

# Bridging the Employability Gap through Soft Skills Training in Higher Education: A Short Review

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## Abstract

In the present competitive job market, technical knowledge alone is not sufficient for employability. Soft skills, behavioral skills, and leadership qualities play a vital role in shaping students into confident and workplace-ready professionals. This paper focuses on the importance of developing communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving ability, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and leadership among college students. The study highlights how these skills improve job performance, interpersonal relationships, and career growth. It also discusses common gaps seen among graduates such as poor communication, lack of confidence, and limited decision-making skills. The paper suggests practical strategies for skill development through classroom activities, group discussions, role plays, internships, project-based learning, mentoring, and personality development programmes. Further, it emphasizes the need for higher educational institutions to integrate soft skill training into the curriculum to enhance employability outcomes. Strengthening these competencies can support students in achieving long-term career success and meeting industry expectations.

**Keywords** : soft skills, higher education, career success, industry expectations.

## Introduction

In modern India, the shift from higher education to professional jobs has become increasingly difficult, despite significant growth in educational infrastructure and student enrollment. A continuous employability gap negatively impacts the job prospects of millions of graduates each year, indicating a fundamental disconnect between academic programs and the diverse skill sets that today's employers require (Rahamam *et al.*, 2025). Contemporary jobs expect graduates to communicate effectively, work collaboratively in teams, tackle real-world challenges, adjust to evolving environments, and exhibit leadership and emotional intelligence (Toney *et al.*, 2024). Employers frequently indicate that while graduates fulfill technical requirements, they often lack essential interpersonal and workplace skills such as professional communication, teamwork, time management, and confidence (Mahajan and Golahit, 2017). This disparity diminishes the job readiness of graduates, raises training expenses for employers, and hinders workforce productivity. Training in soft skills has become a key approach for closing this gap. Studies indicate that well-organized training programs, especially those based on hands-on learning and collaboration with industries are greatly enhance employment prospects (Jackson and Dean 2023). This article reviews the evidence and recommends practical approaches for higher education institutions to enhance graduates' preparedness for the workforce.

## 2. The Employability Gap

### 2.1 Nature and Scope

The severe employability gap present in India. The India Skills Report 2025 indicates that 54.81% of Indian graduates are employable, reflecting a modest increase from 51.25% in 2024. Nevertheless, a significant employability gap of 45% still exists. While graduates possess theoretical knowledge, they frequently lack essential workplace skills such as

teamwork, coordination, communication, and problem-solving (Li and Jansaeng, 2025). This issue extends beyond India, as research in other areas, like Slovakia, reveals that employers often cite a lack of necessary workplace skills among graduates, highlighting the global nature of the employability challenge (Lazíková *et al.*, 2022).

## 2.2 Employer Perspectives

Employers consistently point to inadequate communication skills as the most significant obstacle to employability. Graduates typically face difficulties in professional speaking, writing, active listening, and delivering presentations (Bagonza *et al.*, 2021). Other identified deficiencies include teamwork, time management, adaptability, decision-making, confidence, and problem-solving abilities (Mahajan and Golahit, 2017).

A significant problem is the discrepancy between the priorities of educational institutions and the expectations of employers. While institutions tend to highlight technical skills, stress management, and academic performance, employers place greater importance on collaboration, creativity, confidence, and interpersonal skills (Aguenza and Ingles, 2024). This gap emphasizes the need for a more cohesive integration of employability skills into educational programs.

## 2.3 Technological Change and Skill Shifts

The rise of automation and artificial intelligence is transforming workplaces and the skills that are needed. This evolution heightens the need for adaptability, lifelong learning, social skills, and the ability to operate effectively within digitally oriented teams. (Nyagope, 2025). In workplaces driven by AI, possessing solely technical skills is not enough. Graduates must showcase their abilities in leadership, communication, teamwork, and innovation to stay employable and competitive. As a result, training in soft skills is becoming increasingly vital not just for securing jobs, but also for maintaining a successful career (Challoumis, 2024; Widyakusuma and Hakim, 2024).

## 3. The Role of Soft Skills Training

### 3.1 Key Soft Skills

Soft skills include interpersonal, emotional, and cognitive competencies that support workplace performance. The most frequently cited core skills include, Communication skills such as verbal, written, listening, presentation, then Teamwork and collaboration, Leadership and initiative, Adaptability and flexibility, Problem-solving and critical thinking, Time management and organization (Toney *et al.*, 2024).

Emotional intelligence is increasingly acknowledged as essential, facilitating empathy, conflict resolution, self-regulation, and productive relationships in the workplace (Odame and Pandey, 2025).

### 3.2 Evidence of Impact

Research supports that structured interventions focused on soft skills enhance job readiness specifically, Industry-Oriented Training (IOT) has been shown to boost problem-solving abilities, communication skills, leadership qualities, teamwork, and self-assessment, impacting both academic success and career progression (Ghaith, 2024). Additionally, industry-influenced project-based learning (PBL) led to a 25% increase in job-related skills, a 30% rise in engagement, and a 35% improvement in satisfaction (Naseer *et al.*, 2025). Serious games (competition) led to notable advancements in 13 out of 18 soft skill areas, such as teamwork, stress management, and self-confidence (Serrano *et al.*, 2025). Work-integrated learning (WIL) improved perceived readiness, communication abilities, and teamwork, with results differing by discipline and type of WIL (Jackson, 2015). Overall, research suggests that soft skills can be effectively taught when the training is well-structured, experiential, and relevant to workplace environments.

### 3.3 Theoretical Support

Numerous theoretical frameworks serve as conceptual foundations for soft skills training within higher education. The theory of emotional intelligence, introduced by Goleman, highlights the vital importance of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills for achieving professional success (Nyagope, 2025). This framework

implies that enhancing emotional competencies allows graduates to effectively navigate intricate interpersonal relationships, cope with workplace stress, and establish fruitful professional connections that are crucial for career progression. Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences provides an additional insightful perspective, asserting that intelligence includes various domains such as linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic intelligences. This framework advocates for tailored strategies in soft skills development that reflect diverse learning styles and individual strengths (khan *et al.*, 2025). (Antonopoulou, 2024) suggested Emotional intelligence theory, emphasizes self-awareness, empathy, motivation, and interpersonal competence for workplace success. Experiential learning theory, as defined by Kolb, highlights the importance of learning via direct experiences, reflective thinking, abstract reasoning, and practical experimentation, a process especially pertinent for honing soft skills through hands-on practice, constructive feedback, and continuous refinement (Beaupre *et al.*, 2024). Andragogical principles, acknowledging the necessity for self-direction, relevance, and practical application among adult learners, guide the design of effective soft skills training (McKinstry, 2016).

## **4. Current Initiatives in Higher Education**

### **4.1 Institutional Training Programs.**

Educational institutions around the globe have adopted a range of soft skills training initiatives with different frameworks and levels of intensity. The Industry-Oriented Training (IOT) at St Joseph Engineering College serves as a prime example of a thorough institutional commitment, featuring a thoughtfully organized curriculum that focuses on five key skill areas: communication, self-assessment, leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving (Toney *et al.*, 2024). This organized approach allows participants to cultivate essential problem-solving skills and experience overall growth, illustrating how the intentional inclusion of soft skills training within the curriculum can lead to significant advantages.

### **4.2 Experiential Learning and WIL**

Experiential learning has become a fundamental approach for developing soft skills, with work-integrated learning (WIL) proving to be especially effective. WIL includes various experiences such as internships, cooperative education, service learning, and project-based learning that link academic study to real-world workplace environments (Rowe and Zegwaard, 2017). Numerous studies consistently indicate that WIL improves employability skills, and utilizing suitable teaching strategies along with quality assessment is essential for optimizing results (Rowe and Zegwaard, 2017). The framework focuses on addressing real-world challenges through interdisciplinary strategies, dedicating 40% of the curriculum to project-based learning and incorporating five unique industry engagement activities each academic term (Naseer *et al.*, 2025). Large-scale survey evidence confirms WIL improves employment preparedness and workplace skill confidence (Jackson, 2015). However, equitable access remains a challenge, as not all students can secure quality placements.

The framework focuses on addressing practical challenges using interdisciplinary methods, dedicating 40% of the curriculum to problem-based learning and incorporating five unique industry engagement activities each academic term (Naseer *et al.*, 2025). Likewise, projects that are integrated into courses and involve real clients enhance students' readiness for careers and provide benefits to industry partners, thereby reinforcing the ties between the university and the community (Oh and Polidan, 2018).

## **5. Challenges and Opportunities**

### **5.1 Key Challenges**

Developing extensive soft skills training initiatives encounters various challenges related to resources, curriculum creation, faculty training, and the culture of the institution. A significant obstacle arises from limited resources, as institutions have difficulty providing adequate funding, staff, and infrastructure for the enhancement of soft skills (Karunarathne and Ariyawansa 2022).

Despite evidence of effectiveness, implementation faces major barriers namely, Resource limitations (funding, trainers, infrastructure), Curriculum redesign complexity, Faculty skill gaps in soft skills pedagogy, Weak assessment and evaluation systems, Limited industry involvement (Sohail, 2025). Scaling WIL remains difficult due to placement availability and equity concerns (Jackson, 2015).

## 5.2 Opportunities

The advantages of training in soft skills go beyond just enhancing employability. Employers benefit from having recruits who are ready for the workforce, which lowers training expenses and boosts productivity (Helyer and Lee 2014). Technology-driven learning methods like gamification offer scalable options. Serious games show significant learning results while lessening reliance on physical placements (Serrano *et al.*, 2025). On a national scale, enhancing graduate employability boosts India's capacity for innovation and economic competitiveness, making the integration of soft skills a strategic focus (Li and Jansaeng, 2025).

## 6. Recommendations

### 6.1 Curriculum Integration Strategies

To effectively develop soft skills, a systematic approach to curriculum integration is essential rather than relying on sporadic additions. Educational institutions should incorporate soft skills training throughout their degree programs, starting with foundational courses that introduce key competencies and advancing to higher-level applications within specific disciplines (Nyagope, 2025). Institutions ought to outline soft skills learning outcomes across various programs, highlighting where particular competencies are introduced, practiced, and assessed to guarantee thorough coverage. Assessment methods need to evolve to accurately reflect the development of soft skills. Institutions should adopt portfolio-based assessments in which students document their growth in soft skills through reflective writing, artifacts from hands-on learning experiences, and feedback from a range of sources, including peers, instructors, and workplace supervisors (Helyer and Lee, 2014).

### 6.2 Industrial Collaboration

Collaboration within the industry needs to go further than just single courses to include partnerships at the program level. The project-based learning model that incorporates industry collaboration through five different engagement activities each academic term illustrates how such ongoing partnerships can be methodically integrated (Ziegler *et al.*, 2025). Furthermore, educational institutions should encourage the participation of employers in delivering soft skills training by inviting professionals to co-teach, conduct workshops, and act as mentors, thereby introducing contemporary workplace insights into the educational environment.

### 6.3 Faculty Development and Support

Faculty development plays a vital role in the successful implementation of soft skills training. Institutions should offer professional development opportunities to help faculty grasp the significance of soft skills, cultivate suitable teaching methods, and create effective assessment tools (Bhatnagar *et al.*, 2010). Workshops, practice communities, and mentoring initiatives can enhance faculty capacity for instructing soft skills while promoting a culture within the institution that values these competencies. Recognition and reward systems need to acknowledge the efforts of faculty in developing soft skills. The workload implications of facilitating work-integrated learning experiences, along with effective teaching strategies and quality assessments, require institutional recognition through adjustments in teaching loads, promotion criteria, and other incentives (Imran *et al.*, 2025). Without this acknowledgment, faculty might focus more on conventional subject matter instruction than on the cultivation of soft skills.

## 7. Conclusion

The employability gap in India is strongly driven by deficiencies in soft skills, especially communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. Evidence confirms that structured training—particularly through experiential learning, industry collaboration, work-integrated learning, and innovative tools like serious games—can significantly improve graduate

readiness. While barriers such as limited resources, curriculum redesign challenges, and faculty training needs remain, the benefits for graduates, employers, and national economic development are substantial. Systematic integration of soft skills into higher education is therefore essential to build a workforce capable of thriving in rapidly evolving, technology-driven professional environments.

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