

Assessing Soft Skills Integration in Higher Education (A Survey of Afghan Universities and Higher Education Institutions)

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Abstract

This article presents a comprehensive study that investigates the extent to which Afghan Universities and Higher Education Institutions prioritize the integration of soft skills within curricula, pedagogy, and educational programs, ensuring alignment with the demands of the 21st-century career market. A survey design has been used to collect the data from 35 different departments of 20 universities and higher education institutions in Afghanistan. The findings of the study revealed several important insights. There is a significant misalignment between the curriculum implemented in Afghan Universities and HEIs and the job market demands. The study found that Afghan Universities and HEIs do not pay sufficient attention to the development and fostering of soft skills in students through their educational programs and pedagogy. The study revealed that respondents also expressed concerns regarding the ability of universities and HEIs to effectively nurture and develop soft skills. They identified some key contributing reasons for their concerns such as outdated curriculum and pedagogy, and lack of professionalism. The researchers recommend that universities and higher education institutions strengthen the integration of soft skills into their educational programs to better prepare students for the professional world. and Prioritizing the integration of soft skills alongside technical knowledge.

Keywords: Afghan Universities & HEIs, Programs, Curriculum alignment, developing soft skills, job market demands

1. Introduction

Developing soft skills is currently a matter of global importance. The demand of the 21st century’s job market indeed requires graduates to master both hard and soft skills, but soft skills are believed to be the foundation for both academic and career success. Research indicates that success in a career/job is 85 percent based on soft skills, while hard skills contribute only 15 percent to one’s success (Wats & Wats, 2009). Likewise, in another survey, 77 percent of employers reported that soft skills are just as crucial as hard skills for their career success (Bray, 2015). Some of the experts (Laureta, 2018; Diakiw, 2016; Heckman & Kautz, 2012) emphasize the importance of developing soft skills from the early stages of life and education. According to Lippmann et al. (2015), soft skills “refer to a broad set of skills, competencies, behaviours, attitudes, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals.” (p. 4) The World Economic Forum has identified 16 skills for 21st-century students, out of which 10 are soft skills. According to the statistics shared by WEF, 98% of parents and 90% of teachers in China place strong emphasis on soft skills, while this percentage in the USA is 81% of parents and 78% of teachers. This survey also indicates that 70% of parents and 56% of teachers in the UK place emphasis on soft skills (World Economic Forum, 2016). In Australia, the demand for soft skills is going to intensify, it is predicted that soft skill-intensive jobs will make up nearly two-thirds of the workforce by 2030 (DeakinCo, 2017).

Figure 1.1 21st Century soft skills for students, identified by World Economic Forum



Given this context, traditionally, there has been a lack of relevance between higher education curricula, the labour market, and students' career objectives (Finch, Falkenberg, McLaren, Rondeau, & O'Reilly, 2018; Miles, 2017). Thus, the 'skill gap' is a global challenge, including Afghanistan. The employability skill gap is a matter of significant concern in Afghanistan. The main reasons for the skill gap are poor quality education, irrelevant and outdated curricula, and classroom instruction in Afghan higher education institutions. Graduates, particularly fresh graduates lack needed skills, specifically crucial soft skills which are required for employability such as interpersonal skills, leadership skills, self-management, critical thinking, teamwork, problem-solving, and creativity (Mofleh & Mangal, 2023; Hashemi, 2020). Despite the war and political turmoil in Afghanistan, certain reforms have been implemented to elevate the quality of education and improve students' learning outcomes, e.g. revision and improvement of the curriculum and embracing effective teaching approaches.

Focus on Soft Skills in Higher Education

The three essential questions about soft skills acquiring/teaching are: should soft skills be integrated into the regular academic curriculum of universities and HEIs? Should soft skills be taught in a separate and misaligned way through a range of extracurricular activities, e.g. providing a simulated environment inside the educational institution? Or, can soft skills be acquired through a self-guided approach and without formal and organized supervision, e.g. with the help of technology and social interaction? As informed by Škuškovnika (2022), based on a comprehensive review of research studies and theories concerning the implementation of education policy in various countries around the world, the development of soft skills needs strategic planning and interaction at five levels: national, institutional, curricula, extracurricular activities and the individual level. Therefore, Škuškovnika concluded that: "In order to educate and train university graduates to meet modern requirements and be competitive in the labour market, it is necessary to purposefully integrate the process of hard and soft skills development during studies, using integrative and innovative teaching methods"(p.25). With this in mind, a wide range of literature highlights the importance of extracurricular activities and social interaction practices in developing soft skills rather than integrating them into a regular academic curriculum. Cinque (2017) emphasizes that now that companies need a more skilled workforce, further skills learning opportunities should be provided for the students to learn soft skills that can enable university students to make a successful transition from education to entering the career market.

Universities and higher education institutions are supposed to integrate soft skills into their curricula and educational programs. Warner (2021) mentioned some of these academic programs, namely the Construction Management Program at Ball State University, Indiana University also implements soft skills into multiple courses and in its curriculum, one as CM 222: Technical Presentation for Construction Managers, which covers various topics related to communication in the construction industry, such as presentation skills, business writing, phone skills, meeting minutes, and interviewing skills. Similarly, the University of Arkansas implements a two-credit MBA program, which includes a two-day workshop (Konyi et al., 2023).

Some of the learning activities that can help students develop soft skills are group or project work, presentations, student exchange programs, internships, voluntary work experience, casual and paid part-time work, industry and community project units and mentoring programs, getting involved in different extracurricular activities, and maintaining the records of your work experience (portfolio), voluntary and other activities (Career Center, University of Sydney, n.d.).

Schulz (2008) has highlighted two ways of learning soft skills: formal training, usually received inside a classroom, where teachers and students are provided with necessary pedagogical support and equipment. For formal learning, a learner needs to enroll and receive a course completion certificate at the end. Some of the institutions embrace some kinds of business-driven or special supporting training or skills-enhancement programs. Second, Self-Directed training. The importance of self-directed learning is the supervision and control of the learning process in tune with the needs of the learner. Knowles (1975) noted that self-directed learning allows learners to take the initiative in the learning process with or without the assistance of others, more according to their needs and self-set goals, and through assessing their progress on their own. According to Gibbons (2002), self-directed learning leads to action and involves students in helping each other and working together to learn. He adds that self-directed learning is more brain-compatible. Thus, in contrast to formal or teacher-directed learning, self-directed learning seems to be more helpful in developing or acquiring soft skills.

Marybeth C. Stalp and Susan E. Hill, who are professors at the University of Northern, Iowa believe that through a technology-enhanced classroom and “built pedagogy”, which support student-centered teaching practices, students can effectively develop their soft skills and other competencies required for the career after their graduation (Stalp and Hill, 2019). Tokaruk et al (2021) noted that project activities offer significant opportunities for the enhancement of soft skills

in entrepreneurial business projects, addressing not only educational but also social and administrative tasks, thereby providing vast potential for the development of soft skills.

1.1. Objectives

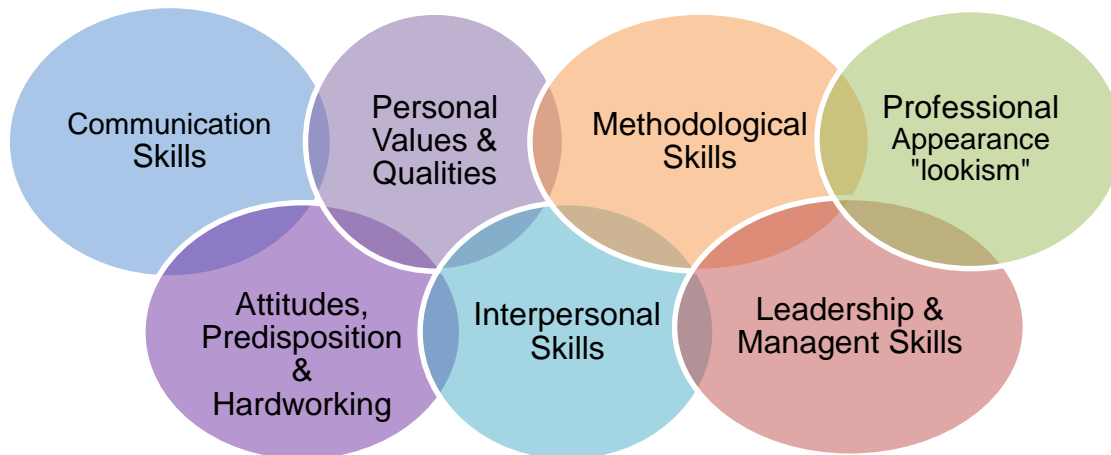
1. To assess the extent to which the curriculum of Afghan Universities/Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) aligns with job market demands.
2. To explore the perceptions of teachers, students, and heads of departments regarding the adequacy of their courses in developing soft skills.
3. To investigate to what extent Afghan Universities/HEIs focus on the development of soft skills within their educational programs and curriculum.
4. To identify barriers/challenges faced by Afghan Universities and HEIs in prioritizing and integrating soft skills in their educational programs.
5. To understand the significance and value of soft skills among teachers and students.

2. Methodology

For this study, a survey design was employed to collect the data from a total of (n=402) respondents including academic members and undergraduate students. The sample of the study comprises teachers, heads of departments, and students. Overall, 110 teachers, 34 heads of departments, and 258 students were the sources of information in this present study. The data was collected from 35 different departments of 20 universities and higher education institutions in Afghanistan. Google online form was used to gather the data. Besides, the researcher also visited university websites to collect information about their training programs for soft skills development/learning.

Designing the questionnaire

To devise the questionnaire, particularly to decide about key categories of soft skills, a literature review was conducted. Consequently, the following distinct areas of soft skills were chosen. The questionnaire consisted of 25 items using a four-point Likert scale to gather the perceptions of respondents on the target skill areas.

Figure 1: Targeted areas of soft skills

Additionally, the number of relevant questions/items assigned to each above-mentioned area varied. In view of that, the Google online questionnaire contained eight parts including the first part of demographic information. Mainly, the study aimed to investigate the emphasis placed on soft skills within different bachelor's degree programs in higher education institutions and universities in Afghanistan, the questionnaire was administered to students at different stages of their bachelor's degree in various universities around the country.

3. Data Analysis and Presentation

The data collected for the study included both numerical and descriptive information, thus, it was analysed and presented using both quantitative and qualitative methods. As mentioned earlier, the collected data was categorized into eight main parts. To present data analysis and findings, a combination of quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative analysis involved summarizing and interpreting the numerical data, including calculating frequency, percentage to provide a quantitative understanding of the data. The qualitative analysis focused on examining the descriptive information collected from open-ended questions and other qualitative data sources. This involved identifying themes, patterns, and narratives within the qualitative responses to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences. Overall, the results of the study were presented comprehensively, combining the quantitative analysis of numerical data with the qualitative analysis of descriptive information. The tables, in conjunction with charts, create a visually appealing and well-organized presentation of the data in six sequencing parts that enhance the accessibility and readability of the data.

Part 1

Table 1.0 Findings on students' Personal values and Qualities

Statements	A	SA	D	NS
1. University education nurtures and develops students' sense of responsibility and associated skills.	176 43.7%	78 19.4%	84 20.8%	64 8%
2. University education assists students to improve their adaptability skills.	118 29.3%	123 30.5%	115 28.6%	46 11.4%
3. University education provides students with the essential knowledge and competencies required for their chosen profession.	92 22.8%	180 44.7%	116 28.8%	14 3.4%
4. University education helps students enhance their personal effectiveness and develop a strong and well-rounded personality.	112 27.8%	212 52.7%	75 18.6%	3 0.7%
5. University education instills in students a comprehensive understanding of ethics related to the job and professional environment.	88 21.8%	175 43.5%	112 27.8%	27 6.7%

A=Agree, SA=Somewhat Agree, D=Disagree, NS= Not Sure

The data presented in Table 1.0 demonstrate the responses of the participants to five related to personal values and qualities. For the first statement, 43.7% (n=176) agreed, 20.8% (n=84) disagreed, 19.4% (n=78) somewhat agreed, and 8% (n=64) remained neutral. The reactions of respondents to the second statement reveal that 30.5% (n=123) of them somewhat agreed, 29.3% (n=118) agreed, 28.86% (n= 115) disagreed, and 11.4% (n=46) were neutral. Regarding the third statement, 44.7% (n=180) somewhat agreed, 28.8% (n=116) disagreed, 22.8% (n=92) agreed, and 3.4% (n=14) remained neutral. In response to the fourth statement, 52.7% (n=212) somewhat agreed, 27.8% (n=112) agreed, 18.6% (n=75) disagreed, and 0.7% (n=3) neutral. With regard to the fifth statement, 43.5% (n=175) somewhat agreed, 27.8% (n=112) disagreed, 21.8% (n=88) agreed, and 6.7% (n=27) stayed neutral.

Chart 1.0 Findings on students' Personal values and Qualities

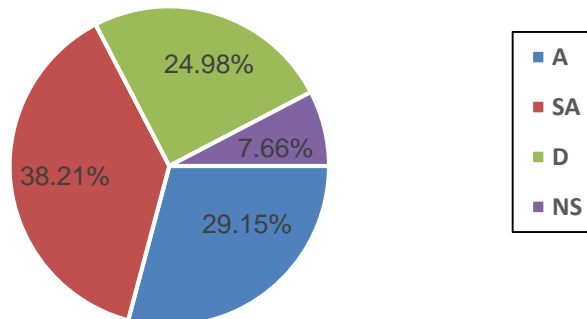


Chart 1.0 illustrates the collective outcomes of the data presented in Table 1.0.

Part 2

Table 1.1 Findings on Attitudes, Predispositions, Enthusiasm and Hardworking

Statements	A	SA	D	NS
1. University education imparts lessons in fostering respect and nurturing friendly behavior towards others within society.	182 45.2%	208 51.7%	12 2.9%	0 0%
2. University education boosts students' interest in learning and fosters a sense of determination to acquire new knowledge and skills.	113 28.1%	194 48.2%	90 22.3%	5 1.2%
3. University education equips students with the skills and capacity to work hard and effectively, even in high-pressure or ambiguous work environments.	78 19.4%	134 33.3%	188 46.7%	2 0.4%

Based on the results of the data analysis presented in Table 1.1, 51.7% (n=208) of respondents somewhat agreed with the first statement, 45.2% (n=182) agreed, and 2.9% (n=12) disagreed. No neutral responses were recorded to this statement. For the second statement, 48.2% (n=194) somewhat agreed, 28.1% (n=113) agreed, whereas 22.3% (n=90) disagreed, and a mere 1.2% (n=5) of participants expressed a neutral stance. Regarding the third statement, the results indicate that 46.7% (n=188) disagreed, 33.3% (n=134) somewhat agreed, 19.4% (n=78) agreed, and 0.4% (n=2) remained neutral.

Chart 1.1 Findings on Attitudes, Predispositions, Enthusiasm and Hardworking

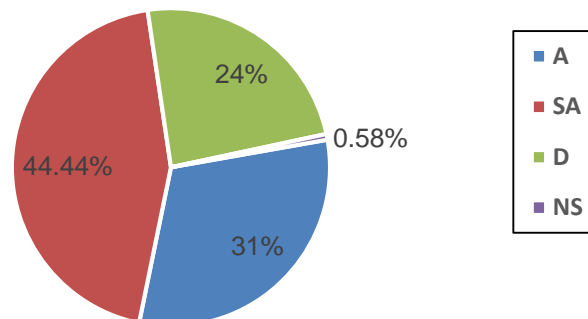


Chart 1.1 demonstrates the overall results of the data presented in Table 1.1.

Part 3

Table 1.2 Findings on Methodological Skills

Questions	A	SA	D	NS
1. University education empowers students with the ability to discern and find appropriate solutions to complex problems.	97 24.1%	190 47.2%	82 20.3%	33 8.2%
2. University education equips students with advanced analytical skills, enabling them to effectively analyse and evaluate complex problems.	95 23.6%	172 42.7%	106 26.3%	29 7.2%
3. University education improves students’ decision-making skills to make informed and impactful decisions.	102 25.3%	196 48.7%	84 20.8%	20 5%
4. University education fosters high-order thinking skills in students, such as creative thinking, innovation, critical thinking, and successful application of knowledge.	96 24%	203 50.4%	97 24.1%	6 1.4%

According to the findings derived from the data presented in Table 1.2, 47.2% (n=190) of respondents somewhat agreed with the first statement, indicating that university education empowers students with the ability to discern and find appropriate solutions to complex problems.

24.1% (n=97) agreed, 20.3% (n=82) not agreed, 8.2% (n=33) are neutral. For the second statement, 42.7% (n=172) somewhat agreed with the statement, saying university education equips students with advanced analytical skills, enabling them to effectively analyse and evaluate complex problems. The data further indicates that 26.3% (n=106) disagreed, 23.6% (n=95) agreed, and 7.2% (n=29) remained neutral. In response to the third statement which suggests that university education improves students’ decision-making skills to make informed and impactful decisions, 48.7% (n=196) somewhat agree, 25.3% (n=102) agreed, 20.8% (n=84) disagreed, while 5% (n=20) stayed neutral. Regarding the fourth statement, 50.4% (n=203) somewhat agreed, 24.1% (n=97) disagreed, 24% (n=96) agreed, and 1.4% (n=6) were neutral.

Chart 1.2 Findings on Methodological Skills

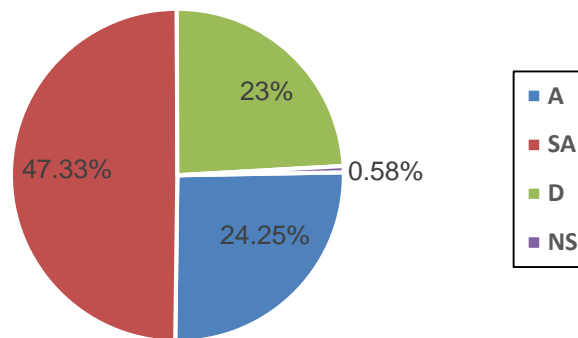


Chart 1.2 presents the overall results of the data showcased in Table 1.2.

Part 4

Table 1.3 Findings on Leadership and Management Skills

Questions	A	SA	D	NS
1. University education empowers students to diagnose their abilities and weaknesses confidently.	110 27.3%	214 53.2%	66 16.4%	12 3%
2. University education equips students with the essential skills how to manage themselves.	89 22.1%	177 44%	107 26.6%	29 7.2%
3. University education instructs students on how to effectively utilize their skills,	125 31%	217 54%	53 13.1%	7 1.7%

enabling them to apply their knowledge, abilities, and expertise in practical ways.

Table 1.3 illustrates the data collected regarding Leadership and Management Skills. Based on the data analysis, presented in this table, 53.2 % (n=214) somewhat agreed, 27.3% (n=110) agreed, 16.4% (n=66) disagreed, and 3% (n=12) others showed neutrality. With regard to the second statement, 44% (n=177) somewhat agreed, 26.6% (n=107) disagreed, 22.1% (n=89) agreed, and 7.2% (n=29) maintained a neutral position. For the third statement, 54% (n=217) of respondents expressed somewhat agreement, 31% (n=125) agreed, 13.1% (n=53) disagreed, and 1.7% (n=7) remained neutral.

Chart 1.3 Findings on Leadership and Management Skills

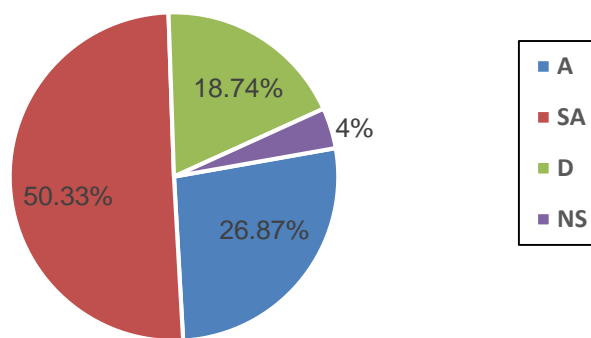


Chart 1.3 demonstrates the total results of the data presented in Table 1.3.

Part 5

Table 1.4 Findings on Communication Skills

Questions	A	SA	D	NS
1. University education equips students with the skills and insights necessary for building good relationships and harmonious interactions with others.	74 18.4%	186 46.2%	134 33.3%	8 2%
2. University education teaches students how to work together within a team.	72 18%	194 48.2%	120 30%	16 4%
3. University education equips students with communicative skills including the capacity to	76 19%	198 49.2%	127 31.5%	1 0.2%

engage in thoughtful discussions, articulate ideas, engage in constructive debates, and solve problems through meaningful and effective conversation.

4. University education fosters in students the capacity to embrace constructive criticism and demonstrate respect toward diverse perspectives and opinions.	96	240	61	5
	24%	58%	15.1%	1.2%
5. University education provides students with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively lead meetings, be a good negotiator, and act as a mediator in debates.	86	218	54	44
	21.3%	54.2%	13.4%	11%

Table 1.4 presents the findings related to communication skills. As the data analysis results indicate, in response to the first statement, 46.2% (n=186) somewhat agreed, 33.3 (n=134) disagreed, 18.4% (n=74) agreed, and 2% (n=8) remained neutral. Concerning the second statement, 48.2% (n=194) somewhat agreed, 30% (n=120) disagreed, 18% (n=72) agreed, and 4% (n=16) were neutral. Regarding the third statement, 49.2% (n=198) somewhat agreed, 31.5% (n=127) disagreed, 19% (76%) agreed, and only 0.2% (n=1) was neutral. In response to the fourth statement, 58% (n=240) somewhat agreed, 24% (n=96) agreed, 15.1% (61%) disagreed, and 1.2% (n=5) neutral. About the fifth statement, 54.2% (n=218) somewhat agreed, 21.3% (n=86) agreed, 13.4% (n=54) disagreed, and 11% (n=44) remained neutral.

Chart 1.4 Findings on Communication Skills

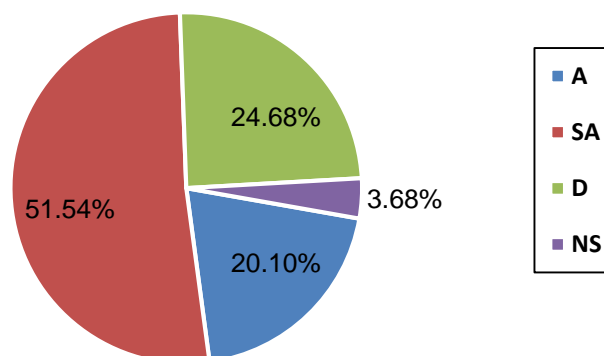


Chart 1.4 showcases the total findings of the data derived from Table 1.4.

Part 6

Table 1.5 Findings on Professional Appearance "Lookism"

Questions	A	SA	D	NS
1. University education imparts valuable guidance on presenting oneself professionally and appropriate dressing and grooming practices.	52 13%	112 28%	217 54%	21 5.2%
2. University education instills in students the significance of observing and valuing appropriate dressing and grooming practices.	50 12.4%	112 28%	220 54.7%	20 4.9%

Table 1.5 presents the collected data about Professional Appearance "Lookism". With respect to the first statement of this part, the findings show that 54% (n=217) disagreed, 28% (n=112) somewhat agreed, 13% (n=52) agreed, and 5.2% (n=21) remained neutral. In response to the second statement, 54.7% (n=220) disagreed, 28% (n=112) somewhat agreed, 12.4% (n=50) agreed, and 4.9% retained a neutral position.

Chart 1.5 Findings on Professional Appearance "Lookism"

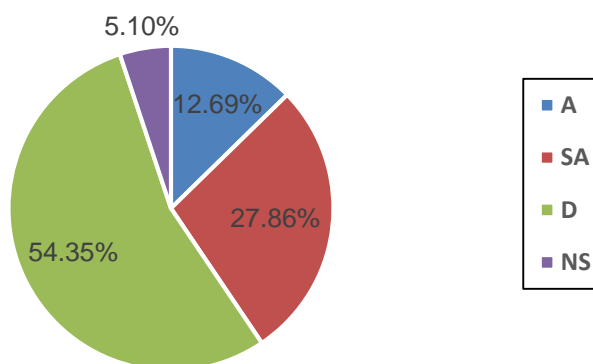


Chart 1.5 illustrates the overall results of the data displayed in Table 1.5.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The study aimed to assess the alignment between the curriculum and educational program of Afghan Universities/Higher education Institutions (HEIs) and the demands of the 21st-century career market. The study also identified the barriers and challenges faced in prioritizing and integrating soft skills into higher educational programs.

Accordingly, the study explored the perceptions of Afghan university teachers, students, and heads of various educational departments in universities and HEIs. The findings of the study revealed several important insights. There is a significant misalignment between the curriculum implemented in Afghan Universities and HEIs and the job market demands. The study found that Afghan Universities and HEIs do not pay sufficient attention to the development and fostering of soft skills in students through their educational programs and pedagogy. Additionally, respondents expressed concerns regarding the adequacy of their courses in developing soft skills. They emphasized the importance of above mentioned soft skills in students' future careers.

In conclusion, the study highlighted the need for Afghan Universities and HEIs to update their curriculum to incorporate job-related soft skills, guaranteeing that graduates are more adequately prepared for employment opportunities. The researchers recommend that universities and higher education institutions strengthen the integration of soft skills into their educational programs to better prepare students for the professional world. and Prioritizing the integration of soft skills alongside technical knowledge. This requires strategic planning, investment in the professional and technical development of faculty, and collaboration between academia and industry stakeholders.

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