



## Components of Soft Skills for University Students in the 21st Century: An Overview of Literature Review

Zahid Jasim Mohammed<sup>1</sup>, Alaa Jasim Alsadaji<sup>2</sup>, Saeb Fadhil Al-Saadi<sup>3</sup>, \*Sadeq Al-Fayyadh<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Basic Science Department, College of Nursing, University of Baghdad, Baghdad, Iraq.

<sup>2</sup>MSN, Technical Affairs Department, Baghdad Medical City, Baghdad, Iraq.

<sup>3</sup>MSN, Al-Shaheed Al-Sader General Hospital, Baghdad, Iraq.

<sup>4</sup>Associate Professor, Chair of Adult Nursing, School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Baghdad, Baghdad, Iraq.

### Abstract

**Background:** Soft skills are of pivotal importance in the education and employment of the 21st century and are sought after by many employers. The present study aimed to provide a brief description of the “soft skills” needed for 21st-century students as well as a brief literatures review on various aspects of soft skills in graduate employability.

**Materials and Methods:** In this overview, online databases Medline, ERIC, PyscINFO, EMBASE, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google search engine were searched for peer-reviewed studies on the soft skills elements for workplace success up to December 2022. Two independent authors undertook the screening, selection, and quality assessment (using the SANRA scale).

**Results:** A total of 12 reviews were selected. The results showed that soft skills consisted of 20 components in two categories: Personal (including self-awareness, self-management, positive attitude, time management, critical thinking, decision-making and problem-solving, strategic thinking, lifelong learning, adaptability and flexibility, creativity, ethics and professionalism, and entrepreneurship skills), and social (including leadership, communication skills, etiquette, negotiation skills, and cultural compatibility, teamwork skills, customer orientation and respect for clients, conflict management, and networking). Soft skills are of critical importance for successful academic and professional performance. Therefore, embedding soft skills into the university curriculum through innovative teaching approaches is necessary to equip students with soft workplace skills.

**Conclusion:** In addition to hard skills, there are soft skills that are crucial to employability. Hard skills aid in acquiring employment, whereas soft skills aid in retaining it. It is critical to integrate soft skills into university curricula to accelerate the progress in the professional performance of young graduates.

**Key Words:** 21st century skills, Soft skills, Hard skills, Students, Important.

\*Please cite this article as: Jasim Mohammed Z, Jasim Alsadaji A, Fadhil Al-Saadi S, Al-Fayyadh S. Components of Soft Skills for University Students in the 21st Century: An Overview of Literature Review. Med Edu Bull 2023; 4(1): 601-9. DOI: **10.22034/MEB.2023.389121.1076**

### \*Corresponding Author:

Sadeq Al-Fayyadh, Chair of Adult Nursing, School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Baghdad, Baghdad, Iraq.

Email: [s.al-fayyadh@conursing.uobaghdad.edu.iq](mailto:s.al-fayyadh@conursing.uobaghdad.edu.iq)

Received date: Dec.12, 2022; Accepted date: Mar.22, 2023

## 1- INTRODUCTION

Skill is a basic need of a university graduate for finding a job and undertaking the specialized responsibilities of society. In addition to mental, physical, and educational abilities and behavioral characteristics such as personality, attitude, motivation, and personal values, other skills must be acquired during studies, including technical, interpersonal, and perceptive skills. Studies show that employers look for general skills (personal empowerment), skills needed in the work environment (work environment empowerment), and industry and job-specific skills (job empowerment) (1, 2). Abolvahhabi et al. proposed that the basic skills required by modern-era students are technical, methodological, social, behavioral, and communication skills and flexibility, teamwork, problem-solving, computer literacy, and responsibility (3).

Skills are classified into two categories based on their type and requirements: soft and hard skills (4). Historically, technical skills have been considered hard skills and the only ones necessary for employment (5). Hard skills are related to technical knowledge and the ability or capacity to perform a specific task in a specific field (6), and are inherently subject skills and are mostly acquired through formal education (7). In contrast, soft skills are trans-subjective skills and, therefore, have various definitions (8).

Soft skills are characteristics and abilities that help achieve efficacy in the work environment, life, and education. Most soft skills have a human/social dimension and are related to human personality, characteristics, behavior, and interactions (5, 9). Soft skills include personal traits, social attractiveness, language skills, personal values, positive attitudes, awareness, and sensitivity (10). Research shows that hard skills have only a 15% effect on success, and the rest are achieved through soft skills (11). Attention to soft

skills and their role in work environments has increased in recent decades (9, 12-15). Soft skills have far-reaching consequences, with obtaining a job and employment being the most desirable. In support of this, Cinque (2016) states that soft skills are not only related to employability but also to various discourses (economic, social, and human), and perspectives (global, national, and personal) (16). Some experts compare soft and hard skills to computer soft- and hardware and state that just as hardware cannot work without the necessary software, hard skills are of little use without soft skills (17).

Therefore, planning and assessing soft skills is essential for students and young graduates. Matteson et al. (2016) believe that despite the importance of soft skill assessment, many researchers are reluctant to address them due to their ambiguity and complexity, leading to a lack of coherent information and knowledge for planning and policy- and decision-making in educational development in higher education centers (15). Overlooking soft skills renders hard skills ineffective in employment and diminishes opportunities in different stages and fields of life, leading to inefficient human resources (5).

The present study aimed to provide a concise description of the soft skills needed for 21st-century academic students and a brief literature review on various aspects of soft skills in graduate employability.

## 2- MATERIALS AND METHODS

All review studies describing the soft skills needed for 21st-century students and various aspects of soft skills in graduate employability were searched. The search was performed on online databases Medline, EMBASE, PyscINFO, EMBASE, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google search engine with no language or time restrictions (up to December 10, 2022).

Two independent researchers conducted the search process, and a supervisor resolved any discrepancies. The reviewers initially screened the abstracts of searched articles, downloaded their full texts for a careful review, and selected the relevant studies independently. The articles that met the inclusion criteria were selected for the review. Narrative reviews were evaluated with the modified six-item SANRA scale. Each item has a score of 0 to 2, with 0 being the low standard and 2 being the high standard score. The scale covers the following topics: explanation of (1) the importance, and (2) the aims of the review, (3) literature search, and (4) referencing and presentation of (5) evidence level and (6) relevant endpoint data. The maximum score of a narrative review can be 12 (18). The reviewers carried out the quality assessment independently and in duplication, and the third reviewer resolved any discrepancies.

### 3-RESULTS

A total of 12 reviews were selected. The review of the existing literature indicated that soft skills consist of 20 components in two categories: individual (e.g., self-awareness, critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving), and social (e.g., leadership, communication skills, negotiation skills, and teamwork skills). These skills are crucial to the development of a professional and employable individual. Education systems must respond to these needs, and integrating soft skills into university curricula is effective in the successful transfer of young graduates into the workplace. The mean sum score across all 12 reviews was 7.6 out of 12 on the SANRA scale. The main characteristics of the selected studies are summarized in the following:

**1.** A review aimed to establish the contribution of various aspects of soft skills in employability showed that soft

skills such as communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving ability are crucial to the development of an employee into a skilled professional and employable. Hard skills help in finding employment, whereas soft skills help people keep their jobs (19).

**2.** A review aimed to explain the importance and purpose of teaching and learning soft skills in the contemporary period and the critical need to acquire soft skills in the workplace. The results indicated that soft skills play an essential role in the life of all as they define the person in relationship with the surroundings. Soft skills, including communication, problem-solving, leadership, entrepreneurship, and professional skills, are integrated with hard skills and are more difficult to teach and learn. Soft skills can be developed within an individual only when they set the foundation. This way, individuals should be committed to learning soft skills as it is a life-long and tiring process. It can also be considered a source of life (20).

**3.** A theoretical review aimed to provide a brief description of the soft skills required in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and analyze the reasons for incorporating soft skill development into university curricula. The results showed that traditional pedagogy is often too passive for university students since they are limited to the transmission of knowledge and it should be replaced by active and innovative methods. Soft skill development should be incorporated into university curricula to promote multidisciplinary work in higher education systems and to transform young graduates into productive professionals able to face the new work environment challenges. Such skills include resilience, agility, emotional intelligence, the ability to work under pressure, and cognitive flexibility. The integration of soft skill development into university curricula through innovative teaching approaches is

necessary to integrate young graduates into a highly competitive workplace (21).

**4.** A theoretical review aimed to determine the best international practices for developing soft skills in students of different specialties. The analysis results showed that the view of scientific literature varied on efficient strategies, methods, and techniques of soft skill development. Approaches included active learning (game-based, project-based, and competition-based learning), a combination of formal, non-formal, and informal learning, self-development practices, and technology-based learning. Each of these didactic tools has supporters (22).

**5.** A review aimed to assess the current situation and needs for soft skill training at FPT University, Can Tho Campus. The results showed that although the soft skill training program in the university met the demands of students in some ways, their quality required improvement. The inappropriate choice of soft skills training course and teaching method or their poor quality, hampers the practice of soft skills training. Students are generally confused when learning and practicing soft skills, and many still lack confidence in their capacity. Therefore, universities need to address these shortcomings by designing an effective training program, selecting appropriate soft skills courses for specialized majors in each study period, focusing on the qualification of lecturers, and, most importantly, creating a favorable environment for students to practice soft skills regularly and continuously, to turn theoretical knowledge into practical competence (23).

**6.** A review aimed to summarize the concept of soft skills from various definitions and to examine the role of universities in the formation and development of soft skills. Results showed that several studies agreed to assign soft

skills a major role in employability, as well as in achieving well-being and personal goals. This need is now considered essential, and efforts to build and implement soft skills effectively should be intensified. It seems necessary to establish a robust framework of soft skills based on theoretical and empirical research (24).

**7.** A review aimed to discuss aspects of sustainable development and how to integrate the identified soft skills into sustainable development in higher education. The findings identified seven elements of soft skills: communicative skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, teamwork, life-long learning and information management skill, entrepreneurship skills, ethics, morals, professional skills, and leadership (25).

**8.** A theoretical study aimed to provide the pedagogue with a clear conceptualization based on a panoramic review of the literature of classical authors, specifying the general definition of the concept and each of the skills, reviewing the theory of social learning as a reference model for training, and presenting the main practices and strategies to be promoted and developed in the context of higher education. The results showed that investing in the integrated training of students could be worthwhile and affect their future. Consequently, the promotion of a higher education scenario that develops soft skills and comprehensive training can lead to the concurrent development of students' "being" and doing skills and, eventually, to becoming happier and more complete human beings (26).

**9.** A review aimed to investigate the nature of the skills, their implications, and barriers, and to demonstrate the relationship between technological practices and soft skills. The results indicated that significant changes have occurred in the employers' expectations of

workers and what individuals require to become resilient, resourceful, responsible, and able to cope at different times. Education systems must respond to these needs and promote programs that prepare and engage learners with maximum efficiency. This approach needs more effective teaching and learning strategies, student engagement, and assessment practices (27).

**10.** A review on essential soft skills for effective teaching and personality development and professionalism explored the meanings and practices of soft skills, with a special focus on online learning. The results showed that soft skills were essential to healthy and effective practices and were increasingly acknowledged as critical to legal education. Most researchers agreed that soft skills were desirable for career and vocational advancement. Several soft skills were identified as necessary for teachers in the digital world through secondary data, including skills in communication, initiative, technology, leadership, productivity, and team working (28).

**11.** A review aimed to survey the importance of soft skills in students' lives at college and afterward and to discuss how soft skills complement hard skills (i.e., the technical requirements of a job that students are trained for). The results showed that incorporating soft skills into hard skills training is a highly effective method for attractive teaching of particular content and enhancing employability. Soft skills play an essential role in shaping personality. They are critical for students to achieve adequate skills beyond academic or technical knowledge. In addition to raising awareness of the importance of soft skills and encouraging students to improve their skills, lecturers should actively practice soft skills with their students. A highly effective method to improve soft skills is integrating their training with the teaching of hard skills. As

a positive side effect, the lessons could be more attractive and increase the success of learners (29).

**12.** A review study aimed to identify the components of soft skills in human resources. The results showed that soft skills consist of 20 components and are classified into two categories: personal (e.g., self-awareness, self-management, positive attitude, time management, critical thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, strategic thinking, lifelong learning, adaptability, flexibility, creativity, ethics and professionalism, and entrepreneurship skills), and social (e.g., leadership, communication, etiquette, negotiation, cultural compatibility, teamwork, customer orientation and respect for clients, conflict management, and networking). Soft skills should be regarded as a subset of general skills, not as synonymous with them (30).

#### 4- DISCUSSION

This overview aimed to briefly describe the soft skills needed for 21st-century academic students and review the existing literature on various aspects of soft skills in graduate employability. It was found that soft skills consist of 20 components and can be classified into two categories of personal (12 items), and social (8 items) skills. Incorporating soft skills into university curricula is an effective method to successfully integrate young graduates into the workplace.

Today's world of personal, social, family, and career crises requires flexible people who are capable of independent and continuous learning and aware of cultural, social, and moral values. People with critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills are necessary for a healthy and dynamic society (31). Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple, was incredibly brilliant and a revolutionary thinker in technology. However, he did not always find success in the workplace and

was fired for lacking soft skills (42). In the present era, higher education curricula are mainly based on the development of hard skills. Employers seek new employees with strong soft skills, but most students graduating from college lack any such training or education (4, 10, 21). The Oxford dictionary defines soft skills as personal characteristics that enable a person to interact effectively and harmoniously with others. Teachers in schools and colleges rarely teach these features (32). The term soft skill was first used in 1972 in the annual military training, which focused on the skills needed to lead and train troops, such as effective communication and the ability to work with others. Today, this word is used in the business world to refer to the necessary characteristics of people for employment and finding a suitable position (33).

In recent decades, technical (i.e., hard) skills were the only skills required for professional employment. However, these skills alone are not sufficient for modern organizations with complex environments, and graduates should acquire skills in teamwork, communication, leadership, customer service, and problem-solving (34). Hard skills include education, work experience, knowledge, and the level of expertise of the individual (5). In contrast, soft skills involve the personal characteristics of professional prospects in people (5, 7).

The importance of personal development in soft skills can be understood through relevant studies. Stanford Research Institute (SRI International), and Carnegie Mellon Foundation investigations on the CEOs of the top 500 companies showed that 75% of long-term business success is achieved through soft skills, and only 25% comes from hard skills (technical and specialized skills) (5, 35). Another study showed that only 15% of success depends

on hard skills, and the rest is due to soft skills (5).

In 2016, Forbes Magazine introduced skills that managers found insufficient and unsatisfactory in graduates who have just entered organizations. These results were obtained from a survey of the opinions of about 64 thousand managers and 14 thousand graduated academics. The most important of these skills (along with the percentage of agreement of the study participants) were critical thinking and problem-solving (60%), communication (46%), leadership (44%), writing (44%), speaking (39%), teamwork (36%), data analysis (36%), and skills to work with the software required for industry and service (34%) (36). In 1997, the World Health Organization (WHO) outlined a primary set of ten life skills, consisting of self-awareness, empathy, critical thinking, creative thinking, problem-solving, effective communication, interpersonal relationship, stress-coping, and emotion-focused coping techniques (37). Acquiring knowledge of life skills creates positive attitudes and values, leading to desirable behavior, preventing problems, and improving mental health in society. These skills are also known as soft skills (38).

Currently, educational environments need to move towards meritocracy. The rapid growth of technology and transformation and diversity in different professions and specializations have led education officials to consider a general revision in educational planning and, following the needs of the work environment, equip learners with workplace-ready soft skills along with hard skills (31, 38). In general, soft skills help people adapt and act positively to deal effectively with their professional and daily life challenges (39). Soft skills are increasingly viewed as fundamental to employability due to the changing nature of global work (40). Despite growing interest in soft skills, there is no clear consensus on which soft

skills are likely to produce the highest benefit to the youth and how these skills vary across essential goals (41). The incorporation of soft skills development into educational programs could help educational systems adapt and cope better with the challenges of the 21st century at present and in the future (42). Soft skills fulfill an important role in shaping an individual's personality by complementing hard skills. However, overemphasizing these skills should not demote hard skills (i.e., expert knowledge in one's field) to secondary importance (29, 43).

## 5- CONCLUSION

Hard skills are commonly defined as the technical requirements for a specific job. Soft skills are non-technical skills that help people manage themselves and interact with others positively. Achieving success in personal and business life requires both hard and soft skills. Hard skills aid in the acquisition of employment, and soft skills help in its retention. Based on the review of the existing literature, soft skills consist of 20 components in two categories: Personal (self-awareness, self-management, positive attitude, time management, critical thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, strategic thinking, lifelong learning, adaptability and flexibility, creativity, ethics and professionalism, and entrepreneurship), and social (leadership, communication, etiquette, negotiation, cultural compatibility, teamwork, customer orientation and respect for clients, conflict management, and networking). Soft skills are of critical importance for successful academic and professional performance. Therefore, incorporating soft skills into university curricula through innovative teaching approaches is necessary to transfer graduates successfully into the workplace.

## 5- AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Study conception or design: ZJ and SA; Data analyzing and draft manuscript preparation: AJ and SF; Critical revision of the paper: ZJ and AJ; Supervision of the research: ZJ and SA; Final approval of the version to be published: ZJ, AJ, SF, and SA.

**6- CONFLICT OF INTEREST:** None.

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