. I had ten students, but it was like, I had to follow up with them even to have an appointment, right. So, I got them to the office, took them around the factory, and spent time with them. Later, I gave some tasks to them, but no one was responding.
(IE 4, Senior HR business partner)

The problem is that students are not taking the assessment as a way to learn, rather they take it as a burden. So, fundamentally, the problem is the way that students are looking at things. They would take an assignment as a burden...but if they are looking at it as a space to learn, okay, this is an assessment, this is where I am researching, this is what I am going to do, this is how I am going to present, this is how I am going to practice presentation, and this is how I'm going to communicate. If they're going to look at it that way, then it is obviously learning. So, there is a huge attitude shift that has to happen, as far as I feel. (IE 6, HR business partner)

Like industry experts, similar concerns were raised by decision-makers with regard to students' mindset/attitude that is reflected in the lack of engagement in soft skills development initiatives:

...So, it is like life skills you need to have, because when it comes to students, what they want is to get good grades. So, they particularly focus more on the technical or the hard skills to get a good grade. They do not participate, even though we organise some workshops and ask them to engage and other exposure programmes. So, sometimes we see some students are reluctant because they do not see it (soft skills development) is important. (DM 2, Head)

A number of academics also perceived that it is the mindset/attitude of the students that inhibit their progress towards the development of soft skills. Importantly, two academics argued that students' dependency mentality in the form of expecting guidance and direction from others (parents, academics) poses a barrier to personal development:

So, I think students, especially the undergraduates because they still have this school sort of mentality, they would think that like the teachers used to do everything at the school, all the lecturers would like to nag them, and then beg them to do things and all, but that does not happen in the university. This is a university, and this is a professional environment. This is where you get the first sort of professional experience before you reach out to the professional, the real work environment.
(FG, AC 10, Assistant lecturer)

For example, a student would think, like, because I have survived till this age and I have had support from my family for survival, this paper qualification (degree certificate) is my expectation rather than worrying about developing soft skills. Why

do I need to put much effort when my parents will support me in the future and so on? So, that concern is there, right? (AC 2, Junior lecturer)

Undergraduates also acknowledged that it is the mindset that impedes their progress in developing soft skills. Many of the undergraduates felt that, instead of focusing on broader developmental aspects, students often spend their energy on maximising their grade point average or marks than capitalising on opportunities either given to them or appearing on their way. Moreover, it appeared that it is also the complacency or maintaining the status quo that limits students' thinking beyond the immediate priorities. As a result, the tendency to procrastinate in investing in skills development arises during the early years of the degree programme:

I would say firstly, it's like a race, right? Everyone wants to get a first-class and finish the degree in the best (possible way) within a number of years. And when that mindset is there, I think it's difficult to sort of convince people that there's more to it than that. Because it's like the conventional mindset that you come to the university, you get through the semesters, and you finish the degree programme and whatever comes next, you think very little about. So, when that mindset is there, I think it is a challenge because even though opportunities come your way, you don't know whether you should grab any... (UG 11, Human resources)

One of the biggest barriers is the mindset of the undergraduates. Even I had that experience. In my first two years as an undergraduate, I had a few things to learn, maybe to work with people and so on. But I didn't push myself. And I could have done it. In the third and fourth years, yes, I did more than in the first two years, but there should have been that drive and that willingness and curiosity to learn (earlier). (UG 3, Business finance)

Another common theme that can be identified under the cultural-cognitive factor is the lack of English language proficiency, which was highlighted by all stakeholder groups, decision-makers, academics, industry experts and undergraduates. It appeared that there was a common belief among stakeholders that a lack of language capability poses significant limitations to nurturing soft skills. Notably, because the majority of students pursue their schooling in their native language, either in Sinhala or Tamil up to their general certificate in education - advanced level examination - it appears that adapting to a new English medium learning environment poses additional challenges during the initial period of undergraduate business education. Some undergraduates, who followed their studies at school in the English medium, acknowledged the challenges faced by other undergraduates in coping up with the

academic workload along with soft skills development. The following quotes from undergraduates depict the gravity of the situation:

So, basically, I think the language is the main problem because this is the second language, this is not our native language. So, this is the main problem when we are going to develop our soft skills. Why I am telling this is we have to communicate in English when it comes to the development of communication skills, and interpersonal skills. The English language is most important for developing almost all types of soft skills. (UG 8, Business Finance)

Decision-makers also identified lack of linguistic capability is one of the barriers affecting soft skills development. They pointed out that, given that primary education is mostly carried out in one of the two first languages, the process of transitioning from secondary to tertiary education is somewhat challenging when it comes to the mastery of the English language:

...what I see as a barrier for them (students) is that because in their Advanced Level, they did in either in Sinhala or Tamil medium and then they want to convert to English medium learning environment later. At the initial level, for example, even if you ask somebody to come forward and then do a speech, probably they may not be capable, number one, or they may have some fear because it is completely a different language that they need to cope with. (DM 3, Dean)

One undergraduate student described in detail how a lack of proficiency in English could lead to challenges on all fronts for students, particularly surviving in English medium instruction in view of acquiring theoretical knowledge while struggling to concentrate on soft skills development:

If you take our batch, I think only five or six of us were from, like, the English medium (in schools). And even if you are proficient in English staying with the transformation is not easy. Because, I mean, you have done good in Advanced Level (a competitive examination) obviously, that is why you are here. But when, you know, all these new terms and new things come up (in lectures), it takes time for you to get used to these things, right. And you have to learn how to write answers in English. And when that happens, you get preoccupied with that. You might lose your focus on developing other skills. And also, when your proficiency is low, the opportunities you get are actually low. Let us say there's a Flex Project and they want to interview you, and your soft skills are really good. And this opportunity is going to give you a better chance at improving your skills more. But when you go to the interview, when you can't express your ideas in English, because the interview is conducted in English, it is going to be a hindrance... (UG 11, Human Resources)

In relation to the system-related barriers, theoretical education, lack of university-industry partnership, ineffective performance evaluation system, lack of staff development

opportunities and the assessment structure were identified by many stakeholder groups. Particularly, while many industry experts highlighted the limited university-industry collaboration as a constraint, a majority of academics identified the inflexible assessment structure in terms of fixed weighting assigned to formative assessment for all courses as a drawback. One industry expert and administrator noted the lack of comprehensive performance evaluation for academics in public universities, pointing out that poor performance is either tolerated or unpunished, resulting in a lack of consistency in terms of individual performance. The deputy vice-chancellor described the situation as academic positions in Sri Lanka are permanent, and the rewarding system favours more seniority than meritocracy. Likewise, one industry expert also raised concerns about ineffective performance appraisal:

...we need to introduce a performance evaluation system for lecturers or academics also. The evaluation system concerned must be designed in a way that should not focus on completing the number of hours or number of years in service; rather, what is needed is the outcome you (academics) are going to deliver...
(IE 8, General manager)

Notably, one decision-maker highlighted how an interplay of student-related and system-related factors poses a barrier. According to him, the interplay of the system-related barrier of the semester-based system and cultural-cognitive factors, such as students' narrow mindset, their lack of English language proficiency, and other constraints of limited financial resources, have a negative impact on teaching and learning, including the use of the flipped classroom, which facilitates effective in-class discussion.

...the other thing is the semester-based system. In developed countries, the semester-based system is good because students have two things: they do not have that language barrier so that they can read whatever the textbooks very easily and, also, they can buy the textbook, read it, and come to the class. As a result, in the classes, only discussions sort of things are happening. In Sri Lanka, students do not have textbooks and they totally depend on the lectures to get content (knowledge)...on the other hand, our students' reading habit is very poor so they totally depend on the lecture notes, and they do not do the extra reading. (DM 4, Deputy vice-chancellor)

Other than the dominant barrier of the cultural-cognitive dimension of students' mindset and lack of English language proficiency, an emerging theme as part of the contextual factors identified out of stakeholder responses was the negative impact of COVID-19 on soft skills development. For instance, academics pointed out the loss of rich, face-to-face interaction with undergraduates and also the lack of opportunities to engage in

meaningful group work activities. Some industry experts also noted the isolation and fewer opportunities to build social skills because of the pandemic. Further, one industry expert felt that there seem to be fewer internship opportunities available for undergraduates because of the adverse economic impact caused by COVID-19. Business undergraduates also perceived limited exposure to soft skills development via active engagement during the period though they experienced an increased number of webinars, workshops, and seminars via the Zoom platform:

Because right now, due to this pandemic, maybe in the universities also students are not meeting each other now and they are in their own silos. So, this will further impact in terms of understanding each other... especially because of the current situation, students are also unable to do at least the usual extra-curricular activities, right? People who are doing sports, dramas or engaging in other societies, are even unable to conduct those. So, this will further make students go into silos, and it will definitely impact them in a negative manner. (IE 6, HR business partner)

...with this COVID problem, we are more isolated from interacting with the lecturers and the tutors. So, in that case, we cannot evaluate our performance...when we do a presentation in a live environment, there is an additional advantage of receiving feedback, but with this COVID problem, sometimes we do not get this individual feedback. (UG 6, Operations)

Particularly, assistant lecturers in the focus group raised concerns about the potential limitations of virtual platform to improve students' presentation skills. They cited the reasons for missing the 'human touch' in the form of the physical presence of the audience along with opportunities to manipulate the presentation delivery are possible hindrances:

...so, when it comes to this pandemic situation, most of the things we do is via an online platform, so that may be one of the barriers...students do not get the exposure to go in front of an audience in a public speaking session and present their ideas. (FG, AC 11, Assistant lecturer)

In addition to COVID-19, another contextual factor which appeared to have a negative influence on soft skills development is related to students' socioeconomic background. Some academics also identified the challenges, specifically English language proficiency and confidence level, faced by students who come from less advantaged backgrounds. However, one academic cautioned about the generalisability of such a view as students coming from a better background sometimes lack the needed soft skills. Nevertheless, many academics acknowledged that students' socioeconomic backgrounds

appeared to have an impact on soft skills development. One academic cautioned about the lack of attention paid to students' background as:

I think for the development of soft skills, we usually have stakeholder meetings. We consider the stakeholders most of the time, but we don't usually consider the backgrounds of the students. So, based on the background also, the development of soft skills (of students) differs. (AC 7, Junior lecturer)

Interestingly, one academic raised a point about whether in-class assessment, such as presentations and the marks given for such tasks truly reflect the gains in terms of knowledge or skills made during the course. Put simply, the academic argued early development of soft skills due to students' background seemed to have an impact when it comes to the in-class performance:

The other thing is the background of the students. In my opinion, we have to measure the knowledge gained by a student within a particular course. So, the context of Sri Lanka is such that because of the polarisation of the societies, whenever we see a student coming from a better background, he/she possesses better soft skills. The disadvantage for students who come from a rural or underdeveloped background is that the students may not have the required background and development of soft skills. So, when we compare two student groups in a course, the higher marks may not be given for the skills or knowledge gained within a course, but for the knowledge and skills gained outside of the university (due to the background) ...
(AC 1, Senior lecturer)

On closer examination of the profile of business undergraduates, particularly school type attended, medium of instruction at schools and the nature of the internship organisation, it is evident that four out of twelve undergraduates went to elite schools where the medium of instruction was English. Moreover, all four undergraduates secured placement for an internship at multinational corporations compared to the other eight business undergraduates. Some of these students have had multiple internships throughout the university study programme. Those students expressed confidence in their level of work-readiness compared to other students. To validate their claim on work-readiness, they used external validation in the form of being recruited as interns at a multinational corporation or feedback from line manager or colleagues on their performance. The following narrative from a business undergraduate highlights the proactive and strategic focus of such students when it comes to crafting the career path early on and testing and acquiring capabilities along the way rather than waiting for the end of the degree programme:

So, when I was in my second year, I worked as a marketing intern at FedEx, Sri Lanka. That was for three months...during my third year, I got selected for Nestle Lanka's first virtual internship, it was entirely virtual. So, I think that soft skills, communication, and presentation skills helped me to get into that internship. I worked there as a finance intern...And again, I got selected to Fonterra as a virtual intern in 2020. So, I worked as a business analyst intern...And this year, in August, I got selected as a research intern at the institute of policy studies where I worked in the education, health and labour unit...currently, I am working as a research assistant for Verite research on public finance... (UG 9, Management Studies)

In Alpha, there appeared to be another contextual factor of the prevalence of ragging (intimidating, harassing, and humiliating the first-year undergraduates by senior students in the name of ritual/tradition) that has a detrimental effect on first-year students' learning and adjustment, including engaging in soft skills development. The deputy vice-chancellor confided that, because of the prevalence of ragging, students are divided along the lines of pro-ragging and anti-ragging. According to the above administrator, students from less advantaged and marginalised backgrounds are often vulnerable groups. Several academics also acknowledged the negative impact of ragging on newcomers' well-being, particularly adjustment challenges. The deputy vice-chancellor noted that, given the lack of self-confidence and limited English language proficiency of most disadvantaged students, they are often brainwashed or indoctrinated into the political ideologies of vested parties through the tradition of ragging. Consequently, for first-year students, the culture of ragging seemed to create a sense of dependency on senior students for academic and other support. Thus, it seems that ragging is more likely to negatively impact students, who come from low socioeconomic status. The following narrative of the deputy vice-chancellor depicts the state of ragging and its negative impact on students' learning and overall wellbeing:

...so, when they (newcomers) come to the university, due to this poor exposure (lack of early development of soft skills), this is the first time they get exposed to the world. Without their parents, they have to face the world. So, these political groups can very easily approach these students and get them brainwashed. So, this is happening very badly in state universities, especially for the students who are coming from a poor family background...so, because of that, these political groups come, and they can easily approach them and get them on their side. Basically, what they (seniors) are nowadays doing is destroying the personality of the student. When you destroy the personality, you can use these students as slaves, and that is what they are doing. So that even whenever they organise picketing or rallies or other things, whenever these students are called upon, they (students) come. They do not have the ability to see whether these things are correct or wrong, or whether these things are justifiable...they do not have the ability to do that because during the ragging period, they (seniors) have destroyed their personality. (DM 4, Deputy vice-chancellor)

In sum, while stakeholders identified the students' mindset and lack of English language proficiency as overwhelmingly dominant barriers, a broad range of institutional barriers, such as lack of university-industry partnership, ineffective performance appraisal of academic staff, assessment structure and theoretical focus, were also identified. Further, stakeholder accounts demonstrated the presence of contextual barriers, including students' socio-economic background, along with the negative impact of COVID-19 on soft skills development.

6.11 Chapter conclusion

For case Alpha, the findings indicate that, first, although key decision-makers identified a range of stakeholders, they considered academics, business undergraduates, and industry experts as highly salient groups when it comes to soft skills development in undergraduate business education. Thus, it is likely that decision-makers would pay more attention to the above three stakeholder groups than others when making decisions about developing business undergraduate soft skills. Second, in relation to the conceptualisation of soft skills, it seems that there were divergent views expressed by stakeholders as they used a range of labels to denote soft skills. The framing of soft skills as generic skills, essential skills, core skills, attributes, characteristics and non-technical skills implies that decision-makers, academics, undergraduates and industry experts viewed the term soft skills either through narrow or broad perspectives. In the case of identification of essential soft skills components, it appeared that there was near consensus as all stakeholders identified both communication and teamwork. Third, with regard to the role of each stakeholder, again, it was evident that while industry experts perceived their role more of supportive, academics and business undergraduates perceived their roles as facilitator and key driver/active participant respectively. Fourth, in designing, teaching and assessment of soft skills, more value is placed on an embedded approach than a stand-alone approach; the reliance on presentations and group work as more prevalent methods used to develop soft skills, and the use of traditional and alternative forms of assessment were evident. Fifth, although stakeholders identified a range of barriers in the form of student-related, academics-related, system-related, industry-related and other contextual barriers, the cultural-cognitive barrier of undergraduates' mindset/attitude was overwhelmingly highlighted by all stakeholder groups as a dominant barrier. The next chapter presents the findings of the stand-alone case Beta.

Chapter 7

Soft skills development in Business School Beta

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis and findings from the case study of soft skills development in undergraduate business education at the business school Beta. The first section provides the context of the case study. The next section provides the results of the brief survey in terms of identifying the primary stakeholders and their salience in soft skills development from the point of view of decision-makers. Based on the empirical data gathered from semi-structured interviews, the subsequent section explores and assesses the key themes of initiation, design, delivery and assessment of soft skills from the perspective of primary stakeholders of academics, business undergraduates, and industry experts, who were identified as key stakeholders in the survey with decision-makers. The final section presents the dominant barriers that impact soft skills development.

7.2 The context of the case study Beta

The business school, Beta, was established in 1999 in the northern region of Sri Lanka as the sixth faculty in the country. It currently offers the flagship degree programme of Bachelor of Business Administration with four specialisation areas namely, marketing, accounting, financial management, and human resource management. The structure of the BBA degree programme is such that students follow common courses in the first two years followed by specialisation in one of the four areas during the next two years. The curriculum stipulates that, as a compulsory component, all students will undergo an internship during the second semester of the final year of the degree programme. Further, the English Language Teaching Unit offers language improvement courses on a non-credit basis throughout the degree programme. Notably, the business school has revised the curriculum recently based on stakeholder inputs and is about to implement the new curriculum shortly. The Department of Human Resource Management won a competitive AHEAD project funded by the World Bank in 2018. One of the key result areas covered in the AHEAD project is to promote and develop the socio-emotional skills of undergraduates to enhance their employability prospects. Further, the business school website describes the initiatives undertaken to develop soft skills, particularly the role of industry liaison, business incubation, and career guidance cells. Also, the business school was awarded an A grade for complying with quality

assurance standards based on the independent programme review undertaken by the University Grants Commission in 2018.

7.3 Identification of salient stakeholders connected to soft skills development

To identify the key stakeholders involved in soft skills development, a brief survey consisting of three questions was administered to the decision-makers before having the interview (see Appendix A). Accordingly, in the first question, the decision-makers were requested to identify primary/key stakeholders connected to soft skills development. The findings of the survey revealed that, although the decision-makers identified a range of stakeholders, prominent among them were academics, employers and business undergraduates (see Table 16).

Table 16. Identification of primary stakeholders

Stakeholder group	Tally (n=5)
Academics	05
Students	04
Employers	03
Family/parents	02
Administrators	01
Peers	01
School teachers	01
Professional body	01
Alumni	01
External consultants	01

In the second question of the survey, decision-makers were asked to identify the relative importance of each stakeholder group by way of assigning the numerical value ranging from one to five. Accordingly, whereas a score of five denotes the highest importance, the lowest prioritised stakeholder group receives a score of one. It was expected that the results for this question could provide a general sense of how decision-makers perceive the standing of each stakeholder relative to others when it comes to soft skills development in undergraduate business education (see Table 17).

Table 17. Prioritisation of primary stakeholders

Stakeholder group	Total score
Academics	21
Students	17
Employers	11
Administrators	07
Family	05
Peers	04
Professional body	04
Alumni	04
External consultants	04
School teachers	02

While the second question in the survey revealed the relative importance of each stakeholder broadly, the third question in the survey asked the decision-makers to identify the salience of each stakeholder group based on the attributes of power, legitimacy and urgency. The theory of stakeholder salience states that cumulative number of stakeholder attributes (power, urgency and legitimacy) determine the degree of salience of a stakeholder group. Accordingly, high salience occurs whenever a stakeholder group is perceived as in possession of all three attributes, and medium salience can be identified if a stakeholder possesses any two attributes. In case a stakeholder only has one attribute, it is considered as having a low level of salience. Accordingly, decision-makers assigned ‘yes’, if they perceive a particular attribute is prevalent and ‘no’ if the attribute is absent. By counting the number of times ‘yes’ was mentioned in relation to each attribute for each stakeholder, the stakeholder salience was computed (see Table 18).

Table 18. Stakeholder salience based on power, legitimacy and urgency

Stakeholder	One attribute (Low salience)	Any two attributes (Medium salience)	All three attributes (High salience)
Academics			05
Students		02	02
Employers		01	02
Administrators			02
School teachers			01
External consultants		01	
Professional bodies		01	
Alumni		01	
Family	01		

As Table 18 shows, regarding soft skills development, decision-makers perceived academics as highly salient in relation to others because all five decision-makers identified that academics possess all three attributes. Then, students/business undergraduates were placed in the second group having medium to high salience followed by the employers. The overall picture emerging from the results of the third survey question is, from the perspective of decision-makers, academics, students and employers were considered key players in developing soft skills in undergraduate business education over other groups. Thus, based on the results of the survey, semi-structured interviews with key informants representing the three groups of academics, students and industry experts were carried out to gain an overall picture of the soft skills development process undertaken.

Interviews

As the decision-makers prioritised academics, students, and employers over other stakeholders involved in soft skills development, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with key informants from each group to explore and understand their perspectives regarding soft skills development (see Table 19).

Table 19. summary of semi-structured interviews

Stakeholder group	Interviews	Total key informants
Decision-makers	04	04
Academics	14	14
Industry experts	10	10
Business undergraduates	03	03
		31

7.4 Key drivers of soft skills development

Decision-makers pointed out that stakeholder pressure, particularly employers' expectations and the competitive labour market, are the main drivers for soft skills development initiatives undertaken in undergraduate business education. For instance, employers' feedback at the stakeholder meetings regarding the graduates' lack of work-readiness in terms of soft skills was an eye-opener, according to one decision-maker. Also, one senior administrator said that concerns raised by governmental bodies, such as the University Grants Commission, about the inclusion of soft skills in the curriculum led to curriculum revision and incorporation of soft skills. The response, below, from a decision-maker summed up the influence of key drivers:

The main factor is the industry needs and employer expectations. So, the industry needs are the main factor driving the faculty to engage in soft skills development. Other than that, the environmental changes, so, globalisation also may have an influence. So, nowadays the graduates are expected to work globally; so, they should be able to work at the global level as well. So, these soft skills are very important. So, this influence of globalisation also influenced the engagement of skill development... and also high competition in the job market. (DM 2, Head)

7.5 Initiation

The conceptualisation of soft skills

In general, all stakeholders applied a variety of labels to refer to soft skills, such as essential skills, core skills, non-technical skills, attributes, traits and characteristics. However, it appeared that the use of the concept of non-technical skills was common in the responses of decision-makers, academics and industry experts. Notably, decision-makers defined soft skills as non-technical skills that are essential to collaborating with stakeholders while maintaining task performance. According to the decision-makers, soft skills are required to interact, collaborate, and maintain relationships with a range of stakeholders. They were also

of the opinion that soft skills appear to serve a broader purpose in life, including personal and professional success. Like the views shared by industry experts and academics, decision-makers also echoed the view that soft skills act as a differentiator in a crowded labour market where a graduate has to present him/herself as unique by showcasing soft skills. One decision-maker compared the vitality of soft skills in the present environment by comparing it to the past era:

Actually, soft skills are in addition to whatever theoretical knowledge the undergraduates gather from the lectures. They have to develop (soft skills) because of the competition in the environment. Because the ultimate intention of the undergraduate to get the degree is to get good employment, when they step into the employment market, soft skills are very much needed nowadays, not like those days. When we were undergraduates, it (the significance of soft skills) was not understood even. And we did not realise the importance of soft skills. (DM 3, Marketing)

Industry experts claimed that soft skills contribute more than hard skills in the case of the professional or workplace context. They highlighted the limitation of theoretical knowledge in the absence of their real-life application. Also, when articulating the value of soft skills, they highlighted their portability in the form of wider application in different contexts. The quotes, below, capture both the framing and utility of soft skills:

...a common skill or core skills that are applicable to all professions.
(IE 8, Regional Manager)

Basically, soft skill includes all the attributes and personality traits which help the people to, you know, interact, and build relationships within the business organisation, and also help them to perform whatever the tasks assigned to them successfully.
(IE 2, Head)

Industry practitioners raised concerns about the level of graduate work-readiness and pointed out the expectation-reality gap. For instance, when describing the graduates' work-readiness, they were of the view that academic credentials, such as paper qualifications are inadequate to operate in the present competitive arena. According to them, although graduates possess hard skills, they often lack the requisite soft skills demanded in the industry. The following quotes of a senior executive responsible for recruitment at a multinational corporation and a senior manager in the banking sector sums up the work-readiness challenge:

We are hunting for interns as well as management trainees at the moment. I would say, on a daily basis, we see a lot of CVs for the particular position advertised. Often these candidates might have very attractive CVs. But when we actually interview them, most of them don't even get through the first interview; especially, we see this in the management trainee programme now. So, it is a very rigorous selection process. So, we did the post-application process. We had some virtual assessments, and only the top scorers get shortlisted for the next round. So, at the moment, they are having panel interviews. So, what we see is, although they are very talented in terms of numbers and, you know, in a written context, so when they come to face an interview or something like that, we feel there is a big gap in the expectation of the industry and what the candidates offer. (IE 1, Senior executive)

... I have been recruiting many university graduates for banking jobs. They could not cope with our requirements... generally, university students have only paper qualifications. They are memorising everything and doing it, but in practical life or a practical scenario, they are not successful. (IE 5, Regional manager)

According to the practitioners, in addition to contributing to job performance, soft skills also facilitate better interaction with stakeholder groups both within and outside the organisation. Several industry experts pointed out that what is needed to differentiate a candidate from the rest during interviews is the way he/she engages in 'self-marketing' or 'personal selling' where soft skills act as a vehicle to persuade or convince potential recruiters about the work-readiness of the candidate. Given the fact that graduates often end up in jobs that are not in line with their area of study or specialisation, soft skills are perceived to play a decisive role over hard skills in the workplace. When describing the utility of soft skills, an industry expert attached to the banking industry explained the limitations of hard skills by drawing on his personal experience in the following manner:

When it comes to the applicability of the hard skills, if you don't have the soft skills, it goes nowhere. Basically, you can have any number of accolades or any number of titles, but if you don't apply it to real-life in what you do, that will not match. It is number one. And number two, the systematic problem that Sri Lanka has is most of the undergraduates do not go or do not get employment in the related field, right? say my undergraduate study was in Agriculture, now I do commercial banking. So, the relationship between my hard skills (and my current job) is not at all relevant to what I do now. The only thing that connects the dots is my soft skills.
(IE 9, Regional manager)

Academics also framed soft skills through various lenses, such as personal characteristics, essential skills, non-technical skills, personal traits, personal attributes, interpersonal skills, and human skills, and the use of the label non-technical skills was prevalent in their responses. Notably, although academics used a plurality of labels, they

believed that soft skills are necessary to interact with stakeholders as they facilitate building better relationships and excel in the workplace. In the case of the value of soft skills, academics acknowledged that soft skills play the role of differentiator in the competitive labour market. Given that nearly all graduates possess the threshold hard skills in the form of academic credentials, positioning a graduate as a unique candidate requires the demonstration of soft skills, according to academics. The following quote depicts the framing of soft skills from an academic's perspective:

So, from my point of view, the soft skill is the person's individual attitudes, which help to develop and maintain relationships with one another. So, as a marketing lecturer, I can say soft skill is the unique selling proposition of a person which helps a person to differentiate himself or herself from other competitors... (AC 6, Senior lecturer)

In terms of utility of soft skills, a number of academics stressed the limitations of academic credentials and highlighted the premium placed on soft skills by organisations when recruiting candidates. As graduates are evaluated at interviews, many academics concurred that possession of soft skills conveys a signal to recruiters that graduates are job-ready:

So, everyone went through the same system, like hard skills means everyone learns the theories and they have applied in the examination, but when they are going for job opportunities, then organisations want to see who will outperform others. So, this can be decided mainly based on soft skills. So, during the interview, based on how you are performing, and how you are expressing your opinions, the organisation is going to select suitable candidates for their vacancies. (AC 7, Junior lecturer)

They need to realise the importance of soft skills because after university life, the soft skills are the only thing that is going to make you, you know, successful, make you reach higher places, it's not your academic qualification. You can be, you know, batch top, or you can get four out of four GPA but if your soft skills are not up to the point, then there are lots of management graduates out there...there are lots of private universities, there are other ways of getting this degree. But for you all to be unique and to shine better, then you need to have those soft skills. (AC 13, Assistant lecturer)

In the case of business undergraduates, they perceived soft skills as abilities, qualities or characteristics that facilitate people to work with others. Two out of three undergraduates emphasised that the role of soft skills is more complementary where the application of hard skills in the form of theoretical knowledge is facilitated or supported by the presence of soft skills:

So, like, we are all undergraduates, we are having the academic and theoretical knowledge.... So, we should have the soft skill to replicate our knowledge (hard skills). So, for example, like if you consider the communication, we have hard skills, but if you are lacking with the communication skills, you are unable to replicate or bring forward an idea to other people. (UG 2, Human Resources)

In sum, despite the use of varied terminology to denote soft skills by key stakeholders, the concept of non-technical skills was generally mentioned. Moreover, stakeholders highlighted the utility of soft skills in the form of facilitating effective interactions both within and outside the organisation and signalling the uniqueness of a candidate over others at selection interviews.

Identification of soft skills: Desired soft skill types

In general, regarding the expected soft skills for entry-level positions, although stakeholders identified a wide range of soft skills, decision-makers, academics, and industry experts recognised communication as the most important skill type over others. Moreover, in the case of teamwork, both industry experts and academics appeared to be on the same page compared to decision-makers and business undergraduates. Notably, out of the four highest mentioned soft skills, all stakeholder groups, apart from business undergraduates, identified leadership. Finally, in the case of problem-solving, while business undergraduates placed it above other skills, academics also identified it next to communication and teamwork. The following representative quotes sum up the significance of communication skills:

Yeah, especially communication skills are very important, but people lack awareness about how to talk. They may be a good graduate with an A-plus or, as I told you earlier, having a GPA of 3.9 or 3.95 or something; what if they don't know how to talk? (DM 3, Head)

So, for example, if I talk about marketing, they (business graduates) have to deal or interact with the customers, you know. When they try to interact with customers, they have to have effective communication skills; then, only, they can clearly interact with the customers and convince them to buy their products or services. (DM 4, Member of Senate)

Industry experts emphasised the utility of communication skills in the workplace as these skills serve diverse purposes, including negotiating with stakeholders, building relationships with people, and presenting ideas and viewpoints persuasively. However, practitioners also cautioned about the negative impact of ineffective communication at various levels, particularly in interpersonal relations:

I have so many examples. For instance, people don't know what to say. They just keep on talking. But they don't know what they should say; and then, in the end, they suffer (with the feeling) that “I have said something that I shouldn't have said”, and it might have hurt somebody else also. And since we don't know how to communicate properly,

people don't convey the message exactly. And that tends to give different perspectives to other people... (IE 4, Entrepreneur)

In addition to the value of communication skills in the workplace, several of the professionals interviewed pointed out that getting through the initial hurdle of an interview invariably requires a demonstration of communication skills as how you say (communication) is far more significant than what you have (academic credentials):

So, when we see (candidates) at an interview, in that situation, we normally see a person's ability to express, or to bring out his thinking. It is basically the communication skills and how he brings out his thinking pattern and everything through soft skills. That is all about how they express something... (IE 8, Regional Manager)

Another industry expert highlighted the significance of presentation skills and public speaking skills as part of communication skills for achieving task performance and career progression:

Presentation (skill) is the most essential skill. Let's say if they (graduates) have something on their paper, they should be able to demonstrate it to the board or the person to whom he is reporting. Basically, without the presentation, I'm not saying the presentation should be in the PowerPoint slides but if they want to communicate something, he should be able to present his thoughts to others clearly. When it comes to public speaking, public speaking is also a skill, which makes him a leader. If they want to be a corporate leader, let's say your CEO (Chief Executive Officer), CFO (Chief Financial Officer), or whatever, he should have the skill to deliver his thoughts to the audience. (IE 6, Senior manager)

Academics believed that, in a competitive labour market for graduates, securing entry-level positions and performing the assigned job role requires various dimensions of communication skills, including presentation skills. However, despite the demand for communication skills, graduates often lack these skills due to a lack of investment, awareness, or negligence:

And then, communication skill is a must because lots of undergraduates here in Sri Lanka are having that problem. They have everything in their mind, they know everything but, then again, when it comes to communication skills, they, you know, hesitate, they back away, they don't communicate with other people and present their ideas. (AC 13, Assistant lecturer)

Business undergraduates commented on the significance of communication skills as not only a key differentiator in the selection interview by way of signalling the work-

readiness of graduates, but also a facilitator when it comes to building relationships and networks at the workplace. One undergraduate, drawing on personal experience, shared her perspective as follows:

From my experience, I have gone for an interview the first time and what I acknowledged is they preferred the communication skills because they expected me to have integrity and openness. So, all these things are possible with communication only because the way we speak and the way we portray ourselves are the important things that they (employers) see in an interview...
(UG 3, Human Resources)

Apart from communication skills, teamwork was singled out by academics and industry experts as another soft skill that is vital to operate in a contemporary team-based working environment. For instance, one academic pointed out the need for teamwork in the following manner:

You know that in organisations, there is a vision, mission, goals, and objectives. As a team, they have to work to achieve them. Thus, teamwork is highly expected by the employer to reach their vision, mission objectives and goals. (AC 2, Senior lecturer)

One industry participant also elaborated on the value of teamwork by drawing on his personal experience as a director of finance:

A few years ago, I was the head of finance. So, let's say that as the director of finance of a particular hotel, then my role is to manage ten to twelve staff. I'm responsible for the preparation of accurate management reports on time, that's my obligation. Then I have to deal with the government, statutory requirements, tax payments and things like that. Then I have to deal with the auditors. Also, I must ensure the hotel is continuously having proper stocks and I mean food and beverage in order to cater to the guests as well as the employees...(IE 3, Director)

Leadership was also mentioned by stakeholders as one of the desired soft skills.

'...they should have the leadership skills because, let's say, you are joining as a junior person, then you are going to climb up the career ladder. Then, you should have the leadership skills.' (AC 7, Junior lecturer)

Overall, with regard to the expected soft skills for entry-level graduate positions, it is evident that, despite the variation in identified soft skills, communication and teamwork were chosen as prominent soft skills by the majority of stakeholders. Likewise, out of the four top soft skills identified, leadership was also mentioned by nearly all stakeholders.

7.6 The role of stakeholders in soft skills development

The key stakeholders of business undergraduates, academics and industry experts, who were identified by the decision-makers, were asked about their own perception of their role in soft skills development and their perspectives of other stakeholders' roles as well. It was expected that by identifying their own role and others' roles, a comparison could be made whether there is any consensus or disconnect when it comes to the role perception in developing soft skills. Key stakeholders' responses indicated that while academics appeared to perceive their more role as facilitators, they also felt that business undergraduates and industry should be active participants and supporters respectively. Likewise, industry professionals seemed to define their role as supportive or enabling, while perceiving academics', and undergraduates' roles as facilitators and active participants. Given the limited sample size of students, although it is difficult to conclude about their conception of stakeholders' roles, in general, they also concurred with the views of academics and industry experts regarding their and others' roles.

7.6.1 Business undergraduates as active participants

In relation to the business undergraduates' role, nearly all stakeholders agreed that they are supposed to take personal responsibility in developing soft skills as they are the ultimate beneficiary of skill development initiatives. From the point of view of decision-makers, undergraduates are expected to take ownership of developing soft skills in the form of seeking out opportunities, showing interest and commitment, and taking personal initiatives. One decision-maker, using the analogy of taking a horse to water, elaborated the role of undergraduates as:

You can direct a horse to water, what you cannot do is to force it to drink water. So, whatever the efforts taken by industry and academics, the undergraduates themselves have to commit to their own skills development. Then, they should be interested in developing their skills, they should commit themselves, and they should make an effort with skills development... And they have to look for opportunities and take on some challenging responsibilities in order to build their confidence and promote these skills.
(DM 2, Head)

Many industry experts opined that taking personal responsibility by way of exploring and exploiting opportunities, building networks, being aware of industry dynamics, and engaging in self-learning are what is expected from business undergraduates. One expert highlighted the mistakes often made by undergraduates, particularly their taken-for-granted mindset in making use of available resources and opportunities:

So, business undergraduates should know, no matter if the university provides all these opportunities to fine-tune your soft skills, the undergraduate should also make an equal effort. For example, these English courses are provided free of charge in universities in the first few years of their undergraduate years, but hardly like, you know, many people put much effort to attend those lessons or try to improve their language competencies. So, they just take it for granted. But at the same time, when you see, when they graduate, when they come into the industry, and when they realise, okay, this is something that they are lacking, they spend thousands, (money) for private tutoring, they go to private English classes and try to build on their English...

(IE 1, Senior executive)

Also, industry participants perceived the attitudinal problems of undergraduates often pose challenges in developing soft skills. For instance, two experts cited the failure to go beyond the academic degree programme in terms of acquiring capabilities, such as taking part in the Toastmasters club, limits undergraduates' progress towards skills development. They also suggested the necessity for engaging in self-analysis to identify the areas for further improvement is of paramount importance. The following quotes illuminate the experts' conception of undergraduates' roles:

They should first change their attitude. If you want to be one among the crowd, right, you can be. You want to be recognised (as unique) from the crowd, right. So, if there's a big herd of people going, if you want to be different only, you will be identified and handpicked. So, the attitudinal difference that the student should show is whether they want to go along with the crowd. And what they often want to do is what the majority is doing... (IE 9, Regional manager)

So, I think even undergraduates have the responsibility to think of their own future by themselves rather than waiting for others to give advice. So, they need to search things: how they can improve their skills, how they can get into different programmes and improve their own skills meanwhile improving their network via networking events...

(IE 4, Entrepreneur)

Nearly all academics emphasised that the role of business undergraduates is centred on active participation, involvement, and engagement in soft skills initiatives. In particular, they advocated for grabbing opportunities along their way and embracing opportunities whenever they are presented. For instance, one academic used the label 'opportunity seeker' to sum up the undergraduates' responsibility. Academics acknowledged that they can only provide a platform for soft skills development but making use of the platform ultimately rests with undergraduates. Two academics argued the need for going beyond the classroom experience to cultivate soft skills by participating in extra-curricular and informal activities. The quotes, below, sum up the academics' expectations about undergraduates' roles:

Now, for example, when we are asking students to do a presentation based on a real case scenario or real industry scenario, the students must take that assignment or that presentation seriously, and they must do their own research, they must go to the industry, they must talk to the people, and they must actively involve and think whatever that is given by us (academics) is actually good for them in the future, it's going to train them, it's going to shape them in the future. So, students must, on their part, they must contribute, in a sense, they must actively engage and communicate... (AC 13, Assistant lecturer)

Undergraduates should come forward voluntarily. Whenever they can see some opportunities, they should come and present... they should also voluntarily participate in the presentation without getting pushed or without the lecturer telling you should do. Everyone should come forward and do it and should know the importance of developing the soft skills. (AC 7, Junior lecturer)

Despite the small sample size of three key informants, business undergraduates perceived their role as undertaking efforts to acquire soft skills via seeking out opportunities and overcoming anxiety. It seemed that they acknowledged the distinction between academic and real-world contexts where the latter requires a practical application of skills. Taking personal responsibility and ownership by accepting opportunities given rather than avoiding them was cited by students. According to students, in addition to understanding the vitality of soft skills, they need to engage in practising such skills via co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. As one undergraduate elaborated:

It is just the responsibility of the business undergraduate to obtain the soft skill because when they are entering the industry, they have to adapt to that industry, it's a new experience. So, they have to get practised (soft skills) ... I feel like we have to come forward whenever lecturers are giving us a voluntary chance for presentation or answering questions or to come in front and present ourselves. So, we have to come forward without being reluctant. (UG 2, Human Resources)

7.6.2 Academics as facilitators

Regarding the role of academics, decision-makers' responses broadly fall into two categories: providing opportunities and support, and involvement in the design and execution of soft skills activities in the curriculum. Notably, providing support in the form of motivating, interacting, guiding and encouraging was pointed out frequently. It appeared that decision-makers expect academics to move beyond imparting theoretical knowledge, alone, and to engage in producing work-ready graduates. One decision-maker highlighted this perspective as:

...every academic should understand that, apart from giving the knowledge, they need to develop the students as marketable graduates. So, that is why they should understand providing knowledge alone is not enough. So, then they need to make kind of a product that is suitable to the market demand. (DM 4, Member of Senate)

When asked about their role in developing soft skills in undergraduate business education, in general, academics specified their role in terms of building awareness, educating the significance of soft skills, using innovative pedagogical strategies, motivating students to engage in soft skills development and providing opportunities to harness soft skills. Importantly, nearly half of the academics emphasised the need for innovative approaches to teaching soft skills, such as the use of case studies, role-plays and practical assignments. The following quotes elaborate upon the academics' perspectives regarding their role in the development of soft skills:

...we have the vital responsibility regarding this aspect (developing soft skills) because, after the Advanced level (examination), students enter the university. So, we have that responsibility to enhance and develop their soft skills because after graduation they are going to enter the job market. So, we have a responsibility to create awareness regarding soft skills and at least try to develop an adequate level of soft skills during this academic period. (AC 2, Senior lecturer)

We should develop some aspect of the soft skills of our students like arranging frequent presentations, giving some feedback for developing their presentation skills, and motivating them to conduct any community activities like CSR activities... And we could motivate them to do the extra-curricular activities rather than relying all the way on the subject matter (hard skills). So extra-curricular activities can also develop the soft skills of the students. And also, we can incorporate club activities, like the Toastmaster club for our students to develop their soft skills. So, as a lecturer, we could facilitate the students to do so. (AC 11, Senior lecturer)

Lecturers, according to some industry experts, need to be role models in inculcating soft skills as their own behaviour in terms of display of soft skills is often observed and imitated by students. Further, many industry professionals emphasised the importance of connecting theory with practice in learning, teaching and assessment. One expert succinctly pointed out the divergent perspectives prevalent between academia and industry:

Yeah, in terms of lecturers, lecturers are more into theory rather than practical (application) because, generally, university studies are for academic lines whereas we (industry) go on professional lines.... So, there is a mismatch between academic and professional (perspectives)... (IE 8, Regional manager)

While acknowledging the fact that academics are often recruited based on academic excellence in terms of possession of scientific knowledge, from the perspectives of experts,

the possible solution to align academic and practical orientations is to engage in a university-industry partnership. They identified internships as an example resulting from such a partnership. Further, giving practical examples to link with the theories taught was cited by one professional to bridge the theory-practice gap. For instance, one industry participant advised the necessity of moving toward real-life, practical scenarios in teaching than focusing more on disciplinary knowledge:

...they (lecturers) have a huge responsibility because, so they are preparing the future workforce. So, rather than just bombarding them with a lot of theories and frameworks, so I think academics should be able to give them opportunities to understand which skills to be used when and where with some of the (practical) examples... (IE 2, Head)

To develop soft skills in the classroom, another industry expert suggested deploying innovative pedagogical strategies where students could co-deliver a portion of the lecture with the faculty. The following quote depicts her conception of this innovative pedagogical perspective:

At the same time, during lectures, for example, this might not be so welcomed by the students, but if this is brought upon, like as a norm, they could also get accustomed to this kind of culture. For example, regarding the in-class interactions with students, maybe they (academics) could delegate a part of the lesson beforehand for this particular group of students, and they have to come to the lecture and explain to the whole class. So, small bite-size initiatives like this can be taken up. (IE 1, Senior executive)

Importantly, one industry participant emphasised the need for continuous monitoring and feedback to track the progress and sustainability of skills improvement over time:

...in their curriculum, I believe there are presentations and other kinds of stuff that also need to be monitored and proper feedback must be given to the student to develop. Actually, rather than saying, “you are good at these things”, it is better to say, “some improvements...” and they have to have a continuous monitoring process to see whether they (business undergraduates) are working on it (soft skills improvement). That part has to be taken up. (IE 6, Senior manager)

Overall, it was evident that industry experts perceived that the role of academics should be more towards building awareness, educating students, providing opportunities to practice, deploying innovative pedagogical strategies, and facilitating learning.

When asked about the academics' role, business undergraduates felt that their role appears to be building awareness, educating the students about the growing importance of soft skills, developing soft skills via in-class activities, and providing additional learning experiences through clubs and societies. Particularly, one undergraduate highlighted the influence lecturers have on students through their own behaviour in terms of how they deliver lectures in the classroom. As a result, students could model the behaviour of academics in relation to soft skills.

7.6.3 The supportive role of industry

Regarding the role of industry, decision-makers perceived their role through the lenses of direct and indirect engagement. While the internship was highlighted as part of the direct role of industry in addressing soft skills development requirements, awareness-building activities through workshops, seminars and short programmes were mentioned under the indirect role by decision-makers.

One decision-maker elaborated upon the ways in which industry can support soft skills development as:

Yeah, industry can support, especially industry can accommodate the undergraduates for internship training, industrial visits, and short training programmes for selected students...industry people can have some guest lectures and university-industry linkage, or collaboration will also be helpful for undergraduates' soft skills development. (DM 2, Head)

The majority of industry professionals expressed the view that their role is to share industry requirements and insights and educate the university about the contemporary world of work. Specifically, they also explained their contribution in terms of providing meaningful learning experiences for undergraduates, particularly through internships. The following representative quotes highlight the different perspectives of industry experts in relation to their responsibility to soft skills development:

They can talk about their needs based on the experience they had with our students, how competent they are, and how they handle their problems, likewise, they can tell those who are producing the staff or employees (the university). So, this is the industry's responsibility to tell the university or other institution to develop or to change their curriculum or to develop their curricula according to industrial needs. (IE 7, Chairman)

The industry has to take part and support the university in every way. The industry should tell the academic people what their expectation is; what is the outcome they are

expecting from a graduate or a student... So, apart from the educational knowledge about the subject, they (academics) should inculcate soft skills to run the industry. So, those expectations are with the industry. So, academic people don't know (the industry requirements). So, the industry should play a big role. The industry should convey these expectations to academics. So, many ways are there. They can conduct seminars, they can conduct training, they can issue whatever directions, they can tell the kind of knowledge or skills they are expecting from graduating people.
(IE 5, Regional manager)

Further, many experts suggested the need to build and engage in university-industry partnerships, including providing inputs for curriculum and sharing information with students via seminars and workshops. One practitioner expressed the view that the need for an increased industry contribution is due to the fact that academics often lack industry exposure, thereby leading to a potential gap in academics' thinking and the ground reality:

I know for a fact that at least maybe other than about 10%-15% of lecturers, who are serving as academics, you know, especially, in the government universities, all others do not have corporate exposure. So, there is a huge difference between what we think (is happening) and what actually happens; the difference between reality and the expectation... (IE 2, Head)

In the case of academics' views regarding industry's role, overwhelmingly, more than half of the academics emphasised building awareness of undergraduates about the need for and value of soft skills through a range of interventions, such as workshops, seminars, experience-sharing sessions and guest lectures which are the critical activities expected from industry. Also, many academics highlighted that the provision of internships to enhance soft skills and entering a memorandum of understanding with the university to provide a range of services are critical to improving soft skills. Moreover, in general, academics appear to believe that since the industry has the expertise and insights, they should share their expectations and educate students about the changing nature of the world of work. The following quotes summarise industry's role from the perspective of academics:

So, what they should do is they can conduct some seminars or workshops or exhibitions. And they can express, okay these are the things we are expecting from you. So, you should develop your skills like this. It should not only be based on technical matters, and you should develop other skills as well. They should pass the message to graduates, then only graduates will know like, what are the things expected by the employer... they (employers) can express their opinion about their actual requirement, what they are expecting from the undergraduate, and how they should develop (the soft skills). (AC 7, Junior lecturer)

...in the undergraduate programme, at the end of the programme, we have industrial training. So, industries can give our undergraduates opportunities to work in their firms.

So, that is one way of assisting. And then they can sponsor us whenever we do some case study competitions. They can come, and they can sponsor the event. And by sponsoring, it's not only, you know, just giving financial support, but you know, they can come here, and they can communicate, or they can just tell the job opportunities that they have in their industries for the students. So, students get to know, they get encouraged and they will get motivated to, you know, work in that industry or in that company. And they can also sign MOUs here with the university...
(AC 13, Assistant lecturer)

When describing industry's role, business undergraduates stressed that given the fact graduates are freshers upon completing the degree programme, industry is expected to provide more learning opportunities to enhance soft skills. Also, during the degree programme, they expected industry to take the initiative to build awareness by way of sharing information about their requirements. They also commented on the significance of university-industry partnerships to provide learning opportunities to students. With regard to awareness building, one undergraduate put it as follows:

So, the industry is like, the companies can come forward and say like what they are expecting from us as an employee for different positions. So, we will get an idea about it, and then we can develop our knowledge and skills related to that.
(UG 2, Human Resources)

Using the key phrases used in the interviews, when each stakeholder's perceived role in soft skills development was compared with other stakeholders' views of the particular stakeholder's role, a similar pattern was observed (see Table 20). As shown in the table, while the first row shows how business undergraduates, academics and industry experts perceived their role in soft skills development in the degree programme, each column shows how each stakeholder perceived the role of other stakeholders in developing soft skills. Accordingly, while the academics' role was generally perceived as facilitators, the undergraduates' role was conceived as active participants. Industry's role was construed as supportive or enabling in the context of soft skills development.

Table 20. Key phrases used by stakeholders to indicate their own and others' roles

<p>Academics <i>Their role:</i> Use of authentic pedagogy, build awareness, being a facilitator, motivate students, educate students, provide a platform, encourage participation, arrange workshops</p> <p>‘Facilitator’</p>	<p>Industry experts <i>Their role:</i> Share requirements, share insights, communicate expectations, provide internships, educate students, take part in seminars/workshops, provide inputs, sign a memorandum of understanding</p> <p>‘Supportive role’</p>	<p>Undergraduates <i>Their role:</i> Acquire soft skills, practice soft skills, exploit opportunities, engage voluntarily, overcome anxiety, understand the significance of soft skills</p> <p>‘Active participant’</p>
<p><i>Industry experts’ role:</i> Provide internships, have a memorandum of understanding, provide training, increase awareness, sponsor competitions, clarify expectations, arrange mock interviews, support industry visits</p> <p>‘Supportive role’</p>	<p><i>Academics’ role:</i> Walk the talk, build awareness, share personal experiences, use innovative pedagogies, provide opportunities, teach soft skills, link theory and practice, arrange early internships</p> <p>‘Facilitator’</p>	<p><i>Academics’ role:</i> Provide opportunities, arrange presentations, motivate students, build awareness</p> <p>‘Facilitator’</p>
<p><i>Undergraduates’ role:</i> Seek out opportunities, involve actively, participate voluntarily, take initiative, have intrinsic motivation, learn job requirements, take personal responsibility, and move beyond classroom activity</p> <p>‘Active participant’</p>	<p><i>Undergraduates’ role:</i> Have personal ownership, take responsibility, use opportunities, engage in self-learning, participate in clubs, build networks, take self-initiative, do self-analysis, and involve actively</p> <p>‘Active participant’</p>	<p><i>Industry experts’ role:</i> Arrange courses, provide training, organise awareness programmes, share information</p> <p>‘Supportive role’</p>

Source: Based on the interview responses with key stakeholders

7.7 Design: The curriculum

In the case of design aspects, particularly the curriculum, industry experts felt there appears to be a theory-application gap where what is included in the curriculum may not synchronise with the practical context. According to the practitioners, there exists an over-emphasis on theoretical knowledge at the expense of practical application. As a result, they argue that there remain challenges when it comes to graduate work-readiness or job-readiness. Moreover, several industry participants argued that the inclusion of one internship during the final year of the degree programme is inadequate; rather, what is desirable is the offering of an interim internship in addition to the main internship preferably during the second or third year:

I have been recruiting many university graduates for banking jobs where they couldn't cope with our requirements... They learn everything, but practical knowledge is lacking. Now, only, I have understood that in the fourth year, they have put an internship through in which they are gaining some experience and knowledge. Generally, university students have only paper qualifications. In a practical scenario, they are not successful. So, in that sense, I would suggest that offering an internship in the university study programme even after two years is much better.
(IE 5, Regional manager)

Another important point raised by an industry expert was the need for industry involvement via providing inputs for curriculum design to make it more relevant and practical:

They (industries) can talk about their needs to those (academics) who are producing the staff or employees. So, this is the industry's responsibility to tell the university or any other institution to develop or change their curriculum according to industrial needs.
(IE 7, Chairman)

Importantly, one industry expert suggested that the incorporation of the concept of service-learning in the curriculum where students engage in projects relating to corporate social responsibility would be beneficial to developing soft skills. Given the gap in terms of academic preparation and industry requirements, the particular expert believed that embedding concepts like service-learning could provide authentic learning experiences for students. The following quote captures the essence of embedment of the service-learning concept in the curriculum:

I think whoever comes to the market is fully competent enough to perform the job. But from the university's stance, they (graduates) are more competent enough in the academic or the theoretical knowledge... in the case of a corporate social responsibility project, the company and the university have to participate. They also have to embed those things in their curriculum. Sometimes they may go with the credit requirement in the curriculum. In the curriculum, they are supposed to include these things and give

more weighting. And, in my view, it (the corporate social responsibility project) has to be mandatory. If it is an elective (component), it is hard to get students into the programme. (IE 6, Senior manager)

In general, the majority of academics talked about the inclusion of soft skills in the curriculum and the design of in-class pedagogical approaches, including group work, presentations and role-plays. Implicit in their accounts is the acceptance of the usefulness of both approaches of embedded and stand-alone approaches. However, it appears that academics hold a favourable perspective in the case of the embedded approach. For instance, one academic argued that the benefit of relying on an embedded approach is that students can understand the significance of soft skills as they are part of the curriculum. Also, such an approach pushes them to engage in soft skills development because soft skills enhancement activities are mandatory. Another academic elaborated on the curriculum revision undertaken as part of the AHEAD project to incorporate soft skills. The following account of an academic reflects the value of the embedded approach and the rationale for curriculum revision:

I think both (embedded and stand-alone approaches) are good approaches and both need to be applied. We have to consider incorporating the soft skills in the curriculum because, you know, it will then become a mandatory course...if it is external (stand-alone initiatives), then there are lots of opportunities like, we can go for different things but given the time constraints and all, it is sometimes a little hard to maintain the balance... to a certain extent, soft skills components can or should be included in the syllabus for the students to realise the importance of it, or else the students would just consider it is not necessary. (AC 13, Assistant lecturer)

In sum, considering the theory-practice gap, industry experts believe that including authentic pedagogies and multiple internships could address the academia-industry divide. Moreover, despite using both embedded and stand-alone approaches, academics appeared to lean more towards an embedded approach, where soft skills are integrated into the curriculum.

7.8 Delivery of soft skills

In relation to the teaching or delivery of soft skills, although it seemed that academics used a range of interventions to develop soft skills, presentations, case studies, and group work were mentioned as dominant methods used in the classroom. They felt that by way of using a variety of methods, a range of soft skills could be developed (see Table 21). The following quotes illuminate the type of and rationale for using various methods:

When I was a temporary assistant lecturer, you know, heads and our senior lecturers asked me to do the assignments or the lectures, and they told me, “Okay, do this assignment”. So, mostly, it is a written assignment, right. After joining as a permanent lecturer, I never give any written assignments. Always I do case studies, presentations or role plays or field trips and give reports and so on. What I want is that I really, really want to engage the students to nurture their soft skills, right. (AC 4, Senior lecturer)

So, in the case of my teaching method, I do take frequent presentations, and also the case study discussions and like group activities that are related to the particular concept... And also giving them some of the tasks to conduct the community activities as they could really go to the communities, and they can do the CSR activity. So, in this way, I did these kinds of activities in order to improve their soft skills. (AC 11, Senior lecturer)

With regard to group work, although many academics painted a positive picture in terms of intended benefits, there seemed to be differences of opinions on their effectiveness when it comes to soft skills development. Specifically, from the account of decision-makers, it could be inferred that group work was used as a potential solution whenever there were big class cohorts, especially during the first two years of the degree programme. In this context, it seemed questionable whether the group work was assigned to develop soft skills or to overcome the challenges posed by large class cohorts:

As I mentioned previously, almost all the staff members are giving presentation opportunities for the students. But I have a doubt about whether we allow all the students to come forward and do something. As I told you, the students might hide, and they (academics) might push one or two to come in front and do something. In the case of individual presentations, because the number of students is very high, we are very much reluctant to go for it because it is time-consuming. Having individual presentations for 300 to 400 students is very difficult. So, in group presentations, repeatedly one or two (students) come in front and deliver... (DM 3, Head)

Table 21. Approaches to soft skills development – Academics’ perspectives

Soft skills development method	No of the academics mentioned* (n = 14)
Presentations	12
Case study	08
Group project/group work	07
Field trip/field visit	05
Individual assignment	03
Visiting/guest lectures	02
Workshops/seminars	02
Roleplay	02
Internship	02

* Only two and above are reported

When asked about the soft skills development activities undertaken in the degree programme, all undergraduates mentioned the presentations, group work, case studies, and industry visits. One undergraduate summed up the activities undertaken:

As I mentioned earlier, we were able to do a lot of presentations. As I am from the HRM department, we went through a lot of case studies, the group works and field visits and all. And there are clubs, I guess, at the University. In our department, we have an HR club, which helps students to develop their public speaking ability and all.
(UG 3, Human Resources)

As far as industry experts are concerned, they identified various methods used to develop soft skills in undergraduate business education (see Table 22). Particularly, sharing industry expectations and insights to build awareness and understanding, along with providing internships, were mentioned by most practitioners. Moreover, to offer better soft skills support programmes, industry people believe there is a practical need to have an effective university-industry partnership. According to industry experts, such a partnership minimises the potential academia-industry gap and leverages the capabilities resting with industries to benefit soft skills development. Industry professionals opined that such partnerships could lead to a win-win scenario if they are undertaken systematically and methodically.

As one industry expert emphasised the university-industry collaboration should be approached in a way that can cover the whole duration of the degree programme through a joint comprehensive strategy rather than focusing only on the third or final year. For instance, industry professionals suggested that early exposure to the industry via interim internship could be beneficial in addition to the final year internship as early internships would minimise the reality shock that students normally experience when they enter internship only in the final year. Also, implicit in their responses is the industry experts' conception that there appears to be the existence of parallel realities where the industry and academia do not understand each other's requirements and expectations. As a result, professionals believed that building university-industry partnerships could be the solution to minimize the university-industry gap. However, one industry expert cautioned that although forming a joint working mechanism between the two entities is of significance, such a partnership should be based on a long-term perspective than an ad hoc arrangement to meet recurring needs:

I don't see in Jaffna or even in Sri Lanka to the extent, that industry and universities work together. Industries don't know what is happening in the university. So basically, the university should go to them (industries) and get their support, because definitely,

there will be a lot of good entrepreneurs, and business heads who would like to support the university in terms of educating or partnering to develop undergraduates on their soft skills... importantly, there should be practical job-oriented demonstrations and dialogue... it should not be an ad hoc thing. There should be a continuous dialogue or process, or programme (between the university and the industry).
(IE 8, Regional manager)

...I would say the university and the industry should have a more comprehensive plan from their (business undergraduates') first year to the final year... They can do workshops or guest lectures or visiting lectures to the university students initially and they can show what industry really requires, and industry can also brief their requirements in their workshops and what is called guest lecturers and all.
(IE 6, Senior manager)

Finally, the salient advantage arising out of industry's involvement in soft skills development is that it seemed to enhance the credibility of the programme as industry people have first-hand experience of what is going on in the industry compared to the academics, thereby leading to better acceptance and participation on the part of students:

...we can bring in more programmes, especially they should be supported by the industries, because when these programmes have the face of an industry, for example, if it is offered by this particular company, students get excited also. So, they will tend to come to that programme in the hope that, you know, to make connections to secure possible internship opportunities or job opportunities in future. (IE 1, Senior executive)

Although the internship was highlighted as the industry's most popular intervention, industry professionals cautioned that the provision of quality internship experience rests with both the university and industry. One expert emphasised that the quality of an internship is shaped by how well it is structured and implemented from the university side. Particularly, she highlighted the active role of the academic supervisor throughout the internship period rather than leaving the monitoring of an intern solely to the internship supervisor in the workplace:

When releasing students for internships, I have seen there are some good universities that followed up on the learning plan, gave them the framework, and understood the competencies they are expecting these people (business undergraduates) to develop through this internship programme...So, they have a structured way but some of the universities don't mind. Like they just send the people for the internship... I actually had three interns coming from the University X. Two of them were offered permanent employment based on their performance. And one critical success factor to their success was the thorough follow-up used by the university. Actually, their (academic) supervisor spoke to me on the very first day they started the employment or the internship, introduced themselves, and they sent us a document. I have to write weekly what are the competencies that they have gained. (IE 2, Head)

When prompted about the quality of internship provision, particularly internships given in the northern region where the business school is located, many industry experts perceived either those interns are often not provided with ample opportunities to learn or used by organisations to achieve their commercial objectives. In the case of internships at public sector organisations, both academics and practitioners believed that, on most occasions, the quality of internship was not up to standard as these organisations are perceived as highly inefficient. As a result, students are often given mundane tasks like photocopying and filing rather than a rounded or comprehensive exposure to all functions. However, another expert in the same industry acknowledged that interns are perceived as providing ‘cheap labour’ to organisations and their developmental needs are often overlooked, including skills development. The lack of quality internships, according to the industry professionals, could be in the form of either asking interns to perform clerical or administrative tasks (underutilisation) or requiring them to perform the tasks of permanent staff (exploitation). The following quotes summarise the above scenarios of exploitation and underutilisation:

I heard that they have been paid a very low salary, but they are doing the same job as a permanent staff in terms of (job requirements). (IE 8, Regional manager)

I remember like, some companies, they just recruit interns, and the interns do nothing. They are like, being isolated, and they just do their own things. They don't even know what they are doing. But they are just there to fulfil (the degree requirement), you know. At the end of the internship programme, they (employers) will just give a letter saying that he completed the internship programme here, but the intern has done nothing. And both the parties have lost resources. (IE 4, Entrepreneur)

On another front, as business undergraduates increasingly go for internships in the banking industry in the region, practitioners opined that, by definition, the banking sector itself has some constraints in providing quality internships due to strict adherence to secrecy and confidentiality. Despite such concerns, banking professionals suggested that interns can gain insights or basic knowledge of banking operations via an internship. However, while acknowledging the inherent weaknesses existing in internships offered by industry, two industry participants explained the limitations in providing a rounded internship experience. Accordingly, given the temporary nature of the internship and the need to protect confidentiality, interns may not be exposed to all internal systems and processes, according to the experts:

As far as banks are concerned, the banks have now become business points or sales points, where the focus is on canvassing business. When somebody comes to a bank as

an intern, they are treated as a trainee and banks, generally - I comment generally not blaming, what they (industries) are doing - is using those people to get the business done, right. So, we are sending interns to canvass for our business, to do a marketing campaign, and they are learning internal things only to a limited extent because secrecy is a concern. They are on a temporary internship where we can't give all the work to them because of the secrecy issue...what we are looking for is how we can utilise these people. We can send them for canvassing, then for marketing, ultimately after one year, what they have learned is only marketing and canvassing, but they should have learned many other things. (IE 5, Regional manager)

Table 22. Soft skills development interventions – Industry’s perspective

Soft skills development method	No of the industry experts mentioned* (n = 10)
Sharing insights/expectations	06
Internship	05
Guest/visiting lectures	03
Seminars/workshops	03
Faculty-industry collaboration	03
Inputs for curriculum	02
Service-learning	02

* Only two and above are reported

In sum, regarding the delivery of soft skills, whilst academics widely used presentations, groupwork, and case study, industry practitioners mostly mentioned sharing expectations and providing internships as a conduit to develop soft skills. Moreover, industry experts emphasised the value of having university-industry collaboration to uplift soft skills development initiatives.

7.9 Assessment of soft skills

When looking at the curriculum, it was apparent that the faculty followed the policy of allocating seventy per cent to summative assessment and thirty per cent for formative/in-course assessment. The summative component of seventy per cent is tested through a paper-based examination held at the end of the semester. In the case of in-course assessment, academics appeared to have the discretion to decide the type and format of assessment to meet the requirements of a particular course. As seen from across the academics’ narratives, assessment via presentations, case studies and group work are common in most of the courses

in addition to role play, written assignments, quizzes, field visits and practical projects. What is important to note is that, given the discretion enjoyed by academics in deciding the assessment type in in-course assessment, even the whole thirty per cent or a substantial portion of thirty per cent could be allocated for mid-semester examination. This perspective was validated when one academic explained that some academics rely on the mid-semester examination to cover a certain portion of the in-course assessment, thus leading to the marginalisation of soft skills improvement.

Academics' responses suggested that the existing assessment structure of 70-30 in terms of summative and formative assessments respectively poses a potential challenge when it comes to the development of soft skills. For instance, several academics felt that allocating equal weight or forty per cent, for in-course assessment better serves the needs of soft skills development than adopting a blanket 70-30 approach. Also, given that a substantial portion of marks is allocated for the end-semester examination, it may convey the message to students that the development of hard skills is far more important than soft skills:

...if a particular student wanted to work in the real world, at least there should be some balance like it should be enhanced in the form of 40 to 60 to 50 to 50 (40% or 50% for in-course assessment and the rest for summative assessment).
(AC 7, Junior lecturer)

However, only one academic disagreed with the notion that the paper-based end-semester examination poses a barrier to developing soft skills given its focus on theoretical knowledge, arguing that soft skills could be tested; even in the summative assessment provided, a deliberate effort is made to design questions to test soft skills:

The 70% is like paper-based, entirely paper-based but then again, there also we can test the soft skills like we can put one case study question, real-life case study question where we can test the soft skills. It could be like, a very practical, very realistic question. So, in the case of 30-70 per cent, I'm not going to, you know, complain about it. It's okay, the thing is, what we can do in the 70%, is we should not only include theoretical, or an entirely academic-related question, but we can definitely include the questions where soft skills also can be tested. (AC 13, Assistant lecturer)

In the case of industry experts, most of the experts seemed somewhat noncommittal when it comes to taking a position on assessment forms and structure due to their lack of exposure to assessment practices adopted at the business school. However, one practitioner highlighted the drawback in assessment in terms of lower weighting assigned:

So, what we lack is we did up to grade twelve (up to advanced level) going through a notebook or a textbook. If you could pass the exam first-class without any exposure, then you are not giving any opportunity for soft skill development. The thing is, okay, some could argue that we should have that part (soft skills) within our curriculum. My question is, what is the weightage of it in the overall grading, right. So, that is very, very minimal. So, if you are not giving that weightage towards soft skills, you are not going to get there, right. (IE 9, Regional manager)

In relation to assessment, it seemed that most of the assessments are lecturer-led than peer assessment or self-assessment. Also, some academics raised a concern about challenges in assessing soft skills due to subjectivity surrounding the decision-making. It appeared that most of the academics provide feedback immediately after the presentations, particularly suggestions for further improvement. However, large class cohorts appeared to negate opportunities for personalised feedback during the first two-year period where students take common courses. Undergraduates also acknowledged the provision of quality feedback and its utility to make further improvements. The following undergraduate narrative captures the positive impact of feedback on personal development.

In my second year, I did a presentation, and it was a group presentation...And I did not expect that the lecturer of mine called me and said, “you have done a great job and you will have a great future...” That appreciation made me to do something more to learn more and develop my skills more because I did not have that much confidence earlier. After getting that appreciation from my lecturer, I was able to learn more and listen to people a lot. So, it (feedback) helped me a lot. (UG 3, Human Resources)

Overall, concerning soft skills assessment, it appeared that substantial weighting is given to summative assessment. Soft skill components are assessed within the allocated thirty percent for formative assessment. Notably, there were widespread concerns raised by academics about the imbalance between weighting allocated to formative and summative assessments.

7.10 Barriers to soft skills development

Considering the theoretical framing of barriers in the form of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive factors, based on the stakeholder groups’ narratives, it appeared that the cultural-cognitive barrier was dominant compared to the other two forms. Overall, almost all stakeholder groups agreed that ‘student mindset’ is a potential barrier influencing soft skills development negatively. Although stakeholders referred to the concept of mindset/attitudes often in their responses, they appeared to conceptualise the term in various ways. For instance, some industry experts and many academics believed students’ mindset in terms of instrumental focus in the form of grades, marks and degree qualifications pose a potential

challenge in enhancing soft skills. Others felt that students' lack of engagement in soft skills development and short-term orientation had a negative impact on skills enhancement initiatives:

...the main barrier, what I have understood is, actually, they don't know, basically, university students don't know the essentiality of soft skills. What they are thinking is getting an A or A-plus on the paper is more essential. Or if they can get 3.5 or 4.0 in the GPA, they are thinking that they have achieved all the things and they have to be at the top. But in the job market or in the industry, that is not the case. It's about, let's say, if the person might have 3.5 (GPA), it is a basic requirement to enter the job, but climbing the ladder is not the case. If this student or the graduate doesn't know how to apply soft skills, they may be stuck in the same position. (IE 6, Senior manager)

Now what we need is we will finish (exams) and after that, we will see what we want to do at that time... That type of mentality I think is a barrier for developing the soft skill. (IE 8, Regional manager)

And also, overall, the mindset of students, for example, they don't understand the importance of having these soft skills or developing their current soft skills. So being unaware of that could be also a barrier.' (IE 1, Senior executive)

Decision-makers also believed that the mindset of the student is a major barrier affecting soft skills development compared to other challenges. Specifically, they commented on students' focus on getting through the degree programme and expecting less-challenging assignments posed difficulties in inculcating soft skills:

The second barrier is what is called the students' mindset. Nowadays student mindset is to get the degree as early as possible and complete it (the degree programme), but they are not concerned about the patterns of learning... (DM 1, Dean)

...and some students are also reluctant, and they are happy when the staff are not giving the presentations opportunities for them because they can write some assignment and other things and get the marks. (DM 3, Head)

More than half of the academics also felt that students' mindsets/attitudes are the single dominant barrier that has a negative impact on soft skills development. Like industry experts and decision-makers, they also concurred with the notion that the overarching instrumental focus on grades and marks on the part of business graduates led to a situation where soft skills development was perceived as secondary:

The first thing is, they (business undergraduates) are reluctant to improve the soft skills...as I reiterated earlier, they are more towards getting a higher grade and getting

the job. Then all are concentrating on getting either the first class or second class and what they are thinking is getting the class itself is sufficient for them to secure a job... they should deviate from this idea or notion, then only they will be successful, I think. (AC 1, Senior lecturer)

Their main focus is how to write the examination or how the examination is going to be. So, in our university, I have introduced a new subject called financial modelling and forecasting. They (students) were like how the exam will be and they don't want to learn how we can apply this (subject) in the real world. Then, they wanted model papers, and they were totally focused on the examination. They don't want to learn many things or like how this subject will be important as being a Finance student. They don't want to be that way. (AC 7, Junior lecturer)

Another academic highlighted the limitation of having a fixed mindset where the focus is on immediate results rather than taking a long-term perspective in terms of investing in soft skills development:

The challenging situation here, I would say, is students are having this mindset that now I have entered the university, what I have to do is just to, you know, get a degree and go to the corporate world, then I will definitely get a job there. They are having that mindset that is, how to say, it's a fixed mindset they are having, but they are not realising that when they go to the corporate sector, then only they are realising that, okay, now, this is not enough. And when they realise at that point, it's too late. So that is a hindrance that we have the mindset of the students, the students are not realising the real value of the soft skills. (AC 13, Assistant lecturer)

Although it seems difficult to identify the causal factor for the problems related to students' mindset, especially their instrumental focus, one industry expert attributed the value placed on degree credentials by society may be one of the contributory factors for students developing such a mindset:

Barriers in a sense, our society is giving much priority to the degree qualifications rather than respecting or recognising a person who has soft skills. Our society is recognising the people who are having physical (paper) qualifications. Of course, we need qualifications, we need knowledge, but that is not the only measurement to measure a person. In that sense, it is a huge barrier. (IE 5, Regional manager)

Another significant cognitive barrier under the cognitive-cultural domain highlighted by many academics is related to students' lack of English language proficiency. The education system in Sri Lanka is such that students often follow their studies either in Sinhala or Tamil languages up to year twelve (advanced level) and sit for a competitive national examination to gain a placement at a state university. Of particular concern are the challenges faced by first-year students as they have to focus on content learning while acquiring linguistic capabilities to engage in classroom discussion and presentations. However,

academics stated that once undergraduates gradually move to the third and final years of the degree programme, they increasingly become more confident and competent in the use of the English language. Given the fact that students have to transition into the new medium of instruction of English, one academic stated the challenges in terms of acquiring language capabilities to get through the degree programme while developing soft skills simultaneously as follows:

...in our university, you know, this is a regional university where people are coming from the village (rural) side. In their school, sometimes there is no English teacher, right...when they come to the university, they immediately enter the English medium, and they get shocked (language shock). When they try to or manage to get through the degree, they always get stressed due to this. Thus, they will not focus on or will not give much attention to the soft skill development. (AC 10, Senior lecturer)

Regarding the barriers relating to academics, resistance to change, attitude towards skills development, lack of competence and lack of industry exposure were highlighted. Notably, one academic pointed out about academics' lack of English language proficiency as a barrier in addition to students' limited language capability. Some industry experts were critical regarding the competence of academics and one practitioner used the analogy of the 'frog in the well' to denote lack of foreign and industrial exposure:

...if you are like a frog in a well, and if you have not seen the (practical) world...then there is a problem...and the other thing is academics, who do not have proper, practical knowledge and practical experience, cannot teach students. You cannot teach anything new to the students other than what your lecturers taught you, am I correct? (IE 3, Director)

Both academics and decision-makers pointed out that institutional barriers, particularly large class sizes, time constraints in terms of semester calendar, and the lack of resources/facilities pose significant challenges. Of particular concern was the large class cohort of more than two hundred students, particularly during the first two years of the degree programme. Decision-makers believed that large class sizes not only impede academics' effort to give individual attention but also limit the kind of soft skills enhancement activities that can be undertaken in the classroom:

...and the number of students is high, so, students don't have adequate opportunity to express their skills. We cannot accurately measure everyone's soft skills in a big class consisting of 200 or 250, or 300 students, because presentations, especially individual presentation is not possible. So, we assigned some group work, so that we can assess based on group (performance). So, some silent participants are also there. So, actually, we don't assess them. (DM 2, Head)

Another academic highlighted the challenges in balancing the needs of the academic programme while focusing on developing soft skills via additional activities or programmes. Given the fully packed semester-based system where a pre-determined academic calendar is adopted, finding time slots, and arranging additional activities to develop soft skills seemed a challenging task:

Yeah, so, as usual, the barriers may be the institutional barriers. You know, we have to cover a total of 45 hours of lecture for a course. So, the barrier is all about when we arrange a workshop right, the lecture programme or maybe midterm exams, or some other faculty programme is going on. So, when we decide the appropriate time for these workshops, there may be a barrier, because, you know, the management (the administrators) all the time expect, whether we have completed the forty-five hours lectures and whether students' attendance is there and so on and so forth.
(AC 3, Senior lecturer)

As far as wider contextual factors are concerned, in general, academics, industry experts and decision-makers agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on students' learning, particularly on soft skills development. For instance, academics drew attention to the lack of face-to-face interaction with students and its impact on students' mastery of soft skills, including limitations in having rich, live presentations and provision of feedback. One decision-maker identified the pandemic as a serious bottleneck that limits opportunities for students to develop soft skills. Academics believed that, in the case of presentations, although virtual platforms provide opportunities for students to deliver them, the critical element that is missing is the human touch or richness of human interaction. As a result, the efficacy of presentations in terms of their intended purpose and potential benefits is somewhat doubtful, according to the faculty:

...during this COVID period, we have shifted our lectures to online mode. When we go for an online mode, we can't see the students' faces, we never get a chance to see students' engagement in the lectures. We are just only delivering the lectures because of the time limitation and our administration's guidelines...we are compelled to teach and interact with them in only a one-way method. There is no two-way communication with the students. Therefore, we don't have any mechanisms to measure the students' soft skills, or we don't give the students (opportunities) for interactive participation in the lectures. (AC 6, Senior lecturer)

I would say, especially, because of the Corona pandemic for last two years, we didn't have that many of, you know, opportunities to get into these scenarios (real-life projects)... I really wanted to give an assignment on sustainable development, and I had the plan (on execution) soon after giving all the instructions to the students. After two weeks, we had the lockdown in March 2020. So, due to that, I really could not do those things. (AC 4, Senior lecturer)

It seemed that business undergraduates also felt the negative impact of COVID-19 on their learning, particularly skills development. One student elaborated upon the limitation inherent in virtual learning in relation to soft skills development:

...nowadays, we are having the virtual mode that is being a big barrier, I feel. So, when we are physically attending the lectures, we are meeting the people and we are dealing with the problems. So, our interpersonal skills are increasing, our communication skills are increasing, we are able to manage the time, and decision-making is done quickly when we are meeting physically. But in the case of virtual mode, all those are lacking, I feel. (UG 02, Human Resources)

Another contextual factor identified by stakeholders was related to the location of the business school. They perceived that, compared to business schools located in metropolitan areas, being a regional university poses additional limitations and barriers, particularly access to industries, securing internship opportunities, and obtaining resources. In the case of Beta, the three decades of civil war, particularly in the northern region, had a negative impact on establishing ties with industry. Although the civil war ended in 2009, one academic pointed out the slow, gradual process of arrival of industries to the region made it difficult to provide industrial exposure. Also, of particular concern were the challenges in engaging with the industry due to the limitations associated with the location of the business school which is far away from the capital city. Consequently, the business school appeared to be relying on regional industrial partners to obtain support services, including the provision of internships, which are somewhat limited compared to the opportunities offered by more established multinational corporations located in the capital city:

... compared with the University of X, and the University of Y, as they are in the central part of Sri Lanka, they have a close connection with industry. They know what industry people want from the graduates, but we don't know. So, we don't have that much collaboration with industry people because industries are far from here. Our road system is not like in other countries. It takes overnight to travel. So, it is a big challenge for us to develop our curriculum and sustain itself in the university.
(AC 08, Senior lecturer)

In sum, key stakeholders singled out students' mindset and lack of English language proficiency as major impediments to develop soft skills. Further, large class sizes appeared to pose multiple hurdles in teaching and assessment of soft skills. Being a regional university also seemed to put limitations on Beta in terms of accessing industry expertise and resources. Finally, COVID-19 also adversely influenced the execution of soft skills activities.

7.11 Chapter conclusion

The findings indicate that decision-makers perceived academics, business undergraduates and industry are the highly salient groups compared to others. Moreover, in relation to the conceptualisation of soft skills, despite the use of various labels by stakeholders, there seems to be an agreement on the underlying value and benefit of soft skills in the form of building a relationship with stakeholders and optimising work performance. As far as the required soft skill types are concerned, all stakeholders prioritised communication over other aspects. Also, teamwork was identified next to communication as the most important skill by academics and industry experts. With regard to the role of stakeholders, the findings suggest that the academics' role was perceived as facilitator whereas business undergraduates were expected to play the role of active participants. The industry experts' role was identified more as providing support in undertaking soft skills initiatives. Further, it was apparent that, in addition to the use of various pedagogical approaches, while academics mostly rely on presentation and group work to develop communication and teamwork skills, industry professionals placed their preference on internships as a pathway to develop soft skills. Regarding soft skills assessment, it appears that most assessments take place through in-course or continuous assessment and presentations, case studies, and group assignments topped the list of assessment methods used by academics. Finally, in the case of barriers to developing soft skills, all stakeholders identified the cultural-cognitive barrier of students' mindset/attitude as the dominant impediment, followed by the lack of English language proficiency in the students. In addition, in the case of the influence of broader contextual factors, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic along with limited university-industry partnership due to being a regional university were highlighted. The next chapter provides a cross-case analysis by comparing the findings of stand-alone cases presented in two earlier chapters.

Chapter 8

A cross-case analysis of Alpha and Beta

8.1 Introduction

Chapters 6 and 7 provide a within-case analysis drawing on the responses from key stakeholders involved in soft skills development in the Alpha and Beta case studies. The purpose of the present chapter is to provide a cross-case analysis by way of comparing the empirical findings to identify similarities and differences between the cases of Alpha and Beta. The analytical framework used in the stand-alone case studies followed four categories identified as operationalising soft skills development: initiation, design, delivery, and assessment of soft skills. The first section compares the similarities and differences between both cases, followed by stakeholder identification and salience from decision-makers' points of view. Thereafter, considering that the four main categories of initiation, design, delivery, and assessment underpin analysis in stand-alone case studies, the four categories guide the cross-case analysis. The final section draws some broad inferences about the development of soft skills.

8.2 Setting the stage: Case study contexts

Despite the similarities between Alpha and Beta in terms of degree programmes offered and curricular structure, there are contextual differences regarding the number of undergraduates enrolled and the availability of resources and facilities. Considering the similarities, the major degree programme offered by both case study organisations is the Bachelor of Business Administration with identical specialisation areas. Moreover, in both cases, the curricular structure is designed to enable undergraduates to progress towards specialisation areas upon completing common courses during the first or second year of the degree programme. More importantly, both cases secured the competitive World Bank grant (AHEAD), which emphasised developing soft skills as one of the core objectives. However, despite twenty years of functioning, Beta seemed to face more challenges in terms of accessing industries compared to Alpha, in part, due to the prevalence of civil war, which inhibited industries from operating in the region in which Beta is located. This means that, for Beta, the absence of established industries limits potential collaborative partnerships, such as providing practical/authentic projects, which enable students to explore and experience industries early

on. Moreover, it could be observed that the student-to-faculty ratio is higher in Beta compared to Alpha as Beta enrolls nearly three times the number of new entrants than Alpha.

8.3 Stakeholder identification and prioritisation

In the case of stakeholder identification, although decision-makers in both case studies identified a range of stakeholders, prominent among them were academics, undergraduates and employers. Notably, in both cases, all decision-makers recognised academics as key stakeholders while placing undergraduates and industry experts/employers next to academics. Specifically, concerning identifying stakeholder salience based on the attributes of power, legitimacy and urgency, decision-makers in both case studies assessed academics as having the highest salience over other stakeholders. However, in the case of Alpha, industry experts and students were identified as having medium to high salience next to academics, whereas decision-makers in Beta prioritised undergraduates, followed by industry experts for possessing medium to high salience.

8.4 Initiation: Conceptualisation and identification of soft skills

In general, key stakeholder responses reveal that there seems to be a lack of clarity about the meaning of the term soft skills, in part due to semantic ambiguity. Notably, salient stakeholders conceptualised soft skills either comprehensively as attributes or qualities or narrowly in some form of skills, such as life skills, essential skills and soft skills. Importantly, while there appeared to be consensus on labelling attributes as soft skills in the responses of academics, industry experts and business undergraduates in the case of Alpha, decision-makers, academics and industry experts in Beta pointed out that non-technical skills represent the concept of soft skills. Regarding the salience of soft skills, stakeholders in both cases mentioned facilitating job performance, projecting an image, complementing hard skills, enabling career progression, acting as a differentiator, enhancing employability prospects and building relationships. However, the notable difference in the case of academics in Beta is that they highlighted the role of soft skills as a differentiator in the labour market, particularly in employee selection.

In relation to the expected or desired soft skill, in both cases, overwhelmingly, nearly all stakeholder groups, except undergraduates in Beta, pointed out communication skills over other soft skills. When it comes to the motive for placing more prominence on communication, stakeholders' narratives in both case studies tend to be around connecting,

relating, understanding, and empathising with people through delivering ideas or messages in a succinct, persuasive, and clear way. Moreover, whilst all key stakeholders in Alpha singled out teamwork next to communication skills, only academics and industry experts in Beta identified teamwork as the next desired soft skill. There seemed to be consensus on the value of teamwork from the stakeholders' perspectives in Alpha and Beta, as they believed in the need for collaboration in a contemporary team-based work environment due to the complexity and interdependency in carrying out tasks. In both the Alpha and Beta cases, leadership was identified as one of the top desired skills by decision-makers and industry experts in both cases. Interestingly, emotional intelligence, which was identified as the third most desired soft skill sought by industry experts in Alpha, did not appear among the top four soft skills desired from the Beta stakeholders' point of view. Overall, it is evident that, despite some notable differences, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and leadership were highlighted in both cases as expected soft skills

8.5 The role of stakeholders in soft skills development

Regarding the role of undergraduates in fostering soft skills, decision-makers in both case studies perceived the role of undergraduates through the perspective of personal ownership. When comparing other stakeholders' perspectives on their own role in soft skills development and other stakeholders' roles, there appeared to be near consensus within and between the two case studies. More specifically, in both case studies, business undergraduates and other stakeholders of academics and industry experts seemed to agree on the role of undergraduates as active participants in soft skills development. Notably, business undergraduates in both cases referred to their role as active participants from the perspective of taking personal responsibility by seeking and exploiting opportunities and engaging actively in soft skills acquisition initiatives. Taking ownership or personal responsibility was highlighted by decision-makers and academics in both case studies when referring to undergraduates' roles. Also, industry experts in Alpha seemed to be in line with their counterparts in Beta in describing undergraduates' roles as active participants. Though a range of phrases was used in both cases, the underlying message in their accounts implied that having a sense of personal responsibility is what is expected from business undergraduates.

In the context of academics' roles, in both cases, decision-makers highlighted academics' roles through the lens of providing awareness and support and engaging in the

design and execution of soft skills. Academics seemed to perceive their role as more geared towards facilitators of soft skills development. When comparing both cases, there appeared to be consensus in the areas of using authentic approaches, motivating students, facilitating soft skills acquisition and encouraging active participation as part of their roles. When looking into other stakeholders' perspectives of academics' role, the responses from industry practitioners in case study Alpha concur with their counterparts in Beta as practitioners in both cases agreed that building awareness about soft skills and providing opportunities for developing soft skills are part of academics' responsibility. Like academics and industry representatives, there seemed to be consensus on academics' roles from business undergraduates' perspectives as well. Overall, on closer examination, it is evident that all stakeholder groups believed in the role of academics as facilitators in soft skills development.

Regarding the role of industry experts in soft skills development, a comparison of both case studies revealed that decision-makers identified direct and indirect forms of engagement on the part of the industry. Particularly, in the case of direct and indirect forms of support, the dominant responses from decision-makers were around internships and awareness building respectively. Moreover, industry experts and academics appeared to frame the industry's role as supportive in the form of sharing industry expectations and requirements, offering internships, and providing inputs for curriculum in both Alpha and Beta. Particularly, providing internships, arranging workshops and training programmes, and sharing industry expectations were pointed out in both cases. Undergraduates' responses in both cases suggest that they also perceived industry's role as sharing information on industry expectations, building awareness, and providing training opportunities, especially internships.

8.6 Soft skills design: the curriculum

In both cases, generally, it appeared that there was a perception among industry experts that the curriculum places more weight on theoretical knowledge than practical application, thereby contributing to a theory-practice gap. For instance, practitioners in both case studies highlighted the inadequacy of the inclusion of a single internship in the final year of the curriculum. Their conception of incorporation of multiple internships in the curriculum implies that early exposure to the real world of work enables undergraduates to undertake course correction early on rather than waiting until the end of the degree programme. There appeared to be some consensus among industry representatives in both cases on the need for industry inputs at the curriculum design stage.

From the perspective of academics in both case studies, their responses implied that the curriculum consists of both embedded and stand-alone components, whereas the former focuses on integrating soft skills into courses through teaching and assessment, and the latter offers separate courses on soft skills development. However, a closer examination of the responses implied that both Alpha and Beta heavily relied on embedded approaches to develop soft skills although they incorporated some elements of stand-alone courses in the curriculum. Notably, the AHEAD project funded by the World Bank had enabled both case studies to revise the curriculum, particularly revisiting and embedding soft skills. There seemed to be clarity on the benefits of the embedded approach in the form of sustainability or continuity of soft skills development throughout the degree programme from the perception of academics in both cases. With respect to stand-alone components, although both Alpha and Beta offer a credit-bearing soft skills development module, Alpha introduced an integrated career support framework in which soft skills development is one component.

8.7 Soft skills delivery

There was general consensus among academics in both cases that presentations, group work, and case studies were predominantly deployed to develop soft skills. Academics suggested that the critical skills of communication, teamwork, and problem-solving could be developed by using the above pedagogical interventions. Notably, in comparison to case study Beta, it could be observed that academics in Alpha used a range of authentic pedagogies in the form of practical projects, including meet-the-expert assignment. In contrast, academics in Beta seemed to focus more on awareness building, facilitating exposure and information sharing through field visits, guest lectures, workshops, and seminars.

In relation to industry interventions to develop soft skills, there was general agreement in both cases that internships and building awareness via sharing insights and expectations were the most used interventions by industry experts. Broadly, practitioners in both cases believed that internships could bridge the theory-practice gap and enable undergraduates to engage in course action measures in terms of underdeveloped soft skills. Implicit in the responses of industry experts in Beta compared to their counterparts in Alpha is the limited choice of internships available in the form of banking and public sector as opposed to the wide variety of opportunities available for business undergraduates in Beta. Industry representatives in Beta perceived the quality of internships as somewhat limited in

the northern region, where the Business School is located, due to industry-specific factors, such as limited exposure in the banking sector because of secrecy concerns and underutilisation and exploitation of interns. Finally, in both cases, there seemed to be agreement on the necessity and value of a university-industry partnership to promote soft skills development from practitioners' perspectives.

	Awareness building	Insights sharing
Short-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Visiting/guest lectures (Alpha and Beta) ○ Workshops/Seminars (Alpha and Beta) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Inputs for curriculum (Alpha and Beta)
Focus	Capability building – soft skills	Capability building – Education
Long-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Internships (Alpha and Beta) ○ Practical projects (Alpha) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Competitions (Alpha and Beta) ○ Academic awards/prizes (Alpha and Beta)
	Direct	Indirect
	Forms of industry engagement	

Figure 5. Industry interventions in soft skills development for Alpha & Beta

Figure 5 represents an integrated analysis of industry interventions derived from both cases. This shows that industry interventions can take four forms: awareness-building activities, insight-sharing events, capability-building (soft skills) initiatives and capability-building (education) activities. Both case studies showed that industry seemed to be involved in awareness-building activities through workshops, seminars, and guest/visiting lectures more or less equally in Alpha and Beta. However, in the case of capability-building initiatives (soft skills), industrial support for Alpha includes more activities like practical projects and internships in contrast to industrial involvement with Beta. Moreover, the provision of inputs in the form of sharing industry-specific insights for the curriculum by industry could be seen in both cases. Finally, industry sponsorships, such as competitions, specific awards and prizes for academic, extracurricular and co-curricular performances, were prevalent in both case

studies from the accounts of industry experts and the details provided on the websites of the respective Business Schools.

8.8 Soft skills assessment

The assessment structure in both case studies consists of formative and summative components, with the latter generally paper-based end-semester examinations. In relation to the weighting given to formative assessment, whereas Alpha allocated 40 per cent of the total marks, Beta allocated 30 per cent of the total marks. Broadly, academics in both case studies regarded the weighting given to formative assessment of soft skills as insufficient. They were of the view that, although discipline-specific knowledge is significant, having a balanced approach between summative and formative assessment could lead to better testing and development of soft skills. In comparison to Beta, academics in Alpha seemed vocal about the impact of less weight given in continuous assessment on the development of soft skills, particularly the implicit message it conveyed to students about what is valued in practice. Importantly, academics in Alpha stressed the inherent limitations in assessing soft skills in end-semester, paper-based examinations as the rationale for increasing the value of continuous assessment. However, a minority of academics in both cases believed that soft skills could be tested in the end-semester examination, provided the question paper is designed properly by incorporating the components of soft skills. From the point of view of industry experts, some practitioners in both cases opined that assessment in the degree programme often failed to reflect the real-world scenario and was inadequate in terms of its coverage of soft skills. Finally, although business undergraduates in both case studies acknowledged the forms of assessment, including the provision of feedback, there seemed to be a concern raised by some undergraduates in Alpha about the lack of continuous monitoring of the progress of soft skills development throughout the degree programme.

8.9 Barriers to soft skills development

In both case studies, although heterogeneity of barriers in the form of student-related, system-related, academics-related, industry-related and context-relevant was identified, it seemed that the dominant barrier of all possible barriers highlighted was undergraduates' mindset. In particular, whilst the concept of mindset was used to denote different perspectives, there was a general consensus that the dimension of instrumental focus as part of mindset has a negative impact on acquiring and developing soft skills. In both case studies, nearly all

stakeholders pointed out that the singular focus on academic achievement in grades, marks and degree classification is a major impediment to enhancing soft skills. In effect, stakeholders argued that the development of soft skills was delayed or completely ignored due to the overriding focus on academic excellence. Although it might be difficult to single out the possible causes for the instrumental focus, in Beta industry experts highlighted the societal norms and expectations and the lack of incentives or rewards for mastery of soft skills as opposed to academic performance as possible reasons. Additionally, it could be argued that given the substantial weighting allocated to summative, paper-based examination in both cases, this may incentivise students to focus on instrumental outcomes as such forms of assessment leans more towards rewarding academic achievement.

Another significant barrier highlighted in both case studies is related to business undergraduates' lack of English language proficiency. Notably, academics, decision-makers and business undergraduates accepted that limited linguistic capabilities posed challenges in two ways. First, the struggle during the initial period of the degree programme to master language proficiency to follow subjects often diverts their focus away from soft skills development. Second, limited language capabilities seemed to impede students' communication with peers from different ethnic backgrounds. In addition, a lack of proficiency in English appeared to pose challenges in securing quality internships as candidates need to go through a rigorous selection process. Although the lack of English language proficiency was an issue in both Alpha and Beta, it appeared that the problem was somewhat critical in the case of Beta as it attracts students mostly from rural, and underprivileged backgrounds. It seemed from stakeholder accounts that the lack of exposure and opportunities to improve language competence at the school level invariably had a negative impact on their adjustment and learning once students entered the university. In contrast, in the case of Alpha, although there seemed to be concern about lack of language proficiency in general, given the location of the university in proximity to the metropolitan areas, including the capital city, there appeared to be a better representation of student profiles.

In relation to system-related barriers, whilst stakeholders, particularly academics and decision-makers in Alpha, identified limited university-industry engagement, issues with the performance evaluation system for academics and the assessment structure, their counterparts in the case study of Beta pointed out the large class cohort, lack of resources and time

constraint as potential barriers. Particularly, the negative effect of large class sizes on soft skills development activities was highlighted in Beta. It was apparent that whereas the annual enrolment of business undergraduates at Alpha is around one hundred and seventy-five, in Beta the annual intake of business undergraduates is almost three times higher. In effect, it appeared that given the first two years of the curriculum for the business administration degree programme offers common courses, having individual presentations or other authentic learning activities, such as role plays, tend to be a challenging task. Additionally, larger class sizes with diverse student profiles make monitoring the students' progress difficult.

A contextual factor identified in both case studies was related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on soft skills development activities. Stakeholders in both case studies perceived that the lack of human interaction and the absence of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities deprived students from obtaining rounded learning, including skills development. Thus, the missing element of the richness of human interaction may have implications for cultivating social skills, such as networking, interpersonal and teamwork skills. The other contextual barrier that appeared to have a negative impact on soft skills development is the socioeconomic background or status of undergraduates. Although academics and decision-makers in both case studies highlighted the effects of socioeconomic factors, such as family background, schooling and access to resources and opportunities, many decision-makers and academics in Alpha appeared to be more vocal about the influence on such factors compared to their academic colleagues in Beta. It is worth mentioning that, in the case of Beta, academics and decision-makers linked the negative impact of socioeconomic factors on the development of soft skills in the context of students' lack of English language capabilities.

8.10 Broad inferences on the development of soft skills in Alpha and Beta

In general, it could be observed that there seem to be some similarities between Alpha and Beta with regard to initiation, design, delivery and assessment of soft skills. Regarding initiation, although stakeholders in both cases conceptualise soft skills in various ways, they identified communication and teamwork as salient components expected for entry-level positions. In relation to the curriculum as part of the design component, key stakeholders in Alpha and Beta appeared to prefer the embedded approach despite using both embedded and standalone approaches. In the case of delivery, whilst academics in Alpha and Beta mostly

identified presentations and group work, industry experts highlighted internships. Concerning soft skills assessment, formative assessment with a fixed weighting of 40 and 30 per cent was used by both Alpha and Beta, respectively. Notably, this assessment appeared to be mainly lecturer-led. When considering barriers affecting soft skills development, the cultural-cognitive barrier of students' mindset was overwhelmingly highlighted by nearly all stakeholder groups in both cases.

Considering the differences, Beta seemed to face more challenges in executing soft skills development activities than Alpha. For instance, in relation to the use of authentic pedagogies in delivering soft skills, academics in Alpha deployed more innovative pedagogical strategies, such as service-learning and meet-the-expert assignment compared to Beta. Moreover, Beta faced impediments in providing quality internships as well. One possible explanation for execution problems is the limited industrial base in the Northern region, where Beta is located. Consequently, the lack of university-industry partnerships constrained Beta from accessing industry expertise and other resources, such as securing internships. Further, the other possible factor is that, in contrast to the modest class sizes in Alpha, the large class cohorts in Beta appeared to constrain the use of authentic pedagogies (see Appendix E for the summary of comparisons of Alpha and Beta).

8.11 Chapter conclusion

This chapter presented a cross-case analysis by comparing and contrasting the empirical findings of the two case studies of Alpha and Beta. The analysis focused on the identification of salient stakeholders, how soft skills were conceptualised and identified, the design, delivery and assessment of soft skills, and barriers to soft skills development. Whilst both internal and external drivers were identified, the influence of external drivers, particularly the expectations of employers, were perceived as dominant in soft skills development. In the case of identification of stakeholders, academics, industry and business undergraduates were identified as key stakeholders in both case studies. Despite the heterogeneity of labels used to denote soft skills by stakeholder groups, it appeared that there was agreement on the value of soft skills to interact and build a relationship with different types of stakeholders. Although communication was identified in both cases as the dominant skill component required for entry-level positions in an organisation, there were differences concerning other expected soft skills components in Alpha and Beta. Moreover, whilst both embedded and stand-alone approaches were apparent in each case, it seemed that the embedded approach was preferred

by stakeholders in both case studies. Further, in relation to soft skills delivery, whereas academics identified presentations, group work and case studies, industry experts emphasised internships and information sharing in both cases. Regarding assessment, it appeared that most of the soft skills assessment takes place via formative or in-course assessment in the form of presentations, group work, case studies and other interventions. Finally, in the case of barriers to soft skills development, the mindset of the students along with their lack of language proficiency was highlighted in both cases. However, notably, the larger class size was perceived as a major barrier to soft skills development in Beta. The negative impact of COVID-19 on skills development was also highlighted in both case studies. The next chapter discusses the theoretical and empirical contributions and positions the findings against the literature.

Chapter 9

Discussion

9.1 Introduction

This chapter positions the findings of the empirical study in the context of scholarly literature and identifies the key contributions of this thesis. First, the research questions and key findings of the study are revisited, followed by a discussion of theoretical and empirical contributions of the study focusing on a number of key themes. Major themes identified in the analysis are stakeholder identification and salience, the conceptualisation and identification of soft skills, the role of key stakeholders, soft skills design, delivery and assessment, and barriers to and facilitators of soft skills development. The chapter concludes with a focus on how the empirical findings contribute to understanding soft skills development in a developing country context.

9.2 Revisiting the research questions: Key empirical findings

The aim of the thesis was to explore and offer an explanation for soft skills development in undergraduate business education drawing on the voices of key stakeholders. The research questions of this study were formed based on the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 4 (Figure 4).

In respect of the first research question (RQ1: *Who are the salient stakeholder groups connected to soft skills development in HEI and, specifically, undergraduate business education?*), academics, industry and students were identified as salient stakeholder groups across the two case studies. Academics were perceived to be highly salient over industry and students in Alpha and Beta. Whilst industry was identified as the second salient stakeholder group in Alpha, decision-makers in Beta identified students as having more salience over industry. The second question explored further the perceptions of these stakeholders (RQ2: *How are soft skills conceptualised by the primary stakeholders; and, is there convergence or divergence in expected soft skills?*). Despite the plurality of labels used to frame soft skills, attributes and non-technical skills were commonly used by key stakeholders to refer to soft skills. Stakeholders identified communication and teamwork as desired soft skills expected for entry-level jobs in organisations. Notably, a majority of industry experts in Alpha only identified emotional intelligence as desired soft skill in addition to communication and

teamwork. The third research question focused on stakeholder roles (RQ3: *How do primary stakeholders perceive their role in soft skills development, along with the soft skills development process in terms of design, teaching and assessment?*). Findings showed that stakeholders perceived the role of academics, undergraduates, and industry in soft skills development as facilitators, active participants and supporters, respectively. Further, although embedded and stand-alone approaches were used, stakeholders preferred the embedded approach, where soft skills are integrated into the curriculum. In the case of soft skills delivery, while academics deployed presentations, group work and case study, industry stakeholders emphasised the use of internships. Soft skills were mostly assessed through formative assessment and the dominant form of assessment was lecturer-led. Finally, the fourth research question sought to explore the development process using the theoretical framing provided by regulative, normative, and cognitive-cultural concepts (RQ4: *To what extent and in what way do regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive factors impact soft skills development?*). The findings revealed that students' mindset and lack of English language proficiency were regarded as a cultural-cognitive barrier and this dominated over regulative and normative barriers. Further contextual barriers highlighted included lack of industrial base, large class cohorts, and students' socioeconomic status.

9.3 Theoretical contribution

9.3.1 Overview

The key theoretical contribution of this thesis is the development of an integrated soft skills development framework, which is the result of the synthesis of existing literature and the integration of multiple theoretical lenses. Given the ambiguity and complexity surrounding the concept of soft skills (Green, Hammer, and Star, 2009; Tight, 2021) and the call for comprehensive employability skills frameworks (Mahajan, Gupta, and Misra, 2022; Tymon, 2013), the soft skills development framework provided an analytical perspective to investigate how soft skills are developed in specific contexts. A thorough synthesis of soft skills literature led to the development of a conceptual framework to understand more comprehensively the process of soft skills development. More specifically, this framework conceptualised the key dimensions of and barriers to soft skills development around the process of initiation, design, delivery and assessment of soft skills. It then provided the basis of a contextualised understanding of the phenomenon of soft skills development in the context of business schools of public universities in Sri Lanka.

One important element of this theoretical contribution is the conceptual integration of the four dimensions. As explored in Chapter 1 (Section 1.3), existing literature on soft skills development is fragmented, treating identification, design, delivery, and assessment of soft skills in isolation. The conceptual integration of the four dimensions in this thesis is one of the first attempts to operationalise soft skills development in this way. With respect to the graduate employability literature, for example, identification and prioritisation of soft skills (initiation), embedding soft skills in the curriculum and offering stand-alone programmes (Design), teaching soft skills through pedagogical approaches (delivery), and appraising soft skills (assessment), extends our understanding of how each component contributes to soft skills development, as stand-alone dimensions. However, examining each dimension in isolation offers a limited perspective on the complex and contextualised nature of the soft skills development process. Thus, by combining key dimensions, the conceptual framework offers a holistic understanding of soft skills development in HEIs. In particular, this thesis' construction and operationalisation of a soft skills development framework responds directly to the argument that existing graduate employability frameworks overlook contextual factors (e.g., Knight and Yorke, 2002; Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007).

Considering the linkages among soft skills dimensions provides the basis for exploring the process of soft skills development in both cases. For instance, the findings demonstrate that communication and teamwork identified under 'initiation' led to embedding them into curriculum 'design', followed by presentations, group work and case study as part of 'delivery' and lecturer-centred 'assessment'. Practically, this framework, by unpacking the key dimensions of the complex phenomenon of soft skills development, provides an opportunity for academics, employers, and students to have a shared understanding and offers a language to have conversations about the process of developing soft skills. For instance, for employers, this framework offers a better understanding of key dimensions of soft skills development and the identification of areas where their interventions might be required. Recent research evidence in the Australian context, for example, suggests that, to provide an effective placement experience and development of competencies, employers should play a more active role as educators than they have in the past (Fleming, Rowe and Jackson, 2021). For academics, there have been calls to support graduates in developing capabilities via skills initiatives (e.g., Kalfa and Taksa, 2015; Petruzzello et al, 2023). By focusing on the key dimensions of soft skills development, the conceptual framework can be used as an evaluation tool to assess the effectiveness of soft skills development, and assist in identifying

gaps within, and misalignment between, dimensions. Furthermore, this conceptual framework could be used as a basis to investigate how soft skills are developed in different HEI contexts, thereby leading to possible further refinement of the framework. Akkermans et al. (2024b) call for more research to gain better understanding of the influence of contextual factors influencing employability, and Winterton and Turner (2019) emphasise the need for incorporating multiple stakeholder views in exploring employability. Consistent with these positions, the proposed conceptual framework includes theoretical concepts derived from stakeholder and institutional theories along with literature-derived key dimensions of soft skills development.

A second aspect of the theoretical contribution made by this thesis is the novel perspective provided by integrating theoretical lenses from diverse disciplinary fields of strategic management and sociology. Regarding the inclusion of multiple theoretical lenses in the framework, given that soft skills development is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, the integration of multiple theoretical lenses drawing from stakeholder theory, the theory of stakeholder salience, and the regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive dimensions of institutional theory allowed a holistic picture of how soft skills are developed. Particularly, while the theory of stakeholder salience (Mitchell, Agle and Wood, 1997) enabled the identification of key stakeholders, stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) facilitated exploring the role of salient stakeholders in soft skills development, particularly in the design, delivery and assessment of soft skills. The institutional pillars of regulative, normative, and cognitive-cultural dimensions (Scott, 2014) provided a unique perspective to investigate the possible barriers that impact soft skills development.

Applying this conceptual framing, the thesis findings contribute to understanding the soft skill development process in at least three ways. These are summarised in this section and developed further below. First, the theory of stakeholder salience allows the identification of key stakeholder groups empirically rather than using a priori classification. For instance, in prior studies, researchers chose key stakeholders based on their perception of significant stakeholder groups (e.g., Ayoubi, Alzarif and Khalifa, 2017; Rosenberg, Heimler and Morote, 2012; Sin, Tavares and Amaral, 2019; Succi and Canovi, 2020) rather than empirically deriving salient stakeholders. Considering also the developing country context in which the present study was undertaken, borrowing the pre-determined list of stakeholders identified in other contexts, particularly in developed country contexts (e.g., Baird and

Parayitam, 2019; Jackson and Chapman, 2012; Verma et al., 2018) may lead to the incorrect identification of key stakeholders. Thus, in the present study, the theory of stakeholder identification and salience was deployed to identify salient stakeholders among an array of stakeholders connected to soft skills development. The findings indicate that academics, students (business undergraduates) and employers were identified as salient groups in relation to soft skills development. Particularly, academics were perceived to be highly salient over the other two stakeholders of students and employers in both case studies.

Secondly, given the widespread use of human capital theory in investigating graduate employability despite its inherent limitations (Suleman, 2021) and the limited use of other theoretical perspectives, particularly stakeholder theory (Nwajiuba *et al.*, 2020), applying a stakeholder theory lens indicates how key stakeholders perceive their role, particularly in the design, delivery and assessment of soft skills, in the context of public universities in Sri Lanka. In particular, as stakeholder theory developed primarily in for-profit contexts (Donaldson and Preston, 1995), using a stakeholder theoretical lens in a public sector context, such as the state universities in Sri Lanka, could be considered a unique contribution. In the present study, considering the call for integration of multiple stakeholder perspectives in employability research (Winterton and Turner, 2019), the voices of industry experts, academics, undergraduates and decision-makers provide a plurality of viewpoints on soft skills development. As stakeholder theory posits that stakeholders often hold divergent views, preferences and expectations (Freeman, 1984; Mainardes, Alves and Raposo, 2012; Savage et al., 1991), the perceptions of four salient stakeholders provide a holistic picture of the process of soft skills development undertaken in undergraduate business education. The findings suggest that in terms of the roles of key stakeholders, business undergraduates, academics and industry experts were perceived as being active participants, facilitators and supporters respectively. Specifically, in the case of initiation, soft skills were framed through attributes and non-technical skills. Whilst stakeholders perceived any skills other than technical and functional as non-technical skills, attributes were conceptualised as encompassing a variety of skills and qualities. Further, communication and teamwork were identified as expected soft skills. Considering design, the use of an embedded approach was dominant although both case studies relied on stand-alone and embedded approaches. In addition to the use of presentations, group work and case studies to develop soft skills, soft skills were appraised through a lecturer-led, formative assessment.

Thirdly, the institutional pillars of regulative, normative, and cognitive-cultural dimensions (Scott, 2014) provided a unique perspective to investigate the possible barriers that impact soft skills development. The findings indicate that cultural-cognitive barriers in the form of student mindset and the lack of English language proficiency were predominant over regulative and normative barriers. Particularly, in both cases of Alpha and Beta, broadly, although a similar pattern in terms of identifying, incorporating, delivering and assessing key soft skills was observable, the cultural-cognitive, institutional and contextual barriers appeared to have varying degrees of negative impact on soft skills development. Notably, considering the contextual factors, while students' socioeconomic status had a negative impact on soft skills development in Alpha, the location of the business school and large class cohorts adversely affected skill development initiatives in Beta.

9.3.2 The identification and role of stakeholders in soft skills development

Considering the stakeholder groups connected to soft skills development, the findings revealed that academics, industry, business undergraduates, support staff, alumni, policymakers, and parents were identified. The findings in relation to key stakeholders from both cases are resonant with the prior literature, where heterogeneity of HE stakeholders, including academics, undergraduates, industry, alumni, community, support staff, administrators, policymakers and parents was recognised (Burrows, 1999; Chapleo and Simms, 2010; Mainardes, Alvis, and Raposo, 2010). More specifically, in the case of salient stakeholders associated with soft skills development, the study findings that academics, business undergraduates and industry had more salience over other stakeholder groups are in line with the existing literature (see e.g., Ayoubi, Alzarif and Khalifa, 2017; Cheng et al., 2022; Kinash *et al.*, 2016; Verma *et al.*, 2018). With regard to the relative salience, the findings of academics as having the highest salience over others, followed by business undergraduates and employers, are partially consistent with existing literature. In Chapleo and Simms's (2010) study of identifying and prioritising stakeholders in a university in the UK, students and academic staff were perceived as more salient than other stakeholders. In contrast, Mainardes, Alves and Raposo's (2012) findings showed that senior administrators in universities and government were perceived as highly salient relative to others.

Regarding the key stakeholders' role in soft skills development, the findings suggest that, in general, the role of industry, academics and business undergraduates was perceived as

supporters, facilitators, and active participants respectively in both case studies. It could be inferred from the findings of both case studies that industry experts conceived their role in terms of direct and indirect engagement with soft skills development, where the former primarily includes the provision of internship and collaborative partnership, such as taking part in practical projects, while the latter focuses on offering inputs for curricula and awareness-building. The evidence suggests that although there seemed to be both direct and indirect engagement of industry in nurturing soft skills in both case studies, a relatively higher level of direct engagement of industry is evident in Alpha. The findings of the present study align with prior studies (Nwajiuba, et al., 2020; Olo, Correia and Rego, 2022; Otache, 2022; Sin and Amaral, 2017) which suggest that offering internships along with other services, including educating students, are what employers perceive they engage in.

In the case of academics, broadly, the key stakeholders' perspectives in both case studies seemed to focus on providing resources and opportunities for soft skills development along with motivating, educating and mentoring students. Overall, it could be inferred that academics discharge their role more as a facilitator in accelerating the soft skills development process via fostering awareness and providing opportunities. The present study's findings reflect the evidence from an empirical study undertaken in a developing country context by Okolie, Nwosu, and Mlanga (2019) that suggests academics are perceived to be facilitators and coaches to inspire, motivate and support students to enhance their employability prospects. Moreover, the present study's findings, to some extent, reflect Sin and Amaral's (2017) findings in the Portuguese context, where academics identified curricular review, focusing on soft skills and the provision of internships as key activities performed in their academic role.

There appeared to be a tendency to assign more burden on business undergraduates in the form of two broad types of responsibilities: engaging in self-analysis and showing a sense of personal commitment. In both case studies, while the first category of self-analysis was portrayed as having self-awareness and intrinsic motivation and engaging in self-reflection, the second type seemed to reflect their role in seeking and exploiting opportunities and active involvement in participation in soft skills initiatives and activities. The findings are in accordance with the existing literature (see, e.g., Bridgstock, 2009; Scott et al., 2019; Su, 2014) which advocates for students' personal responsibility in self-development by displaying proactivity and engaging actively in co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities. Thus, without the active involvement of undergraduates, the provision of opportunities and

implementation of soft skills initiatives are less likely to yield expected outcomes (Fettes, Evans and Kashefpakdel, 2020). Moreover, contrary to the findings in Tran's (2015) study, where students assigned more responsibility to universities to enhance required soft skills, the present study's empirical evidence suggests that students accept their responsibility in nurturing soft skills. One possible reason is that, given that business undergraduates in this study are in their final year of the degree programme, they may have increased awareness of the importance of being proactive and self-driven in developing soft skills, rather than expecting other stakeholders to step in and drive the process.

Regarding the role of undergraduates, the empirical findings pose a number of questions about the commonly held stakeholder perspective of undergraduates as active participants or key drivers in soft skills development. One pertinent concern is whether students are capable enough to be self-driven and self-directed in nurturing soft skills, considering the findings that showed the negative effects of lack of English language proficiency and socioeconomic background on nurturing soft skills. Additionally, given the high weighting given to summative assessment in both cases, and concerns raised about the theory-focused curriculum by industry practitioners, another question arises as to whether the existing structures and systems enable students to acquire the needed soft skills despite the expectation that students should play a decisive role in soft skills development. Another interesting question is whether, by expecting students to be risk-bearers in terms of accepting substantial responsibility, the key academic and industry expert stakeholders seem to distance themselves from embracing their share of responsibility in fostering soft skills development. As a result, lack of progress in developing soft skills on the part of students could be perceived through the prism of 'deficit conception' (e.g., Valencia, 1997), which blames students for failing to acquire soft skills rather than acknowledging numerous constraints, which are beyond the control of students. This means that these stakeholders overlook the influence of contextual contingencies, such as the socioeconomic background of students and institutional constraints when placing major responsibility on students' shoulders. These questions somewhat echo the concerns raised by Moreau and Leathwood (2006), who argue that focusing exclusively on individual responsibility for the enhancement of skills overlooks the influence of structural impediments, such as labour market dynamics and socioeconomic factors, on skills development.

9.3.3 The soft skills development cycle

Regarding the conceptualisation of soft skills, the findings revealed that stakeholders in both case studies refer to a range of cognate labels to denote soft skills, including non-technical skills, attributes, essential skills, qualities, generic skills and interpersonal/people skills. These findings reflect, to a large extent, the prevalence of diverse conceptions and perspectives in framing soft skills in the scientific literature on graduate employability (see, e.g., Matteson, Anderson, and Boyden, 2009; Grugulis and Vincent, 2009; Tight, 2021), thereby leading to what is labelled as ‘conceptual ambiguity’ (Jackson, 2009, p.216). Also, in the present study, the empirical evidence suggests that there seemed to be widespread usage of the concepts of non-technical skills and graduate attributes by key stakeholders compared to other descriptions. This evidence is in accordance with the assertions made by Jackson and Chapman (2012), who conceived non-technical skills broadly as a combination of cognitive and soft skills needed for workplace functioning. Similarly, the term attributes appeared to be used by stakeholders as more encompassing consisting of soft skills, characteristics and qualities other than discipline-specific skills (Barrie, 2007; Jackson, 2009). The use of varied terminology by key stakeholders indicates the lack of consensus on what is meant by the concept of soft skills (Tight, 2021). About the utility of soft skills, stakeholders in the present study believed that building and maintaining effective relationships with stakeholders at multiple levels require demonstrating soft skills. The existing literature also posits that, in a broad sense, soft skills appear to contribute to the workplace success of graduates (Jackson, 2013; Tran, 2013). Moreover, the empirical evidence further suggests that soft skills were perceived as a key differentiator in the competitive, overcrowded labour market, where a large number of graduates possess the same or similar degree credentials. The evidence concurs with the findings of Tomlinson and Anderson’s (2021) study, which shows that employers perceive academic qualification as a foundation or a threshold requirement to enter the world of work. In addition, it seemed that, along with other social and cultural capitals, by demonstrating soft skills, graduates implicitly convey or signal their level of work-readiness to employers, thereby positioning themselves as unique over other candidates (Tomlinson and Anderson, 2021). Finally, the findings also indicate the value of soft skills as complementary skills that facilitate the effective application of hard skills in the workplace due to their transferability to wide-ranging contexts (Beenen and Pichler, 2016).

In relation to the desired soft skills, all stakeholders in both case studies pointed out communication as the most critical skill required for entry-level positions. This is corroborated by the literature that has indicated communication skill, indeed, is the most expected or desired soft skill in both developed and developing country contexts when recruiting for graduate-level positions (Lim *et al.*, 2016; Osmani *et al.*, 2019; Tempone *et al.*, 2012; Succi and Canovi, 2020). The findings also showed that, in addition to communication, all stakeholders other than decision-makers in Beta, highlighted the significance of teamwork as one of the contemporary requirements to enter the world of work. Previous studies also identified the vitality of teamwork skills in the modern organisational environment due to the inherent complexity and interdependency of tasks to be accomplished (See, e.g., Osmani *et al.*, 2019; Paguio and Jackling, 2016; Singh and Jaykumar, 2019; Tymon and Mackay, 2016). It could be argued that both communication and teamwork, given their strategic value, rise above other skills as the absence of these two skills often contributes to managerial failure in enterprises (Longenecker, Neubert and Fink, 2007). Apart from communication and teamwork, notably, it could be observed in both case studies that problem-solving and leadership were mentioned by many stakeholders as the demanded soft skills for entry-level jobs. The findings in relation to problem-solving skills resonate with the results of the study by Lim *et al.* (2016), where problem-solving is perceived as highly important from the students' perspective. Similarly, in the case of leadership, the evidence from Ayoubi, Alzarif and Khalifa's (2017) study in Syria showed industry practitioners placed more value on leadership and other soft skills.

Regarding soft skill design, particularly curriculum design, industry experts in both case studies raised concerns about the impractical, theory-laden curriculum that contributes to the theory-practice gap. According to practitioners, an over-emphasis on theoretical knowledge undermines the inclusion of authentic or real-world pedagogical practices. This assertion is consistent with the findings of Tran (2018) in Vietnamese universities, where a theory-focused curriculum was identified as a major cause for the possible graduate skills gap. Similarly, employers' concerns about the theory-focused curricular structure in the present study reflect recent findings, which suggest that increased prominence given to hard skills invariably leads to less focus on soft skills (Olo, Correia and Rego, 2022).

In regard to curriculum design, although both embedded and stand-alone approaches were used in the present case studies for the purpose of teaching, learning and assessment of

soft skills, there was a general agreement that the embedded approach is more suited given the progressive nature of skills building throughout the degree programme. Both Alpha and Beta had undertaken curriculum revision in the recent past, integrating soft skills into the curriculum while offering stand-alone, non-credit-bearing workshops, seminars and other relevant programmes. The findings of the present study favouring the embedded approach are consistent with the results of MacVaugh, Jones and Auty's (2014) longitudinal study which showed that business undergraduates, following the embedded module, demonstrated enhanced performance over time when compared to other business undergraduates who took part in a stand-alone module on soft skills development in a business management degree programme. However, recent research evidence from a study carried out by Scott and Willison (2021) has revealed that, in general, students representing diverse disciplinary backgrounds, including business management, appreciated the activities delivered as part of a separate course on an employability module although many raised concerns about the practical utility of the course. An increased attention given to the embedded approach in both case studies concurs with the findings of Sin, Tavares and Amaral (2019), which suggest that academics in the management discipline embrace embedding soft skills in the Portuguese context more. It could be argued that the preference for the embedded approach in both case studies, in addition to the use of stand-alone activities, is the opportunity to contextualise requisite soft skills based on disciplinary requirements (e.g., Cranmer, 2006).

Soft skills delivery, in general, is concerned with the interventions used to inculcate the requisite soft skills in the degree programme. In both case studies, although presentations, group work, case studies, roleplay, exhibitions, field visits, workshops and seminars, debates, internships and practical projects were highlighted by academics, it was found that presentations, group work, and case studies are predominantly used to develop the demanded soft skills. Notably, other than the case studies, authentic pedagogies in the form of roleplays, internships, meet-the-industry expert assignments, and some forms of service learning were mentioned by academics. These findings are consistent with previous studies (e.g., Andrews and Higson, 2008; Cavanagh *et al.*, 2015; Kerby and Romine, 2009), which showed that the in-class usage of presentations and group activities seemed to contribute to enhancing communication and team working skills. However, considering Beta, given the concerns raised by academics and decision-makers about the challenges posed by large student numbers, there is a possibility that group activities were used to overcome challenges presented by large class sizes rather than focusing exclusively on team working skills.

Further, the findings also suggest that the use of authentic approaches like service learning in Alpha was perceived to be effective in building a range of soft skills. This may be because authentic pedagogical practices are viewed as having the potential to bring the world of work into the classroom setting. The findings concur with the literature on authentic learning (e.g., Ornellas, Falkner, and Stalbrandt, 2019), particularly service learning (e.g., Mtawa, Fongwa and Wilson-Strydom, 2021), which suggests the opportunities for the development of broad-based employability skills using authentic interventions. However, the use of authentic pedagogical approaches in the present study differs from other developing country contexts, such as Nigeria, where the traditional lecture approach dominates as opposed to the use of innovative pedagogies (Okolie et al., 2020a).

In the case of the industrial perspective of soft skills delivery, there appeared to be a general consensus that internships and sharing expectations or building awareness are the dominant interventions to inculcate soft skills. In both case studies, more importantly, the value of internships as a vehicle to bridge the theory-practice gap was highlighted by industry practitioners. These findings synchronise with the literature on work-integrated learning, which postulates that internships as an experiential-learning approach facilitate the application of theoretical knowledge in a real-world scenario in addition to the testing, learning, development and reflection of soft skills in an authentic setting (Benati, Lindsay and Fischer, 2021; Kapareliotis, Voutsina, and Patsiotis, 2019; Yusof *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, there was a general perception, particularly in Beta, that interns are underutilised and exploited instead of getting meaningful learning experiences. The literature also suggests the perception of exploitation and/or underutilisation from undergraduates' assigning mundane, routine, less-challenging tasks during the internship (Crebert et al., 2004; Tran, 2015). One possible explanation for the exploitation of interns in Beta could be that, given the lack of developed industries in the region, as academics pointed out, undergraduates increasingly end up in firms, such as public-sector organisations, which are commonly perceived as lethargic, bureaucratic and inefficient. In such a situation, interns are more likely to be used to 'getting things done' than building their capabilities, including employability skills. Also, there seemed to be an emphasis on the part of industry experts on the necessity of university-industry partnerships to bridge the gap between the academic and practical world, thereby leading to the sustained development of soft skills programmes and initiatives. This finding concurs with the existing literature, particularly the forms and benefits of university-industry linkages, particularly creating a positive-sum outcome for both parties (Ishengoma and

Vaaland, 2016, Ressa and Shaw, 2022). However, of significance is the quality of sustained engagement with a strategic focus in the form of joint projects rather than ad hoc and piecemeal short-term, needs-based collaborations in the form of awareness-building and information-sharing approaches (e.g., Ishengoma and Vaaland, 2016).

Generally, assessments in HEIs are categorised into formative and summative assessments, where the former implies the assessment used to enhance learning, and the latter focuses on assessing learning. In both case studies, it was evident that soft skill assessment activities take place through formative or in-course or continuous assessment, whereas summative assessment appeared to be a paper-based end-of-semester examination. In both cases, key stakeholders, particularly academics, expressed reservations about the low weight given for developing soft skills in formative assessment. The findings of more prominence given for the summative assessment in the present study reflect the findings of Fernandes and Flores (2022) in Portugal, where programme directors acknowledged the increased use of traditional assessment forms, such as examinations, to the deployment of alternative forms of assessment. Particularly, the phenomenon of an examination-oriented approach could be seen in developing country contexts, where rote learning is widely prevalent (e.g., Tran, 2013). One possible shortcoming arising from less weighting given for soft skills in formative assessment is that students may focus more on instrumental outcomes in maximising grades in the final examination than engaging with soft skills development activities (Nghia, 2018b). Although a range of assessment methods, including quizzes, class tests, multiple choice questions, case studies, oral presentations, group projects and individual assignments were used, some forms of presentation, group work and case studies were dominant among them. Notably, in both cases, the phenomenon of lecturer-led assessment of soft skills contradicts findings from Vietnamese universities, where peer and self-assessment were prevalent (Nghia, 2018b).

9.3.4 Barriers to developing soft skills: Developing country context

The findings revealed that a range of barriers appeared to have an adverse impact on developing soft skills, particularly in the areas of design, delivery and assessment of soft skills. It was apparent that, while the cultural-cognitive barrier of student mindset and lack of English language proficiency were dominant, the contextual barriers of students'

socioeconomic status, COVID-19, large class size and location of the business school also seemed to pose significant challenges.

The cultural-cognitive barrier in context

Considering the barriers affecting soft skills development, the findings revealed that the cultural-cognitive barriers are dominant over regulative and normative barriers. For instance, nearly all stakeholders in both Alpha and Beta appeared to concur that the student mindset is the key impediment to acquiring and developing soft skills in undergraduate business education. More specifically, the mindset of focusing on instrumental outcomes, such as grades, marks, degree classification and credentials at the expense of soft skills development, was apparent in both case studies. These findings accord with the empirical evidence obtained in Tomlinson's (2008) study, where undergraduates in the UK shared instrumental concerns, and perceived credentials could provide a competitive advantage in the labour market. Similar evidence is emerging from developing country contexts (e.g., Igwe, Lock and Rugara, 2022; Tandika and Ndijuge, 2022). For instance, Igwe, Lock and Rugara (2022) found that the symbolic value placed on degree credentials appeared to have an influence on students' instrumental focus on credential acquisition rather than enhancing employability skills in Nigeria. Although it appears to be difficult to identify causal factors for the prevalence of what Tomlinson (2007, p.291) referred to as the 'instrumental rationality' perspective, it could be argued that, in the Sri Lankan context like in many other developing contexts, students are exposed to a competitive education system in primary and secondary education, where positional advantage in terms of grades and marks are overriding concerns, particularly when securing a place at state universities via national competitive examinations. Drawing on the findings from their empirical investigation in Malaysia, Cheong, Leong and Hill (2021) argue that when the education system throughout primary and secondary education in general, and higher education in particular, promotes and rewards academic excellence such as grades, the development of soft skills often becomes a secondary priority. Likewise, Chan *et al* (2017) also note that, given the symbolic value placed on academic success in Asian countries, students tend to focus more on mastering theoretical knowledge than fostering soft skills.

Another significant cultural-cognitive barrier, which has a negative impact on the acquisition and enhancement of soft skills, rests with a lack of English language proficiency. Most stakeholders in Alpha and Beta appeared to perceive issues with linguistic capability

impeding soft skills development and the subsequent employability of graduates. Notably, the existence of this phenomenon appears to be widespread in developing country contexts where students often undergo primary and secondary education in their respective native language before transitioning into the English medium at tertiary institutions (Cheong, Leong, and Hill, 2021; Zainuddin *et al.*, 2019). Recent empirical evidence also suggests that, in the context of English medium instruction in a non-English speaking context, students with a lower level of proficiency appeared to struggle to concentrate on acquiring disciplinary content (Rose *et al.*, 2020). Likewise, in the Vietnamese context, adjusting to English medium instruction and engaging in in-class learning were identified by Yao *et al.* (2022) as major challenges confronted by students. The findings of the present study share similarities with the findings noted above, particularly adjustment challenges related to transitioning to English medium instruction. This implies that, because of the context of English as a second language in Sri Lanka, it could be argued that, as students require more effort to comprehend the subject matter that is taught in English, invariably it may lead to a shifting of focus away from developing soft skills due to the need to get through the courses and examinations. Further, industry experts' view of business undergraduates' lack of English language competence in the present study resonates with the findings of Zainuddin *et al.*, (2019), which suggest employers use English language proficiency as a screening tool when recruiting candidates.

Considering the cultural dimension of cognitive-cultural barriers, in the Sri Lankan context, like other Asian cultures, the prevailing cultural norms of obedience to teachers, hierarchical structures, submission to authority, respect for teachers, and obedience towards elders pose a barrier to soft skills development (Thanh-Pham, 2011; Somaratne, 2022). For example, the findings demonstrate that when it comes to the assessment of soft skills, the predominant method used in both cases was lecturer-led assessment despite the availability of peer assessment and self-assessment tools. Moreover, the greater weight given to summative assessment in both cases reflects the value placed on knowledge acquisition, implying the influence of societal attitude towards credentials rather than the development of skills (e.g., Igwe, Lock and Rugara, 2022). Given the high-power distance in Asian countries and the influence of cultural norms and values, one could question whether the innovative teaching and learning practices, such as outcome-based learning and student-centred learning introduced in Sri Lanka based on their success in Anglo-Saxon countries to enhance skills (Bandara, 2021) are likely to achieve the intended results.

The role of socioeconomic status

Another theme that emerged from stakeholders' views, although to a lesser extent compared to students' mindset and language issues, is the effect of socioeconomic background on learning and soft skills development. On the issue of students' socioeconomic status or background, there was a perception among key stakeholders in Alpha that lack of early exposure to soft skills, limited access to resources and capital such as social capital, and impoverished family background may have an adverse impact on soft skills development. For instance, in Alpha, out of the twelve students interviewed, only a handful reported fewer adjustment challenges during the degree programme due to better English language capability. These students had had exposure to English medium education at primary and secondary levels along with co-curricular activities. Additionally, the findings suggest that students from elite and middle-class backgrounds have better social capital in the form of informal connections/networks as in the case of Alpha. Those students also appeared to have access to quality internships, particularly in multinational corporations compared to other students. In contrast, students representing low socio-economic status, due to their limited social capital, seemed to face obstacles in terms of accessing better internships. For example, because the district where Beta is located is categorised as an 'educationally disadvantaged district' by the government as opposed to Alpha (University Grants Commission, 2022), it enrolled more working-class students and those students appeared to face more obstacles, including securing internships, improving English language proficiency and cultivating social capital. Given the evidence that, in addition to soft and hard skills, social mobility factors have a positive impact on graduate employability (Hossain *et al.*, 2020), the findings of the present study suggest student profiles in terms of their socioeconomic status tend to influence acquiring soft skills. Also, the findings share some similarities with Parutis and Howson's (2020) and Wright and Mulvey's (2021) studies, where students, who come from advantageous socioeconomic backgrounds, have early access to various forms of capital and exploit them strategically. For instance, in the study of Parutis and Howson (2020), higher socioeconomic status students' characteristics of being proactive in exploring internship opportunities, having confidence in their capabilities, maintaining a balancing act in terms of academic and extra-curricular and co-curricular activities, and having a well-thought-out career plan are somewhat similar to the findings of the present study. In particular, students coming from advantaged socioeconomic status were more able to access early internship opportunities and had a long-term career perspective. The findings suggest that students from disadvantaged socioeconomic status seemed to face challenges in accessing better

internships, as well as other forms of obstacles, such as being subject to ‘ragging’ and struggling to adapt to the English medium instruction. It is plausible to argue that, despite the best practices adopted in developing soft skills, students’ socioeconomic context was likely to pose challenges in achieving intended outcomes.

Location, class size and accessibility to resources as barriers

In the case of system-related barriers, whereas academics and decision-makers in Alpha appeared to be concerned about time constraints, assessment method and availability of resources, their counterparts in Beta seemed to perceive large class cohorts, a lack of resources/facilities and limitations of being a regional university to have an adverse effect on the development of soft skills. In Beta, of particular concern were the challenges associated with large cohorts in the first two years of the degree programme, where individual attention and monitoring seem improbable. The findings from other developing country contexts (e.g., Igwe, Lock, and Rugara, 2022; Tran, 2015) and developed countries (e.g., Bui and Porter, 2010; Ito and Takeuchi, 2021) support the empirical evidence of the present study in terms of the negative consequences of large class cohorts. Particularly, large class size poses a limitation on engaging in student-centred pedagogies, including in-class discussion and group activities. As a result, academics may be forced to focus more on content delivery (e.g., traditional lectures) than engaging in soft skills development activities. It could be argued that, given the necessity for early awareness and understanding of soft skills in the first and second years of the degree programme, large student classes may invariably negate this opportunity to lay the foundation (Green, Hammer, and Star, 2009). Moreover, unlike major structural and system constraints such as ineffective pedagogy, and an unsupportive learning environment reported in other developing countries (e.g., Okolie *et al.*, 2020a), the present study’s findings allude to the notion that those issues are of less concern for stakeholders. Also, it could be observed that there is apprehension regarding the university-industry partnership in both case studies from industry practitioners’ perspectives. Notably, in contrast to Alpha, given the conclusion of three decades of civil conflict, Beta appeared to face unique challenges in building university-industry collaboration in the absence of established industries. As prior studies also highlight the necessity of university-industry partnerships to form a shared perspective on soft skills development (e.g., Suleman and Laranjeiro, 2018), the lack of an industrial base posed challenges in understanding industry expectations, obtaining quality inputs for curriculum design and delivering industry-aligned projects.

The impact of COVID-19 on developing soft skills

Another contextual factor that has both direct and indirect impacts on soft skills development is COVID-19. In general, stakeholders in both case studies, particularly the key internal stakeholders (academics, undergraduates and decision-makers), perceived that the pandemic caused an adverse effect on soft skills development initiatives. The effects of the pandemic are such that, in addition to a lack of exposure to the industry in the form of field visits and practical projects, the virtual platform also appeared to put limitations on presentations and teamwork as well. There was an agreement that the loss of a human touch due to virtual engagement along with deprivation of extracurricular and co-curricular activities contributed to the lack of soft skills development. These findings reflect the recent literature on the impact of COVID-19 on multiple stakeholder groups in the context of management education (see, e.g., Brammer and Clark, 2020). Also, the findings are consistent with the results of Mali and Lim (2021) and Powell and McGuigan (2021), which have shown that the absence of rich human interaction between and among stakeholders along with pedagogical challenges have caused barriers for both academic learning and skills development.

9.4 Empirical contributions

The data drawing from a developing country context allows the thesis to also contribute empirically. First, soft skills development is context-dependent, yet studies in developing country contexts are rare (Tran et al., 2022). Importantly, the contextual dynamics of developing countries in terms of historical, cultural, economic and social dynamics significantly differ from developed countries, and such factors appear to have differential influences on skills development initiatives (Okolie, Nwosu, and Mlanga, 2019). Further, concerning the mismatch between employer expectations and graduate competencies in the Sri Lankan context (e.g., Abayadeera and Watty, 2014; Edgar et al., 2020; Wickramasinghe and Perera, 2010) and considering the call for more empirical studies in developing countries by Winterton and Turner (2019), this thesis provides a holistic understanding of soft skills development and insights into the impact of contextual conditions in a developing, upper-middle-income country context. Notably, the major barriers, such as student mindset in the form of focusing on instrumental outcomes and the lack of English language capability, reveal challenges specific to the developing world context (e.g., Okolie, Nwosu and Mlanga, 2019; Phan, Yapa and Nguyen, 2020; Tran, 2015; Zainuddin et al., 2019). The findings of the thesis suggest that a combination of societal expectations, a competitive education system,

assessment weighting and students' fixed mindsets contribute to embracing an instrumental perspective. Thus, the findings imply the necessity of having early interventions such as awareness-building at the primary and secondary education levels to effect early attitudinal change. In relation to the lack of English language proficiency, the findings suggest that socioeconomic background, early exposure to English medium education in primary and secondary education and students' attitudes appeared to play a role. As such, a comprehensive policy agenda focusing on enhancing English language capability at multiple levels (primary, secondary and tertiary education) is needed.

The second empirical contribution of this thesis is that empirical studies undertaken in soft skills development have focused mainly on voices either from the supply side in the form of HEIs, academics, undergraduates and policymakers (e.g., Ayoubi, Alzarif and Khalifa, 2017; Jackson and Chapman, 2012; Tymon, 2013; Verma et al., 2018) or demand-side from industry practitioners (e.g., Finch et al., 2013; Robles, 2012; Suleman and Laranjeiro, 2018; Tymon and Mackay, 2016), thereby failing to capture multiple perspectives. Given that the equation of employability is influenced by factors on the demand and supply side (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005), the integration of stakeholder views from both the supply side, including academics, decision-makers and business undergraduates, and the demand side of industry practitioners provide an in-depth, holistic perspective on soft skills development, thereby contributing to the body of knowledge in the graduate employability literature. The findings suggest that there appeared to be convergence in terms of expected soft skills and the role of stakeholders in enhancing soft skills among demand and supply side stakeholders. Particularly, despite sharing common perspectives of communication and teamwork as expected soft skills and industry and academics as being a supporter and facilitators respectively, divergent perspectives emerged between academics (supply-side) and industry experts (demand-side) about soft skills delivery and assessment. While the industry prioritised internship as the dominant approach to developing soft skills, academics used presentations, group work and case studies to nurture soft skills.

9.5 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has elaborated on the theoretical and empirical contributions of the thesis and offered an interpretation and discussion of the research findings. Considering the theoretical contributions, first, an integrated soft skills development framework was developed and used

to explore soft skills development. Particularly, the operationalisation of the concept of soft skills development as encompassing initiation, design delivery and assessment dimensions offered an effective framework to explore soft skills development. Secondly, the use of multiple theoretical lenses of the theory of stakeholder and identification and salience, stakeholder theory and the institutional pillars provided a holistic picture of soft skills development. Further, this chapter has provided a discussion of findings under the themes of identification and the role of key stakeholders, the soft skills development cycle and the barriers to soft skills development. First, the significance of the finding of academics, undergraduates and industry as having high salience implies that decision-makers of HEIs need to consider their expectations and concerns whenever decisions relating to soft skills development are made. Secondly, the consensus of academics, industry and students as being facilitators, supporters and active participants reveals the existence of shared perspective in framing key stakeholders' roles in soft skills development. Nevertheless, as discussed in this chapter, there remain questions about the feasibility of executing those roles, particularly the perceived role of students as active participants. Lastly, considering the soft skills development cycle, there were somewhat similar processes in terms of initiation, design, delivery and assessment adopted to develop soft skills in both case studies. However, the cultural-cognitive barriers of students' mindset along with a lack of English language proficiency had a negative impact on developing soft skills in Alpha and Beta. Empirical contributions of this thesis include exploring soft skills development in a developing country-context and incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives from the demand and supply sides. The next chapter outlines major conclusions and implications for policy and practice.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

Considering that this is the final chapter of the doctoral research journey, revisiting the initial research aims is appropriate for evaluating the extent to which the thesis has made a theoretical contribution as well as its implications for policy and practice. This final chapter also discusses the limitations of the thesis, the extent to which these impact any inferences, and avenues for future research.

The first aim of this thesis was to provide an overarching soft skills development framework and then test the framework empirically. Given the dearth of soft skills development frameworks, the constructed framework based on consulting the key literature on graduate employability comprises the identification of salient stakeholders, soft skills dimensions of initiation, design, delivery and assessment, and regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive barriers. As argued in Chapter 1 (section 1.3), despite the interdependency of key soft skills dimensions, they have been treated in a superficial and piecemeal manner, thus necessitating an in-depth exploration. After proposing an overarching soft skills development framework, fieldwork was undertaken to test the framework empirically using two case studies of Alpha and Beta.

The study revealed that key stakeholders of academics, business undergraduates and industry perceived their roles to be facilitators, active participants and supporters respectively. Considering initiation, despite the lack of consensus on what is meant by the concept of soft skills, communication and teamwork were identified as the important soft skill dimensions needed to enter the world of work. Moreover, in the case of the design dimension, there was a widespread preference towards an embedded approach, where soft skills are integrated into the curriculum. Regarding the delivery of soft skills, while academics relied on presentations, groupwork and case study, industry favoured internships to develop soft skills. Finally, regarding assessment, soft skills were assessed through lecture-led, formative assessment. In relation to the barriers to soft skills development, it was revealed that the cognitive-cultural barriers in the form of students' mindset and lack of English language proficiency were dominant over regulative and normative barriers. Also,

contextual barriers of students' socioeconomic status, large student classes, location of business school, and resource constraints were dominant. The analysis of the empirical findings showed that, whilst both case studies adopted a similar pattern of soft skills development in terms of identifying desired skills, embedding them into curricula, nurturing such skills through presentations, groupwork and case studies and assessing them through lecturer-led, formative assessment, the various forms of barriers had a differential impact on the overall process of soft skills development. Particularly, the cultural-cognitive barrier of student 'mindset' and lack of English language proficiency appeared to have a negative impact on mastering required soft skills. Also, contextual factors of students' socio-economic status, lack of industrial base, location of the business school, large class cohorts and lack of resources put constraints on the effective delivery of soft skills.

The second aim of the thesis was to expand understanding of how soft skills are developed in undergraduate business education. The empirical findings revealed that soft skills development, indeed, is context-dependent or context-bound as the cultural-cognitive and contextual barriers impact how soft skills are developed in a particular higher education context. Importantly, it was revealed that the nature and magnitude of the influence of such barriers differ across contexts even within the same country as in the present case study. For instance, in addition to the common barriers of students' mindset and lack of English language capability, while students' socioeconomic status was highlighted in Alpha, the location of the business school, lack of industry infrastructure, and resource constraints were the dominant themes in Beta. Arguably, this implies that although HEIs adopt similar processes to develop soft skills, various forms of barriers could undermine the effectiveness of the overall process of design, delivery and assessment of soft skills. Thus, it is argued that this thesis has addressed the two research aims, which were established at the beginning of the research journey.

10.2 Implications for policy and practice

The thesis suggests policy and practical implications for both internal stakeholders of decision-makers, academics and undergraduates, and external stakeholders of government and employers in relation to soft skills development.

First, the findings highlight that a lack of English language proficiency impedes enhancing soft skills in Alpha and Beta. This phenomenon appeared to be widespread in developing countries, where English is taught as the second language (See Cheong, Leong and Hill, 2021; Phan, Yapa and Nguyen, 2020). It is worth noting that inequities in developing linguistic capabilities are structurally embedded, particularly regarding accessibility to social and reputational capital. For instance, the findings reveal that the type of school attended and the English medium of instruction at schools contribute positively to undergraduates' transition to tertiary education and securing better internships. As HEIs may not be the appropriate place to develop English language proficiency, given their main focus of imparting disciplinary knowledge, possible interventions to enhance language capability could focus on primary and secondary education (Cheong, Leong and Hill, 2021). Considering the fact that English is taught as a compulsory subject throughout the primary and secondary levels of education in Sri Lanka, issues relating to students' English language proficiency raise questions about the efficacy of the teaching and learning approaches used and the competence of teachers. Thus, for the government, creating a level playing field through fair distribution of resources, such as investing in capacity building of teachers at the regional schools and modifying curricular structure, such as embedding pedagogical innovations, is imperative to uplift English language proficiency.

A second implication concerns the inequity found in accessing internships between the two cases - a regional business school (Beta) and metropolitan business school (Alpha). Given the lack of a well-established industrial base consisting of multinational corporations and other blue-chip companies in the context of Beta, HEIs need to rethink the provision of internships, particularly expanding the coverage of internship providers when designing internships. This means that partnering with small and medium enterprises to offer internships would be ideal for regional business schools like Beta. Further, rather than relying on the current practice of letting undergraduates choose internship placements, facilitating access to internships through university-industry partnerships, such as having a memorandum of understanding, could minimise the exploitation or underutilisation of interns. Additionally, concerning the expansion of internship provision, a policy agenda that would bring HEIs, government, and industry together need to be explored. For instance, the emergent models of degree apprenticeship in the UK, where the industry-based internship is funded by the government and employers (see Welbourn, Devins and Reynolds, 2019) and the 2u2i programme of the Malaysian government, where students spend two years in the university

and the remaining two years in industry in the form of an internship (Yusof et al., 2020) could be explored in the Sri Lankan context because such policy initiatives have the potential to address social mobility barriers by way of widening the participation to internships. However, incentivising employer engagement via providing financial incentives is imperative to make such internship programmes effective at a policy level.

Third, the integrated soft skills development framework, which consists of four dimensions of initiation, design, delivery, and assessment, could be used as an evaluation tool to provide and develop soft skills at the programme level, particularly in the context of public universities in developing economies. This means that, apart from the conceptual contribution of the soft skills development framework for educators, this framework has the potential to be used for assessing the overall efficacy of executed soft skills programmes. Considering Bridgstock and Jackson's (2019, p.479) suggestion of having a 'whole-of-programme design', in which all soft skills development components are integrated and progressively applied throughout the programme, the soft skills framework provides an evaluative tool for educators and decision-makers of HEIs.

Fourth, given the practical utility of authentic pedagogy, such as the use of experiential learning initiatives which are perceived to be effective in facilitating the transfer of learning from the classroom to the workplace (Ornellas, Falkner, and Stalbrandt, 2019), a shift in focus may be needed to move away from the over-reliance on in-class presentations and group work towards service learning, business simulation, and practical projects as they resonate with real-world scenarios. As experiential learning activities can potentially enhance multiple soft skills more than a single type of soft skill like communication (Jackson and Dean, 2022), assigning more weight to such activities in the curriculum is significant. Given that soft skills are assessed through formative assessment (Jones, 2009), HEIs need to rethink the current assessment structure where a low, fixed weighting for each subject is allocated for formative assessment. Thus, the weighting given for formative assessment needs to vary based on the requirements of each course rather than using a pre-determined, fixed allocation.

Finally, a systematic approach to industry engagement throughout the degree programme is imperative to foster soft skills development (Ishengoma and Vaaland, 2016). The findings reveal that although a range of activities was undertaken as part of university-industry engagement (see Figure 5), there is little evidence to suggest that such activities are

systematically integrated and applied throughout the degree programme. Notably, it could be observed that both case studies relied more on the industry's peripheral participation in the form of one-off activities of seminars, workshops, and guest lectures to promote soft skills. Thus, what is needed is a strategic approach where soft skills development activities are coherently aligned and systematically applied throughout the degree programme. This means that, while initial industrial exposure via field visits and building awareness about soft skills development could be undertaken during the first year of the university, on-campus and off-campus work-integrated learning activities, such as business simulation and practical projects, respectively, could be implemented in the second year. By building on prior experience and exposure to soft skills activities, an internship and/or a capstone project could be part of the third and final year of the university. Importantly, the above structured, progressive approach to soft skills development would allow undergraduates to become aware of soft skills requirements early on, followed by their acquisition and application in real-life contexts.

10.3 Limitations of the study

Like any other empirical inquiry, this study is also subject to limitations that must be acknowledged. First, despite the argument that case study research leads to 'analytic generalisation' (Yin, 2018) and can be evaluated based on 'transferability' (Guba, 1981), there remain concerns about the lack of or limited generalisability of the findings of the case study (Denscombe, 2010). However, Patton (2002, p.46) argues that whilst generalisability is a great deal in quantitative research because of reliance on probability sampling, 'the logic and power of purposeful sampling derive from the emphasis on in-depth understanding'. Because the focus of the case study is on 'particularization' (Lee and Saunders, 2017, p.22; Stake, 1995, p.8) to gain insights and understanding of the complexities of a social phenomenon, the concentration on one or few cases, by definition, limits the generalisability of findings (Patton, 2002). Similarly, Rubin and Rubin (2012, p.16) comment that, in evaluating qualitative research, the focus needs to be on 'freshness – its ability to discover new themes and new explanations' instead of the generalisability of findings. Thus, although one could argue that the limited generalisability is of concern in the case of the present multiple case study, as Walsham (1995, p.79) argues, one of the possible generalisations derived from the present study is in the form of '...the contribution of rich insight' about soft skills development in a developing country context. Despite the concern about limited

generalisability, the findings of this empirical study, particularly the cultural-cognitive barriers of student mindset in the form of focusing on instrumental outcomes and the lack of English language proficiency have wider applicability in developing countries contexts, specifically countries in the South Asian region, which share similar educational contexts.

Considering the fact that the timing of the fieldwork fell into the two critical events of COVID-19 and the economic crisis in Sri Lanka, I faced additional challenges in data collection. As I commenced the fieldwork during the first week of August 2021, a series of lockdowns imposed for a period of two months during the latter part of 2021 restricted access to face-to-face interviews. Moreover, because I also contracted COVID-19 during the third week of August 2021, I had to postpone fieldwork for a period of three weeks. Despite these adverse situations, I completed the data collection for case study Alpha by January 2022. However, despite the relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions, the economic unrest caused by the foreign exchange crisis and the resulting bankruptcy of the country in February 2022 led to more curfews imposed by the government to curtail violence. As a result, for case study Beta, recruiting participants proved more challenging as they were preoccupied with pressing issues of hyperinflation and economic turmoil. In addition, due to the 12-18 hour power cuts introduced by the government, although some participants agreed to take part in the interviews, I was unable to conduct virtual interviews. Thus, the fieldwork was inevitably extended for a period of two months and finally ended in June 2022. Given that both of these events were beyond my control, although I managed to complete the data collection in the end, both crises posed potential limitations, which I had to overcome to complete the fieldwork.

In the case of semi-structured interviews, although they can produce rich, detailed, and insightful accounts from participants, given the nature of the process where the researcher and the participants bring their predispositions, preconceptions, values and opinions to interviews, ensuring the complete authenticity of the interviewees' statements is a challenging task (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Moreover, although I made every effort in the present study to minimise the distorted picture through multiple data sources and method triangulation, ensuring the veracity of participants' accounts can be challenging without formal observation. Due to the prevalence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdown, I could not undertake participant observation of in-class activities relating to soft skills development. Given that the limitations posed by COVID-19 were beyond my control,

physical fieldwork, including participant observation in both case studies, would have added novel insights into how soft skills initiatives and activities are implemented in practice. That said, having triangulation of data sources in the form of interviews with multiple stakeholder groups, focus group and documentary analysis in the present study greatly enhanced the rigour of the data collected. Particularly, interviews with decision-makers, academics, business undergraduates and industry experts allowed me to compare and cross-check each stakeholder's perspective with others' viewpoints.

In the case of Beta, I was able to conduct only three interviews with students due to uncontrollable factors. Having completed the fieldwork for case study Alpha in January 2022, when I started to collect data from Beta in February 2022, Sri Lanka was declared bankrupt. As a result of hyper-inflation and severe shortages of essential commodities, there was political unrest and violence experienced throughout the country and the government implemented stringent measures, including enforcing of curfews. In this context, although I made repeated attempts to recruit study participants in Beta, I was not successful as participants experienced economic hardship and uncertainty about their future. Moreover, although I was able to carry out a focus group with teaching associates in Alpha, in Beta, despite my best efforts, it was not possible to have a focus group due to extended power cuts, political unrest, and teaching associates' reluctance. Instead, I could only interview teaching associates along with other academics in Beta.

There seems to be ambiguity regarding the number of cases needed in case study research (Perry, 1998). Eisenhardt (1989) suggests that selecting cases between four to ten or choosing embedded cases when a few cases are less than four can provide more opportunities for theory building. However, Perry (1998) suggests that a minimum of two to four and an upper limit of twelve to fifteen cases seem acceptable. Although the present study's focus on two cases may be seen as another limitation, given the exclusive role of a single investigator, resource constraints, and other contingencies such as restricted movements due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the choice of two cases can be justified based on Patton's (2002) suggestion of focusing on information-richness in case selection. Because focusing on more cases could lead to superficial or limited engagement with the chosen cases (Creswell, 2013), due to the in-depth exploration, I believe that the chosen cases provided rich and in-depth information on soft skills development.

10.4 Avenues for future research

A survey instrument by incorporating the major constructs identified in the conceptual framework (Figure 4) could be constructed and validated. Particularly, as the standardised instrument (questionnaire) could be administered to salient stakeholders of different types of universities (public and private), the focus of universities (research-intensive and teaching-intensive) and their geographical locations (regional and metropolitan), responses from a broader sample of key stakeholder groups could shed light on the extent to which soft skills development in the form of conceptualisation, design, delivery and assessment is executed in diverse contexts.

A second area for future research relates to the use of a participant observation approach. Due to the impact of COVID-19, in the present empirical study, mostly virtual and limited face-to-face interviews were used as the primary data collection method other than participant observation of in-class soft skills development activities. For instance, although the findings suggest that key stakeholders identified communication and teamwork as expected soft skills and pedagogical practices of oral presentations and group work were mostly used to develop such skills, the efficacy of the execution of such pedagogical strategies could not be ascertained without participant observation. Particularly, in addition to academics' perspectives of soft skills development, in-class observation of teaching of soft skills, an analysis of documents, such as course outlines, teaching materials and assessment tasks have the potential to offer a rounded picture of the provision of soft skills development in a specific context. Thus, a single or multiple case study by incorporating participant observation could allow a better comparison of key stakeholders' perspectives with the real state of soft skills execution.

Finally, future studies could expand the scope in the form of employing a multiple case study incorporating business schools of public and private universities. Such studies could provide insights into how soft skills are developed at two different types of tertiary institutions. Further, considering the lack of scope in terms of focusing on two public universities in the present study, a comparative investigation, including multiple case studies of public and private tertiary institutions, could provide possibilities for expanding and refining the existing soft skills development framework. In addition, another limitation of this study was its focus on a specific snapshot in time. Longitudinal research focusing on key

dimensions of soft skills development identified in the conceptual framework could provide insights on how the process of soft skills development is undertaken over a period of time.

10.5 Conclusion

This thesis has provided a holistic and contextualised understanding of soft skills development, drawing on findings from two case studies. This concluding chapter revisited the research aims in light of the major findings and outlined implications for key stakeholders and possible avenues for further research based on the limitations of the current empirical study. Given the under-researched area of soft skills development in non-western contexts from the vantage point of the view of multiple stakeholders, this thesis provides unique insights into the process of soft skills development in undergraduate business education. Also, given the prevailing divergence of perspectives on stakeholder roles and responsibilities in developing soft skills in the literature, the thesis makes a valuable contribution to the existing debate in this regard. The main theoretical contribution of this thesis is the development of the conceptual framework, which embodies the key dimensions of soft skills development and the theoretical concepts drawn from stakeholder salience theory, stakeholder theory and institutional theory pillars. The thesis also makes an empirical contribution to understanding through the exploration of soft skills development in a developing country context and by incorporating the voices of supply and demand sides stakeholders.

Bibliography

- Abayadeera, N. and Watty, K. (2016) 'Generic skills in Accounting education in a developing country: Exploratory evidence from Sri Lanka'. *Asian Review of Accounting*, 24(2), pp. 149-170.
- Abayadeera, N. and Watty, K. (2014) 'The expectation-performance gap in generic skills in accounting graduates: Evidence from Sri Lanka'. *Asian Review of Accounting*, 22(1), pp. 56-72
- AbuJbara, N.K. and Worley, J.A. (2018) 'Leading toward new horizons with soft skills'. *On the Horizon*, 26 (3), pp. 247-259.
- Accelerating Higher Education Expansion and Development (AHEAD). <https://ahead.lk>. Accessed 31 July 2022.
- Ackermann, F. and Eden, C. (2011) 'Strategic management of stakeholders: Theory and practice'. *Long Range Planning*, 44, pp. 179-196.
- Adachi, C., Tai, J.H.M. and Dawson, P. (2018) 'Academics' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of self and peer assessment in higher education'. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43 (2), pp. 294-306.
- Akkermans, J., Donald, W.E., Jackson, D. and Forrier, A. (2024a) 'Are we talking about the same thing? The case for stronger connections between graduate and worker employability research'. *Career Development International*, 29(1), pp. 80-92.
- Akkermans, J., Le Blanc, P., Van der Heijden, B. and De Vos, A. (2024b) 'Toward a contextualised perspective of employability development'. *European Journal of Work and Occupational Psychology*, 33(1), pp. 1-10.
- Allen, D. and Simpson, C. (2019) 'Inquiry into graduate attributes: Reviewing the formal and informal management curricula'. *Journal of Management Education*, 43 (4), pp. 330-358.
- Allen, D.E., Donham, R.S. and Bernhardt, S.A. (2011) 'Problem-based learning'. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2011 (128), pp. 21-29.
- Alves, M.G. and Tomlinson, M. (2021) 'The changing value of higher education in England and Portugal: Massification, marketization and public good'. *European Educational Research Journal*, 20(2), pp. 176-192.

- Anderson, W. and Sanga, J.J. (2019) 'Academia-Industry Partnerships for Hospitality and Tourism Education in Tanzania'. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education*, 31 (1), pp. 34-48.
- Andreas, S. (2018) 'Effects of the decline in social capital on college graduates' soft skills'. *Industry and Higher Education*, 32 (1), pp. 47-56.
- Andrews, J. and Higson, H. (2008) 'Graduate employability, 'soft skills' versus 'hard' business knowledge: A European study'. *Higher education in Europe*, 33 (4), pp. 411-422.
- Ankrah, S. and Omar, A.T. (2015) 'Universities-industry collaboration: A systematic review'. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*. 31(3), pp. 387-408.
- Anthony, S. and Garner, B. (2016) 'Teaching soft skills to business students: An analysis of multiple pedagogical methods'. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 79(3), pp. 360-370.
- Anthony, S. and Jack, S. (2009) 'Qualitative case study methodology in nursing research: an integrative review'. *J Adv Nurs*, 65 (6), pp. 1171-1181.
- Arthur, M.B. (1994) 'The boundaryless career: A new perspective for organizational inquiry'. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 15 (4), pp. 295-306.
- Asonitou, S. (2022) 'Impediments and pressures to incorporate soft skills in higher education accounting studies', *Accounting Education*, 31(3), pp. 243-272.
- Atkins, M.J. (1999) 'Oven-ready and Self-basting: taking stock of employability skills'. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 4 (2), pp. 267-280.
- Ayoubi, R.M., Alzarif, K. and Khalifa, B. (2017) 'The employability skills of business graduates in Syria'. *Education + Training*, 59 (1), pp. 61-75.
- Azevedo, A., Apfelthaler, G. and Hurst, D. (2012) 'Competency development in business graduates: An industry-driven approach for examining the alignment of undergraduate business education with industry requirements'. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 10(1), pp. 12-28.
- Bailey, C.A. (2018) *A guide to qualitative field research*. 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

- Baird, A.M. and Parayitam, S. (2019) 'Employers' ratings of importance of skills and competencies college graduates need to get hired: Evidence from the New England region of USA', *Education + Training*, 61(5), pp. 622-634.
- Bajada, C., Kandlbinder, P. and Trayler, R. (2019) 'A general framework for cultivating innovations in higher education curriculum'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 38 (3), pp. 465-478.
- Baldwin, T.T. and Ford, J.K. (1988) 'Transfer of training: A review and directions for future research'. *Personnel Psychology*, 41 (1), pp. 63-105.
- Ballantine, J. and Larres, P.M. (2007) 'Final Year Accounting Undergraduates' Attitudes to Group Assessment and the Role of Learning Logs'. *Accounting Education*, 16 (2), pp. 163-183.
- Bandara, D.C. (2021) 'The Sri Lankan higher education journey: From inclusion and improving relevance to acceleration'. In: Sarangapani, P.M. and Pappu, R. (eds.) *Handbook of education systems in South Asia*. Singapore: Springer, pp. 1009-1045.
- Bandura, A. (1977) 'Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change'. *The Psychological Review.*, 84 (2), pp. 191-215.
- Bandura, A. (1993) 'Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning'. *Educational Psychologist*, 28 (2), pp. 117-148.
- Barbosa, I. and Freire, C. (2019) 'Portuguese employers' perceptions on management undergraduates' transferable competencies'. *Journal of Management Development*, 38 (2), pp. 141-156.
- Barney, J. and Wright, P. (1998) 'On becoming a strategic partner: the role of human resources in gaining competitive advantage'. *Human Resource Management*, 37 (1), pp. 31-46.
- Barney, J.B. and Harrison, J.S. (2020) 'Stakeholder Theory at the Crossroads'. *Business & Society*, 59 (2), pp. 203-212.
- Barrie, S.C. (2007) 'A conceptual framework for the teaching and learning of generic graduate attributes'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32(4), pp. 439-458.
- Baxter, P. and Jack, S. (2008) 'Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers'. *The qualitative report*, 13 (4), pp. 544-559.

- Beard, D., Schwieger, D. and Surendran, K. (2008) 'Integrating Soft Skills Assessment through University, College, and Programmatic Efforts at an AACSB Accredited Institution'. *Journal of Information Systems Education*, 19 (2), pp. 229-240.
- Beenen, G. and Pichler, S. (2016) 'A discussion forum on managerial interpersonal skills'. *Journal of Management Development*, 35 (5), pp. 706-716.
- Behle, H. (2020) 'Students' and Graduates' Employability. A Framework to Classify and Measure Employability Gain'. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, 4 (1), pp. 105-130.
- Bell, E., Bryman, A. and Harley, B. (2022) *Business research methods*. 6th edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Belwal, R., Priyadarshi, P. and Al Fazari, M.H. (2017) 'Graduate attributes and employability skills'. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 31 (6), pp. 814-827.
- Benati, K., Lindsay, S. and Fischer, J. (2021) 'Applying theory in practice: Views of graduating business students.' *Education + Training*, 63(9), pp. 1213-1224.
- Bennett, R. (2002) 'Employers' demands for personal transferable skills in graduates: A content analysis of 1000 job advertisements and an associated empirical study'. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 54 (4), pp. 457-476.
- Benneworth, P. and Jongbloed, B.W. (2010) 'Who matters to universities? A stakeholder perspective on humanities, arts and social sciences volarisation'. *Higher Education*, 59(5), pp. 567-588.
- Bennis, W. and O'Toole, J. (2005) 'How business schools lost their way'. *Harvard Business Review*, 83 (5), pp. 96-104.
- Berryman, D.R. (2019) 'Ontology, Epistemology, Methodology, and Methods: Information for Librarian Researchers'. *Med Ref Serv Q*, 38 (3), pp. 271-279.
- Bhaerman, R. and Spill, R. (1988) 'A Dialogue on Employability Skills: How Can They Be Taught?'. *Journal of Career Development*, 15 (1), pp. 41-52.
- Boden, R. and Nedeva, M. (2010) 'Employing discourse: universities and graduate 'employability''. *Journal of Education Policy*, 25 (1), pp. 37-54.

- Bodle, K.A., Malin, M. and Wynhoven, A. (2017) 'Students' experience toward ePortfolios as a reflective assessment tool in a dual mode indigenous business course'. *Accounting Research Journal*. 30(3), pp. 333-350.
- Bogdan, R.C. and Biklen, S.K. (1998) *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. 3rd edn. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bourner, T. (1997) 'Teaching methods for learning outcomes'. *Education + Training*, 39(9), pp. 344-348
- Brammer, S. and Clark, T. (2020) 'COVID-19 and management education: Reflections on challenges, opportunities and potential futures'. *British Journal of Management*, 31(3), pp. 453-456.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology'. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3 (2), pp. 77-101.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2013) *Successful qualitative research: a practical guide for beginners*. London: Sage.
- Brew, A., Boud, D., Lucas, L. and Crawford, K. (2022) 'Hampering teaching excellence? Academics making decisions in the face of contradictions'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 47(4), pp. 941-952.
- Bridgstock, R. (2009) 'The graduate attributes we've overlooked: Enhancing graduate employability through career management skills'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 28 (1), pp. 31-44.
- Bridgstock, R. and Jackson, D. (2019) 'Strategic institutional approaches to graduate employability: Navigating meanings, measurements and what really matters'. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 41(5), pp. 468-484.
- Brinkmann, S. and Kvale, S. (2015) *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Brown, P., Hesketh, A. and Williams, S. (2003) 'Employability in a knowledge-driven economy'. *Journal of Education and Work*, 16(2), pp. 107-126.
- Brown, P., Hesketh, A. and Williams, S. (2004) *The mismanagement of talent: Employability and jobs in the knowledge economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Brown, P., Lauder, H. and Cheung, S.Y. (2020) *The death of human capital?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bryman, A. (2012) *Social research methods*. 4th edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bryson, J.M. (2004) 'What to do when Stakeholders matter'. *Public management review*, 6 (1), pp. 21-53.
- Bui, B. and Porter, B. (2010) 'The expectation-performance gap in accounting education: An exploratory study'. *Accounting Education: an international journal*, 19 (1-2), pp. 23-50.
- Bunce, L., Baird, A. and Jones, S.E. (2017) 'The student-as-customer approach in higher education and its effects on academic performance'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(11), pp.1958-1978.
- Bunney, D., Sharplin, E. and Howitt, C. (2015) 'Generic skills for graduate accountants: The bigger picture, a social and economic imperative in the new knowledge economy'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 34(2), pp. 256-269
- Burrows, J. (1999) 'Going beyond labels: A framework for profiling institutional stakeholders'. *Contemporary Education*, 70 (4), pp. 5-10.
- Casado, M.L., Lopez, D. and Lapuerta, V. (2016) 'Socio-emotional competencies in engineering education'. *International Journal of Engineering Education*, 32 (4), pp. 1660-1678.
- Cavanagh, J., Burston, M., Southcombe, A. and Bartram, T. (2015) 'Contributing to a graduate-centred understanding of work readiness: An exploratory study of Australian undergraduate students' perceptions of their employability'. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 13 (3), pp. 278-288.
- Central Bank of Sri Lanka – Sri Lanka (2021) 'Annual report (volume 1)', https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/sites/default/files/cbslweb_documents/publications/annual_report/2021/en/Full_Text_Volume_I.pdf. (Accessed 31 July 2022).
- Chan, C.K.Y., Fong, E.T.Y., Luk, L.Y.Y. and Ho, R. (2017) 'A review of literature on challenges in the development and implementation of generic competencies in higher education curriculum'. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 57, pp. 1-10.

- Chapleo, C. and Simms, C. (2010) 'Stakeholder identification and prioritization in the higher education sector: A case study of the university of Portsmouth'. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 14(1), pp. 12-20.
- Chavan, M. and Carter, L. (2018) 'Management students—expectations and perceptions on work readiness'. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 32 (5), pp. 825-850.
- Check, J. and Schutt, R.K. (2012) *Research methods in education*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Chen, P.S.L., Cahoon, S., Pateman, H., Bhaskar, P., Wang, G. and Parsons, J. (2018) 'Employability skills of maritime business graduates: industry perspectives'. *WMU Journal of Maritime Affairs*, 17 (2), pp. 267-292.
- Cheng, M., Adekola, O., Albia, J. and Cai, S. (2022) 'Employability in higher education: A review of key stakeholders' perspectives'. *Higher Education Evaluation and Development*, 16(1), pp. 16-31.
- Cheong, K.C., Leong, Y.C. and Hill, C. (2021) 'Pulling in one direction? Stakeholder perceptions of employability in Malaysia'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(4), pp.807-820.
- Christie, F. (2017) 'The reporting of university league table employability rankings: A critical review'. *Journal of Education and Work*, 30(4), pp. 403-418.
- Clarke, M. (2018) 'Rethinking graduate employability: The role of capital, individual attributes and context'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43 (11), pp. 1923-1937.
- Clarke, T. (2008) 'The business schools: 50 years on'. *Education + Training*. 50(1), pp. 52-54.
- Clarkson, M.B.E. (1995) 'A Stakeholder Framework for Analyzing and Evaluating Corporate Social Performance'. *The Academy of Management Review*, 20 (1), pp. 92-117.
- Clements, M.D. and Cord, B.A. (2013) 'Assessment guiding learning: developing graduate qualities in an experiential learning programme'. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38 (1), pp. 114-124.

- Clokie, T.L. and Fourie, E. (2016) 'Graduate employability and communication competence: Are undergraduates taught relevant skills?'. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 79 (4), pp. 442-463.
- Coffelt, T.A., Baker, M.J. and Corey, R.C. (2016) 'Business communication practices from employers' perspectives'. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 79 (3), pp. 300-316.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2018) *Research methods in education*. 8th edn. London: Routledge.
- Cotronei-Baird, V.S. (2020) 'Academic hindrances in the integration of employability skills development in teaching and assessment practice'. *Higher Education*, 79 (2), pp. 203-223.
- Cranmer, S. (2006) 'Enhancing graduate employability: best intentions and mixed outcomes'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31 (2), pp. 169-184.
- Crebert, G., Bates, M., Bell, B., Patrick, C. and Cragolini, V. (2004) 'Developing generic skills at university, during work placement and in employment'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 23(2), pp. 147-165
- Creswell, J.W. (2013) *Qualitative inquiry and research design : choosing among five approaches*. 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, California : Sage.
- Creswell, J.W. (2015) *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. 5th edn. New York: Pearson.
- Creswell, J.W. and Creswell, J.D. (2018) *Research design:Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*. 5th edn. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Creswell, J.W. and Miller, D.L. (2000) 'Determining Validity in Qualitative Inquiry'. *Theory into Practice*, 39 (3), pp. 124-130.
- Creswell, J.W. and Poth, C.N. (2018) *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. 4th edn. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Creswell, J.W., Hanson, W.E., Plano, V.L.C. and Morales, A. (2007) 'Qualitative Research Designs: Selection and Implementation'. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 35 (2), pp. 236-264.

- Crisostomo, M.E. and Chauhan, R.S. (2019) 'Individualized Student Feedback: Are Templates the Solution?'. *Management Teaching Review*, 4 (4), pp. 371-382.
- Crotty, M. (1998) *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. London: Sage.
- Crowe, S., Cresswell, K., Robertson, A., Huby, G., Avery, A. and Sheikh, A. (2011) 'The case study approach'. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 11 (1), pp. 1-9.
- Crowley, L. and Jeske, D. (2020) 'Recruiter perceptions and expectations of desirable graduate attributes and fit'. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 49(1), pp. 78-89.
- Dacre Pool, L. and Sewell, P. (2007) 'The key to employability: developing a practical model of graduate employability'. *Education+ Training*, 49 (4), pp. 277-289.
- Dacre Pool, L., Qualter, P. and Sewell, P. (2014) 'Exploring the factor structure of the CareerEDGE employability development profile'. *Education + Training*, 56 (4), pp. 303-313.
- Daft, R.L. and Marcic, D. (2012) *Management: The new workplace*. 8th edition edn. New York: South-Western, Cengage.
- Daily Mirror (2020) 'Support of the private sector pivotal: Eliminating the gap between education and the job market'. <https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking-news/Support-of-the-private-sector-pivotal/108-196676> (Accessed 21 February 2024)
- Damoah, O.B.O., Peparah, A.A. and Brefo, K.O. (2021) 'Does higher education equip graduate students with the employability skills employers require? The perceptions of employers in Ghana'. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. 45(10), pp. 1311-1324.
- Daniel, J. (2017) 'A changing world: expectations of higher education'. *Change: the magazine of higher learning*, 49 (4), pp. 8-13.
- Daniel, S.J. (2020) 'Education and the COVID-19 pandemic.' *Prospects*, 49(1), pp. 91-96.
- Daniels, J. and Brooker, J. (2014) 'Student identity development in higher education: implications for graduate attributes and work-readiness'. *Educational Research*, 56 (1), pp. 65-76.

- Darke, P., Shanks, G. and Broadbent, M. (1998) 'Successfully completing case study research: combining rigour, relevance and pragmatism'. *Information systems journal (Oxford, England)*, 8 (4), pp. 273-289.
- Datar, S.M., Garvin, D.A. and Cullen, P.G. (2010) *Rethinking the MBA: business education at a crossroads*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press.
- David, F.R., David, M.E. and David, F.R. (2011) 'What are business schools doing for business today?'. *Business Horizons*, 54(1), pp. 51-62.
- Davis, B.D. and Muir, C. (2004) 'Learning Soft Skills at Work: An Interview with Annalee Luhman'. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 67 (1), pp. 95-101.
- Dayaratna-Banda, O.G. and Dharmadasa, P.D.C.S. (2022) 'An economic analysis of employability and unemployment of humanities and social sciences graduates in Sri Lanka'. *South Asian Survey*, 29(2), pp. 155-180.
- de La Harpe, B. and David, C. (2012) 'Major influences on the teaching and assessment of graduate attributes'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31 (4), pp. 493-510.
- De Lange, P., Jackling, B. and Gut, A.M. (2006) 'Accounting graduates' perceptions of skills emphasis in undergraduate courses: an investigation from two Victorian universities'. *Accounting and Finance*, 46 (3), pp. 365-386.
- De Silva, T., Gothama, S. and Premakumara, P. (2021) 'Admissions quotas in university education: Targeting and mismatch under Sri Lanka's affirmative action policy'. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 84, pp. 1-11.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102440>.
- Dean, S.A. (2019) 'Soft Skills Needed for the 21st-Century Workforce'. *International Journal of Applied Management & Technology*, 18 (1), pp. 17-33.
- Denscombe, M. (2010) *The good research guide for small-scale social research projects*. 4th edn. Berkshire: McGraw-Hill, Open University Press.
- Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (1994) 'Introduction: Entering the field of qualitative research'. In: Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, pp. 1-17.

- Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (2017) 'Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research'. In: Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.) *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. 5th edn. California: Sage, pp. 1-26.
- Devedzic, V., Tomic, B., Jovanovic, J., Kelly, M., Milikic, N., Dimitrijevic, S., Djuric, D. and Sevarac, Z. (2018) 'Metrics for Students' Soft Skills'. *Applied Measurement in Education*, 31 (4), pp. 283-296.
- DiCicco-Bloom, B. and Crabtree, B.F. (2006) 'The qualitative research interview'. *Medical Education*, 40 (4), pp. 314-321.
- DiMaggio, P.J. and Powell, W.W. (1983) 'The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields'. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), pp. 147-160.
- Divan, A., Knight, E., Bennett, D. and Bell, K. (2019) 'Marketing graduate employability: understanding the tensions between institutional practice and external messaging'. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 41 (5), pp. 485-499.
- Donald, W.E., Baruch, Y. and Ashleigh, M.J. (2020) 'Striving for sustainable graduate careers: Conceptualisation via career ecosystems and the new psychological contract'. *Career Development International*, 25(2), pp. 90-110.
- Donaldson, T. and Preston, L.E. (1995) 'The Stakeholder Theory of the Corporation: Concepts, Evidence, and Implications'. *The Academy of Management Review*, 20 (1), pp. 65-91.
- Douglas, S. and Gammie, E. (2019) 'An investigation into the development of non-technical skills by undergraduate accounting programmes'. *Accounting Education*, 28 (3), pp. 304-332.
- Drucker, P.F. (1999) *Management challenges for the 21st century*. New York: Harper Business.
- Durdella, N. (2019) *Qualitative dissertation methodology: A guide for research design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Dweck, C.S. (2017) *Mindset: changing the way you think to fulfill your potential*. New York: Robinson.

- Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R., Jackson, P.R. and Jaspersen, L.J. (2018) *Management & business research*. 6th edn. London: Sage.
- Economist Intelligence Unit (2013) 'Skills development in South Asia. Trends in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. A research report for the British Council. London: EIU.
- Edgar, J., Anderson-Knox, N., Turner, D. and Black, J. (2020) 'Student engagement in quality assurance in the context of state universities in Sri Lanka – The final report'. <https://www.uws.ac.uk/media/6656/student-engagement-quality-assurance-sri-lanka-report-2020-final.pdf> (Accessed 31 July 2022).
- Ehiyazaryan, E. and Barraclough, N. (2009) 'Enhancing employability: integrating real world experience in the curriculum'. *Education + Training*, 51 (4), pp. 292-308.
- Eisenhardt, K.M. (1989) 'Building Theories from Case Study Research'. *The Academy of Management Review*, 14 (4), pp. 532-550.
- Eisenhardt, K.M. (1991) 'Better Stories and Better Constructs: The Case for Rigor and Comparative Logic'. *The Academy of Management Review*, 16 (3), pp. 620-627.
- Eisenhardt, K.M. and Graebner, M.E. (2007) 'Theory Building from Cases: Opportunities and Challenges'. *Academy of Management Journal*, 50 (1), pp. 25-32.
- Eisner, S. (2010) 'Grave New World? Workplace Skills For Today's College Graduates'. *American Journal of Business Education*, 3(9), pp. 27-50.
- Farenga, S.A. and Quinlan, K.M. (2016) 'Classifying university employability strategies: Three case studies and implications for practice and research'. *Journal of Education and Work*, 29(7), pp.767-787.
- Fassin, Y. (2009) 'The stakeholder model refined'. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 84, pp. 113-132.
- Fernandes, E.L. and Flores, M.A. (2022) 'Assessment in higher education: Voices of programme directors'. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 47(1), pp. 45-60.
- Fettes, T., Evans, K. and Kashefpakdel, E. (2020) 'Putting skills to work: it's not so much the what, or even the why, but how...'. *Journal of Education and Work*, 33(2), pp.184-196.

- Finch, D.J., Hamilton, L.K., Baldwin, R. and Zehner, M. (2013) 'An exploratory study of factors affecting undergraduate employability'. *Education+ Training*, 55 (7), pp. 681-704.
- Finch, D.J., Peacock, M., Levallet, N. and Foster, W. (2016) 'A dynamic capabilities view of employability: Exploring the drivers of competitive advantage for university graduates'. *Education+ Training*, 58 (1), pp. 61-81.
- Fleming, J. and Haigh, N.J. (2017) 'Examining and challenging the intentions of work-integrated learning'. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 7 (2), pp. 198-210.
- Fleming, J., Rowe, A.D. and Jackson, D. (2021) 'Employers as educators: the role of work placement supervisors in facilitating the transfer of skills and knowledge'. *Journal of Education and Work*, 34(5/6), pp. 705-721.
- Foley, P. (1999) 'Transferable skills teaching: Contextual pressures and personal dilemmas'. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 4 (1), pp. 5-25.
- Fossey, E., Harvey, C., Mcdermott, F. and Davidson, L. (2002) 'Understanding and evaluating qualitative research'. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 36 (6), pp. 717-732.
- Freeman, R. (1984) *Strategic management: A stakeholder's approach*. Boston MA: Pitman.
- Freeman, R.E., Phillips, R. and Sisodia, R. (2020) 'Tensions in Stakeholder Theory'. *Business & Society*, 59 (2), pp. 213-231.
- Freeman, R.E. and Reed, D.L. (1983) 'Stockholders and stakeholders: A new perspective on corporate governance'. *California Management Review*, 25 (3), pp. 88-106.
- Friedman, A.L. and Miles, S. (2002) 'Developing Stakeholder Theory'. *Journal of Management Studies*, 39 (1), pp. 1-21.
- Frooman, J. (1999) 'Stakeholder Influence Strategies'. *The Academy of Management Review*, 24 (2), pp. 191-205.
- Gale, A.J., Duffey, M.A., Park-Gates, S. and Peek, P.F. (2017) 'Soft Skills versus Hard Skills: Practitioners' Perspectives on Interior Design Interns'. *Journal of Interior Design*, 42 (4), pp. 45-63.

- Gammelgaard, B. (2017) 'Editorial: the qualitative case study'. *The International Journal of Logistics Management*, 28 (4), pp. 910-913.
- Gardner, H. (1999) *Intelligence reframed : multiple intelligences for the 21st century*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Gardner, H. (2011) *Frames of mind : the theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gasson, S. (2004) 'Rigor in grounded theory research: An interpretive perspective on generating theory from qualitative field studies'. In: Whitman, M.E. and Woszczyński, A.B. (eds.) *The handbook of information systems research*. Hershey: Idea Group Publishing, pp. 79-102.
- Gawrycka, M., Kujawska, J. and Tomczak, M.T. (2019) 'Competencies of graduates as future labour market participants—preliminary study'. *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istrazivanja*, 33(1), pp. 1-13.
- Glesne, C. (2016) *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. 5th edn. Boston: Pearson Education.
- Golafshani, N. (2003) 'Understanding Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research'. *The Qualitative Report*, 8 (4), pp. 597-607.
- Goleman, D. (1995) *Emotional intelligence : why it can matter more than IQ*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Goleman, D. (1998) *Working with emotional intelligence*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Gosling, J. and Mintzberg, H. (2006) 'Management Education as if Both Matter'. *Management Learning*, 37 (4), pp. 419-428.
- Gray, F.E. (2010) 'Specific Oral Communication Skills Desired in New Accountancy Graduates'. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 73 (1), pp. 40-67.
- Green, W., Hammer, S. and Star, C. (2009) 'Facing up to the challenge: why is it so hard to develop graduate attributes?'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 28 (1), pp. 17-29.
- Gribble, C., Blackmore, J. and Rahimi, M. (2015) 'Challenges to providing work integrated learning to international business students at Australian universities'. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 5 (4), pp. 401-416.

- Griffiths, K., Bullough, S., Shibli, S. and Wilson, J. (2017) 'The impact of engagement in sport on graduate employability: Implications for higher education policy and practice'. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Practice*, 9(3), pp.431-451.
- Groves, C.J., White, G.D.O., Panya, F. and Stewart, J. (2018) 'Can business schools increase student employability by embedding action learning into undergraduate management education? An account of practice'. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 15 (3), pp. 258-266.
- Grugulis, I. (2007) *Skills, training and human resource development: a critical text*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grugulis, I. (2012) 'Skills and training'. In: Bach, S. and Edwards, M.R. (eds.) *Managing human resources: human resource management in transition*. 5th edn. New York: Wiley, pp. 178-197.
- Grugulis, I. (2017) 'Training and development'. In: Wilkinson, A., Redman, T. and Dundon, T. (eds.) *Contemporary human resource management: text and cases*. 5th edn. Harlow: Pearson, pp. 132-157.
- Grugulis, I. and Stoyanova, D. (2011) 'Skill and Performance'. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 49 (3), pp. 515-536.
- Grugulis, I. and Vincent, S. (2009) 'Whose skill is it anyway? 'soft'skills and polarization'. *Work, Employment and Society*, 23 (4), pp. 597-615.
- Grugulis, I., Warhurst, C. and Keep, E. (2004) What's happening to skill? In: Warhurst, C., Keep, E. and Grugulis, I. (eds.) *The Skills That Matter*. London: Palgrave
- Guba, E.G. (1981) 'Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries'. *Educational Communication and Technology Journal*, 29 (2), pp. 75-92.
- Guba, E.G. and Lincoln, Y.S. (1982) 'Epistemological and methodological bases of naturalistic inquiry'. *Educational Communication and Technology*, 30 (4), pp. 233-252.
- Guba, E.G. and Lincoln, Y.S. (1989) *Fourth generation evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

- Guba, E.G. and Lincoln, Y.S. (1994) 'Competing paradigms in qualitative research'. In: Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research*. California: Sage, pp. 105-117.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A. and Johnson, L. (2006) 'How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability'. *Field Methods*, 18(1), pp. 59-82.
- Gunarathne, N., Senaratne, S. and Senanayake. (2020) 'Outcome-based education in accounting: The case of an accountancy degree programme in Sri Lanka'. *Journal of Economic and Administrative Sciences*, 36(1), pp. 16-37.
- Gunarathne, N., Senaratne, S. and Herath, R. (2021) 'Addressing the expectation-performance gap of soft skills in management education: An integrated skill-development approach for accounting students'. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 19(3), pp. 1-16.
- Ha, N.T.N. (2022) 'The involvement of industry professionals and barriers to involvement in work-integrated learning: The case of the profession-oriented higher education framework in Vietnam'. *Journal of Education and Work*, 35(1), pp. 92-107.
- Halberstadt, J., Tim, J-M., Kraus, S. and Gundolf, K. (2019) 'Skills and knowledge management in higher education: how service learning can contribute to social entrepreneurial competence development'. *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 23 (10), pp. 1925-1948.
- Hall, D.T. (1996) 'Protean Careers of the 21st Century'. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 10 (4), pp. 8-16.
- Hancock, D.R. and Algozzine, B. (2006) *Doing case study research: A practical guide for beginning researchers*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hannon, S., McBride, H. and Burns, B. (2004) 'Developing Creative and Critical Thinking Abilities in Business Graduates: The Value of Experiential Learning Techniques'. *Industry and Higher Education*, 18 (2), pp. 95-100.
- Harlen, W. and James, M. (1997) 'Assessment and learning: Differences and relationships between formative and summative assessment'. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 4(3), pp. 365-379.
- Harvey, L. (2001) 'Defining and measuring employability'. *Quality in Higher Education*, 7(2), pp. 97-109.

- Hastings, S.O., Aponte, S., Valverde, E., Gristock, C., Fraser, R. and Missigman, M. (2020) 'Nonverbal Communication and Writing Deficiencies of Graduates: Research by Undergraduates for Undergraduates'. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 83 (2), pp. 133-151.
- Healy, M., Hammer, S. and Mciiveen, P. (2022) 'Mapping graduate employability and career development in higher education research: A citation network analysis'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 47(4), pp. 799-811.
- Heckman, J.J. and Kautz, T. (2012) 'Hard evidence on soft skills'. *Labour Economics*, 19 (4), pp. 451-464.
- Helyer, R. and Lee, D. (2014) 'The role of work experience in the future employability of higher education graduates'. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 68 (3), pp. 348-372.
- Hennink, M., Hutter, I. and Bailey, A. (2011) *Qualitative research methods*. London: Sage.
- Hill, J. and Walkington, H. (2016) 'Developing graduate attributes through participation in undergraduate research conferences'. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 40 (2), pp. 222-237.
- Hillage, J. and Pollard, E. (1998) *Employability: Developing a framework for policy analysis: Research brief*, 85. London: Department for Education and Employment.
- Hinchliffe, G.W. and Jolly, A. (2011) 'Graduate identity and employability'. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37 (4), pp. 563-584.
- Hirsch, B.J. (2017) 'Wanted: Soft skills for today's jobs'. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 98 (5), pp. 12-17.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983) *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G.J. and Minkov, M. (2010) *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind*. New York. McGraw-Hill.
- Holmes, L. (2001) 'Reconsidering graduate employability: The 'graduate identity' approach'. *Quality in Higher Education*, 7(2), pp.111-119.
- Holmes, L. (2013) 'Competing perspectives on graduate employability: possession, position or process?'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38 (4), pp. 538-554.

- Hoo, H.T., Tan, K. and Deneen, C. (2020) 'Negotiating self- and peer-feedback with the use of reflective journals: an analysis of undergraduates' engagement with feedback'. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 45 (3), pp. 431-446.
- Hopkins, C.D., Raymond, M.A. and Carlson, L. (2011) 'Educating students to give them a sustainable competitive advantage'. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 33(3), pp. 337-347.
- Hora, M.T., Benbow, R.J. and Smolarek, B.B. (2018) 'Re-thinking soft skills and student employability: A new paradigm for undergraduate education'. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 50 (6), pp. 30-37.
- Hora, M.T., Newman, R.Y., Hemp, R., Brandon, J. and Wu, Y.J. (2020) 'Reframing student employability: From commodifying the self to support student, worker, and societal well-being'. *Change: A Magazine of higher Learning*. 52(1), pp. 37-45.
- Hossain, M.M., Alam, M.M., Alamgir, M. and Salat, A. (2020) 'Factors affecting business graduates' employability—empirical evidence using partial least squares (PLS)'. *Education+ Training*. 62(3), pp. 292-310.
- Hughes, C. and Barrie, S. (2010) 'Influences on the assessment of graduate attributes in higher education'. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*. 35 (3), pp. 325-334.
- Humburg, M. and Van der Velden, R. (2015) 'Skills and the graduate recruitment process: Evidence from two discrete choice experiments'. *Economics of Education Review*, 49, pp. 24-41.
- Hurrell, S.A., Scholarios, D. and Thompson, P. (2013) 'More than a 'humpty dumpty' term: Strengthening the conceptualization of soft skills'. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 34 (1), pp. 161-182.
- Hussey, T. and Smith, P. (2008) 'Learning outcomes: a conceptual analysis'. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13 (1), pp. 107-115.
- Hynie, M., Jensen, K., Johnny, M., Wedlock, J. and Phipps, D. (2011) 'Student internships bridge research to real world problems'. *Education + Training*, 53 (1), pp. 45-56.
- Igwe, P.A., Lock, D. and Rugara, D.G. (2022) 'What factors determine the development of employability skills in Nigerian higher education'. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 59(3), pp. 337-348.

- Igwe, P.A., Hack-Polay, D., Mendy, J., Fuller, T. and Lock, D. (2021) 'Improving higher education standards through reengineering in West African universities: A case study of Nigeria.' *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(8), pp. 1635-1648.
- Ishengoma, E. and Vaaland, T.I. (2016) 'Can university-industry linkages stimulate student employability?', *Education + Training*, 58(1), pp. 18-44.
- Ito, H. and Takeuchi, S. (2021) 'Active learning in Japan: Breaking barriers at individual, institutional, and policy levels', *Policy Futures in Education*, 19(8), pp. 950-967.
- Iyer, V.M. and Dave, K. (2015) 'Industry's role in employability'. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 47 (3), pp. 151-158.
- Jackling, B. and De Lange, P. (2009) 'Do accounting graduates' skills meet the expectations of employers? A matter of convergence or divergence'. *Accounting Education: An International Journal*, 18(4/5), pp.369-385.
- Jackling, B. and Natoli, R. (2015) 'Employability skills of international accounting graduates'. *Education + Training*, 57 (7), pp. 757-773.
- Jackson, D. (2009) 'Undergraduate management education: Its place, purpose and efforts to bridge the skills gap'. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 15 (2), pp. 206-223.
- Jackson, D. (2013a) 'Business graduate employability - where are we going wrong?'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 32 (5), pp. 776-790.
- Jackson, D. (2013b) 'Student perceptions of the importance of employability skill provision in business undergraduate programs'. *Journal of Education for Business*, 88 (5), pp. 271-279.
- Jackson, D. (2015) 'Employability skill development in work-integrated learning: Barriers and best practice'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(2), pp. 350-367.
- Jackson, D. (2016a) 'Re-conceptualising graduate employability: The importance of pre-professional identity'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 35 (5), pp. 925-939.
- Jackson, D. (2016b) 'Modelling graduate skill transfer from university to the workplace'. *Journal of Education and Work*, 29 (2), pp. 199-231.
- Jackson, D. (2017) 'Developing pre-professional identity in undergraduates through work-integrated learning'. *Higher Education*, 74(5), pp. 833-853

- Jackson, D. and Chapman, E. (2012) 'Non-technical competencies in undergraduate business degree programs: Australian and UK perspectives'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 37 (5), pp. 541-567.
- Jackson, D. and Dean, B.M. (2022) 'The contributions of different types of work-integrated learning to graduate employability'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 42(1), pp.93-110.
- Jackson, D. and Hancock, P. (2010) 'Non-technical skills in undergraduate degrees in business: Development and transfer'. *Education Research and Perspectives*, 37 (1), pp. 52-84.
- Jackson, D. and Wilton, N. (2016) 'Developing career management competencies among undergraduates and the role of work-integrated learning'. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21 (3), pp. 266-286.
- James, S., Warhurst, C., Tholen, G. and Commander, J. (2013) 'What we know and what we need to know about graduate skills'. *Work, Employment and Society*, 27(6), pp. 952-963.
- Jameson, A., Carthy, A., McGuinness, C. and McSweeney, F. (2016) 'Emotional Intelligence and Graduates – Employers' Perspectives'. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 228 (C), pp. 515-522.
- Jones, A. (2009) 'Generic attributes as espoused theory: The importance of context'. *Higher Education*, 58 (2), pp. 175-191.
- Jones, A. (2010) 'Generic attributes in accounting: the significance of the disciplinary context'. *Accounting Education: An International Journal*, 19 (1-2), pp. 5-21.
- Jones, T.M. and Wicks, A.C. (1999) 'Convergent Stakeholder Theory'. *The Academy of Management Review*, 24 (2), pp. 206-221.
- Jongbloed, B., Enders, J. and Salerno, C. (2008) 'Higher education and its communities: Interconnections, interdependencies and a research agenda'. *Higher Education*, 56(3), pp. 303-324.
- Jorre de St Jorre, T. and Oliver, B. (2018) 'Want students to engage? Contextualise graduate learning outcomes and assess for employability'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37 (1), pp. 44-57.

- Kalfa, S. and Taksa, L. (2015) 'Cultural capital in business higher education: Reconsidering the graduate attributes movement and the focus on employability'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(4), pp. 580-595.
- Kallio, H., Pietilla, A.M., Johnson, M. and Docent, M. K. (2016) 'Systematic methodological review: developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide'. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 72 (12), pp. 2954-2965.
- Kapareliotis, I., Voutsina, K. and Patsiotis, A. (2019) 'Internship and employability prospects: assessing student's work readiness'. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 9(4), pp. 538-549.
- Katz, R. (1955) 'Skills of an effective administrator'. *Harvard Business Review*, 33 (1), pp. 33-42.
- Keevy, M. (2016) 'Using case studies to transfer soft skills (also known as pervasive skills): Empirical evidence'. *Meditari Accountancy Research*, 24(3), pp. 458-474
- Kerby, D. and Romine, J. (2009) 'Develop oral presentation skills through accounting curriculum design and course-embedded assessment'. *Journal of Education for Business*, 85(3), pp. 172-179.
- Ketokivi, M. and Choi, T. (2014) 'Renaissance of case research as a scientific method'. *Journal of Operations Management*, 32 (5), pp. 232-240.
- Kettunen, J. (2015) 'Stakeholder relationships in higher education'. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 21 (1), pp. 56-65.
- Key, S. (1999) 'Toward a new theory of the firm: a critique of stakeholder "theory"'. *Management Decision*, 37 (4), pp. 317-328.
- Khasanzyanova, A. (2017) 'How volunteering helps students to develop soft skills'. *International Review of Education*, 63 (3), pp. 363-379.
- Kinash, S., Crane, L., Judd, M.M. and Knight, C. (2016) 'Discrepant stakeholder perspectives on graduate employability strategies'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 35 (5), pp. 951-967.
- King, N., Horrocks, C. and Brooks, J. (2019) *Interviews in qualitative research*. 2nd edn. London: Sage.

- Kinsella, C. and Waite, B. (2021) 'Identifying and developing desirable soft skills for public service'. *Teaching Public Administration*, 39(3), pp.337-350.
- Knight, P.T. and Yorke, M. (2002) 'Employability through the curriculum'. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 8 (4), pp. 261-276.
- Knight, P.T. and Yorke, M. (2003) 'Employability and good learning in higher education'. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 8(1), pp. 3-16.
- Knox, S. and Burkard, A.W. (2009) 'Qualitative research interviews'. *Psychotherapy Research*, 19 (4-5), pp. 566-575.
- Kolb, A.Y. and Kolb, D.A. (2005) 'Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education'. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 4 (2), pp. 193-212.
- Korstjens, I. and Moser, A. (2018) 'Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 4: Trustworthiness and publishing'. *European Journal of General Practice*, 24 (1), pp. 120-124.
- Krishnan, I.A., Jan, J.M. and Zainudin, S.Z.B. (2021) 'Use of lexical items in job interviews by recent candidates in Malaysia'. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 11(4), pp. 837-859.
- Krouwel, S.J.C., van Luijn, A. and Zweekhorst, M.B.M. (2020) 'Developing a processual employability model to provide education for career self-management'. *Education + Training*, 62(2), pp. 116-128.
- Lafer, G. (2004) 'What is skill? training for discipline in the low-wage labour market'. In: Warhurst, C., Grugulis, I. and Keep, E. (eds.) *The skills that matter*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 109-127.
- Lawler III, E.E. (2017) *Reinventing talent management: principles and practices for the new world of work*. Oakland: Oakland, CA: BK/Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- Lechuga, V.M. (2011) 'Faculty-graduate student mentoring relationships: Mentors' perceived roles and responsibilities'. *Higher Education*, 62 (6), pp. 757-771.
- Lee, A.S. (1989) 'A Scientific Methodology for MIS Case Studies'. *MIS quarterly*, 13 (1), pp. 33-50.

- Lee, B. and Saunders, M.N.K. (2017) *Conducting case study research for business and management students*. London: Sage.
- Leong, R. and Kavanagh, M. (2013) 'A work integrated learning (WIL) framework to develop graduate skills and attributes in an Australian university's accounting program'. *Asia-Pacific Journal of cooperative education*, 14 (1), pp. 1-14.
- Levant, Y., Coulmont, M. and Sandu, R. (2016) 'Business simulation as an active learning activity for developing soft skills'. *Accounting Education*, 25 (4), pp. 368-395.
- Lichtman, M. (2012) *Qualitative research in education: A user's guide*. 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Lim, Y.M., Lee, T.H., Yap, C.S. and Ling, C.C. (2016) 'Employability skills, personal qualities, and early employment problems of entry-level auditors: Perspectives from employers, lecturers, auditors, and students'. *Journal of Education for Business*, 91 (4), pp. 185-192.
- Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G. (1985) *Naturalistic inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Lincoln, Y.S., Lynham, S.A. and Guba, E.G. (2011) 'Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited'. In: Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 4th edn. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, pp. 97-128.
- Lobe, B., Morgan, D. and Hoffman, K.A. (2020) 'Qualitative data collection in an era of social distancing'. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, pp.1-8.
[DOI: 10.1177/1609406920937875](https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920937875)
- Longenecker, C.O. and Ariss, S.S. (2002) 'Creating competitive advantage through effective management education'. *Journal of Management Development*, 21 (9), pp. 640-654.
- Longenecker, C.O., Neubert, M.J. and Fink, L.S. (2007) 'Causes and consequences of managerial failure in rapidly changing organizations'. *Business Horizons*, 50 (2), pp. 145-155.
- Longley, A. and Kensington-Miller, B. (2020) 'Visibilising the invisible: three narrative accounts evoking unassessed graduate attributes in dance education'. *Research in Dance Education*, 21 (1), pp. 18-33.
- Lune, H. and Berg, B.L. (2017) *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. 9th edn. Harlow: Pearson.

- Lyons, P. and Bandura, R. (2019) 'Self-efficacy: core of employee success'. *Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal*. 33(3), pp. 9-12.
- Macmillan, L., Tyler, C. and Vignoles, A. (2015) 'Who gets the top jobs? The role of family background and networks in recent graduates' access to high-status professions'. *Journal of Social Policy*. 44 (3), pp. 1-29.
- MacVaugh, J., Jones, A. and Auty, S. (2014) 'Implicit, stand-alone or integrated skills education for undergraduates: A longitudinal analysis of programme outcomes'. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. 38(6), pp. 755-772.
- Mahajan, R., Gupta, P. and Misra, R. (2022) 'Employability skills framework: A tripartite approach'. *Education + Training*. 64(3), pp. 360-379.
- Mainardes, E.W., Alves, H. and Raposo, M. (2010) 'An exploratory research on the stakeholders of a university'. *Journal of Management and Strategy*. 1(1), pp. 76-88.
- Mainardes, E.W., Alves, H. and Raposo, M. (2011) 'Stakeholder theory: issues to resolve'. *Management Decision*, 49 (2), pp. 226-252.
- Mainardes, E.W., Alves, H. and Raposo, M. (2012) 'A model for stakeholder classification and stakeholder relationships'. *Management Decision*, 50 (10), pp. 1861-1879.
- Mali, D. and Lim, H. (2021) 'How do students perceive face-to-face/blended learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?' *The International Journal of Management Education*, 19(3), pp. 1-17.
- Malterud, K. (2001) 'Qualitative research: Standards, challenges, and guidelines'. *The Lancet*, 358 483-488.
- Marginson, S. (2019) 'Limitations of human capital theory'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(2), pp. 287-301.
- Marshall, B., Cardon, P., Poddar, A. and Fontenot, R. (2013) 'Does sample size matter in qualitative research?: A review of qualitative interviews in IS research'. *Journal of Computer Information Systems*, 54(1), pp. 11-22.
- Martin, P.D. and Pope, J. (2008) 'Competency-based interviewing - has it gone too far?'. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 40 (2), pp. 81-86.

- Mason, G., Williams, G. and Cranmer, S. (2009) 'Employability skills initiatives in higher education: What effects do they have on graduate labour market outcomes?'. *Education Economics*, 17(1), pp. 1-30.
- Matteson, M., Anderson, L. and Boyden, C. (2016) "'Soft Skills': A Phrase in Search of Meaning'. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 16 (1), pp. 71-88.
- Maxwell, J.A. (2020) 'The Value of Qualitative Inquiry for Public Policy'. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 26 (2), pp. 177-186.
- Mayburry, T. and Swanger, N. (2011) 'Identification of industry needs for baccalaureate hospitality graduates: A Delphi study'. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education*, 23 (4), pp. 33-45.
- McArthur, E., Kubacki, K., Pang, B. and Alcaraz, C. (2017) 'The employers' view of "work-ready" graduates: A study of advertisements for marketing jobs in Australia'. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 39 (2), pp. 82-93.
- McArthur, J. (2011) 'Reconsidering the social and economic purposes of higher education'. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 30(6), pp.737-749.
- McCorkle, D.E., Reardon, J., Alexander, J.F., Kling, N.D., Harris, R.C. and Iyer, R.V. (1999) 'Undergraduate Marketing Students, Group Projects, and Teamwork: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly?'. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 21 (2), pp. 106-117.
- McCowan, T. (2015) 'Should universities promote employability?'. *Theory and Research in Education*, 13 (3), pp. 267-285.
- McGrath, C., Palmgren, P.J. and Liljedahl, M. (2019) 'Twelve tips for conducting qualitative research interviews'. *Medical Teacher*, 41 (9), pp. 1002-1006.
- McManus, L. and Rook, L. (2021) 'Mixed views in the academy: academic and student perspectives about the utility of developing work-ready skills through WIL'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(2), pp. 270-284.
- McMurray, S., Dutton, M., McQuaid, R. and Richard, A. (2016) 'Employer demands from business graduates'. *Education+ Training*, 58 (1), pp. 112-132.
- McNamara, J. (2013) 'The challenge of assessing professional competence in work integrated learning'. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38 (2), pp. 183-197.

- McQuaid, R.W. and Lindsay, C. (2005) 'The concept of employability'. *Urban Studies*, 42 (2), pp. 197-219.
- Merriam, S.B. (1985) 'The case study in educational research: A review of selected literature'. *Journal of Educational Thought*, 19 (3), pp. 204-217.
- Merriam, S.B. (1998) *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S.B. (2009) *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S.B. and Elizabeth, J.T. (2016) *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. 4th edn. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mertens, D.M. (2020) *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods*. 5th edn. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Mgaiwa, S.J. (2021) 'Fostering graduate employability: Rethinking Tanzania's university practices'. *SAGE Open*, pp. 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/215824402111006709>.
- Mihail, D.M. (2006) 'Internships at Greek universities: an exploratory study'. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 18 (1), pp. 28-41.
- Minocha, S., Reynolds, M. and Hristov, D. (2017) 'Developing imaginers not managers – How to flip the business school model'. *The international journal of management education*, 15 (3), pp. 481-489.
- Mitchell, G.W., Skinner, L.B. and White, B.J. (2010) 'Essential soft skills for success in the twenty-first century workforce as perceived by business educators'. *Delta Pi Epsilon Journal*, 52(1), pp. 43-53.
- Mitchell, R.K., Agle, B.R. and Wood, D.J. (1997) 'Toward a theory of stakeholder identification and salience: Defining the principle of who and what really counts'. *Academy of Management Review*, 22 (4), pp. 853-886.
- Moore, T. and Morton, J. (2017) 'The myth of job readiness? Written communication, employability, and the 'skills gap' in higher education'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42 (3), pp. 591-609.

- Moreau, M.P. and Leathwood, C. (2006) 'Graduates' employment and the discourse of employability: A critical analysis'. *Journal of Education and Work*, 19(4), pp. 305-324.
- Morris, A. (2015) *A practical introduction to in-depth interviewing*. London: Sage.
- Morrow, S.L. (2005) 'Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology'. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52 (2), pp. 250-260.
- Moss, P. and Tilly, C. (1996) "'Soft" Skills and Race: An Investigation of Black Men's Employment Problems'. *Work and Occupations*, 23 (3), pp. 252-276.
- Mtawa, N., Fongwa, S. and Wilson-Strydom, M. (2021) 'Enhancing graduate employability attributes and capabilities formation: a service-learning approach'. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 26(5), pp. 679-695.
- Murillo-Zamorano, L.R. and Montanero, M. (2018) 'Oral presentations in higher education: a comparison of the impact of peer and teacher feedback'. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43 (1), pp. 138-150.
- Myers, M.D. and Newman, M. (2007) 'The qualitative interview in IS research: Examining the craft'. *Information and Organization*, 17(1), pp. 2-26.
- Myry, L., Karaharju-Suvanto, T., Virtala, A.M.K., Raekallio, M.R., Salminen, O., Vesalainen, M. and Nevgi, N. (2022) 'How self-efficacy beliefs are related to assessment practices: A study of experienced university teachers'. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 47(1), pp. 155-168.
- Nankervis, A., Prikshat, V. and Dhakal, S. (2018) *Mapping Stakeholders of Graduate Work-Readiness (GWR)*'. Singapore: Singapore: Springer Singapore.
- National Education Commission – Sri Lanka (2019) 'National policy proposals on higher education'. http://nec.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Higher-education-Policy_2019_English.pdf. (Accessed 31 July 2022).
- National Education Commission (2022) 'National education policy framework (2020-2030)'. Colombo: National Education Commission Publication.
- Newman, W.L. (2011) *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. 7th edn. New York: Pearson.

- Ngang, T.K. and Chan, T.C. (2015) 'Critical issues of soft skills development in teaching professional training: Educators' perspectives'. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 205, 128-133.
- Nghia, T.L.H. (2017) 'What hinders teachers from translating their beliefs into teaching behaviours: The case of teaching generic skills in Vietnamese universities'. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 64, pp. 105-114.
- Nghia, T.L.H. (2018a) 'External stakeholders' roles and factors influencing their participation in developing generic skills for students in Vietnamese universities'. *Journal of Education and Work*, 31 (1), pp. 72-86.
- Nghia, T.L.H. (2018b) 'It is complicated!: Practices and challenges of generic skills assessment in Vietnamese universities'. *Educational Studies*, 44(2), pp. 230-246.
- Nikitina, L. and Furuoka, F. (2012) 'Sharp focus on soft skills: a case study of Malaysian university students' educational expectations'. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 11 (3), pp. 207-224.
- Nwajiuba, C.A., Igwe, P.A., Akinsola-Obatolu, A.D., Ituma, A. and Binuomote, M.O. (2020) 'What can be done to improve higher education quality and graduate employability in Nigeria? A stakeholder approach'. *Industry and Higher Education*, 34(5), pp. 358-367.
- O'Brien, K., Wittmer, D. and Ebrahimi, B.P. (2017) 'Behavioural ethics in practice: Integrating service learning into a graduate ethics business course'. *Journal of Management Education*, 41(4), pp. 599-616.
- O'Byrne, D. and Bond, C. (2014) 'Back to the future: the idea of a university revisited'. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 36 (6), pp. 571-584.
- O'Connor, H. and Bodicoat, M. (2017) 'Exploitation or opportunity? Student perceptions of internships in enhancing employability skills'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38 (4), pp. 435-449.
- O'Leary, S. (2013) 'Collaborations in higher education with employers and their influence on graduate employability: An institutional project'. *Enhancing Learning in the Social Sciences*. 5(1), pp. 37-50.

- Okay-Somerville, B. and Scholarios, D. (2017) 'Position, possession or process? Understanding objective and subjective employability during university-to-work transitions'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(7), pp. 1275-1291.
- Okolie, U.C., Nwosu, H.E. and Mlanga, S. (2019) 'Graduate employability: How the higher education institutions can meet the demand of the labour market'. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-based Learning*, 9 (4), pp. 620-636.
- Okolie, U.C., Igwe, P.A., Nwosu, H.E., Eneje, B.C. and Mlsga, S. (2020a) 'Enhancing graduate employability: Why do higher education institutions have problems with teaching generic skills?'. *Policy Futures in Education*, 18 (2), pp. 294-313.
- Okolie, U.C., Igwe, P.A., Nwajiuba, C.A., Mlanga, S., Binuomote, M.O., Nwosu, H.E. and Ogbaekirigwe, C.O. (2020b) 'Does PhD qualification improve pedagogical competence? A study on teaching and training in higher education'. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, 12(5), pp. 1233-1250.
- Oliver, B. (2013) 'Graduate attributes as a focus for institution-wide curriculum renewal: Innovations and challenges'. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 32(3), pp. 450-463.
- Olo, D., Correia, L. and Rego, C. (2022) 'How to develop higher education curricula towards employability? A multi-stakeholder approach'. *Education + Training*, 64(1), pp. 89-106.
- Orb, A., Eisenhauer, L. and Wynaden, D. (2001) 'Ethics in Qualitative Research'. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 33 (1), pp. 93-96.
- Ormston, R., Spencer, L., Barnard, M. and Snape, D. (2014) 'The foundations of qualitative research'. In: Ritchie, J. et al. (eds.) *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*. 2nd edn. London: Sage, pp. 1-25.
- Ornellas, A., Falkner, K. and Stålbrandt, E.E. (2019) 'Enhancing graduates' employability skills through authentic learning approaches'. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 9 (11), pp. 107-120.
- Ortiz, L.A., Region-Sebest, M. and MacDermott, C. (2016) 'Employer perceptions of oral communication competencies most valued in new hires as a factor in company success'. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 79 (3), pp. 317-330.

- Osmani, M., Weerakkody, V. and Hindi, N. (2017) 'Graduate attributes in higher education: Examining academics' perception in the Middle East'. *Journal of Education for Business*, 92 (2), pp. 53-64.
- Osmani, M., Weerakkody, V., Hindi, N. and Eldabi, T. (2019) 'Graduates employability skills: A review of literature against market demand'. *Journal of Education for Business*, 94 (7), pp. 423-432.
- Otache, I. (2022) 'Enhancing graduates' employability through polytechnic-industry collaboration'. *Industry and Higher Education*, 36(5), pp. 604-614.
- Paguio, R. and Jackling, B. (2016) 'Teamwork from accounting graduates: what do employers really expect?'. *Accounting Research Journal*, 29 (3), pp. 348-366.
- Palthe, J. (2014) 'Regulative, normative, and cognitive elements of organizations: Implications for managing change'. *Management and Organization Studies*, 1 (2), pp. 59-66.
- Pang, E., Wong, M., Leung, C.H. and Coombes, J. (2019) 'Competencies for fresh graduates' success at work: Perspectives of employers'. *Industry and Higher Education*, 33 (1), pp. 55-65.
- Parlami, J. and Monnot, M.J. (2019) 'Getting to the CORE: Putting an End to the Term "Soft Skills"'. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 28 (2), pp. 225-227.
- Parmar, B., Freeman, R.E., Harrison, J.S., Wicks, A.C., Purnell, N. and de Colle, S. (2010) 'Stakeholder theory: The state of the art'. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 4(1), pp. 403-445.
- Parutis, V. and Howson, K. (2020) 'Failing to level the playing field: Student discourses on graduate employability'. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 25(4), pp. 373-393.
- Patton, M.Q. (2002) *Qualitative research & evaluation methods*. 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Patton, M.Q. (2014) *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice*. 4th edn. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

- Payne, J. (2000) 'The unbearable lightness of skill: the changing meaning of skill in UK policy discourses and some implications for education and training'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 15 (3), pp. 353-369.
- Perry, C. (1998) 'Processes of a case study methodology for postgraduate research in marketing'. *European Journal of Marketing*, 32 (9/10), pp. 785-802.
- Peterson, T.O. and van Fleet, D.D. (2004) 'The ongoing legacy of RL Katz: An updated typology of management skills'. *Management Decision*, 42(10), pp. 1297-1308.
- Petruzzello, G., Mariani, M.G., Guglielmi, D., Van der Heijden, B., de Jong, J. P. and Chisea, R. (2023) 'The role of teaching staff in fostering perceived employability of university students'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 48(1), pp. 20-36.
- Petty, N.J., Thomson, O.P. and Stew, G. (2012) 'Ready for a paradigm shift? Part 1: Introducing the philosophy of qualitative research'. *Manual Therapy*, 17 (4), pp. 267-274.
- Pfeffer, J. and Fong, C.T. (2002) 'The end of business schools? Less success than meet the eye'. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*. 1(1), pp. 78-95.
- Phan, D., Yapa, P. and Nguyen, H.T. (2020) 'Accounting graduates readiness for work: A case study of South East Asia'. *Education + Training*, 63(3), pp. 392-416.
- Phillips, J.M. and Gully, S.M. (2012) *Strategic staffing*. 2nd edn. New Jersey: Pearson, Prentice Hall.
- Phillips, R.A. (1997) 'Stakeholder Theory and A Principle of Fairness'. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 7 (1), pp. 51-66.
- Phillips, R., Freeman, R.E. and Wicks, A.C. (2003) 'What stakeholder theory is not'. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 13 (4), pp. 479-502.
- Pitan, O.S. (2016) 'Towards enhancing university graduate employability in Nigeria'. *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology*, 7 (1), pp. 1-11.
- Ponterotto, J.G. (2005) 'Qualitative Research in Counseling Psychology: A Primer on Research Paradigms and Philosophy of Science'. *Journal of counseling psychology*, 52 (2), pp. 126-136.
- Poon, J. (2012) 'Real estate graduates' employability skills: the perspective of human resource managers of surveying firms'. *Property management*, 30 (5), pp. 416-434.

- Powell, L. and McGuigan, N. (2021) 'Teaching virtually: A critical reflection'. *Accounting Research Journal*. 34(3), pp. 335-344.
- Prikshat, V., Montague, A., Connell, J. and Burgess, J. (2020) 'Australian graduates' work readiness–deficiencies, causes and potential solutions'. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*. 10(2), pp. 369-386.
- Rabionet, S.E. (2011) 'How I learned to design and conduct semi-structured interviews: an ongoing and continuous journey'. *Qualitative report*, 16 (2), pp. 563-566.
- Rae, D. (2007) 'Connecting graduate enterprise and employability: Challenges to the higher education culture and curriculum?'. *Education + Training*, 49(8/9), pp.605-619.
- Rana, S., Anand, A., Prashar, S. and Haque, M.M. (2022) 'A perspective on the positioning of Indian business schools post COVID-19 pandemic'. *International Journal of Emerging Markets*, 17(2), pp. 353-367.
- Rao, M.S. (2014) 'Enhancing employability in engineering and management students through soft skills'. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 46 (1), pp. 42-48.
- Rattan, A., Savani, K., Chugh, D. and Dweck, C.S. (2015) 'Leveraging mindsets to promote academic achievement: Policy recommendations'. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10 (6), pp. 721-726.
- Ravitch, S.M. and Carl, N.M. (2020) *Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological*. 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Rebele, J.E. and Pierre, E.K.S. (2019) 'A commentary on learning objectives for accounting education programs: The importance of soft skills and technical knowledge'. *Journal of Accounting Education*, 48, pp. 71-79.
- Ressia, S. and Shaw, A. (2022) 'Employability outcomes of human resource management and employment relations graduates'. *Labour and Industry*, 32(2), pp. 178-193.
- Richards, L. and Morse, J.M. (2013) *Readme first for a user's guide to qualitative methods*. 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Richardson, L. (2000) 'Evaluating Ethnography'. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6 (2), pp. 253-255.
- Riley, T.J. and Simons, K.A. (2016) 'The written communication skills that matter most for accountants'. *Accounting Education*, 25 (3), pp. 239-255.

- Robles, M.M. (2012) 'Executive perceptions of the top 10 soft skills needed in today's workplace'. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 75 (4), pp. 453-465.
- Robley, W., Whittle, S. and Murdoch-Eaton, D. (2005) 'Mapping generic skills curricula: a recommended methodology'. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 29 (3), pp. 221-231.
- Robson, C. and McCartan, K. (2016) *Real world research: A resource for users of social research methods in applied settings*. 4th edn. Chichester: Wiley.
- Rodzalan, S.A. and Saat, M.M. (2012) 'The Effects of Industrial Training on Students' Generic Skills Development'. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 56 (C), pp. 357-368.
- Romgens, I., Scoupe, R. and Beusaert, S. (2020) 'Unravelling the concept of employability, bringing together research on employability in higher education and the workplace, *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(12), pp. 2588-2603.
- Rose, H., Curle, S., Aizawa, I. and Thompson, G. (2020) 'What drives success in English medium taught courses? The interplay between language proficiency, academic skills, and motivation'. *Studies in Higher Education*. 45(11), pp. 2149-2161.
- Rosenberg, S., Heimler, R. and Morote, E.S. (2012) 'Basic employability skills: a triangular design approach'. *Education + Training*, 54 (1), pp. 7-20.
- Rossmann, G.B. and Rallis, S.F. (2017) *An introduction to qualitative research: Learning in the field*. 4th edn. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Rotatori, D., Lee, E.J. and Sleeva, S. (2020) 'The evolution of the workforce during the fourth industrial revolution'. *Human Resource Development International*, 24(1), pp. 92-103.
- Roulin, N. and Bangerter, A (2013) 'Students' use of extra-curricular activities for positional advantage in competitive job markets'. *Journal of Education and Work*, 26(1), pp. 21-47.
- Rowley, T.J. (1997) 'Moving beyond Dyadic Ties: A Network Theory of Stakeholder Influences'. *The Academy of Management Review*, 22 (4), pp. 887-910.
- Rubin, H.J. and Rubin, I.S. (2012) *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*. 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

- Saavedra, A.R. and Opfer, V.D. (2012) 'Learning 21st – century skills requires 21st – century teaching'. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 94(2), pp. 8-13.
- Sadler, D. R. (1989) 'Formative assessment and the design of instructional system'. *Instructional Science*, 18, pp. 119-144.
- Saito, E. and Pham, T. (2021) 'A comparative institutional analysis on strategies deployed by Australian and Japanese universities to prepare students for employment'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 40(5). pp.1085-1099.
- Salancik, G.R. and Pfeffer, J. (1974) 'The bases and use of power in organizational decision making: The case of a university'. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 19 (4), pp. 453-473.
- Saldana, J. (2015) *Thinking qualitatively: Methods of mind*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Samkin, G. and Keevy, M. (2019) 'Using a stakeholder developed case study to develop soft skills'. *Meditari Accountancy Research*, 27 (6), pp. 862-882.
- Sangster, A., Stoner, G. and Flood, B. (2020) 'Insights into accounting education in a COVID-19 world'. *Accounting Education*, 29(5), pp. 431-562.
- Saunders, M.N.K. and Townsend, K. (2016) 'Reporting and justifying the number of interview participants in organisation and workplace research', *British Journal of Management*, 27, pp. 836-852.
- Sousa, M.J. and Rocha, A. (2019) 'Leadership styles and skills development through game-based learning'. *Journal of Business Research*, 94, pp. 360-366.
- Savage, G.T., Nix, T.W., Whitehead, C.J. and Blair, J.D. (1991) 'Strategies for assessing and managing organizational stakeholders'. *Academy of Management Executive*, 5 (2), pp. 61-75.
- Scarinci, J. and Pearce, P. (2012) 'The perceived influence of travel experiences on learning generic skills'. *Tourism Management*, 33 (2), pp. 380-386.
- Schoepp, K. (2019) 'The state of course learning outcomes at leading universities'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44 (4), pp. 615-627.
- Schull, D., King, E., Hamood, W. and Feakes, A. (2021) 'Context matters: Factors considered by employers when selecting new graduate veterinarians'. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 40(2), pp. 386-399.

- Schulz, B. (2008) 'The importance of soft skills: Education beyond academic knowledge'. *NAWA Journal of Language and Communication*, 2 (1), pp. 146-154.
- Schwandt, T.A. (1998) 'Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry'. In: Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.) *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*. California: Sage, pp. 221-259.
- Scott, W.R. (2010) 'Reflections: The past and future of research on institutions and institutional change'. *Journal of Change Management*, 10 (1), pp. 5-21.
- Scott, W.R. (2014) *Institutions and organizations: Ideas, interests, and identities*. 4th edn. California: Sage.
- Scott, F.J., Connell, P., Thomson, L.A. and Willison, D. (2019) 'Empowering students by enhancing their employability skills'. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(5), pp. 692-707.
- Scott, F.J. and Willison, D. (2021) 'Students' reflections on an employability skills provision'. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(8), pp. 1118-1133.
- Sewell, P. and Dacre Pool, L. (2010) 'Moving from conceptual ambiguity to operational clarity: Employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship in higher education'. *Education + Training*, 52(1), pp. 89-94
- Shah, S.Z.A. (2013) 'The use of group activities in developing personal transferable skills'. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 50 (3), pp. 297-307.
- Shenton, A.K. (2004) 'Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects'. *Education for Information*, 22 (2), pp. 63-75.
- Silva, P., Lopes, B., Costa, M., Seabra, D., Melo, A.I., Brito, E. and Dias, G.P. (2016) 'Stairway to employment? Internships in higher education'. *Higher Education*, 72(6), pp. 703-721.
- Sin, C. and Amaral, A. (2017) 'Academics' and employers' perceptions about responsibilities for employability and their initiatives towards its development'. *Higher Education*, 73(1), pp. 97-111.
- Sin, C. and Neave, G. (2016) 'Employability deconstructed: Perceptinos of Bologna stakeholders'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(8), pp. 1447-1462.

- Sin, C., Tavares, O. and Amaral, A. (2019) 'Accepting employability as a purpose of higher education? Academics' perceptions and practices'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(6), pp. 920-931.
- Sincoff, M.Z. and Owen, C.L. (2004) 'Content guidelines for an undergraduate human resources curriculum: Recommendations from human resources professionals'. *Journal of Education for Business*, 80 (2), pp. 80-85.
- Singh, A. and Jaykumar, P. (2019) 'On the road to consensus: key soft skills required for youth employment in the service sector'. *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, 11 (1), pp. 10-24.
- Small, L., Shacklock, K. and Marchant, T. (2018) 'Employability: a contemporary review for higher education stakeholders'. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 70 (1), pp. 148-166.
- Somaratne, R.M.P.N. (2022) 'Exploring collaborative working of undergraduate students through virtual worlds: A study conducted in a Sri Lankan context'. An unpublished doctoral thesis, Bristol: University of the West of England.
- Speight, S., Lackovic, N. and Cooker, L. (2013) 'The contested curriculum: Academic learning and employability in higher education'. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 19 (2), pp. 112-126.
- Spencer, D., Riddle, M. and Knewstubb, B. (2012) 'Curriculum mapping to embed graduate capabilities'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31 (2), pp. 217-231.
- Stake, R.E. (1978) 'The Case Study Method in Social Inquiry'. *Educational researcher*, 7 (2), pp. 5-8.
- Stake, R.E. (1995) *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Stake, R.E. (2006) *Multiple case study analysis*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Stake, R.E. (2008) 'Qualitative case studies'. In: Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.) *Strategies of qualitative inquiry*. 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, pp. 119-149.
- Stanley, T. and Marsden, S. (2012) 'Problem-based learning: Does accounting education need it?'. *Journal of Accounting Education*, 30 (3-4), pp. 267-289.

- Stanny, C.J. (2016) 'Reevaluating Bloom's Taxonomy: What Measurable Verbs Can and Cannot Say about Student Learning'. *Education Sciences*, 6 (37), pp.1-12.
- Star, C. and Hammer, S. (2008) 'Teaching generic skills: Eroding the higher purpose of universities, or an opportunity for renewal'. *Oxford Review of Education*. 34(2), pp. 237-251.
- Starkey, K., Hatchuel. A. and Tempest. S. (2004) 'Rethinking the business school'. *Journal of Management Studies*. 41(8), pp. 1521-1531.
- Steenkamp, N. and Roberts, R. (2020) 'Does workload and institutional pressure on accounting educators affect academia at Australian universities?', 60(1), pp. 471-506.
- Stoner, G. and Milner, M. (2010) 'Embedding generic employability skills in an accounting degree: development and impediments'. *Accounting Education: An International Journal*, 19 (1-2), pp. 123-138.
- Su, Y. (2014) 'Self-directed, genuine graduate attributes: The person-based approach'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33 (6), pp. 1208-1220.
- Succi, C. and Canovi, M. (2020) 'Soft skills to enhance graduate employability: comparing students and employers' perceptions'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(9), pp.1834-1847.
- Succi, C. and Wieandt, M. (2019) 'Walk the talk: soft skills' assessment of graduates'. *European Journal of Management and Business Economics*. 28(2), pp.114-125.
- Suchman, M.C. (1995) 'Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches'. *Academy of Management Review*, 20 (3), pp. 571-610.
- Suleman, F. (2016) 'Employability skills of higher education graduates: Little consensus on a much-discussed subject'. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 228 169-174.
- Suleman, F. (2021) 'Revisiting the concept of employability through economic theories: Contributions, limitations and policy implications.' *Higher Education Quarterly*, 75(4), pp. 548-561.
- Suleman, F. and Laranjeiro, A.M.C. (2018) 'The employability skills of graduates and employers' options in Portugal'. *Education + Training*, 60 (9), pp. 1097-1111.

- Sullivan, S.E. and Arthur, M.B. (2006) 'The evolution of the boundaryless career concept: Examining physical and psychological mobility'. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 69 (1), pp. 19-29.
- Sumsion, J. and Goodfellow, J. (2004) 'Identifying generic skills through curriculum mapping: a critical evaluation'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 23 (3), pp. 329-346.
- Tan, L.M. and Laswad, F. (2018) 'Professional skills required of accountants: what do job advertisements tell us?'. *Accounting Education*, 27 (4), pp. 403-432.
- Tandika, P. and Ndiyuje, L.G. (2022) 'The question of university graduates' employability: Are the students aware of the employers' preferences'. *Higher Education, Skills, and Work-Based Learning*, 12(3), pp. 588-603.
- Taylor, S.J., Bogdan, R. and DeVault, M.L. (2016) *Introduction to qualitative research methods: A guidebook and resource*. 4th edn. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.
- Teece, D. and Leih, S. (2016) 'Uncertainty, Innovation, and Dynamic Capabilities: An Introduction'. *California Management Review*, 58 (4), pp. 5-12.
- Teece, D., Pisano, G. and Shuen, A. (1997) 'Dynamic capabilities and strategic management'. *Strategic Management Journal*, 18 (7), pp. 509-533.
- Tempone, I., Kavanagh, M., Segal, N., Hancock, P., Howieson, P. and Kent, J. (2012) 'Desirable generic attributes for accounting graduates into the twenty-first century: The views of employers'. *Accounting Research Journal*, 25 (1), pp. 41-55.
- Teng, W., Ma, C., Pahlevansharif, S. and Turner, J.J. (2019) 'Graduate readiness for the employment market of the 4th industrial revolution: The development of soft employability skills'. *Education + Training*, 61(5), pp. 590-604.
- Thanh-Pham, T.H. (2011) 'Issues to consider when implementing student-centred learning practices at Asian higher education institutions'. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 33 (5), pp. 519-528.
- Tight, M. (2021) 'Twenty-first century skills: Meaning, usage and value'. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 11(2), pp. 160-174.

- Tiwari, A., Lai, P., So, M. and Yuen, K. (2006) 'A comparison of the effects of problem-based learning and lecturing on the development of students' critical thinking'. *Medical Education*, 40 (6), pp. 547-554.
- Tomlinson, M. (2007) 'Graduate employability and student attitudes and orientations to the labour market'. *Journal of Education and Work*, 20(4), pp. 285-304.
- Tomlinson, M. (2008) 'The degree is not enough': Students' perceptions of the role of higher education credentials for graduate work and employability'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. 29(1), pp. 49-61.
- Tomlinson, M. (2012) 'Graduate employability: A review of conceptual and empirical themes'. *Higher Education Policy*, 25 (4), pp. 407-431.
- Tomlinson, M. (2016) 'The impact of market-driven higher education on student-university relations: Investing, consuming, and competing'. *Higher Education Policy*, 29(2), pp. 149-166.
- Tomlinson, M. (2017) 'Forms of graduate capital and their relationship to graduate employability'. *Education+ Training*, 59 (4), pp. 338-352.
- Tomlinson, M. (2018) 'Conceptions of the value of higher education in a measured market'. *Higher Education*, 75 (4), pp. 711-727.
- Tomlinson, M. and Anderson, V. (2021) 'Employers and graduates: The mediating role of signals and capitals'. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 43(4), pp. 384-399.
- Tomlinson, M., McCafferty, H., Fuge, H. and Wood, K. (2017) 'Resources and Readiness: the graduate capital perspective as a new approach to graduate employability'. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 38 (1), pp. 28-35.
- Tomlinson, M. and Kelly, P. (2018) 'A prize for a price? HE marketisation and the question of value'. *Theory and Research in Education*, 16 (3), pp. 351-367.
- Tracy, S.J. (2010) 'Qualitative Quality: Eight "Big-Tent" Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research'. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16 (10), pp. 837-851.
- Tracy, S.J. (2013) *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

- Tran, T.T. (2013) 'Limitation on the development of skills in higher education in Vietnam'. *Higher Education*, 65 (5), pp. 631-644.
- Tran, T.T. (2015) 'Is graduate employability the 'whole-of-higher-education-issue'?. *Journal of Education and Work*, 28 (3), pp. 207-227.
- Tran, L.H.N. (2018) 'Game of blames: Higher education stakeholders' perceptions of causes of Vietnamese graduates' skills gap'. *International Journal of Educational Development*. 62(c), pp. 302-312.
- Tran, L.T., Ngo, N.T.H., Nguyen, H.T.M., Le, T.T.T. and Ho, T.T.H. (2022) "Employability in context": graduate employability attributes expected by employers in regional Vietnam and implications for career guidance'. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, pp. 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-022-09560-0>
- Trede, F. and McEwen, C. (2015) 'Early workplace learning experiences: What are the pedagogical possibilities beyond retention and employability'. *Higher Education*, 69(1), pp. 19-32
- Treleaven, L. and Voola, R. (2008) 'Integrating the development of graduate attributes through constructive alignment'. *Journal of marketing education*, 30 (2), pp. 160-173.
- Trevino, L.K. and Weaver, G.R. (1999) 'The stakeholder research tradition: Converging theorists, not convergent theory'. *The Academy of Management Review*, 24 (2), pp. 222-227.
- Tsang, E.W.K. (2014) 'Generalizing from research findings: The merits of case studies'. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 16 (4), pp. 369-383.
- Tucker, M.L., Sojka, J.Z., Barone, F.J. and McCarthy, A.M. (2000) 'Training tomorrow's leaders: Enhancing the emotional intelligence of business graduates'. *Journal of Education for Business*, 75 (6), pp. 331-337.
- Turner, D.W., III (2010) 'Qualitative interview design: A practical guide for novice investigators'. *Qualitative Report*, 15 (3), pp. 754-760.
- Tymon, A. (2013) 'The student perspective on employability'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38 (6), pp. 841-856.

- Tymon, A. and Mackay, M. (2016) 'Developing business buccaneers: employer expectations of emergent leaders'. *Human Resource Development International*, 19 (5), pp. 429-446.
- University Grants Commission – Sri Lanka (2018) 'Tracer study of graduates: Universities in Sri Lanka'. <https://www.ugc.ac.lk/downloads/statistics/webTracer/2018/Tracer%20Study%202018.pdf> (Accessed 31 July 2022).
- University Grants Commission – Sri Lanka (2022) 'Admission to undergraduate courses of the universities in Sri Lanka'. https://www.ugc.ac.lk/downloads/admissions/Handbook_2021_22/HANDBOOK_ENGLISH.pdf (Accessed February 10, 2024)
- Urciuoli, B. (2008) 'Skills and selves in the new workplace'. *American Ethnologist*, 35(2), pp. 211-228.
- Valencia, R. R. (1997) 'Conceptualizing the notion of deficit thinking'. In: Valencia, R.R. (ed.) *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. New York: RoutledgePalmer, pp.1-12.
- van Harten, J., Cuyper, N.D., Guest, D., Fugate, M., Knies, E. and Forrier, A. (2020) 'Introduction to special issue on HRM and employability: Mutual gains or conflicting outcomes?'. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*. 31(9), pp. 1095-1105.
- VanWynsberghe, R. and Khan, S. (2007) 'Redefining Case Study'. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 6 (2), pp. 80-94.
- Verma, P., Nankervis, A., Priyono, S., Mohd Salleh, N., Connell, J. and Burgess, J. (2018) 'Graduate work-readiness challenges in the Asia-Pacific region and the role of HRM'. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, 37 (2), pp. 121-137.
- Verschuren, P. (2003) 'Case study as a research strategy: Some ambiguities and opportunities'. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 6 (2), pp. 121-139.
- Viviers, H.A., Fouché, J.P. and Reitsma, G.M. (2016) 'Developing soft skills (also known as pervasive skills)'. *Meditari Accountancy Research*, 24 (3), pp. 368-389.
- Wagener, B. (2013) 'Autogenic training, metacognition and higher education'. *Educational Psychology*, 33 (7), pp. 849-861.

- Wald, N. and Harland, T. (2019) 'Graduate attributes frameworks or powerful knowledge?'. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 41 (4), pp. 361-374.
- Walsham, G. (1995) 'Interpretive case studies in IS research: nature and method'. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 4 (2), pp. 74-81.
- Walsham, G. (2006) 'Doing interpretive research'. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 15 (3), pp. 320-330.
- Warhurst, C. and Nickson, D. (2007) 'Employee experience of aesthetic labour in retail and hospitality'. *Work, Employment and Society*, 21(1), pp. 103-120.
- Weber, M.R., Finley, D.A., Crawford, A. and Rivera, D. (2009) 'An Exploratory Study Identifying Soft Skill Competencies in Entry-Level Managers'. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 9 (4), pp. 353-361.
- Welbourn, J., Devins, D. and Reynolds, M. (2019) 'Degree apprenticeships: Reflecting on university-employer partnership practice to improve workforce development in the United Kingdom'. *Industry & Higher Education*, 33(6), pp. 403-413.
- Wellman, N. (2010) 'The employability attributes required of new marketing graduates'. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 28 (7), pp. 908-930.
- Wesley, S.C., Jackson, V.P. and Lee, M. (2017) 'The perceived importance of core soft skills between retailing and tourism management students, faculty and businesses'. *Employee Relations*, 39 (1), pp. 79-99.
- Wheelahan, L., Moodie, G. and Doughney, J. (2022) 'Challenging the skills fetish'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 43(3), pp. 475-494.
- Whetten, D.A. and Cameron, K.S. (2011) *Developing management skills*. 8th edn. New Jersey: Pearson.
- Wickramasinghe, V. (2018) 'Higher education in state universities in Sri Lanka: Review of higher education since colonial past through international funding for development'. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 32(3), pp. 463-478.
- Wickramasinghe, V. and Perera, L. (2010) 'Graduates', university lecturers' and employers' perceptions towards employability skills'. *Education+ Training*, 52 (3), pp. 226-244.

- Williams, S., Dodd, L.J., Steele, C. and Randall, R. (2016) 'A systematic review of current understandings of employability'. *Journal of Education and Work*, 29(8), pp. 877-901.
- Wilton, N. (2008) 'Business graduates and management jobs: an employability match made in heaven?'. *Journal of Education and Work*, 21 (2), pp. 143-158.
- Wilton, N. (2011) 'Do employability skills really matter in the UK graduate labour market? The case of business and management graduates'. *Work, Employment and Society*, 25 (1), pp. 85-100.
- Wilton, N. (2014) 'Employability is in the eye of the beholder: Employer decision-making in the recruitment of work placement students'. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-based Learning*, 4 (3), pp. 242-255.
- Windels, K., Mallia, K. and Broyles, S. (2013) 'Soft skills: The difference between leading and leaving the advertising industry?'. *Journal of Advertising Education*, 17 (2), pp. 17-27.
- Winterton, J. and Turner, J.J. (2019) 'Preparing graduates for work readiness: an overview and agenda'. *Education+ Training*, 61 (5), pp. 536-551.
- Wood, D.J., Mitchell, R.K., Agle, B.R. and Bryan, L.M. (2021) 'Stakeholder identification and salience after 20 years: Progress, problems, and prospects'. *Business & Society*, 60(1), pp. 196-245.
- Woollard, A. (1995) 'Core Skills and the Idea of the Graduate'. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 49 (4), pp. 316-325.
- World Bank (2016) 'Sri Lanka development update'.
<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/622841476967944601/pdf/109372-REVISED-PUBLIC-SLDU-fv9.pdf>. (Accessed 31 July 2022).
- Wright, E. and Mulvey, B. (2021) 'Internships and the graduate labour market: How upper-middle-class students get ahead'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 42(3), pp. 339-356.
- Yao, C., Collins, C., Bush, T., Briscoe, K.L. and Dang, N.L.T. (2022) 'English as a 'double barrier': English medium instruction and student learning at Vietnamese transnational universities'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 41(4), pp. 1372-1386.

- Yeager, D.S. and Dweck, C.S. (2012) 'Mindsets that promote resilience: When students believe that personal characteristics can be developed'. *Educational Psychologist*, 47 (4), pp. 302-314.
- Yin, R.K. (1981a) 'The Case Study as a Serious Research Strategy'. *Science Communication*, 3 (1), pp. 97-114.
- Yin, R.K. (1981b) 'The Case Study Crisis: Some Answers'. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 26 (1), pp. 58-65.
- Yin, R.K. (2009) *Case study research: Design and methods*. 4th edn. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Yin, R.K. (2012) *Applications of case study research*. 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Yin, R.K. (2015) *Qualitative research from start to finish*. 2nd ed. New York: Guilford Press.
- Yin, R.K. (2018) *Case study research and applications: design and methods*. 6th edn. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Yorke, M. (2006) *Employability in higher education: What it is - what is not*. York: The Higher Education Academy: Learning and teaching support network.
- Yorke, M. and Knight, P. (2004) 'Self-theories: some implications for teaching and learning in higher education'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 29 (1), pp. 25-37.
- Yorke, M. and Knight, P. (2006) *Embedding employability into the curriculum. Vol-3*. York. Higher Education Academy.
- Yusof, M.N.M., Wong, A., Ahmad, G., Aziz, R.C. and Hussain, K. (2020) 'Enhancing hospitality and tourism graduate employability through the 2u2i programme'. *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, 12(2), pp. 137-144.
- Zainuddin, S.Z.B., Pillai, S., Dumanig, F.P. and Phillip, A. (2019) 'English language and graduate employability'. *Education+ Training*, 61 (1), pp. 79-93.

Appendix A: A survey for decision-makers of Business Schools

Part – A:

Q1. Primary stakeholders are considered to ensure the sustained functioning and survival of Higher Education Institutions through their contribution. In the case of soft skills development in undergraduate business education, in your opinion, who are the primary stakeholders in your Business School?

Primary stakeholder

Q2. Based on the identification of primary stakeholders in Q1, please assign a score between 1 and 5 for each stakeholder group considering their relative importance (5 – the highest priority and 1- the lowest priority) to soft skills development in undergraduate business education.

Primary stakeholder	Score

2. Based on the identification of primary stakeholders in question (Q1), please indicate in the below table what type of attributes each stakeholder possesses regarding soft skills development in your Business School.

Primary stakeholder	Power (Yes/No)	Legitimacy (Yes/No)	Urgency (Yes/No)

- * Power - The ability of a stakeholder to influence/affect the development of soft skills.
- * Legitimacy - Desirability and appropriateness of a stakeholder's actions that are within socially accepted norms and values.
- * Urgency - A stakeholder's expectation of the need for a speedy response regarding the provision of soft skills development.

Appendix B: Profile of key informants – Case study Alpha

Decision-makers

Decision-maker ID	Job role
DM 1	Head – Department of Operations
DM 2	Head – Department of Marketing
DM 3	Dean – Faculty of Management
DM 4	Deputy Vice-Chancellor
DM 5	Head – Department of HRM
DM 6	Head – Department of Management Studies

Industry experts

Industry expert ID	Job role	Industry/sector	Industry experience
IE 1	Merchandising manager	FMCG	07
IE 2	Senior partner	Audit	12+
IE 3	Senior Executive	Apparel	06
IE 4	Senior HR business partner	Dairy	09
IE 5	Operations Manager	Courier	10
IE 6	HR business partner	FMCG	10
IE 7	Head of Manufacturing	Beverages	11
IE 8	General manager – HR	Banking	20+
IE 9	Senior manager	Banking/leasing	20+
IE 10	Chief Executive Officer	Pharmaceutical	20+
IE 11	Training & Development Manager	FMCG	06
IE 12	Senior manager – HR	Heavy industry	20+
IE 13	Senior manager	Telecom	22
IE 14	Head – Talent Development	Apparel	20

Academics

Academics ID	Job role	Department
AC 1	Senior lecturer	Operations Management
AC 2	Junior lecturer	Management Studies
AC 3	Senior lecturer	Human Resource Management
AC 4	Junior lecturer	Business Finance
AC 5	Senior lecturer	Management Studies
AC 6	Senior lecturer	Business Finance
AC 7	Junior lecturer	Operations Management
AC 8	Junior lecturer	Marketing Management
AC 9	Senior lecturer	Operations Management
AC 10	Instructor	English Language Teaching Unit
AC 11	Assistant lecturer	Operations Management
AC 12	Assistant lecturer	Human Resource Management

Business undergraduates

Undergraduates ID	Department	Internship/Dissertation
UG 1	Marketing Management	Internship
UG 2	Business Finance	Internship
UG 3	Business Finance	Internship
UG 4	Operations Management	Internship
UG 5	Operations Management	Internship
UG 6	Operations Management	Dissertation
UG 7	Business Finance	Internship
UG 8	Business Finance	Internship
UG 9	Management Studies	Internship/Dissertation
UG 10	Marketing Management	Internship
UG 11	Human Resource Management	Internship
UG 12	Management Studies	Internship

Appendix B: Profile of key informants – Case study Beta

Decision-makers

Decision-maker ID	Job role
DM 1	Dean
DM 2	Head/Human Resource Management
DM 3	Head/Marketing
DM 4	Member of Senate

Industry experts

Industry expert ID	Job role	Industry/sector	Industry experience
IE 1	Senior Executive – HR	FMCG	03
IE 2	Head – Learning & Development	MNC	16+
IE 3	Director – Finance	Tourism	24+
IE 4	Entrepreneur	Technology	13+
IE 5	Regional manager	Banking	17+
IE 6	Senior manager	Auditing	08
IE 7	Chairman – Industry body	Consulting/Advisory	15+
IE 8	Regional manager	Banking	15+
IE 9	Regional manager	Banking	15+
IE 10	Regional manager	Insurance	20

Academics

Academics ID	Job role	Department
AC 1	Senior lecturer	Accounting
AC 2	Senior lecturer	Accounting
AC 3	Senior lecturer	Human Resources Management
AC 4	Senior lecturer	Marketing Management
AC 5	Senior lecturer	Human Resources Management
AC 6	Senior lecturer	Marketing Management
AC 7	Junior lecturer	Finance
AC 8	Senior lecturer	Accounting
AC 9	Senior lecturer	Accounting
AC 10	Senior lecturer	Human Resources Management
AC 11	Senior lecturer	Human Resources Management
AC 12	Senior lecturer	Marketing Management
AC 13	Assistant lecturer	Marketing Management
AC 14	Assistant lecturer	Human Resources Management

Business undergraduates

Undergraduates ID	Department
UG 1	Finance
UG 2	Human Resources Management
UG 3	Human Resources Management

Appendix C: Interview guide for decision-makers

Introductory question

- What are the drivers that have an influence on the business school to engage in soft skills development in undergraduate business education?

The conceptualisation of soft skills

- What does the term soft skills mean to you?
- How would you describe the significance of soft skills for business undergraduates?
(**Probe:** Current work-readiness of business undergraduates)

Expected soft skills

- What types of soft skills are essential for business graduates to secure entry-level positions in organisations?
(**Probe:** The rationale for the identification of specific skill types)

The role of key stakeholders in soft skills development

- How would you describe the role of academics in developing soft skills in undergraduate business education?
- How would you describe the role of business undergraduates in developing soft skills in undergraduate business education?
- How would you describe the role of industry in supporting soft skills development in undergraduate business education?

The role of curriculum

- What is your assessment regarding the relevance of the curriculum in meeting the industry requirements?

Barriers to soft skills development

- What are the barriers/challenges as a decision-maker you see when it comes to the planning, teaching, and assessment of soft skills?

Closing questions

- Are there any points you would like to add that we have not discussed so far in this interview?

Appendix C: Interview guide for academics

The conceptualisation of soft skills

- What does the term soft skills mean to you?
- How would you describe the significance of soft skills for business undergraduates?

Expected soft skills

- What types of soft skills are essential for business graduates to secure entry-level positions in organisations?

(Probe: The rationale for the identification of specific skill types)

The role of key stakeholders in soft skills development

- How would you describe the role of academics in developing soft skills in undergraduate business education?
- How would you describe the role of business undergraduates in developing soft skills in undergraduate business education?
- How would you describe the role of industry in supporting soft skills development in undergraduate business education?

The role of curriculum

- What is your assessment regarding the extent of the inclusion of soft skills in the curriculum? **(Probe:** Embedded and stand-alone approaches)

Soft skills delivery

- What are the teaching/learning methods do you use to develop soft skills during the delivery of a course?

(Probe: The rationale for using particular approaches)

Soft skills assessment

- Please describe the types of formative assessment you normally use in your courses.
- (Probe:** The types of formative and summative assessment components used)

Barriers to soft skills development

- What are the barriers/challenges as an academic you see when it comes to the planning, teaching, and assessment of soft skills?

Closing questions

- Are there any points you would like to add that we have not discussed so far in this interview?

Appendix C: Interview guide for industry experts

The conceptualisation of soft skills

- What does the term soft skills mean to you?
- How would you describe the significance of soft skills for business graduates?
- How would you describe the work-readiness of business graduates?

(Probe: Perceived causes for the lack of work-readiness)

Expected soft skills

- What types of soft skills do you expect from business graduates when recruiting for entry-level graduate positions?

(Probe: The rationale for the identification of specific skill types)

The role of key stakeholders in soft skills development

- How would you describe the industry's role in supporting soft skills in undergraduate business education?

(Probe: The state of university-industry partnership to enhance soft skills)

- How would you describe the role of business undergraduates in developing soft skills in undergraduate business education?
- How would you describe the role of academics in developing soft skills development in undergraduate business education?

Soft skills delivery

- In what ways do you support the development of soft skills of business undergraduates in undergraduate business education?

(Probe: The role of internship)

Barriers to soft skills development

- From your perspective, what are the barriers/challenges you have observed affecting the development of soft skills in undergraduate business education?

(Probes: Institutional, stakeholder-related, and industry-specific factors)

Closing questions

- Are there any points you would like to add that we have not discussed so far in this interview?

Appendix C: Interview guide for business undergraduates

The conceptualisation of soft skills

- What does the term soft skills mean to you?
- Do you think that the possession of soft skills can enhance your employability prospects? Why?

Expected soft skills

- From your point of view, what types of soft skills are essential for business graduates to secure entry-level graduate positions in organisations?

(Probe: The rationale for the identification of specific skill types)

The role of key stakeholders in soft skills development

- How would you describe the role of business undergraduates in developing soft skills in undergraduate business education?
- How would you describe the role of academics in developing soft skills in undergraduate business education?
- How would you describe the role of industry in supporting soft skills development in undergraduate business education?

Soft skills delivery

- What is your overall assessment regarding the soft skills development undertaken in the degree programme?
- In relation to soft skills delivery, what are the types of in-class activities you have taken part in your courses?
- Based on your experience, how would you describe the role of an internship in developing soft skills? (This question was specifically targeted at undergraduates of Alpha only as they were on an internship at the time of fieldwork)

Soft skills assessment

- Please describe the types of formative assessment you have experienced in your courses.

Barriers to soft skills development

- What are the barriers/challenges you perceive as an undergraduate when it comes to the development of soft skills in the degree programme?

Closing questions

- Are there any points you would like to add that we have not discussed so far in this interview?

Appendix D: Focus group agenda for Assistant lecturers/Instructor in Alpha

Introduction:

- Greet the participants
- Explain the purpose of the study, the process to be adopted in the focus group, and the role of the facilitator

Key topics to be covered:

- Key informants' own understanding of the concept of soft skills
- The vitality of soft skills for business graduates
- Level of work-readiness of business undergraduates
- Types of soft skills valued/expected for entry-level graduate positions
- Self-perception of your own role in developing soft skills
- Methods used to develop soft skills in discussion classes
- Role perception in relation to other key stakeholders: Industry, and business undergraduates
- Barriers/challenges affecting soft skills development
- The influence of students' socioeconomic background on soft skills development

Wrap-up and conclusion

- Thanking key informants for the participation
- Answering participants' questions (if any)
- Conclude the session

Appendix E: Summary of comparisons of Alpha and Beta: The salient stakeholders’ perspectives

Theme	Alpha	Beta
<u>Initiation</u>		
The conceptualisation of soft skills	The use of varied labels, generally viewed soft skills as ‘attributes’	The use of varied labels, generally viewed soft skills as ‘non-technical skills’
Identification of soft skills	Placed more emphasis on communication and teamwork	Placed more emphasis on communication and teamwork
The role of key stakeholders	Academics, employers, and undergraduates were perceived as facilitators, supporters, and active participants respectively	Academics, employers, and undergraduates were perceived as facilitators, supporters, and active participants respectively
Design: The curriculum	Reliance on embedded approach, but offered bolt-on activities (separate, parallel courses/workshops)	Reliance on embedded approach, but offered bolt-on activities (separate, parallel courses/workshops)
Delivery of soft skills	Academics: In-class use of presentations, group work, and case study The deployment of service learning and other authentic pedagogy Industry: Internship and awareness building	Academics: In-class use of presentations, group work, and case study Industry: Internship and sharing of insights

<p>Assessment of soft skills</p>	<p>Mostly via formative assessment (Out of total weighting for a subject, 40% for formative assessment), and lecturer-led assessment</p> <p>General discontent with the assessment structure (Academics)</p>	<p>Mostly via formative assessment (Out of total weighting for a subject, 30% for formative assessment) and lecturer-led assessment</p> <p>General discontent with the assessment structure (Academics)</p>
<p>Barriers to soft skills development</p>	<p>Students' mindset and the lack of English language proficiency as dominant cultural-cognitive barriers</p> <p>The negative impact of students' socioeconomic background</p> <p>The prevalence of ragging</p> <p>The effects of COVID-19 on the provision of soft skills</p>	<p>Students' mindset and the lack of English language proficiency as dominant cultural-cognitive barriers</p> <p>The location of the university (being a regional university)</p> <p>The impact of large class size on teaching and assessment of soft skills</p> <p>The effects of COVID-19 on the provision of soft skills</p>