

## Internal quality assurance strategies for enhancing students' soft skills in Tanzania's higher education institutions

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### Abstract

*This paper explored the strategies used by the Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) units of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to enhance soft skills among university students in Tanzania. The qualitative research approach was adopted using a multi-case study design involving a sample of thirty-nine (39) participants obtained through purposive and convenient sampling procedures. The study used interviews, focus group discussion and documentary review methods to collect data for the study. The paper deployed thematic and content analysis procedures in the analysis of data. The findings revealed four quality assurance strategies to enhance university students' soft skills, including developing and reviewing curricula, prolonged field attachment, student assessment and developing academic personnel. The study concludes that there is more to be done to ensure that HEIs students are competent in soft skills for their future life realities. The study recommends assigning soft skills greater emphasis in HEIs curricula due to their importance in future life of the students. More studies on the studied topic using larger samples and different contexts are also recommended.*

**Keywords:** Soft skills, internal quality assurance, quality assurance strategies, higher education institutions

### Introduction

Quality assurance in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is essential to their survival. This is particularly the case after the massification of university education, which is characterised by a shift from traditional elite education to mass-quality education (Gupta, 2021; Kis, 2005; Zheng, 2022). Quality assurance processes have been viewed as critical aspects for ensuring the effective functioning of the HEIs for producing quality graduates who can productively compete in the labour market (Abbas, 2020; Alzafari & Ursin, 2019; Manatos et al., 2015; Odukoya et al., 2015; Okolie et al., 2019; Prakash, 2018; Rahnuma, 2020; Ryan,

2015). As such, today's HEIs face critical challenges in their efforts to produce competent graduates with technical and soft skills suitable to face life realities after graduation. While the risk of losing jobs in the labour market to robots is apparent, HEIs need to provide soft skills to their students to safeguard those jobs requiring soft skills and emotional development that requires little automation. This suggests that robots may be more efficient in technical-related jobs while human beings remain with those jobs requiring human skills. The university graduates may be well trained in human and conceptual skills that require emotional and social bonding, such as critical thinking, problem-solving and self and social regulation in the workplace. However, there is scarce research in Tanzania on internal quality assurance strategies for enhancing students' soft skills in Higher Education Institutions.

Soft skills are personal attributes that support situational awareness and enhance an individual's ability to interact with others while accomplishing tasks effectively (NACTE, 2020). Those skills, such as effective communication, teamwork, time management, adaptability, decision making and critical thinking, are crucial for students' future careers. They are considered integral in the workplace as they foster collaboration, discussion and smooth flow of ideas, thus creating a productive and healthy work environment (Fogleman, 2019). Soft skills play a significant role in various aspects of one's career, i.e., from job interviews to promotions, thus enabling graduates to obtain employment and excel throughout their lifetime (NACTE, 2020).

Most HEIs, particularly in Tanzania, predominantly offer hard skills that are insufficient for graduates to perform their jobs effectively (Fogleman, 2019). Mgaiwa (2021) and Williams (2015) maintain that besides hard skills, soft skills such as excellent communication and negotiation skills can give individuals an advantage in interactions. However, in Tanzania, there is a significant shortage of these skills among graduates, depriving them of job opportunities or putting their careers at risk (NACTE, 2020; Ngalomba, 2018; Richard, 2018; Williams, 2015; Wood, 2018). Evidence shows that over 60% of employers in Tanzania express dissatisfaction with the lack of soft skills such as customer care, innovation, report writing, teamwork, communication, problem-solving and time management among graduates, which is attributed to the ineffectiveness of HEIs' training in these areas (NACTE, 2020; Ngalomba, 2018). This suggests that either HEIs in Tanzania have not adequately updated their curricula to enable their graduates to develop the requisite soft skills matching the current global demand, or their programmes face some flaws as they address soft skills; or the combination of these two situations. This further suggests that research on strategies for enhancing students' soft skills in the HEIs is imperative.

The inadequacy of soft skills among graduates has significant socio-economic effects on the labour market in Tanzania and globally (Amani, 2017). Many graduates in Tanzania struggle to compete in the labour market but lack soft skills (Ngalomba, 2018). Consequently, numerous employers in Tanzania are compelled to incur additional costs by providing extra training to complement,

among others, the graduates' soft skills (NACTE, 2020; Richard, 2018). Recognising the significant absence of soft skills among graduates and the importance of such skills for employment and career development, the Tanzanian government and other education stakeholders have devised various initiatives to address the soft skills inadequacies. Such initiatives included implementing Education and Skills for Productive Job programmes for results (ESPJ), which was a World Bank-funded project of 120 million United States Dollars. Other initiatives included educational reforms such as the Tanzania Education and Training Policy (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2014) and the Education Sector Development Programme [ESDP 2008-2017] (URT, 2018). In today's rapidly evolving job market, employers increasingly prioritise candidates with strong soft skills alongside academic qualifications. However, little is known about HEIs' quality assurance strategies for enhancing students' soft skills. Hence, the research question that guided the current enquiry was: What strategies are applied by the HEIs to nurture the students' soft skills in Tanzania?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was informed by the theory of employability by Yorke and Knight (2004), which states that employability is the outcome of one's learning, achievements and understanding of personal skills needed to be successful within a chosen career. The theory emphasises the importance of specific skills and attributes that individuals need to succeed in the job market. This theory suggests that academic qualifications and technical skills are necessary but not sufficient for securing and sustaining employment. Instead, a broader range of skills, often called employability skills, including soft skills, are required to meet the changing demands of the workplace. This theory is relevant to the study as it provides a comprehensive understanding of soft skills enhancement strategies and their alignment with the broader employability agenda that the HEIs need to consider. The theory has been applied in several other studies (see, for example, Craig, 2021; Römgens et al., 2020; Sumanasiri et al., 2019; Tong & Gao, 2022; Yajid & Khatibi, 2015).

### **Conceptual Literature**

Besides the tenets of the employability theory, graduates in lower economies like Tanzania tend to miss the critical attributes of employability when considering their suitability concerning the required soft skills. As such, the literature is replete with reports of the hardships experienced by graduates who are poorly prepared for the workplace (Assan & Nalutaaya, 2018; Deloitte Access Economics, 2017; Development Economics, 2015; Mutalemwa et al., 2020). Arguably, the inadequacy of soft skills in the curriculum of the HEIs has been cited as one of the critical factors affecting graduates' employability (Ravindran & Bandara, 2015; UNICEF, 2019). It appears that most HEIs prioritise technical skills and only address soft skills in later stages of education, assuming they would emerge by themselves during interactions in the workplace (Fogleman, 2019). Furthermore, the university curricula are rarely updated to align with current

labour market requirements (Obinna et al., 2014; Tamrat, 2020). Literature also highlights the trainers' inadequate background in soft skills and the challenges associated with assessing and quantifying these skills, thus leading to difficulties in grading them (Danial et al., 2014; Fogleman, 2019). Additionally, the lack of consistent teaching, learning and assessment methods for soft skills results in different definitions and confusion among trainers and students (Fogleman, 2019; Sanga, 2019). Since soft skills do not appear as a specific course in its own right, its assessment tends to be inconsistent. Under normal circumstances, teaching procedures in the HEIs widely focus on formal curriculum that emphasises the use of standardised testing, paying lip service to the hidden curriculum. Hence, when soft skills appear in the HEIs as mere hidden curriculum, they may not be emphasised similarly to those technical aspects forming formal curriculum.

The literature indicates some shortcomings of the education policy initiatives that fail to address non-technical skills, including soft skills, adequately. Some education policy initiatives prioritise the technical skills relevant to student's specific areas of specialisation while neglecting other crucial non-technical skills, such as communication, management and leadership skills, that are highly valued by employers (Richard, 2018; UNICEF, 2019). Damon et al. (2016) point out a discrepancy between existing education policies and national development policies, which indicates a failure to consider the demands of the labour market, including the need for students to possess soft skills essential for employability and overall growth. Consequently, higher education institutions produce graduates with limited soft skills required for employment (Richard, 2018; Williams, 2015) as their curricula tend to overlook soft skills and other affective dimensions generally. This error of omission leads to insufficient acquisition of soft skills among HEI graduates (Ravindran & Bandara 2015; UNICEF, 2019; Wood, 2018).

Despite the fact that internal quality assurance strategies are crucial for enhancing students' soft skills in Tanzanian higher education, significant gaps still exist. Many universities focus on academic and technical performance, often overlooking essential soft skills like communication and teamwork (Mwita et al., 2023; Mutalemwa et al., 2020; Sanga, 2019). While some institutions have initiated workshops for soft skill development, these efforts are inconsistent and lack integration into the curriculum (Kinyondo & Shija, 2024, Malmqvist & Kullman, 2022). Overall, limited research on HEI strategies to foster students' soft skills in Tanzania makes this study imperative.

## **Research Methods**

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, which seeks the informants' personal experiences subjectively (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2011). Qualitative research was deemed important because it served as an appropriate means to seek answers for the research question on strategies adopted by HEIs to enhance students' soft skills. The study was

informed by the interpretivist philosophical view, concerned with interpreting, understanding, experiencing, and constructing the social world (Burrell & Morgan, 2017; Soklaridis, 2009). The investigation was undertaken using the multiple case study design (Yin, 2011) in which three privately owned HEIs were involved as cases. Multiple case study design was used because it makes in-depth investigations of a phenomenon of interest hence increasing the research rigour and interpreting what transpires in a bounded system compared to others (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2011). The choice of the private HEIs follows the evidence that those private HEIs had been facing the punitive measures, including de-registration more often than the government HEIs based on quality concerns (Peter, 2020). In the case of this study, the bounded systems comprised the three university settings whose heads of quality assurance units, academic staff, student leaders and students were involved in the study.

This study involved 39 participants, that is, three (3) heads of quality assurance units (QAU), six (6) members of the quality assurance committee, six (6) academic staff, three (3) student leaders and twenty-one (21) students. The point of saturation determined the sample size as any addition of the sample had data that repeated what had already been generated. Whereas the heads of quality assurance units were purposively selected, other participants were obtained through convenient sampling based on their time schedules and readiness to participate in the study. Those included members of the quality assurance committees, academic staff members, student leaders and students. Each category of informants represented a perspective that varied from the others. For instance, the perspective of student leaders differed from that of other students as they attended quality assurance meetings and had occasional meetings with the administration, which enabled them to be more informed. This small sample provided rich and in-depth insights (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2011). Overall, the variability of the informants was deemed necessary as a means to enrich the study with rigour. The data were mainly collected through focus group discussion and face-to-face semi-structured interviews to generate data that was analysed thematically. It also utilised the documentary review method to obtain data that was subjected to content analysis. The reviewed documents included tests and examination papers, fieldwork guidelines, prospectuses, course outlines and the University Qualification Framework (EQF). The researchers visited the field before collecting the data for the purpose of familiarising with the research contexts and building professional relationships with the research informants. During the field visits, the FGD and interview questions were revised by the researchers in order to obtain accurate and in-depth information from the study participants.

The data gathered were analysed thematically using the stages clarified by Saldaña (2014). The referred stages involved identifying codes in the data, creating and developing high-level categories, reviewing those categories to create themes, and applying emerging themes to research questions. Before starting coding,

general codes were designed according to study objectives. Then, two researchers coded each transcript consistently to ensure inter-rater reliability. Discussions were held on any points of difference until a consensus was reached. Additionally, pivot tables were developed where the obtained clean codes were tabulated, enabling easy identification of themes, analysis and reporting. Having familiarised with the data, the researchers checked the transcribed data continuously as they received them, thus engaging participants in approving what they had said. Using a small sample enabled the researchers to read and iterate the data set several times (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Cohen et al., 2011). The data coding was inductively done as it relied on the transcribed data, where the vital emerging issues were noted. The coding was done by critically reading the words, phrases, and paragraphs that repeatedly emerged in the data set (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

## Findings and Discussion

The findings were presented and discussed based on the themes established in relation to the research question on strategies for teaching soft skills in HEIs. The themes included curriculum development and review, long field attachment, staff development and student assessment. There were diverse perspectives between the heads of QAU, members of QAU meetings, academic staff, student leaders and students regarding strategies for enhancing soft skills among students in HEIs, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: QAU strategies and practices for enhancing soft skills among students in HEIs

Clean code	Head QAU	QAU Members	Academic Staff	Student Leaders	Students
Curriculum Development	5(38.5%)	6(31.6%)	7(31.8%)	4(44.4%)	18(45%)
Long field attachment	2(15.4%)	6(31.6%)	6(27.3%)	2(22.2%)	16(40%)
Staff Development	4(30.8%)	6(31.6%)	6(27.3%)	1(11.1%)	2(5%)
Student Assessment	2(15.4%)	1(5.3%)	2(9.1%)	1(11.1%)	3(7.5%)
Irrelevant			1(4.5%)	1(11.1%)	1(2.5%)
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>13(100%)</b>	<b>19(100%)</b>	<b>22(100%)</b>	<b>9(100%)</b>	<b>40(100%)</b>

Table 2: Findings in Summary

S/N	Strategies		Quotes
1.	Curriculum review and development		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ The nation and regulatory authorities are aware of the importance of soft skills, but they never emphasise incorporating the same into the curricula.</li> <li>□ The unit needs to initiate the curriculum review process, which should ensure the integration of some soft skills components in some modules within those curricula.</li> </ul>
2.	Prolonged attachment	Field	□ I can assure you that the six-week period is inadequate in developing soft skills for the students. We are mostly busy preparing ourselves for being assessed by our instructors.
3.	Academic development	personnel	□ Instructors cannot normally deliver soft skills when they have not been taught the same in their course of study. This problem can be solved by conducting soft skills workshops for faculty members so that they can be introduced to such skills before teaching students.
4.	Student assessment		□ I have already advised the university management to re-think and review the university format and guidelines so that the examination questions should at least measure how the student acquires the soft skills.

### Curriculum Review and Development

Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussion (FGD), 38.5% (Head-QAU), 31.6% (QAU-Members), 31.8% (Academic staff), 44.4% (Student Leaders) and 45% (Students) it was revealed that most of the university curricula did not adequately accommodate soft skills. This follows that the aforementioned skills were mostly taught in first years of studies and lessons in subsequent years, thus causing students to develop those skills differently in their programmes and courses. It was revealed that the students' soft skills learning was based on the instructor's willingness and flexibility during the lesson delivery, as soft skills were not in most of the course outlines. Actually, only three courses tended to underscore the soft skills in the first year, namely Development Studies, Communication Skills and Social Studies. Hence, instructors for the other courses were not obliged to teach soft skills as those were not part of the curriculum they implemented. In this view, the study participants argued that HEIs needed to enhance the students' soft skills by incorporating such skills in the new courses or modules specifically designed to develop soft skills. However, there was concern

among the participants that adding soft skills as a standalone course would require reducing some existing courses, extending the programme duration, or doing it as a preliminary course before students joined their specific areas of specialisation. Participants further provided examples of how soft skills could be enhanced, including offering comprehensive communication skills courses, leadership workshops or project-based learning activities that require teamwork and problem-solving in the course of learning, with the focus promoting soft skills.

The research findings obtained through in-depth interviews with academic staff members and FGD with students revealed that a significant number of university curricula did not accommodate soft skills in their teaching. For example, student leaders noted that soft skills were not part of their study programmes despite their importance in ordinary life and specifically in social interactions. They pointed out that the world has changed significantly such that soft skills could be a tool for their future lives in the globalised world.

In one of the focus group discussions, a student made an example of the need for incorporating soft skills in communication skills or a course related to cultural anthropology because their context involved opportunities for mingling with tourists. The student stressed that those soft skills for interacting with the tourists would be a means towards self-employment as a tour guide. Both the teaching members of staff and student leaders decried the absence of soft skills content. They noted that even when there were attempts to provide personal examples, such as role modelling, it would be difficult for students to internalise them. Hence, they said, a soft skills course was missing from the curriculum. Equally, both the heads of quality assurance units and quality assurance officers admitted that the university curricula had overlooked the aspect of soft skills. Still, they claimed there was a need for assigning it space. These findings aligned with those by Noah and Aziz (2020), who reported that graduates lack soft skills that employers highly valued. They also resonate with findings by Cimatti (2016), who recommended that soft skills should be embedded in teaching that corresponds to related disciplines. The absence of such curricula leads to a lack of opportunities for students to learn and develop soft skills within their classes. These findings suggest that universities must build and develop the nation's human capital through comprehensive curricula to overcome the challenges of neglected soft skills. As such, Gunarathne et al. (2021) recommended designing and integrating specific courses or modules devoted to developing soft skills. The view that students engaged in activities like seminars and practical aspects reported improved communication skills, increased confidence, better problem-solving abilities, and enhanced teamwork capabilities (Jackson, 2015) further suggests curriculum modification for soft skills package. This fact also aligns with Cimatti (2016), who reported that seminars, coaching and tutoring to teach soft skills help students develop soft skills, hence becoming marketable and competitive globally.



### Long-term Field Attachment

The findings obtained through interviews and FGDs revealed that providing long-term opportunities for field attachment enhanced soft skills acquisition. Participants stated that this involved internships, collaborative education programmes, community service projects or simulations that would simulate real-world work environments. The participants opined that the prolonged field experience was practical in enhancing soft skills. It provided time and space for students to learn and adjust their attributes and abilities as they interacted with many individuals in their natural contexts. Participants further cited the field experience as an avenue for improving students' intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships, thus improving their soft skills, as field experience involved broader attachments than the institutional environment. The findings further emphasised that such experiences allow students to apply their competencies and develop their soft skills in practical settings. During one of the interviews, one of the student leaders from institution 'B' remarked:

... I think you know [...]we normally undertake fieldwork for six weeks during our study's first and second years. Fieldwork also applies to most of the programmes taught at our university. However, I can assure you that the six-week period is inadequate for developing soft skills for the students. We are mostly busy preparing ourselves for assessments by our instructors; hence, we do not make time to interact with the hosts in the field to learn and exchange life experiences (Interview with the students' leaders, 7<sup>th</sup> December 2023).

In another FGD, one of the students from institution 'C' perceived field experience, saying:

It is mainly in the fieldwork that we learn how to socialise with others and develop soft skills. During the semester sessions, instructors usually focus [...] on the coverage of their modules and testing, even for the courses with a practical component. This move is inappropriate as we are denied an opportunity to make meaning of what we learn (Interview with the students, 12<sup>th</sup> December 2023).

Furthermore, one of the interviewed academic staff from institution 'A' commented on the students' deficiency of soft skills, contending that:

Currently, soft skills inadequacy forms an obstacle among the graduates in our country. The students' ability to explain themselves is a critical issue. They fail to apply what they have learned to solve social problems they encounter. I believe that field attachment can [...] address this lack of soft skills. To make the field attachment useful, it is important to demand students prepare the fieldwork reflection reports indicating

what soft skills they have developed. (Interview with the academic staff member, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2023).

Overall, the participants' views revealed the importance of prolonged field attachment as one of the ways to enhance HEI students' soft skills. Nonetheless, how the accrediting authorities view the field attachment in relation to students' soft skills development is not clearly understood. However, it may be established that the study participants understood that the more students stayed in the field, the better their chances of enhancing their life and soft skills increased. Hence, participants' voices indicated that the positive impact of long-term field attachment on developing soft skills were evident. These findings were supported by Ongonda and Muindi (2019), who found that field attachment provides an accessible environment for developing listening skills and enhances writing and teamwork skills. Equally, Succi and Canova (2019) underlined that universities offer less exposure to the real world and that internships, case studies and corporate testimonials can overcome this challenge. Arguably, field attachment provides a more immersed and practical learning environment, thus allowing the students to gain hands-on experience, reflect on their experiences, and actively engage with the learning process (Jawabri, 2017). Jawabri further posits that the inculcation of soft skills is strongly associated with the internship experience and learning other new skills. Hence, by emphasising field attachment opportunities, higher educational institutions can better prepare students for success in their future careers and personal lives.

### **Development of Academic Personnel**

The research participants' views established that the academic staff played a vital role in fostering the students' soft skills. The findings established that faculty development programmes focusing on teaching effective communication methods were essential to empower the academic personnel with competencies for dealing with soft skills. These approaches, which promote soft skills such as using active, meaningful and deep learning models, could significantly impact students' learning outcomes in soft skills and various social and academic aspects. Participants further argued that the development of academic staff helps develop mentors and role models, thus providing guidance and support to students to develop their soft skills. One of the academic staff from institution 'B' commented that:

Most of the academic staff in Tanzania's HEIs constitute the product of the theoretical-based education system. Therefore, they cannot teach soft skills since they are not equipped with such skills. Under normal circumstances, the instructors cannot deliver the soft skills while they were not taught the same in their courses of study. Hence, soft skills training workshops for faculty members are important (Interview with the academic staff member, 21<sup>st</sup> December 2023).

Based on the verbatim voices from the academic staff and students, it can be established that HEIs have a role to play, such as designing soft skills workshop training or any training sessions for their teaching staff to address aspects such as communication, presentation skills, time management and emotional intelligence. HEIs can also help to establish mentoring or coaching programmes where students can receive guidance and support from faculty members, alums or industry professionals. This assertion entails that in the absence of refresher programmes, the teaching force would teach as they were taught without considering the soft skills. These views align with Cimatti's, 2016; Haviland, Robbins, Belur, Cherfrere & Klieger, 2021; Ibrahim, Boerhannoeddin & Bakare, 2017; Noah & Aziz 2020 recommendations that the teaching staff be trained and motivated to incorporate soft skills to help students identify their own soft skills gaps to become independent learners. They further emphasised that the role of a lecturer extends beyond imparting standardised testing to encompass the nurturing of students' soft skills.

Furthermore, Md-Ali et al. (2016) argued that lecturers are the best experts, thinkers, knowledge generators and role models hence they should be well-equipped to develop soft skills in students. The validity of this argument, however, depends on the levels of staff motivation; the motivated staff stand a better chance to offer extended professional services, such as engaging in their students' soft skills, while those who are not motivated might not care. Franco et al. (2019) and Foster and Yaoyuneyong (2016) further argued that the academic staff who are trained to offer soft skills can create engaging and interactive classroom experiences that may foster the development of communication, teamwork, critical thinking and problem-solving skills among HEI students. Generally, responses on the theme of staff development seemed to indicate that soft skills happened to be newer and unfamiliar to the teaching staff. The need to train the teaching staff cannot be overemphasised, considering that the HEI students had not been taught those skills since their early schooling years. Hence, it is at the HEI level that they have to learn those skills before joining the world of work.

### **Student Assessment**

The student assessment of soft skills formed one of the themes of the present study. The study participants viewed it as one of the missing aspects in the HEIs, stating that the HEIs' assessment and evaluation procedures followed the traditional standardised testing. Findings further revealed that the conventional system of assessment does not determine a student's acquisition of soft skills or any affective dispositions. Participants noted that contemporary employers emphasise high levels of soft skills, but the HEIs have overlooked those skills, resulting in implementation gaps (Kis, 2005). Participants admitted that much left to be desired concerning assessing students' soft skills. The head of the quality assurance unit from institution 'B' maintained that:

Most assessment procedures used to evaluate our students undertaking social science programmes are too theoretical and cannot assess the students' soft skills. I have advised the university management to re-think on making a review of the university format and guidelines so that the examination questions could at least measure how a student acquires soft skills. This will lead to several other reviews, but we should start somewhere else (Interview with the head of the quality assurance unit on 4<sup>th</sup> December 2023).

During the interview, one of the academic staff from institution 'C' commented that:

As academicians, we normally set the examination based on the existing university guidelines. However, I have not yet come across an examination measuring soft skills. Based on the necessity of soft skills in the world's current labour market, I can say we are lagging behind, or, to say it well, we are using the old-fashioned system of assessment when considering soft skills. (Interview with the academic staff member, 28<sup>th</sup> November, 2023).

Considering the voices of the study participants, it was revealed that the assessment procedures used in the Tanzanian HEIs did not consider the labour market demands. This inconsideration further suggests that the HEIs represented the characteristics of the universities of the lower economies of the world, which lack clear connections with industry and enterprises. Literature (Asgari et al., 2021; Mizraie & Motaharinezhad, 2018; Oztel, 2020; Sepehri et al., 2021) classifies the universities into first to fourth-generation universities, where the higher levels, that is, third and fourth-generation levels is characterised with clear links between the university, industry, enterprises and the government. Hence, the university graduates in those regions fit into the labour market upon graduation, having the requisite soft skills for the jobs they learnt about at their HEIs

While the participants' views indicated that the assessment of students' learning did not take into account soft skills, scholars (Allen & Glanzer, 2017; Bartel, 2018; Mwita et al., 2023; Tang, 2019; Vogler et al., 2018) emphasise the need for HEIs to have their teaching and assessment targeting employment-related competencies. The focus is to enable students to acquire soft skills applicable to the world market. This focus includes students' assessing the way they understand and reflect on their self-control development. Additionally, Hadiyanto et al. (2017) reported that very few higher education students had acquired satisfactory soft skills for the demands of their future careers. This report implies that there is a need to improve the mode of assessment to ensure that the students graduate with all the required skills, including soft skills.

One of the best practices for assessing soft skills could be the deep and meaningful learning model (Mystakidis, 2021; Zheng, 2022). This model emphasises deep learning instead of surface learning, characterising the university education studied. In the deep learning model context, students direct their own learning, attempt to comprehend the learning content and procedures and modify according to their beliefs, behaviour and values (Mystakidis, 2021). It is, therefore, apparent that within the deep learning model, students' chances of developing soft skills can be enhanced. The assessment and provision of feedback on the students' soft skills are crucial for several reasons. First, it allows the students to understand their strengths and weaknesses in communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability and leadership (Devedzic et al., 2015; Qizi, 2020). Constructive feedback helps the students identify specific areas for improvement and guides them in effectively enhancing their soft skills (Otermans et al., 2023).

Furthermore, assessing soft skills provides a holistic view of the students' capabilities beyond measuring their content knowledge. Soft skills are vital in professional settings, and their evaluation helps to ensure that the students are well-prepared to meet the demands of the workforce (Asefer & Abidin, 2021; El Messaoudi, 2021; Meeks, 2017). By incorporating soft skills assessment into the curriculum, educational institutions can better align their programmes with the expectations and needs of employers.

An analysis of course outlines for courses like Development Studies, Communication Skills, and Social Studies revealed that these courses contained a strong emphasis on soft skills. However, the study revealed that most of the reviewed documents like prospectus, course outlines for specialty courses, assessment documents, fieldwork guidelines lacked a strong mention of the soft skills. This is contrary to the University Qualification [UQF] (TCU, 2012) which sets out the levels of competences needed to be attained by students graduating from the HEIs, including soft skills. However, the HEIs prospectuses and course guidelines did not indicate areas where affective-based competencies, such as soft skills, are considered in the teaching and learning arrangements. The test and examination papers reviewed did not indicate how students' affective dispositions, particularly soft skills, were included in the various courses they pursued. The fieldwork guidelines indicated the need for professional conduct but did not specify the role of HEI students towards soft skills during their interactions with their hosting institutions. Hence, the study established that soft skills in the reviewed teaching documents did not align with the envisaged qualification framework.

Generally, participants noted a lack of practical application in everyday teaching and learning. This suggests that while soft skills were introduced in students' first year, they were not reinforced in later years. Additionally, the extent to which students mastered these skills remains unclear, as reviewed tests and

assignments showed little evidence of soft skills being included in assessments in line with the University Qualifications Framework (UQF).

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Soft skills in the studied HEIs were enhanced mainly through some first-year courses designed to capture such skills; this presumes that students would have developed adequate and broad soft skills through various interactions with academic staff, students and others in their courses of study. The studied HEIs have taken various efforts to enhance soft skills development in their curricula. However, the situation indicated that there was much more to be done to ensure that HEI students are competent in soft skills for their future life realities. The study, therefore, recommends prompt steps to be undertaken by the HEIs, including curriculum reforms to produce their outputs in relation to the needs of the industry, enterprises and government sectors by addressing soft skills pitfalls. The study also recommends more studies on the topic using larger samples and different contexts.

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