# Students' Perceptions of Soft Skills Development Programs at a Public University in Bangladesh

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## Abstract

Soft skills, such as communication, leadership, teamwork, a positive work attitude, and interpersonal skills, are valuable for career development, and graduates with these skills receive priority from employers. This study assessed students' perceptions of the soft skills development programs of Sylhet Agricultural University (SAU) using both qualitative and quantitative data. A total of 134 students and 12 key informants were selected using quota and purposive sampling, respectively. The majority of the students felt that the content and overall management of the skill development program held at SAU were unique. The uniqueness of this program was associated with the subject matter (68.8%), the keynote speaker's motivational skills (64.5%), and the overall management of the session (50.5%), which were the three weighted factors that made this program successful. In addition, they desired to attend various skill development programs, even paying for them themselves, to acquire these skills for their careers. Since tertiary education in Bangladesh often fails to equip students with sufficient soft skills, this research suggests launching student training centers at each university to facilitate soft skills development programs, which are essential for better institutional quality assurance.

**Keywords:** *Soft Skills, Skills Development, Students' Perception, Career Center, Training Center*

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## 1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the global emphasis on developing soft skills has notably increased, reflecting their essential role in modern education and employment sectors (Nealy, 2005). Soft skills encompass character traits, attitudes, behaviors, and high levels of commitment to the job that make the candidate stand out ahead of their peers (Deepa & Seth, 2013; Robles, 2012).

Soft skills have emerged as a critical determinant of employability, with employers across diverse sectors increasingly prioritizing these competencies as essential qualifications for candidate selection and professional advancement (Duncan & Dunifon, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2010; Robles, 2012). New graduates who acquire these skills are necessary for organizations to uphold competitive advantages (Seetha, 2014), thus, employers put effort into increasing these skills in their employees. In the United Kingdom, organizations are increasingly allocating substantial resources to developing soft skills among underperforming managers, recognizing significant gaps in interpersonal and adaptive capacities essential to effective workplace performance and leadership effectiveness (Garwood, 2012). Research by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD, 2012), now known as the Association for Talent Development, reported that in 2011, American industries spent up to USD 156.2 billion on employee training and development. They have noted a positive correlation between organizational investment in employee development initiatives and measurable business outcomes (ASTD, 2012). Organizations prioritizing comprehensive training programs targeting interpersonal and adaptive competencies have demonstrated substantially enhanced financial performance, with returns manifesting in higher profitability margins, greater revenue per workforce member, and stronger market valuations (Rodriguez & Walters, 2017). For instance, empirical evidence suggests that an average investment of $1,575 per employee in learning resulted in a 218% increase in revenue per employee and a 24% increase in gross profit (Rodriguez & Walters, 2017). These statistics indicate the significance of soft skills for employee performance, helping employers raise their growth rates to higher trajectories (Saini, 2015). These findings also emphasize the strategic importance of allocating human capital resources toward workforce capability development as a mechanism for achieving competitive advantage and organizational sustainability in contemporary business environments.

The general opinion among employers is that fresh graduates often fail to meet the required qualifications (Jackson, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2010; Paul, 2018; Seetha, 2014). While a few students have potential and are equipped with various skills, such as communication, teamwork, time management, and the ability to handle

multiple tasks, most have struggled to integrate these skills into their careers (Shamsuddin et al., 2013). Despite employer expectations that universities should cultivate soft skills competencies, empirical evidence reveals substantial gaps between institutional curricula and workplace requirements for these essential (Hairi et al., 2011; Sparks & Waits, 2011). Previous research suggests that in higher education institutions (HEIs), subject-specific knowledge and skills are strongly emphasized and do not fulfil society's realistic needs (Armstrong & Kleiner, 1996; Osman et al., 2012; Sparber & Fan, 2012).

In Bangladesh, 108 private and 50 public universities govern the country's higher education landscape and provide higher education to a combined student population of 4.23 million (University Grants Commission of Bangladesh, 2022). Among them, 20 public universities, including 7 specialized agricultural universities, offer agricultural-related graduate degrees in Bangladesh, including Sylhet Agricultural University (SAU). It has been observed that there is still no noticeable activity in higher education institutions to develop students' soft skills (Rahman et al., 2019). Although educational policy documents in Bangladesh emphasize the need to integrate soft skills into the curriculum, practical implementation remains challenging (Rahman et al., 2019).

There is a growing mismatch between the skills of graduates and the job market, with a particular dearth of soft skills of students from Bangladeshi universities (Alam et al., 2022; Rahman et al., 2019). Employers in Bangladesh consider soft skills the most important factor in hiring decisions, with the greatest gap in communication and language skills (Khatun et al., 2022). Ansarey (2017) notes that roughly 75% of employed university graduates in Bangladesh fell short of the skillset expected in a professional work setting. Obviously, this soft skills gap has led to high unemployment among graduates. Bangladesh, with a predominantly agricultural and service-driven workforce, faced a persistent unemployment crisis even before the pandemic. The educated workforce witnessed an annual addition of nearly 2.2 million unemployed individuals (Trading Economics, 2020), pushing the unemployment rate from 4.4% in 2019 to 5.4% in 2020 and 5.2% in 2021, mostly due to the COVID-19 impact (World Bank, 2022). Rahman et al. (2021) report an unemployment rate of 11.2% among Bangladesh's university graduates, while Biswas (2020) highlights an influx of nearly 1 million fresh graduates into the already unemployed pool each year. In this context, this study examines students' perceptions of the soft skills development program conducted at a public university in Bangladesh.

This paper follows the following structure. Firstly, a literature review has been conducted to understand the meaning of soft skills and the research conducted in

this field. The research questions and methodology of this study have been presented. The subsequent section results and discussion examine students' insights into the effectiveness of the soft skills development program, the soft skills they consider critical for their careers, and the ways that can help students develop these essential skills. The latter section presents the research limitations, policy implications, and the paper's conclusion.

## 2. Literature Review

Soft skills encompass intangible interpersonal and behavioral competencies that facilitate effective leadership, collaborative problem-solving, conflict resolution, and stakeholder engagement across organizational contexts (Robles, 2012). It encompasses personal attributes and interpersonal abilities essential for effective and harmonious interaction with others, serving as valuable complements in professional workplace settings (Matteson et al., 2016). Numerous authors have defined soft skills differently and have included a variety of factors in their definitions (Seetha, 2014; Deepa & Seth, 2013; Andrews & Higson, 2008; Osman et al., 2012). For example, Deepa & Seth (2013) state that soft skills represent a constellation of personal attributes encompassing teamwork, communication, leadership, customer engagement, and analytical problem-solving capabilities that collectively enhance individual and organizational effectiveness. Seetha (2014) notes six key skills, i.e., communication skills, positive attitude, teamwork, interpersonal and social skills, analytical and problem-solving skills, and leadership skills, as critical success factors, while Andrews & Higson (2008) add reliability, professionalism, the ability to work under pressure, and cope with uncertainty. The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (2006) established a comprehensive framework identifying seven foundational soft skill competencies essential for tertiary education outcomes: effective communication, critical analytical and problem-solving capabilities, collaborative teamwork, continuous learning and information literacy, entrepreneurial orientation, ethical and professional conduct, and adaptive leadership capacity (Osman et al., 2012). This institutionalized approach reflects recognition that contemporary higher education must systematically cultivate interpersonal and cognitive competencies beyond disciplinary expertise to prepare graduates for dynamic professional environments. To meet the purposes of this study, we operationalize the above-mentioned concept of soft skills definition in the context of academic settings, systematic education and training from a Bangladesh perspective.

Previous studies on soft skills have mostly examined them from employers' and managers' perspectives (Chisty et al., 2007; Curry et al., 2003; Ghani et al., 2018; Hairi et al., 2011; Seetha, 2014). These studies primarily focused on identifying

the soft skills employers expect from graduates. Some studies focused on educator perceptions of soft skill development at HEIs (Osman et al., 2012; Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University, 2009). Osman et al. (2012) examined the views of 25 educators from five Malaysian Public HEIs and focused on those educators perceptions which influenced their emphasis on the teaching and learning of soft skills. Soft skills development from students' perspectives was also examined (Ahmad et al., 2010; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2012). Nikitina and Furuoka (2012) conducted an empirical investigation in the Malaysian higher education context, examining students' expectations regarding the acquisition of soft skills and evaluating perceived pedagogical effectiveness. Their research critically assessed the degree to which instructional practices and curricula aligned with students' professional development objectives, providing insights into institutional capacity to deliver competency-based learning outcomes beyond disciplinary content mastery (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2012). In recent years, numerous studies and reports have highlighted the pressing issue of graduate unemployment in Bangladesh, attributed to a lack of essential skills and competencies (Chisty et al., 2007; Khatun et al., 2022; Rahman et al., 2021). This paradox of job openings coexisting with a shortage of skilled graduates has prompted a critical examination of the landscape of soft skills development. Meeting the demands of the fourth industrial revolution and achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG) are driving the need for improving the quality of soft skills development to align with evolving industry demands (Ansarey, 2017; Khatun et al., 2022). Deficiencies in soft skills competency, professional skills, communication abilities, and capacity development have been identified as crucial factors contributing to graduate unemployment in Bangladesh (Ansarey, 2017; Khatun et al., 2022). Complex factors such as non-uniform education curricula, varying education quality, limited government and institutional initiatives, and social inequities further exacerbate the soft skills and employability crisis (Alam et al., 2022; Duta & Iannelli, 2018; Uddin, 2021). Recent shifts in student perceptions highlight a growing emphasis on soft skill development to enhance future employability (Alam et al., 2022). However, significant obstacles hinder graduates and current students from accessing essential opportunities for soft skill development (Alam et al., 2022).

Despite existing research, crucial questions remain unanswered. The reasons behind the skills deficit and the connections between self-assessed soft skills and employability prospects warrant exploration. Graduates' awareness of the need for skill development is evident, but the specifics of addressing this gap require further investigation. Additionally, comprehensive insights into the current state of soft skill development in Bangladeshi universities, particularly agricultural-related

institutions, are limited due to institutional initiatives and inadequate documentation. This research gap underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of students' perceptions and experiences in the context of soft skills development, offering valuable insights for addressing the challenge of graduate unemployment in Bangladesh. Focusing on agricultural-related degree-awarding universities in Bangladesh, with SAU as a representative case study, our research pioneers the exploration of graduate students' views on soft skills development in concurrent landscapes.

## 3. Research Questions

This research sought to answer the following questions:

1) How do students perceive the effectiveness of the soft skills development program at SAU?
2) What soft skills do students consider essential for their career success?
3) What strategies can be implemented to aid students in developing these essential soft skills?

## 4. Methodology

The study was conducted at Sylhet Agricultural University (SAU), a public higher education institution. This study employed a mixed-method research approach; therefore, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to address the research questions. To gain a holistic understanding of students' perceptions regarding the soft skills development program, data collection took place in three different phases, i.e., (i) pre-evaluation phase, (ii) second phase, and (iii) post-evaluation phase. The description of the phases is given below:

### *4.1 Pre-evaluation phase*

To organize the skill development program, information was well circulated through social media (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp), email, posters, leaflets, personal communication, and short message service (SMS). A total of 134 students expressed initial interest in the program through online registration (Table 1). These participants were named as the ‘Pre-evaluation Group’. In this first phase, these students were required to complete a questionnaire, which included questions about their expectations for learning from this workshop. Besides, a set of open-ended questions were included in this questionnaire, such as what employers expect from students in an interview, how to handle contradictory questions and avoid conflicting situations, how to answer questions about the strong and weak points of a candidate, how to be prepared before facing an interview (e.g., time

management, belongings), differences in job interview patterns between a government job and corporate job, what the dress code should be and other formalities, how to deal with multiple questions asked at a time, what they should do and what they should not do during an interview, etc.

This pre-evaluation phase, conducted through a Google Form, served several essential purposes: firstly, it enabled the researcher to assess and select suitable candidates for the skill development program. By analyzing their interests, expectations regarding skill development, and eagerness to participate, the researchers selected individuals who align with the program's objectives and cater to their specific needs; secondly, it allowed the researchers to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment within the context of SAU. By understanding the participants' expectations and desires for skill development, the researchers gained insights into the specific areas that require attention and improvement; thirdly, armed with the pre-interview data, the researchers were able to tailor the skill development program to match the identified needs and expectations, which ensured that the program was relevant and valuable to the participants.

### *4.2 Second Phase*

In the second phase, the skill development program took place. On August 12, 2018, this university organized a soft skills development program titled ‘How to face an interview?’ The resource person and keynote speaker of the session was selected based on long experience of conducting various types of training (35 years of training experience) and high insight into soft skills development training initiatives in Bangladesh. This skill development program served as a model, particularly for agricultural degree-awarding universities in Bangladesh. This program facilitated collaboration among diverse stakeholders through a seminar/workshop format, providing an opportunity for comprehensive data collection.

In this phase, 93 students (drawn from the initial 134 participants) were selected to attend the soft skill development program named ‘How to face an Interview?’ using the quota sampling technique (Table 1). The rationale for choosing non-proportional quota sampling was that it primarily allowed researchers to divide the population into subgroups, helped them obtain the desired number of participants from each group, and then allowed them to focus on the groups that matter most to the research. In this type of sampling, researchers can select participants based on predetermined criteria (Makwana et al., 2023). Students’ level of education worked as a quota for choosing this study’s sample. Thus, 93 participants were chosen based on their level of study. Final-year or level-4 students and Master's-

level students were selected for this phase, as they will enter the job market soon after graduating.

### *4.3 Post-evaluation Phase*

A total of 93 participants who attended the skill development program were also provided with another questionnaire, including both close and open-ended questions.

The latter group, named 'Post-evaluation Group', played a crucial role in evaluating the effectiveness and impact of the skill development program. Post-evaluation responses helped researchers assess respondents' perceptions of the effectiveness of the soft skill development program and explore the evolving demands and requirements of the target audience for future program planning. The responses were also recorded in Google Forms. Google Forms were used as an online supporting tool to get appropriate data. Comparing responses between the 'Pre-evaluation' and 'Post-evaluation' groups helped elicit students' expectations, perceptions, and aspirations regarding skill development programs. The pre-evaluation phase informed program design and participant selection, while the post-evaluation phase served as a feedback mechanism to assess outcomes and refine future iterations of the program. Besides, this provided researchers with insights into the necessity of establishing an independent skill development section within universities and the level of management desired by students.

Additionally, we incorporated insights from 12 key informants and expert opinions to investigate, cross-check, and validate students' perceptions of this topic at SAU (Table 1). Purposive sampling was used for key informants because it enabled researchers to interview relevant and informative individuals who could answer the research questions and meet the study's objectives (Saunders et al., 2009). Therefore, some criteria were considered, e.g., knowledge about various concurrent academic, institutional and student perspectives; working with various institutions, organizations and agencies; performing roles as expert members in various job/ recruitment interview boards; performing roles as examiner of various competitive testing systems, and academic examinations; involvement in policy formulation at various level of institutional setup; having long professional experiences. The key informants hold the rank of Vice-chancellor of SAU, Deans of various faculties, Director of Student Counselling and Guidance, Professors, Associate Professors, and Assistant Professors of various faculties i.e. Faculty of Fisheries (FF); Faculty of Agricultural Economics and Business Studies (FAEBS); Faculty of Agricultural Engineering and Technology (FAET); Faculty of Biotechnology and Genetic Engineering (FBGE); Faculty of Agriculture (FA) & Faculty of Veterinary, Animal and Biomedical Sciences (FVABS).

**Table 1:** Demographic information of participants used in the study

| Enrolled education program/ Faculty[1] | No. of Participants from Level 1 to Level 4 & Experts | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Level of study: Master's and BSc (Hons.) degrees students of different levels (First year/level 1- Final year/level 4) | | | | | Gender | | Pre-evaluation group | Post-evaluation group | Experts or Key informants | Designation of experts and their cumulative professional experiences (years) |
| | Masters (level 5) | BSc (level 4) | BSc (level 3) | BSc (level 2) | BSc (level 1) | Female | Male | | | | |
| FF | 17 | 25 | 8 | 22 | 19 | 38 | 53 | 91 | 67 | 5 | • Vice-Chancellor (VC), Dean, Director, Students Counselling and Guidance, Professor, Associate Professor, and Assistant Professor, SAU<br>• Cumulatively possess 185 years of professional experience. |
| FAEBS | 6 | 15 | 10 | 2 | - | 12 | 21 | 33 | 25 | 2 | |
| FAET | - | 5 | - | - | - | 1 | 4 | 5 | - | 1 | |
| FBGE | - | - | 1 | 2 | - | 2 | 1 | 3 | - | 1 | |
| FA | - | 1 | 1 | - | - | - | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | |
| FVABS | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 1 | |
| Total | 23 | 46 | 20 | 26 | 19 | 53 | 81 | 134 | 93 | 12 | |

[1] Participant belongs to the Faculty of Fisheries (FF), Faculty of Agricultural Economics and Business Studies (FAEBS), Faculty of Agriculture (FA), Faculty of Agricultural Engineering and Technology (FAET), Faculty of Biotechnology and Genetic Engineering (FBGE), Faculty of Veterinary, Animal and Biomedical Sciences (FVABS),

of Sylhet Agricultural University (SAU), Sylhet, Bangladesh. Number of students interested in participating (Pre-evaluation group) and Number of students who participated in the program (Post-evaluation group)

For the quantitative part of the study, a five-point Likert scale (Likert, 1932) was used to elucidate students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the soft skills development program. Additionally, Microsoft Excel 2010 and IBM SPSS Statistics 22 were used for descriptive statistics. For the qualitative part of the study, content analysis (Berelson, 1952) was used to analyse open-ended questions to complement quantitative data. The rationale for using content analysis was to describe participants' attitudinal and behavioural responses. To analyze the text using content analysis, the text was coded, or broken down, into manageable code categories for analysis (i.e., codes). After carefully reading the responses from different participants, the content was coded into three (3) broad categories, i.e., (i) effectiveness of the skill development program, (ii) essential skills for career success, and (iii) strategies to achieve soft skills.

The next section presents the results and discussion of this study.

## 5. Results and Discussion

### *5.1 Effectiveness of soft skill development program (entitled "How to face an interview?")*

This paper examines students' perceptions of the effectiveness of soft skills development programs using well-developed pre- and post-evaluation questionnaires. Before the event "How to face an interview?" took place, 134 respondents (pre-evaluation group) were asked about their expectations to learn from this workshop. About 79.9% were eager to learn what employers expect from candidates (Figure 1). Sixty-three percent (63.4%) of participants expressed interest in learning how to handle conflicting questions and situations. About 59.7% of participants emphasized acquiring knowledge of the differences in job interview patterns between government and corporate jobs. Similarly, 59.7% participants felt that they should get acquainted with dos and don'ts during an interview.

The most frequently asked question by employers is: 'What do candidates think about the greatest strength and weakness of him/her?' In this regard, Prossack (2018) says that candidates must think differently and present their answers in ways that make them more appropriate for getting the job. In this research, 56.7% of respondents showed interest in learning about this. Facing multiple questions at a time, both in academic and professional interviews, is a common phenomenon, and a significant number of respondents (39.6%) expressed willingness to learn more about it.

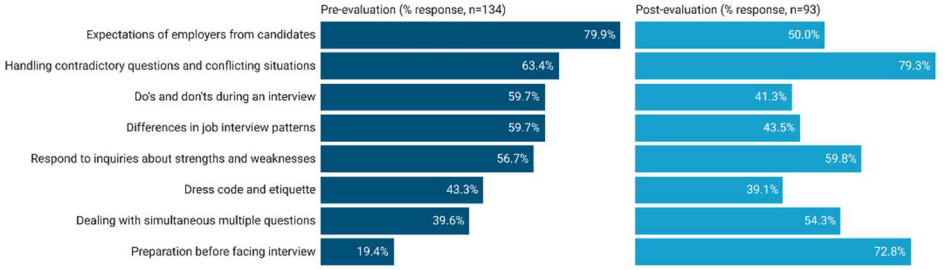



**Figure 01:** Comparison of students' expectations (pre-evaluation group, n=134) and perceptions (post-evaluation group, n=93) from the skill development program (Data source: this study)

The question of how to handle contradictory questions and avoid conflicting situations became more important before and after participating in the skill development program. A large number of participants (79.3%) perceived that they should gain more knowledge about conflicting and contradictory situations, as they felt that contemporary employers actively seek emotionally intelligent candidates who can adeptly handle such situations. Another interesting finding suggests that while 19.4% of participants were interested in learning how to prepare before an interview and after the event, a significant number (72.8%) felt they should know more about preparation before an interview.

Respondents in the post-evaluation group (n=93) appreciated that this skill development program was unique compared to other such programs held at SAU. There were six categories to evaluate the effectiveness of the skill development program entitled 'How to face an interview?'. These are the subject matter/content, the speaker's motivation and skills, the selection procedure for participants, participants' attitude, adherence to the time schedule, and overall management of the session. Figure 2 shows that the uniqueness of this program was associated with the subject matter (68.8%), the keynote speaker's motivational skills (64.5%), and the overall management of the session (50.5%), which were the three weighted factors that made this program successful. The participants' positive attitudes (40.9%), maintenance of the time schedule (31.2%), and screening process (28%) were all found significant by the respondents.

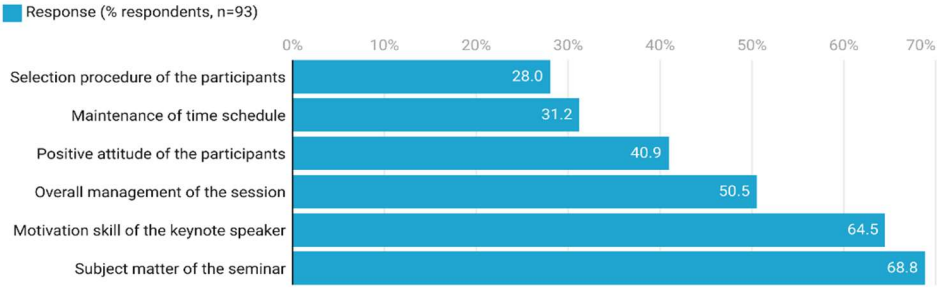



**Figure 2:** Participants' (post-evaluation group, n=93) perception regarding the uniqueness of this skill development program (Data source: this study)

Participants were also asked about the overall management of the soft skills development program and its effectiveness. These were considered important factors for examination because they motivated both parties (i.e., participants and coordinators) to engage in and arrange these types of skill development programs in the future. Overall management included factors such as the registration process, the timing of the program, the question-and-answer session, session management, accommodation, & transparency on financial matters. Regarding overall program management, nearly half of the respondents rated the skill development program as 'Excellent' (46.2%), followed by 'Very Good' (39.8%), 'Good' (11.8%), and 'Poor' (2.2%) (Figure 3). Similarly, concerning the degree of effectiveness, 40.8% of respondents mentioned the soft skill program as 'Highly effective', 54.8% mentioned it as 'Effective', 2.2% mentioned it as 'Moderately Effective', and only 2.2% respondents mentioned it as 'Ineffective' (Figure 3). The possible reasons for the ineffectiveness were the inability to allow all registered students to participate and time constraints.




**Figure 3:** Participants' perceptions (post-evaluation group, n=93) on the overall management of the skill development program and their degree of effectiveness (Data source: this study)

### *5.2 What soft skills do students consider essential for their career success?*

The respondents were asked to share their expectations for future programs that university authorities, faculties, or associated bodies can arrange. They mentioned that skills like curriculum vitae (CV) buildup and writing, Microsoft Office (MS Word, MS PowerPoint, MS Excel), scientific report writing and editing (how to write a good thesis, report, research paper), statistical data analysis (SPSS, STRAT, R, Minitab), office management, time management, smart presentation of examination script, and preparing applications for higher study abroad are essential for their career. Cimatti (2016) notes that these skills can also be termed personal skills, as they involve the level of knowledge acquisition. The literature suggests that employability skills are the skills employers require and consist of two categories: technical and generic skills, which are vital for the workplace (Hairi et al., 2011; Ghani et al., 2018). Technical competencies encompass discipline-specific knowledge and procedural proficiencies acquired through structured educational curricula, exemplified by specialized fields such as computer systems maintenance or financial management. Conversely, generic skills are transferable, non-technical capabilities, including communication proficiency, collaborative effectiveness, and leadership capacity, that constitute critical determinants of workforce employability and professional advancement across organizational contexts. Although employers require graduates to possess both technical and soft skills to become more competitive in the job market, research findings in this study suggest that students were more interested in learning skills of a technical nature.

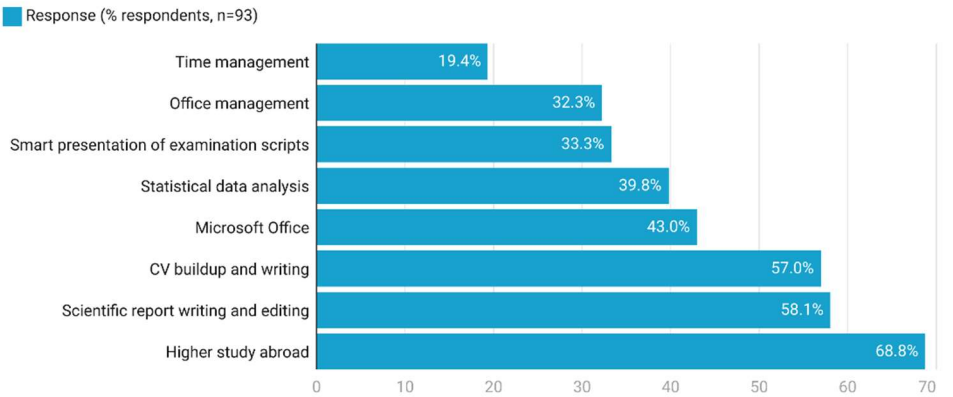



**Figure 4:** Participant's aspiration (post-evaluation group, n=93) to attend future skill development programs (Data source: this study)

The largest proportion of participants (68.8%) stated that universities should organize programs on 'Higher study abroad' (Figure 4). The driving factor behind this choice might be the limited job availability in Bangladesh. That's why students are inclined to prepare themselves to get the opportunity to do higher studies abroad. Figure 4 shows that about 58.1% were interested in knowing 'scientific report writing and editing', followed by 'CV writing' (57%), 'Microsoft Office' (43%), and 'Statistical data analysis' (39.8%). Although statistical data analysis tools are crucial in any field of education and research, universities rarely offer such skill development programs for their students. The following quote illustrates:

> *The existing obstacles in most Bangladeshi universities, including governance processes, financial constraints, and stakeholder engagement, often hinder soft skills development within curricula. Introducing volunteer-based, fee-paying soft skill programs may bridge this gap, enhancing participants' skill sets and meeting societal demands more effectively.*
>
> *[Dean, Faculty of Fisheries, SAU]*

In addition, respondents were asked whether they would be interested in paying for these future skill development programs. More than half of the respondents (65%) agreed to participate in this kind of program and showed a high willingness to pay. About 23.6% of respondents showed moderate willingness, and 9.7% showed low willingness to pay for such skill development programs (Figure 5). However, only 2.2% of respondents were not interested in paying any fee. These participants believed that skill development initiatives should be free and that universities should provide such programs to improve students' well-being.

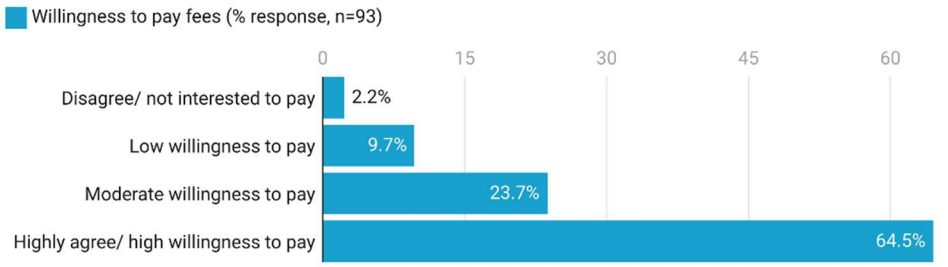



**Figure 5**: Students' willingness (post-evaluation group, n=93) to pay for career development programs (e.g., training, workshops, seminars, etc.). Data source: this study.

### *5.3 Strategies to achieve soft skills*

Researchers in soft skills argue that deficiencies in soft skills development among graduates are a significant contributing factor to elevated unemployment rates in Bangladesh's labor market (Salleh, 2007; Ghani et al., 2018). A significant competency gap persists between the skill profiles demanded by employers and the capabilities of university graduates, reflecting an institutional-sectoral misalignment in workforce development objectives. Islam (1980) notes that the education system is simply producing graduates who are not needed by the labor market. A key informant, Student Advisor, SAU, opined that

> *In Bangladesh, public universities are equipped with student advisors, guidance and counselling services to assist students with various issues, from career guidance to personal concerns. However, these services often face obstacles due to bureaucratic processes, financial constraints, and governance challenges. While officially in place, the quality of these services remains inconsistent, presenting both opportunities for improvement and the need for research to enhance their effectiveness in meeting society's evolving demands.*

Each year, Bangladesh witnesses a tragic loss of nearly 100 university students through suicide, a crisis driven primarily by career frustration (Rahman et al., 2019). This dire situation has made suicide the leading cause of death among young people aged 15-29, with 11% attributed to mental disorders (Bangladesh National Mental Health Institute, 2019). A significant factor contributing to this crisis is the absence of career-oriented skill development programs in higher education institutions. To address this issue, promoting such programs and enhancing support for students grappling with career frustration are imperative. Offering self-funded, volunteer-led skill development initiatives, such as seminars, workshops, or career clubs, within academic institutions can empower students to build essential skills and alleviate career-related distress. In this study, in line with the majority of the interviewees, key informants noted that existing curricula often fail to provide the necessary skills required for jobs:

> *It is necessary to concentrate on skill development initiatives for students, but from the university authority, there is no appropriate setup for arranging such skill development programs, which will help students with their careers.*
>
> *[Student Advisor, SAU]*

> *From my teaching experience and presence in different public and private/corporate viva voce exams, I have understood that our current curricula are often not career-related and fairly insufficient to provide field-oriented skills.*
>
> *[Vice-Chancellor, SAU]*

While communication skills appear as the most required skills by employers in the working environment (Ahmad et al., 2010; Hairi et al., 2011), one of the key informants, the Vice-Chancellor, SAU, in this study, further expressed his concern:

> *Students get good marks in theoretical examinations, but they cannot answer questions in the viva. That means they lack communication skills.*

This quote suggests that students at SAU, as well as at other educational institutions in Bangladesh, lack communication skills. This finding is consistent with Osman et al.'s (2012) study in the Malaysian context, which revealed that most students entering higher learning with flaws in communication skills, especially. In connection with this, a key informant, Assistant Professor, SAU, opined that

> *Current students and recent graduates should proactively enhance their communication (spoken, listening, reading, writing) and critical analysis skills through co-curricular engagement and online courses. Writing for journals, newspapers, and web content can bolster English proficiency. Additionally, early exposure to business concepts, proper academic guidance, and financial support can empower aspiring entrepreneurs.*

Academic institutions increasingly recognize the pedagogical imperative to systematically cultivate soft skills competencies through structured institutional mechanisms, with dedicated training centers and integrated curricula demonstrating measurable effectiveness in enhancing student capability development (Osman et al., 2012). Structured training interventions facilitate the acquisition of interpersonal, operational, and disciplinary competencies requisite for effective job performance (Jehanzeb & Bashir, 2013). Comprehensive workforce development programs function as strategic organizational mechanisms that enhance individual performance trajectories while cultivating operational efficiency, productivity, professional satisfaction, motivational engagement, and innovative capability across organizational contexts (Elnaga & Imran, 2013).

Some of the quotes from key informants illustrated the importance of the training center and the student career center:

> *The global competitiveness challenge is faced by graduates in today's era of globalization. While the National Higher Education Policy of 2010 and the establishment of the university accreditation council have made strides in ensuring quality education, there's still a significant journey ahead. This includes the imperative need for comprehensive institutional reforms, including curriculum revision, reorganization, and the integration of soft skill development opportunities—a formidable challenge that requires collective efforts to bridge the existing gap between institutional capabilities and societal needs.*
>
> *[Vice-Chancellor, SAU]*

He further noted that,

> *Since we are not able to include soft skills into our existing curricula, in that case, a training center like Graduate Training Institute (GTI) can be established, which can arrange skill development programs regularly. There is no alternative to it if academicians want their graduates to compete in the world.*
>
> *[Vice-Chancellor, SAU]*

> *Though the university was established in 2006, we couldn't establish any training institute, career center, or institute of entrepreneurship. I think there should be a training institute or a career center in the university. Experts from other universities and industries can come here to share their experiences with our graduates.*
>
> *[Dean, Faculty of Economics, SAU]*

Career centers, generally located on university campuses, can help students improve their job search skills, enhance their networking skills, and assist them in finding suitable careers. Identifying the right career opportunities for students will help prepare them for competing in today's global market.

Strategic institutional partnerships between higher education organizations and industry stakeholders represent a viable mechanism for addressing soft skills

competency deficiencies within graduate populations (Salleh, 2007). Collaborative engagement facilitates alignment between academic curricula and employment sector requirements, systematically bridging the persistent gap between university-delivered learning outcomes and industry-demanded competencies. Such partnerships enable institutions to integrate workplace-relevant skill development into pedagogical frameworks, thereby enhancing graduate employability and organizational readiness upon labor market entry.

## 6. Policy Implications & Research Limitations

The results of the study have implications for educators, higher education Institutions (HEs), and policymakers in this area of soft skill development. Tertiary education institutions in Bangladesh should focus on developing curricula that incorporate the specific soft skills required by employers. The University Grants Commission of Bangladesh (2016) established institutional directives requiring comprehensive skill development frameworks integrating curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular learning experiences within university educational structures. Subsequently, the Bangladesh Accreditation Council incorporated ten foundational graduate competencies—aligned with World Economic Forum (2015) recommendations—into the Bangladesh National Qualifications Framework (BNQF), encompassing complex problem-solving, critical analytical thinking, creative capability, human resource management, interpersonal coordination, emotional intelligence, judgment and decision-making proficiency, service orientation, negotiation effectiveness, and cognitive adaptability (BNQF, 2021). This institutionalized framework reflects a national commitment to systematically developing competencies essential for graduate success in contemporary employment contexts.

These skills have been further categorized into four learning outcomes domains: the fundamental domain, the social domain, the thinking domain, and the personal domain. It is high time to incorporate these skills into university curricula and identify ways for students to acquire them. Besides, developing training institutions and a career center in each university can also play an important role. Graduate Training Institute (GTI) of Bangladesh Agricultural University is the only training institute in Bangladesh providing various skill development programs for its tertiary-level students. Considering students' interests, all higher education institutions in Bangladesh should immediately establish an independent section, a training institute, or a career planning center to develop students’ soft skills.

This study is not beyond limitations. In this research, most of the participants interviewed were from the Faculty of Fisheries (FF) and the Faculty of Agricultural Economics and Business Studies (FAEBS). The organizers of the program were from these faculties, and news about the program was well circulated among these students. Thus, the representation of participants from the FF and FAEBS was higher than that of participants from other faculties.

## 7. Conclusion

Students are now more conscious of their careers. They prepare themselves for the job market. They attend various soft skills development programs whenever available and are even interested in paying for them on their own. However, it is not only their responsibility to make them competitive with the rest of the world. The respective educational authority, university or institution should play an important role in this. Bangladesh's National Qualification Framework's graduate skills should be incorporated into university curricula. In addition, collaboration between the university and industry to enhance graduate competency, and the establishment of a separate section, training institute, or career planning center, can develop students' soft skills, which, in turn, can make graduates more successful in the job market and improve overall unemployment conditions in Bangladesh.

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