

Perceptions of Najran University Students on Utilization and Enhancing Soft Skills and Challenges

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Abstract

The study aims to identify the level of soft skills utilization among Najran University students and the challenges they face in developing these skills from their perspective. A descriptive-analytical approach was employed, where a list of soft skills was categorized into four classes, comprising a total of 37 skills from key competencies. A questionnaire was prepared to determine the importance of soft skills from the student's point of view, as well as to assess their satisfaction with their proficiency levels. In addition, it aimed to gauge their satisfaction with the methods and strategies used by the university in enhancing these skills and to identify the obstacles hindering their development. The survey was administered to 296 male and female students at Najran University. The results indicated that students highly valued the importance of soft skills. The ranking of soft skills categories, based on their importance to the students, was as follows: learning and life skills, effective communication skills, strategic planning and time management skills, and finally, leadership and teamwork skills. However, the results also revealed their dissatisfaction with their proficiency levels, as they expressed low satisfaction. Furthermore, they were dissatisfied with the methods and strategies employed by the university in developing these skills. Despite this, they strongly agreed that significant obstacles were preventing the development of these skills among them.

Keywords: *Soft Skills, Obstacles, University Students*

INTRODUCTION

The current job market is witnessing consecutive changes, given the digital, technological, and industrial developments that impact all aspects of life. This has resulted in work environments becoming more complex and faster in responding to these advancements. While recruitment processes traditionally focused primarily on professional expertise in a specific field, the trend has shifted towards emphasizing common skills applicable across all fields. These skills are not limited to a particular profession or specialization. Instead, they enable individuals to prepare for responding to changes in the work environment swiftly and adapt to shifts in professions and jobs that the future job market demands. These skills are referred to as soft skills, representing added value for both the individual and the organization simultaneously. They have positive effects on empowering individuals for rapid response and adaptation, as well as enabling organizations to increase productivity.

The impact of these transformations extends to changing the perceptions and hiring priorities of employers and recruitment agencies in the search for individuals qualified to handle future professions and jobs. It is no longer sufficient to focus solely on academic certificates and cognitive and applied skills. There is a need for individuals qualified with soft skills due to their importance as indicators of increased productivity, professional efficiency, and meeting competitive requirements. These requirements are based on continuous updating and development of an individual's skill set (Qizi, 2020). The successive developments and changes have imposed challenges on institutions and employers, necessitating a reevaluation of recruitment standards and requirements. Soft skills have become a fundamental pillar alongside practical skills and profession-related knowledge. These institutions have realized that cognitive and technical skills alone are no longer sufficient to achieve their goals and objectives. Soft skills have become the decisive criterion for success in professions and jobs (Majid et al., 2019). However, researchers agree that there is a gap between the soft skills expected by institutions and employers from graduates and the actual skills possessed by graduates, which do not meet those expectations (Singh & Jaykumar, 2019). For instance, Qizi (2020) presented the results of some survey studies,

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including one conducted by Harvard University, which found that 80% of professional achievements in productive institutions were directly linked to soft skills. Only 20% were associated with hard skills or cognitive and academic skills related to a specific specialization or profession. The survey conducted by Stanford Institute in collaboration with Carnegie Mellon Foundation also found that 75% of success and stability in the workplace is linked to soft skills.

Soft skills are diverse and varied, differing from one work field to another, and only a few individuals possess them. Those who do often achieve numerous accomplishments and stand out in their jobs due to their possession of these skills. Soft skills refer to a set of personal characteristics that individuals can acquire. These skills enable them to build successful relationships with others, propel them to achieve more ambition, excel in performance, and experience a sense of accomplishment. Soft skills also encompass self-management abilities that individuals possess to adapt to their surrounding environment. They are a part of an individual's personality and are not tied to a specific profession or particular specialization (Singh & Jaykumar, 2019). This does not imply a separation between soft skills and hard skills or those skills associated with a specific profession or specialization. Instead, soft skills form a fundamental foundation for the success of academic and administrative skills an individual possesses. They serve as essential personal traits that enhance outstanding performance and professional success.

In the context of defining the nature of soft skills, (Asbari et al., 2020) indicated that they encompass a set of skills including leadership, management, communication, teamwork, collaboration, decision-making, adaptability and flexibility, problem-solving, emotional intelligence, negotiation and persuasion, time management, organization and self-motivation, critical and innovative thinking. On another classification, (Fahimirad et al., 2019) expressed soft skills as including communication skills, creativity and innovation, critical thinking, management and planning, problem-solving, social responsibility, lifelong learning, teamwork, and team management. By reviewing some literature (Tripathy, 2020; Tang, 2020; Volkova et al., 2020; Semenova et al., 2021), soft skills can be identified as effective communication skills, collaboration and team spirit, flexibility and adaptability, leadership and effective planning, time management skills, creative and innovative thinking, problem-solving skills, critical and innovative thinking, emotional intelligence, negotiation and persuasion skills, motivation, independent learning and lifelong learning skills, entrepreneurial skills, and project management skills.

Skills are generally divided into two main types: soft skills and hard skills. Although they complement each other, they differ in terms of added value, scope, and work environment. While hard skills are associated with a specific field, profession, or specialization, soft skills are considered a requirement in all fields, professions, and jobs. According to survey studies, soft skills contribute directly to the professional success of both individuals and organizations, with percentages ranging from 75% to 80%. Soft skills are directly linked to the dynamic job market, indicating an individual's ability to interact with others and demonstrating personal, human, and managerial skills. On the other hand, hard skills refer to a set of skills associated with a specific specialization, qualification, or profession without broader applicability (Majid et al., 2019). Many researchers have focused on the general frameworks of soft skills (Singh & Jaykumar, 2019; Tang, 2020; Noah & Aziz, 2020). Literature suggests that while hard skills can be acquired through formal education to obtain a professional or academic qualification for a specific job or profession, soft skills, sometimes referred to as personal skills, are challenging to teach directly in specific curricula. Hard skills are measurable, testable, and easily evaluated, whereas soft skills are difficult to define, measure, and evaluate. Qiizi (2020) highlighted that soft skills are essential, whether for obtaining employment or succeeding in the work environment. Their benefits extend beyond the workplace to include personal development, and they are linked to the non-cognitive skills, mental abilities, and intelligence of the individual. Soft skills are not tied to a specific occupation, field, or specialization, unlike hard skills, which are associated with a specific discipline, field, or profession.

Soft skills are considered essential requirements that universities must impart to their students. University students, being in the higher education stage, possess an awareness of the importance of soft skills and their relevance to future professions. This awareness can be leveraged as a motivational factor for self-development. As highlighted by (Asbari et al., 2020), the need for qualified human resources with such skills compels universities to prepare and equip their students to respond to these changes. This involves incorporating soft

skills into the curriculum and ensuring that the university environment is more prepared by revising its curricula and training faculty to use teaching methods and strategies that are suitable for developing students' soft skills (Qizi, 2020). According to Noah and Aziz (2020), the emphasis on soft skills has placed new roles and responsibilities on universities, including the need to retrain graduates to align with future professions and jobs. Despite universities acknowledging these tasks and making efforts to accomplish them, graduates often face a deficiency in possessing soft skills. The current study aims to contribute to research in this area by investigating the reality of students' soft skills, including their awareness of the importance of these skills, their satisfaction with them, and the methods through which they acquire these skills.

Statement of the Problem

The emphasis on soft skills stems from the urgent and evolving desire of employers and recruiters to acquire graduates qualified with the skills necessary to respond and adapt to the developments and challenges imposed by the ever-changing nature of the job market. This has compelled universities to exert efforts and strategically plan strategies to ensure a revision of their curricula, teaching and learning methods, faculty characteristics, and learning environments. This contributes to enhancing opportunities for developing soft skills among graduates.

Against the backdrop of increasing numbers of graduates and changing job requirements, with some jobs disappearing and others emerging with different requirements than those currently in demand, the standard for differentiating between graduates and hiring them lies in their proficiency in soft skills. These skills enhance their job performance and personal lives. Numerous studies have emphasized the importance of equipping graduates with soft skills. For instance, Tem et al. (2020) stated that soft skills contribute to improving the ability to manage and organize projects. Abraham et al. (2021) added that they enhance the capability to deal with the world of big data, and Majid et al. (2019) mentioned that university students are aware of the importance of soft skills but expressed dissatisfaction with their level of proficiency. A study conducted by Succi and Canovi (2020) in European countries indicated that 86% of companies focus on soft skills when hiring graduates. Tang (2019) and Okolie et al. (2019) pointed out that the lack of soft skills among graduates is a major cause of unemployment. Employers and recruiting agencies prioritize soft skills more than hard skills and qualifications during the hiring process. Despite this emphasis, Singh and Jaykumar (2019) confirmed the existence of a gap between the soft skills expected by productive institutions and employers and what graduates possess.

Despite universities recognizing the importance of soft skills, plans in this regard still need evaluation and revision, as emphasized by a study conducted by (Noah & Aziz, 2020). In this context, Asbari et al. (2020) recommend that universities provide the necessary environment to train faculty in soft skills and take measures to ensure the transfer of the impact of this training to students. Qizi (2020) underscores the need for a shift in the efforts and practices of higher education institutions from focusing solely on preparing academically qualified graduates to prepare them with both professional and soft skills. Noah and Aziz (2020) noted that despite the universities' interest and efforts in curriculum paths or skills development programs, there is still a need to reassess those efforts, ensuring a focus on soft skills. Fahimirad et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of not limiting the role of faculty members to providing knowledge only but assisting students in acquiring soft skills by integrating them into their teaching practices. Some literature (Succi & Canovi, 2020; Volkova et al., 2020; Tripathy, 2020; Semenova et al., 2021; Kostikova et al., 2021; Malykhim et al., 2021) has also agreed on the necessity of developing soft skills and the relationship between educational practices aimed at developing these skills and the graduates' satisfaction with the soft skills they possess. There is a need for further research to diagnose the current efforts in developing students' soft skills. Based on the previous information, the research problem can be identified in the following main question: "What is the level of utilization of soft skills from the perspective of Najran University students and its relation to their perceptions towards future professions?" This main question can be further elaborated with the following sub-questions:

The research objectives include:

1. What is the level of importance of soft skills from students' perspective?
2. To what extent are students satisfied with their proficiency in soft skills?

3. How satisfied are students with the methods and strategies employed by the university to develop their soft skills?

4. What are the obstacles to developing soft skills from students' point of view?

The research objectives include:

- Understanding the level of importance of soft skills from the students' perspective.
- Determining the extent of students' satisfaction with their proficiency in soft skills.
- Revealing the satisfaction level of students regarding the methods and strategies employed by the university to develop their soft skills.
- Diagnosing the obstacles to developing soft skills from the student's perspective.

METHODS

Using a descriptive-analytical research approach involves examining literature that addresses soft skills to extract a list of these skills, as well as identifying obstacles to their development among students based on the studies reviewed. Following this, a questionnaire was designed to answer the research questions, with each axis dedicated to addressing a specific question from the research questions.

Sample

The research sample consisted of a group of male and female students from Najran University, selected purposively. The focus was on sixth and seventh-level students, as they have gained various experiences and are close to graduation. The research sample comprised 335 participants, including 100 male students and 235 female students. The questionnaire was converted into an electronic form using Google Forms and distributed to the participants through dedicated WhatsApp groups for courses, Blackboard, and email. A total of 296 responses were collected, including 79 from male students and 217 from female students.

Tool

Several relevant literature sources were consulted, including works by Majid et al. (2019), Tang (2020), Qizi (2020), Noah & Aziz (2020), Asbari et al. (2020), Tripathy (2020), Abraham et al. (2021), Malykhim et al. (2021), and Kestikova et al. (2021). A list of 37 soft skills was compiled and presented to experts and academics to verify their content validity. The agreement percentages for each skill ranged from 78.6% to 100% among the 14 reviewers. The average agreement percentages for each main category of skills ranged from 93.6% to 99%. The final list of skills was categorized into four main groups: Effective Communication Skills, Leadership and Teamwork Skills, Strategic Planning and Time Management Skills, and Learning and Life Skills.

Table1. Percentages of experts' agreement on soft skills

Section1: Soft skills							
Effective communication skills		Leadership skills and team work		Strategic planning and time management skills		Learning and life skills	
Items	%	Items	%	Items	%	Items	%
1	100%	1	92.8%	1	92.8%	1	92.8%
2	100%	2	100%	2	92.8%	2	92.8%
3	100%	3	100%	3	100%	3	100%
4	100%	4	100%	4	92.8%	4	100%
5	92.8%	5	100%	5	78.6%	5	100%
6	100%	6	100%	6	100%	6	100%
7	100%	7	92.8%	7	92.8%	7	100%
8	100%	8	78.6%	8	100%	8	100%
total	99%	9	92.8%	9	92.8%	total	98.2%
		10	92.8%	total	93.6%		
		11	92.8%				
		12	100%				
		total	95.2%				

In light of the identified soft skills list, a questionnaire was developed to assess the students' perceptions of the importance of soft skills, their satisfaction with their proficiency in these skills, the university's methods and strategies for developing these skills, and the obstacles hindering their development. To ensure the questionnaire's validity and reliability, it was reviewed by experts and faculty members. The content validity was verified, and the reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) was calculated, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of calculating the reliability coefficient using Cronbach's alpha

Section	Category	No of items	Cronbach's alpha Coefficients
Section1: Soft skills	Category One: effective communication skills	8	0.711
	Category Two: leadership skills and team work	12	0.753
	Category three: strategic planning and time management skills	9	0.793
	Category four: learning and life skills	8	0.803
Section 2:	methods and strategies used by the university in developing the soft skills	9	0.866
Section 3:	Obstacles to developing soft skills from the students' perspective	9	0.873
Total		55	0.798

Through Table 2, it is evident that the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the questionnaire sections were high, both for the skill categories in the second section and for the combined second and third sections. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the entire questionnaire reached a value of (0.798), indicating a high reliability rate for the questionnaire.

Table 3. Results of calculating the values of the correlation coefficient of the questionnaire items with the dimensions to which they belong

Section1: Soft skills							
Category One: Effective communication skills		Category two: leadership skills and team work		Category three: strategic planning and time management skills		Category four: learning and life skills	
Items	Person Corr.	Items	Person Corr.	Items	Person Corr.	Items	Person Corr.
1	0.622**	1	0.577**	1	0.711**	1	0.603**
2	0.637**	2	0.598**	2	0.615**	2	0.711**
3	0.596**	3	0.632**	3	0.588**	3	0.609**
4	0.499*	4	0.646**	4	0.561**	4	0.588**
5	0.649**	5	0.579**	5	0.629**	5	0.544*
6	0.513*	6	0.634**	6	0.577**	6	0.694**
7	0.588**	7	0.566**	7	0.596**	7	0.703**
8	0.611**	8	0.499*	8	0.588**	8	0.687**
Section 2: methods and strategies		9	0.519*	9	0.618**	Section 3: Obstacles to developing soft skills	
1	0.577**	10	0.619**			1	0.587**
2	0.609**	11	0.633**			2	0.619**
3	0.649**	12	0.647**			3	0.678**
4	0.701**					4	0.635**
5	0.703**					5	0.687**
6	0.688**					6	0.588**
7	0.597**					7	0.609**
8	0.849*					8	0.559*
9	0.629**					9	0.677**

Through Table 3, it is evident that the correlation coefficients for all questionnaire items were statistically significant, indicating a significant correlation between the items of each section and the section that follows it (whether a section or a main category of soft skills). Based on this, there is internal consistency within the questionnaire, confirming its validity for application.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The responses were collected and analyzed using SPSS v25.0 software, employing descriptive statistics, including the calculation of mean, standard deviation, and ranks. Given that the response levels were trinary, the response mean range was set at (0.66). Based on this, the calculated response means were classified according to the following values: (2.34 to 3, indicating a high response, 1.67 to 2.33, indicating a moderate response, and 1 to 1.66, indicating a weak response). The answers to the research questions are provided below:

Research question 1: What is the level of importance of soft skills from the students' perspective?

To answer this question, the means, standard deviations, and ranks were calculated, as illustrated in Table 4.

Table4: Level of importance of soft skills from the student's perspective

Main Scales and related sub-skills		Importance of soft skills from the student's perspective			
		Mean	Std.dev	Rank	Response Category
Category one: Effective communication skills					
1	speaking With others skill	2.88	0.17	3	High
2	listening skill well to others	2.87	0.22	6	High
3	designing and implementing presentations Skill	2.90	0.19	2	High
4	using body language skill	2.96	0.17	1	High
5	exchanging and appreciating points skill of view with others	2.66	0.11	8	High
6	persuading others skill and positively influencing them	2.88	0.21	4	High
7	Self-confidence skill	2.87	0.10	5	High
8	building successful professional and social relationships skill	2.86	0.13	7	High
Total		2.86	0.16	High	
Category two: leadership skills and team work					
1	forming and managing work teams Skill 0.21	2.67	0.23	12	High
2	cooperating with others skill 0.19	2.78	0.19	10	High
3	negotiating with others Skill 0.14	2.81	0.14	8	High
4	Emotional intelligence skill0.16	2.93	0.16	1	High
5	commitment and discipline skil0.18l	2.86	0.11	5	High
6	Responsibility skill0.19	2.89	0.10	2	High
7	perseverance and effo0.23rt skill	2.71	0.19	11	High
8	empathizing with others skill	2.83	0.18	7	High
9	Self-motivation skill	2.87	0.22	4	High
10	People management skill	2.79	0.19	9	High
11	Conflict resolution skill	2.84	0.18	6	High
12	managing expectations skill	2.89	0.17	3	High
Total		2.82	0.17	High	
Category three: strategic planning and time management skills					
1	setting priorities and alternative scenarios skill	2.83	0.22	6	High
2	planning for the future skill	2.87	0.23	3	High
3	Innovation and initiative skill	2.91	0.24	2	High
4	Logical thinking skill	2.82	0.23	8	High
5	Analysis and deduction skill	2.73	0.24	9	High
6	Critical thinking skill	2.93	0.24	1	High
7	Project management skill	2.84	0.19	5	High
8	Entrepreneurship skill	2.87	0.18	4	High
9	Change management skill	2.83	0.21	7	High
Total		2.85	0.22	High	
Category four: learning and life skills					
1	Self-regulation skill	2.93	0.25	2	High
2	Metacognitive skills	2.91	0.19	4	High
3	Flexibility and adaptability skill	2.94	0.22	1	High
4	Skill in solving complex problems	2.93	0.19	3	High
5	Decision making skill	2.87	0.18	6	High
6	Self-learning and continuous learning skill	2.84	0.16	7	High
7	Continuing professional development skill	2.77	0.21	8	High
8	interacting with digital environments Skill	2.91	0.23	5	High
Total		2.89	0.21	High	

Through Table 4, it is evident that the perception level of Najran University students regarding the importance of soft skills was high. The arithmetic mean for soft skills as a whole was (2.85), with a standard deviation of (0.19), indicating homogeneity in students' opinions and agreement on the high importance of soft skills. The highest level of appreciation for the importance of these skills, from the students' perspective, was as follows: the category of learning and life skills, with a mean of (2.89). The category of effective communication skills came second in importance according to students, with an average of (2.86). Following that, the category of strategic planning and time management skills had an average of (2.85). In the fourth and last place, the category

of leadership and teamwork skills had an average of (2.82). All of these categories were considered highly important by the students.

Table 4 also shows that all the skills listed under the effective communication skills category received a high level of importance from the students, with arithmetic means ranging from (2.86 to 2.96). The results indicate that within this category, body language skills were considered the most important, while building successful professional and social relationships with others was perceived as the least important skill. Moreover, the students highly valued the category of leadership and teamwork skills, with arithmetic means ranging from (2.67 to 2.93). Emotional intelligence was identified as the most important skill within this category, while building and managing a work team was perceived as the least important. In addition, Table 4 illustrates that students acknowledged the importance of the category of strategic planning and time management skills, with arithmetic means ranging from (2.83 to 2.93). Critical thinking was identified as the most important skill within this category, while analysis and deduction were perceived as the least important. The results also indicate that students highly appreciated the category of learning and life skills, with average values ranging from (2.77 to 2.94). Adaptability and flexibility were considered the most important skills within this category, while continuous professional development was perceived as the least important skill.

Therefore, it can be concluded that soft skills, in all their four categories, have obtained a high level of importance for the students. This result indicates the students' awareness and recognition of the significance of these skills, given their crucial role and impact on their future professional and personal success. These skills are considered essential requirements for future employment. The findings of this research align with studies conducted by Perez-Luno et al. (2018), Imran et al. (2018), Majid et al. (2019), Tang (2019), Okolie et al. (2019), Ashari et al. (2020), Tang (2020), Tem et al. (2020), Qizi (2020), and Abraham et al. (2021). All these studies emphasized the importance of innovative skills in developing graduates' innovative abilities, enabling them to secure suitable employment. Furthermore, soft skills are crucial for faculty members to cultivate in their students. These skills are instrumental in entrepreneurship, project management, effective handling of big data environments, and adapting to the ever-changing dynamics in work environments.

Research question 2: To what extent are students satisfied with their proficiency in soft skills?

To answer this question, the means, standard deviations, and ranks were calculated, as shown in Table 5.

Table5. Degree of student satisfaction with his level of the skill mastery

Main domains and related sub-skills		Degree of student satisfaction with his level of the skill mastery			
		Mean	Std.dev	Rank	Response category
Category One: Effective communication skills					
1	Speaking With others skill	1.63	0.23	5	Low
2	Listening skill well to others	1.82	0.21	2	moderate
3	Designing and implementing presentations skill	1.83	0.19	1	moderate
4	Using body language skill	1.46	0.26	7	Low
5	Exchanging and appreciating points skill of view with others	1.53	0.31	6	Low
6	Persuading others skill and positively influencing them	1.39	0.25	8	Low
7	Self-confidence skill	1.77	0.33	3	moderate
8	Building successful professional and social relationships skill	1.71	0.35	4	moderate
Total		1.64	0.27	Low	
second category: leadership skills and team work					
1	Forming and managing work teams Skill	1.43	0.41	6	Low
2	Cooperating with others skill	1.58	0.29	3	Low
3	Negotiating with others Skill	1.41	0.31	7	Low
4	Emotional intelligence skill	1.43	0.28	5	Low
5	Commitment and discipline skill	1.37	0.41	8	Low
6	Responsibility skill	1.68	0.52	1	moderate
7	Perseverance and effort skill	1.67	0.39	2	moderate
8	Empathizing with others skill	1.33	0.31	9	Low
9	Self-motivation skill	1.24	0.29	10	Low
10	People management skill	1.13	0.44	11	Low
11	Conflict resolution skill	1.09	0.39	12	Low
12	Managing expectations skill	1.47	0.34	4	Low

Total		1.40	0.37	Low	
Third category: strategic planning and time management skills					
1	Setting priorities and alternative scenarios skill	1.37	0.41	7	Low
2	Planning for the future skill	1.48	0.51	5	Low
3	Innovation and initiative skill	1.41	0.29	6	Low
4	Logical thinking skill	1.51	0.33	4	Low
5	Analysis and deduction skill	1.58	0.41	3	Low
6	Critical thinking skill	1.71	0.37	1	moderate
7	Project management skill	1.67	0.51	2	moderate
8	Entrepreneurship skill	1.32	0.39	8	Low
9	Change management skill	1.07	0.37	9	Low
Total		1.46	0.40	Low	
Fourth category: learning and life skills					
1	Self-regulation skill	1.47	0.42	6	Low
2	Metacognitive skills	1.49	0.51	5	Low
3	Flexibility and adaptability skill	1.33	0.39	8	Low
4	Skill in solving complex problems	1.56	0.37	3	Low
5	Decision making skill	1.58	0.51	2	Low
6	Self-learning and continuous learning skill	1.42	0.44	7	Low
7	Continuing professional development skill	1.57	0.46	4	Low
8	interacting with digital environments Skill	1.72	0.38	1	moderate
Total		1.52	0.43	Low	

Through Table 5, it is evident that students' satisfaction with their proficiency in soft skills is low. The arithmetic mean for the overall satisfaction level with soft skills was (1.50) at a weak level, with a standard deviation of (0.37). Students' responses indicated that the category of effective communication skills was the least weak, with a mean of (1.64). Following that was the category of learning and life skills with a mean of (1.52), then the category of strategic planning and time management skills with a mean of (1.46). The category of leadership and teamwork skills emerged as the most deficient skills among students, with a mean of (1.40). This underscores the need to focus on all categories of soft skills, as students expressed a low level of proficiency across these areas.

The results in Table 5 indicate that students demonstrated a moderate proficiency level in four skills (2, 3, 7, 8), while they exhibited a low proficiency level in the same set of skills (2, 3, 7, 8). In addition, the results show that students displayed a moderate proficiency level in two leadership and teamwork skills: responsibility and perseverance. However, they expressed a low proficiency level in the remaining skills within the leadership and teamwork category.

From Table 5, it is also evident that students exhibited responses indicating a moderate level of proficiency in two skills related to strategic planning and time management: "Critical Thinking and Project Management." Meanwhile, they displayed responses suggesting a low proficiency level in the remaining skills within the category of strategic planning and time management. In addition, the results indicated that students assessed their proficiency level in learning and life skills as moderate in only one skill: "Interacting with Digital Environments." However, their proficiency level in the remaining learning and life skills was rated as low. This result may be attributed to the programs and activities offered by student activity committees in colleges, as well as the programs provided by the Dean of Student Affairs for the development of student skills.

This result may be attributed to the programs and activities offered by student activity committees in colleges, as well as the programs provided by the Dean of Student Affairs for the development of student skills. In addition, it can be linked to the activities and training programs offered by university clubs, the Deanship of Digital Transformation, and digital information resources. These results align with the findings of studies (Williams, 2019; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020; Noah & Aziz, 2020), which emphasized that despite students' positive perceptions of soft skills, they are dissatisfied with their proficiency levels in these skills.

Research question 3: How satisfied are students with the methods and strategies employed by the university to develop their soft skills?

To answer this question, frequencies were calculated and translated into percentages, along with the calculation of the mean scores, as illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6. How satisfied are students with the methods and strategies used by the university (if any) in developing the soft skills of its students

	items	1	2	3	Mean	Response Category
1	Do you know what soft skills are?	20.9%	32.8%	46.3%	2.25	moderate
2	How do you rate the usefulness of soft skills for future professional success?	2%	25.7%	72.3%	2.70	High
3	How satisfied are you with the level of development of your soft skills?	76.7%	15.2%	8.1%	1.31	Low
4	How do you see the university's contribution to developing your soft skills during your studies?	69.3%	19.9%	10.8%	1.42	Low
5	How satisfied are you with the faculty's contribution to developing your soft skills?	73.3%	22.3%	4.4%	1.31	Low
6	How satisfied are you with the inclusion of soft skills in educational curricula?	70.6%	21.3%	8.1%	1.38	Low
7	How appropriate are the methods and strategies used in teaching to develop your soft skills?	74.7%	19.3%	6.1%	1.31	Low
8	To what extent do the extracurricular activities and skills development programs offered by the university contribute to developing your soft skills?	56.4%	25.7%	17.9%	1.61	Low
9	How interested are you in future planning to develop your soft skills?	63.2%	17.2%	19.6%	1.56	Low
	Total	21.6%	22.1%	56.3%	1.65	Low

Through Table 6, it is evident that the mean score for the paragraph designed to determine the students' awareness of soft skills ("Do you know what soft skills are?") is moderate, with a value of (2.25). Approximately (46.3%) expressed awareness of soft skills, (32.8%) of the students showed hesitation and uncertainty about their knowledge, and (20.9%) of the students lacked sufficient awareness. The results also indicate that students demonstrated responses indicating a high importance of soft skills for them, with a mean score of (2.70) for the paragraph related to "What is your estimation of the benefit of soft skills for future professional success?" The majority of students (72.3%) perceive their importance as high, (25.7%) see their importance as moderate, while (2%) of the students consider their importance as low. These results align with findings from studies (Majid et al., 2019; Succi & Canovi, 2020; Tripathy, 2020; Mitses et al., 2021) that highlighted an increased awareness of soft skills among students and the recognition of their importance in enhancing employment opportunities and complementing hard skills for effective individual preparation.

The results in Table 6 also indicate that students showed responses suggesting a low satisfaction level with the methods and strategies employed by the university in developing soft skills. The mean values ranged from (1.31 to 1.61), indicating that students are not satisfied with the university's methods and strategies for developing their soft skills. There is a need for a reevaluation of these methods and strategies. These findings align with results from studies (Fahimirad et al., 2019; Rebele & Pierre, 2019; Kostikova et al., 2021; Malykhin et al., 2021), which affirmed that universities are making efforts, programs, and activities in the field of developing digital skills. However, these measures are still limited in adequately developing soft skills among students.

Research question 4: What are the obstacles to developing soft skills from the students' point of view?

To answer this question, the frequencies were calculated and translated into percentages, along with the calculation of the means, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Obstacles to developing soft skills from the students' perspective

	items	1	2	3	Mean	Response Category
1	Weak training dedicated to developing soft skills	12.2%	15.9%	72.0%	2.60	High
2	The educational curricula do not include soft skills	10.1%	19.3%	70.6%	2.60	High
3	Weak role played by the faculty member in developing students' soft skills	8.1%	17.2%	74.7%	2.67	High
4	Inappropriate teaching and learning methods and strategies used to develop soft skills	6.1%	20.6%	73.3%	2.67	High
5	Lack of guides and self-learning materials for developing soft skills	8.1%	16.6%	75.3%	2.67	High

6	Insufficient time required to attend and participate in professional development programs and workshops related to soft skills	16.2%	26.0%	57.8%	2.42	High
7	There is a gap between learning outcomes and the requirements for developing students' personal skills	7.4%	24.0%	68.6%	2.61	High
8	Weak training strategies and methods used to provide and measure soft skills	18.2%	22.3%	59.5%	2.41	High
9	Weak attention to the methods and methods used in evaluation of soft skills and methods for measuring them	18.2%	26.7%	55.1%	2.37	High
Total		11.6%	21%	67.4%	2.56	High

Through Table 7, it is evident that the students agreed on the mentioned factors as hindrances to a high degree, where the overall arithmetic mean value was (2.56), and the arithmetic mean values for the items indicating hindrances ranged from (2.37 to 2.67), all at high levels. The results also indicated that (67.4%) of the students strongly agreed on these hindrances, (21%) agreed on them to a moderate extent, and (11.6%) agreed on them to a low extent. This suggests the presence of hindrances in various aspects that the university needs to address to enhance the development of soft skills among students. These findings align with the results of studies (Noah & Aziz, 2020; Volkova et al., 2020; Semenova et al., 2021), which confirmed the existence of multiple hindrances such as faculty readiness, curriculum revision and the need for the development of teaching practices.

CONCLUSION

The study results indicated that the level of awareness among Najran University students regarding the importance of soft skills was high. The importance of these skills, according to students, was ranked as follows: learning and life skills, effective communication skills, followed by strategic planning and time management skills, and finally leadership and teamwork skills. However, the students expressed dissatisfaction and perceived weakness in their soft skills. The ranking of skill categories based on the students' perceived weaknesses was as follows: leadership and teamwork skills, followed by strategic planning and time management skills, learning and life skills, and finally, effective communication skills. Furthermore, the results highlighted the students' dissatisfaction with the university's methods and strategies for developing their soft skills, indicating a low level of satisfaction. In addition, students strongly agreed that the obstacles discussed in the study are hindrances that impede the development of their soft skills.

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