

Soft Skills, Policies, Practices, and Self-Assessment: Employability Challenges and Opportunities of University Graduates in Pakistan

Syed Abdul Manan¹, Maya Khemlani David²& Sham Haidar³

Abstract

In a fast changing landscape of a globalized world and knowledge-driven economies, producing graduates with multiple competencies is critical as well as challenging for the universities. Given the growing importance of soft skills and their employability prospects, the present study draws on quantitative and qualitative data and examine soft skills of undergraduate students in four public universities of Pakistan. Total 426 students were participants in the survey questionnaire while 25 participated in interviews. Results show that although students' self-assessment of different soft skill shows high levels quantitatively; however, there still appears a wide gap between policies, classroom practices vis-à-vis achieving soft skills targets. Although the Higher Education Commission Pakistan (HEC) incorporates soft skills in curriculum; however, we find the lack of clear policy direction about integration of soft skills in actual classroom teaching and practices. Noticeably, vital soft skills such as entrepreneurship and professional ethics are absent from the curriculum. We observe that without establishing a comprehensive policy framework and integration of soft skills in pedagogies, the graduating students are likely to encounter potential obstacles in finding reasonable jobs. Applying such framework could train students as a sustained and competent human resource, employable in the global economy.

Keywords: *soft skills, employability, Higher Education Pakistan, higher education policies and practices*

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Introduction

In a fast changing landscape of a globalized world and knowledge-driven economies, producing graduates with multiple competencies is not only critical, but also challenging for the universities. A huge stock of research and literature testify to the significant role soft skills can play in the employability prospects of the graduate (Bhatnagar, 2011; Butterfield, 2010; Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; C. a. Knight, 2012; Prince; Rao, 2010). 198 employers were surveyed in the UK and it was found that “for graduates, being good at communicating, a team player, confident and analytical were all more important than having technical knowledge” (BBC, 2014). Generally, hard skills include technical process and practical activities that are normally simple to observe, measure, and quantify while soft skills refer to skills, such as personal attributes, interpersonal, and problem solving and decision-making abilities. The marketability and employability entail graduates who have technical skills along with soft skills or human skills. The human skills are also variously termed as employability and people skills, emotional intelligence, interpersonal and social skills (Rao, 2010). Emphasizing the ever increasing significance of soft skills and their applicability in the modern world, Bhatnagar (2011) vividly explicates that,

Communication have become crucial in academia due to steady growth in information technology and globalization. Professionals, teachers, students and scientist are facing challenges due to world becoming a global market resulting in different businesses. We must have traits of leadership and take up challenges and responsibilities to failure into success—these skills are called soft skills. (2011, p. vii)

In the age of cut-throat competition and demanding market , most graduates need soft skills, and it is aptly argued that “people rise because of hard skills and fall due to lack of soft skills in the corporate world” (Rao, 2010, p. 4). The renowned Indian scientist A.P.J. Abdul Kalam while underlining the importance of an education system that produces skilled and industry-oriented graduates, he proposed that,

Education system must aim towards employability and ensure quality in education. There is a large gap in the availability of employable skill. To bridge the gap, an interface is needed between the school curriculum and the needs of the industry. (Cited in Rao, 2010, p. 3)

In the new job market, workers require soft skills along with technical expertise that usually are job specific and non-transferrable. Therefore, along with technical skills, workers also need soft skills—“employability skills”—for contributing to the development and growth of their specific industry. Barnett (2006) argues that these soft skills not only help in obtaining professional jobs but also add into development of individuals in time of social and technical changes. These include the skills, understanding, basic knowledge, and individual attitude that not only help in

employment but also in sustaining the jobs successfully and satisfactory (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). Moreover, Cotton (2001) concludes that usually employers value general soft skill more than specific technical skills. Employers also mentioned that graduates often lack the general needed employability skills. A study conducted by Spencer and Spencer (1993) found that good employees often possess both technical and soft skills. In view of the growing importance of soft skills and their employability prospects, the present study sets to examine soft skills of the graduating students enrolled in the universities of Pakistan. The survey targets undergraduate students in four universities. Although, the Higher Education Commission (HEC), the governing body of all public as well as private universities, enforces a centralized curriculum across the country, which includes some general courses, not necessarily all what we know as the soft skills. The importance of soft skills is yet to be emphasized in the curriculum. There is also missing a strategic plan or specific policy agenda, which may be described as soft-skills oriented as observed in some countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines and so on. Therefore, given the significance of the soft skills and lack of any obvious specific policy framework about the soft skills, this study can be an important contribution toward exploring the situation within the universities. The main thrust of the study is to address three prominent areas concerning the soft skills—policies and practices towards soft skills, students' self-assessment of soft skills and in the end, based on emerging data and themes, an examination of employability challenges and opportunities of university graduates in Pakistan. Thus, the study is to show the extent at which the universities in Pakistan provide with an enabling environment, and endow students with the demanding needs of the market, who may be fully equipped with both specialized knowledge as well as additional skills. Soft skills, which are also called transferable skills, employability skills, key skills and generic skills, serve both horizontally as well as vertically across organizations/industries and jobs. The focus of the study stays on the following soft skills: communication skills, problem solving skills, critical thinking skills, the ability of lifelong learning, teamwork, entrepreneurship, and leadership and professional ethics.

The Employment Scenario

Reporting about 'Unemployment monster preying on Pakistanis', a local newspaper described based on the statistics received from industries that out of 59 million potential workforce in the country, 56.5 million is employed while 3.5 million (6%) are unemployed. Interestingly almost 90% of unemployed are unskilled people and the remaining 10% are educated but not having any skill (Newspaper, 2014). According to a report by the British Council (2014), the participation in higher education was 1,572,664 in the year 2011. Estimated graduate unemployment in 2012 was 28% of the total unemployment rates of the total country, which stood 6.0%. There is lack of comprehensive research on soft skills of unemployed graduates in Pakistan; however, in

a small-scale survey of 100 engineering students participated from a Pakistani engineering university of by Kakepoto, Said, Buriro, and Habil (2013) concluded that lack of English fluency, anxiety and fear of new environment, scarcity of motivation and large number of students in classrooms were barriers of engineering students to develop oral communication skills. A previous study on the causes of graduates' unemployment points to some of the soft skills related factors. The study finds that the reality remains that the market demands skilled graduates, equipped with reasonable know-how of the latest technology, a combination of soft skills, proficiency in English language, a dynamic personality and so on (Zia, Khan, Raja & Ali, 2011). Although, policies make ambitious aims; however, they do not translate into practice.

Defining employability

The idea of employability has been widely researched and well documented by several studies in the business related area (Hesketh, 2000; Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Holmes, 2001; P. Knight & Yorke, 2004; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Wolf, 2002; Yorke, 2006). Similarly, in the last two decades, several studies have worked on to develop typologies of employability in several disciplines and from different ideological standpoints (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Grip, van & Sanders, 2004; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). According to Field (2000), employability is generally understood as one of the expressions of the rapid changes linked to the globalization era of the past two decades. What employability is, and what this notion actually entails needs clarification. Hillage and Pollard (1998) explain that employability is peoples' success to obtain initial employment, continued with their employment, perform different roles while working in one organization, in case of need be able to gain new employment, and perform up to the satisfaction of employers. It can be said that employability is more important than the simple state of being employed only. The United Kingdom Institute of Employment describes it as having the ability to acquire, maintain, and seek for a newer job and it also includes:

...their assets in terms of the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess; the way they use and deploy those assets; the way they present them to employers; and crucially, the context (e.g. personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they see work. (Hillage & Pollard, 1998, p. 1)

Yorke (2006) summarizes the main component of employability in the following words:

A set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupation(s) to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. (p. 21)

The broader definitions of employability as underlined above clearly indicate that mere discipline-specific technical knowledge often contributes very little to the actual understanding of employability while the predominant emphasis appears to include personal attributes such as the ability use and manipulate the technical skills creatively as per the demand of situation (Orr, 1991). With reference to the employers' needs in the context of Malaysia, Singh, Thambusamy, and Ramly (2014) explain that employability must be seen as a package that comprises of skills and work-related capabilities which should attract as well as serve the employers' needs. The tenets of employability now show that soft skills or generic skills are integrally related to the overall employability package, and their interrelationship is indisputable. Employability cannot be seen in isolation from soft skills. Until lately, the importance of soft skills erroneously went under-rated; however, people have now realized the intertwined nature of employability and soft skills, and the limited scope of mere discipline-specific knowledge (Hampson & Junor, 2010). Therefore, the general skills required for employability contains a very wide range of abilities that include reading skills, writing skills, mathematical competence, affective communication; critical thinking skills; the ability of team work; computer skills; technical skills; and leadership (Leon & Borcehrs , 2002). In addition, Koo (2007) suggested the term pluriliteracy that include language proficiency, communicative competence, cultural awareness, citizenship, vocational literacy, and critical literacy. To sum up, generic or soft skills are integral feature of employability, and generic skills do not denote technical knowledge or hard skills'. The employability equations comprises of two main factors:

...One factor is the technical knowledge or hard skills while the other factor comprises the soft skills or the generic skills. These generic skills support the hard skills in the work place as they deal with those capabilities that employees would need to function competently in any organization. (Singh et al., 2014, p. 318)

Methodology

This study utilizes both quantitative as well as qualitative data collection and analysis techniques. The study collects data from a total of 426 university undergraduates from 4 degree-awarding universities of Pakistan. Three universities are located in three different provinces while one is situated in the federal capital. The samples were drawn from a wide range of academic disciplines such as engineering, social sciences and humanities, natural sciences , biotechnology, computer sciences, management sciences, architecture, English literature (refer to field studies in the appendix A). Strategically, the students were picked from the 3rd and 4th year. Generally, students who are in their 3rd or 4th year of their study have undergone several soft skills and experiences concerning different

skills. The demographic profiles of the respondents suggest that boys make up considerably higher representation with n=342(81.0%) while girls form noticeably less numbers with n=80(19.0%). In addition, gender information of 4 students was found missing.

Data collection instruments comprised of a questionnaire survey and interviews. A total of 426 students participated in the survey questionnaire and 20 students from each university responded to interviews. The questionnaire survey was utilized to elicit students' responses on the following subjects: demographic information, exposure, and learning of soft skills, and their self-assessment in the soft skills. The questionnaire data was analyzed at descriptive level using SPSS to obtain frequency count, ratios, and percentages. Similarly, the interviews, which were both semi-structured and open-ended, were analyzed to draw emergent themes and to obtain in-depth information about subjects given in the questionnaire. Thus, a mixed method was used so that the data obtained from questionnaire survey may be validated and counterbalanced with the help of interviews (Creswell, 2008; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Data

In this part, we present data concerning students' use and exposure to different soft skills during their academic studies. A total of six soft skills have been addressed in the questionnaire survey—communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving, lifelong learning and information management, entrepreneurship, teamwork and leadership, and professional ethics.

Policies and practices

Communication skills

Communication skills refer to a broader definition as employed by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2006). It means that students are supposed to be fluent to communicate efficiently in two languages that is Bahasa Malaysia and the English language. After graduation they should be able to use both written and oral language skills to convey their thoughts clearly and confidently. Students should also learn the skills to be good listeners of both languages and to provide active responses. They should also learn the skills to use technology during presentations effectively and confidently (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2006)

The following table illustrates that how often students get opportunities for exercising communication in the English language. The first question was about the frequency with which students interact with their fellow students and lecturers to discuss academic issues in the English language. Against five Likert scales such as always, often,

sometimes, rarely and never, the students largely suggest that they always (31.9%), often (24%) while a significant number of them suggests that they sometimes (29.0%) use English to interact with their peers and lecturers in the English languages. Similarly, a relatively small number of them show they rarely (5.2%) and never (9.0%) use English for interaction with peers and lecturers in their academic issues.

The second question was to seek how often students used English with their classmates. The largest number of them responds that they sometimes (31.5%) while a significant number of them say they often (26.3%) interact in the English language. In addition, a vast majority of students reports that they use every opportunity to utilize presentation skills for improving their communications skills. As figures in the third row of the given table demonstrate, (72.5%) collectively suggest that they always and often obtain such opportunities. Collectively, (26.6%) say they always and often feel shy to communicate in the English language. Importantly, n=84(19.9%) sometimes hesitate to communicate in English in class. Similarly, figures in the fourth row show that a large number of students never feel shy n=180(42.7%) whereas n=46 (10.9%) rarely feels the same way. It is important to note that the findings from interviews noticeably contrasting picture than suggested in the questionnaires. For instance, during interviews, it was found that the use of English for communication is not as frequent as figures indicate in the questionnaire data. Urdu than English is usually used as a communication tool for day-to-day classroom activities such as lecture delivery, question/answers, and the related discussion. However, this applies to general technical courses while other courses such as Functional English or courses learning English involve some degree of communication in the English language. For instance, a student of BS Economics from one of the universities said that,

Yes, it is true English is the language of textbooks and exams are conducted in the English language throughout, but English is not being used regularly for communication. There is constant code switching of English words because there is no substitute of most technical concepts in Urdu. Teachers and students prefer to use Urdu to explain concepts. We are not used to English lectures.

Table 1: Communication skills

Communication skills	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
I interact with other students and lecturers in English to solve my academic problems	134(31.9%)	104(24.8%)	122(29.0%)	22(5.2%)	38(9.0%)
I communicate in	66(15.5%)	112(26.3%)	134(31.5%)	72(16.9%)	42(9.9%)

English with my classmates in class							
I use every opportunity for presentation in Class	192(45.5%)	114(27.0%)	54(12.8%)	34(8.1%)	28(6.6%)		
I am shy and unable to communicate in English	48(11.4%)	64(15.2%)	84(19.9%)	46(10.9%)	180(42.7%)		

Critical thinking and problem solving

Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2006) explains these skills that graduates should develop the ability to think critically, be creative and innovative, and they should use their analytical skills not only to have knowledge but to develop the ability to apply knowledge practically. Some of the elements that graduates must develop to fulfill this requirement are their capability to identify and analyze complex situations and have the skills to evaluate the situation and act as per the circumstances (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2006).

To all the six situations presented before the students concerning the use and experience of critical thinking and problem solving skills, they suggest positive response as a whole. Largely, the students show that they quite regularly perform activities in the classrooms, which allow them to deploy their critical thinking and hone their problem solving skills. We find that a vast majority of the students respond that they always and often happen to solve their problems by analyzing the problems finding logical reasons and evaluating the arguments presented before them. A significant number of students as suggested in column three from the right illustrates they sometimes are exposed to critical thinking and problem solving skills. In addition, comparatively smaller number of students rarely or never exercises critical thinking and problem solving problems during their studies.

Input from universities suggests that teaching methodologies are usually teacher-centered. Approach is largely traditional in which lecturers spend larger portion of time explaining subject material while students remain passive. In most of the universities surveyed, students suggested that task-based or activity based learning is not common. However, courses involving lab work do involve a degree of learner autonomy that naturally brings about critical and problem solving element in learning. Given the teacher-centered approaches, the element critical thinking and problem-solving element

arguably minimizes as students are not given active involvement to share, comment, deliberate or add their own input to the learning processes.

Table 2: Critical thinking and problem solving

Critical thinking & problem solving	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
When there is a problem I try to solve it by analyzing the situation	210(49.3%)	142(33.3%)	60(14.1%)	6(1.4%)	8(1.9%)
When there is a problem I ask others to help me solve the problem	126(29.9%)	130(30.8%)	106(25.1%)	42(10.0%)	18(4.0%)
I discuss assignments and academic problems with friends but try to solve the problem myself	194(45.5%)	142(33.3%)	60(14.1%)	16(3.8%)	14(3.3%)
I try to find logical reasons why things happen the way they do	158(37.6%)	130(31.0%)	92(21.9%)	34(8.1%)	6(1.4%)
I evaluate different points of view in an argument	132(31.0%)	156(36.6%)	98(23.0%)	30(7.0%)	10(2.3%)
I make connections between information and arguments	144(33.8%)	152(35.7%)	80(18.8%)	30(7.0%)	20(4.7%)

Life-long learning and information management

These skills require that students while acquiring knowledge and skills should be able to do self-regulated learning independently after graduating. They should have develop the ability to search the required information using variant available resources and they should also be able to manage the information efficiently. They should accept new ideas and be able to use their mind for new inquiries (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2006).

The first point regarding lifelong learning and information management seeks students to suggest if they took part in IT related classes for building up their skills about

information technology. A significant number of them (31.8%) shows that they sometimes attended while n=110(26.1%) suggested they often do so. Similarly, put together, (56.9%) students say that they always (30.8%) and often (26.1%) utilize their ability in IT to prepare for their examination while another (26.5%) sometimes make the use of IT for their examination. In addition, the third row indicates the frequency of awareness with which the students can determine where to find certain information about their field of studies. Overall, (79.5%) students admit that they always and often know where to look for certain information with the help of technology. The results of interviews mostly matched with that of questionnaires; however, not all students of the social sciences and humanities were not using information technology for their studies such as use of computer and internet for browsing material or doing assignments.

Table 3: Lifelong learning and information management

Lifelong learning and information management	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
I take part in IT classes and information skills workshops	72(17.1%)	110(26.1%)	134(31.8%)	60(14.2%)	46(10.9%)
I practice my IT abilities when preparing of my class assignments	130(30.8%)	110(26.1%)	112(26.5%)	34(8.1%)	36(8.5%)
If I need information I know how and where to find it	182(43.3%)	152(36.2%)	44(10.5%)	26(6.2%)	16(3.8%)

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship involves the ability to venture into new business and professional opportunities while having the ability to take calculated risk. This skill is important to search for business opportunities, to prepare business plans for those opportunities which eventually leads to self-employment (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2006).

In a related question to entrepreneurship, the students were asked to suggest their work experience. Table 4 illustrates their work experience. Nearly all the students suggest some degree of work experience as (23.2%) has received 1 to 3 months work experience

whereas the majority of them (76.8%) have 4 to 6 months experience. The following table gives details of their work experience:

Table 4: Work experience

		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	1 to 3 months	96	23.2	23.2
Valid	4 to 6 months	318	76.8	100.0
	Total	414	100.0	
Missing	System	12		
Total		426		

Table 5 below illustrates students' experience and exposure about entrepreneurship. A total of 5 situations were presented before them to seek their response. Figures show a mixed responses with regard to entrepreneurship related activities and courses. Although, a significant portion of the students always and often take part in activities (always 27.8% & often 26.4%); however, an equally significant part of the students sometimes, rarely or never get opportunity for employment related courses. Another (26%) suggests that it does not apply to them, as they have not undergone entrepreneurship related exposure. The second row shows nearly similar figures as in the previous question. The responses show considerable variation; however, the larger number suggests that they take part in activities that might help them launch their own business. For fund raising activities, the largest number of them sometimes (25.4%) participates whereas other responses also show variation. Put together, relatively small number of them takes part in activities for fund raising in their respective campuses. Similarly, the figures also indicate that a significant portion participates and contribute to their family in business while a relatively larger number of them do not run their own businesses. Interviews further confirmed that the vast majority of students were neither familiar with the word entrepreneurship nor were they educated about the purpose of studying entrepreneurship. This concept is yet to establish across universities in Pakistan. Therefore, based on the findings, it may be argued that students acutely lack this skill, and the authorities need to introduce this subject to make up for their deficiency in this critical soft skill.

Table 5: Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	N. A
I take part in courses/activities related to self-employment	118(27.8%)	112(26.4%)	94(22.2%)	40(9.4%)	34(8.0%)	26(6.1%)
I try to learn soft skills that will assist me open my own business	124(29.7%)	110(26.3%)	100(23.9%)	36(8.6%)	16(3.8%)	32(7.7%)
I participate in campus activities for fund raising	62(14.8%)	92(22.0%)	106(25.4%)	70(16.7%)	68(16.3%)	20(4.8%)
I help in my family business	112(26.5%)	86(20.4%)	70(16.6%)	60(14.2%)	46(10.8%)	48(11.4%)
I run my own business part time	40(9.7%)	58(14.0%)	58(14.0%)	56(13.5%)	90(21.7%)	112(27.1%)

Teamwork and leadership

Teamwork involves the ability to engage and cooperate with different people having variant social and cultural background to work for the common goals. For the successful professional work relationship, graduates should develop the skills to be respectful towards other people beliefs, behavior and attitude. In the teamwork graduate should develop the abilities to perform the responsibilities of a group leader and team member from time to time (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006). Similarly, leadership requires the ability to lead in various circumstances. In order to be effective leaders, graduate should acquire the basic knowledge of leadership theories to help them in leading some projects. They, therefore, acquire the skills of both a leader and team member to perform both these responsibilities interchangeably (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2006).

Table 6 illustrates that the largest section of the students takes active part in activities that are related to teamwork and leadership. Working together and group based combined student and joint assignment work appear to be regular features of the students as the figures largely fall in always and often. There are significant figures suggesting that they sometimes participate in teamwork and leadership oriented work. The figures as a whole may be described as promising in terms of teamwork and leadership; however, those being exposed to leadership and teamwork sometimes can be a concern as a significant number of them suggest sometimes. In addition, a considerable number of them also rarely get opportunity for teamwork and leadership activities.

Table 6: Teamwork and leadership

Teamwork and leadership	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
I study together with my classmates in a group	166(39.2%)	126(29.7%)	104(24.4%)	8(1.9%)	20(4.7%)
I take part in discussion groups actively	174(41.2%)	116(27.5%)	92(21.8%)	28(6.6%)	12(2.8%)
When group assignments are given I contribute actively	230(54.2%)	118(27.8%)	48(11.3%)	24(5.7%)	4(.9%)
I choose a co-curricular subject where I can work as a member of a team	122(29.2%)	134(32.1%)	118(28.2%)	24(5.7%)	20(4.8%)

Professional ethics

By acquiring and practicing professional ethics, graduates are supposed to practice moral standards while performing their duties in professional fields. It compels the graduates to gain the knowledge of economy, environment, and socio-culture aspects in their professional fields. Graduate should develop the capacity and skills to analyze the situation and decide in matters concerning ethics. Along with the professional life, graduates should practice good ethics in general life (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2006).

Table 7: Professional ethics

Teamwork and leadership	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
When I have an appointment with lecturer or classmates, I make sure that I come on time	276(65.1%)	100(23.6%)	32(7.7%)	8(1.9%)	8(1.9%)

I keep the deadlines to submit my Assignments	252(59.4%)	100(23.6%)	52(12.3%)	6(1.4%)	14(3.3%)
I avoid plagiarism	122(29.9%)	132(32.4%)	88(21.6%)	36(8.8%)	30(7.4%)
I respect my classmates and lecturers	324(76.4%)	46(10.8%)	28(6.6%)	10(2.4%)	16(3.8%)

The students predominantly suggest observance in terms of professional ethics. The most vital component of professional ethics at the university level may term as plagiarism and its prevention. It is significant to note that apart from a large number of students' avoidance of plagiarism, there are students suggest that they either sometimes avoid or never do it. Plagiarism and its prevention are integrally related to professional ethics; however, putting together those who sometimes, rarely or never 37.8% avoid plagiarism, should be a concern to highlight.

Self-assessment

In this part of the survey questionnaire, students were asked to rate their own strength in terms of each soft skills presented before them. The students were to do self-assessment against the five scales—the lowest 1 and 5 the highest. The following graphs show their rating across each soft skill.

Communication skills

Figure 1 below illustrates the self-assessment of students in communication skills. As the percentages indicate, the highest number of them (23.94%) rates themselves in the lowest scale. Similarly, the scales vary considerably as (15.02%) stand in scale 2, (20.19%) in scale 3, and other (19.25%) in scale 4, and (16.90%) in the highest category. Overall, the figures stand varied as nearly similar number of students fall in all the five scales presented. A small portion of them fails to respond; therefore, their scales are indicated as missing.

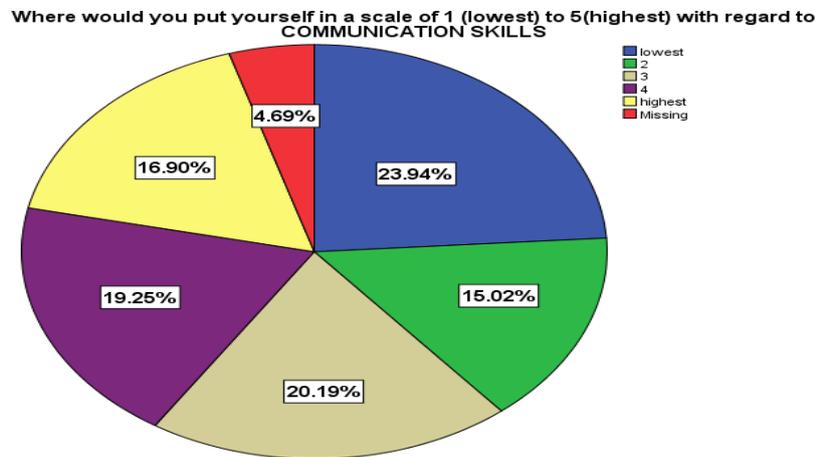


Figure 1: Self-assessment in communication skills

Critical thinking & problem solving

Figure 2 below illustrates that the largest number of students rank themselves in scale 4th—(27.70%). Those who rate themselves in the highest scale are noticeably low (9.86). Similarly, a significant number of them stand in scale 3 with (21.13%). Another (19.72%) stand in 2 while (16.90%) in the lowest category. As a whole, most of them fall in 1,2 and 3 from the lowest scales. In addition, (4.69%) responses are missing.

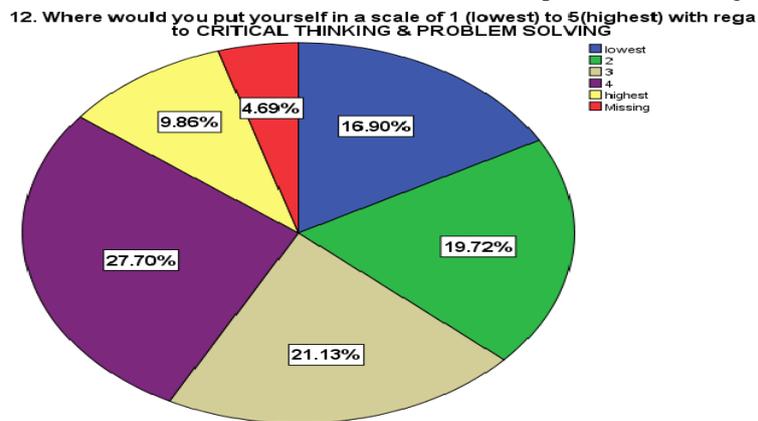


Figure 2: Critical thinking & problem solving

Life-long learning and information management

Figure 3 shows that highest number of students rank themselves in scale 3 (28.64%) while many others suggest scale 3 (22.7%) and scale 4 (22.54%). Another (14.08%)

suggest 1 (the lowest) while (8.45%) show the highest scale (the highest). 4.23% do not show their assessment of the skills. Collectively, the ratios are considerably varied.

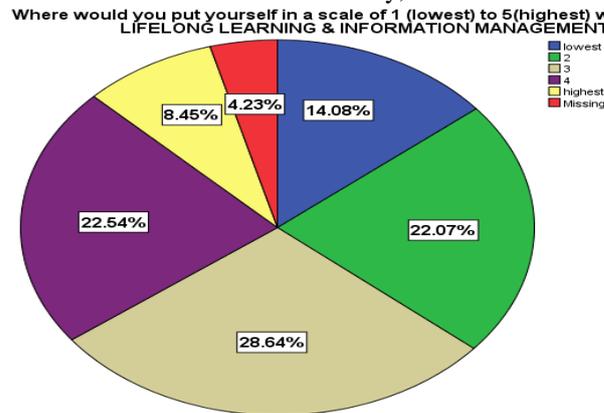


Figure 3: Life-long learning and information management

Entrepreneurship

As figure 4 shows, (20.66) stand in the lowest scale whereas (15.49%) fall in the highest scale. Moreover, the highest number of them show scale 3 (31.46%), and (18.78%) in scale 2, the second from the lowest. As a whole, the highest position stands in the middle position, which signifies that they are neither too strong nor too weak in their entrepreneurship skills.

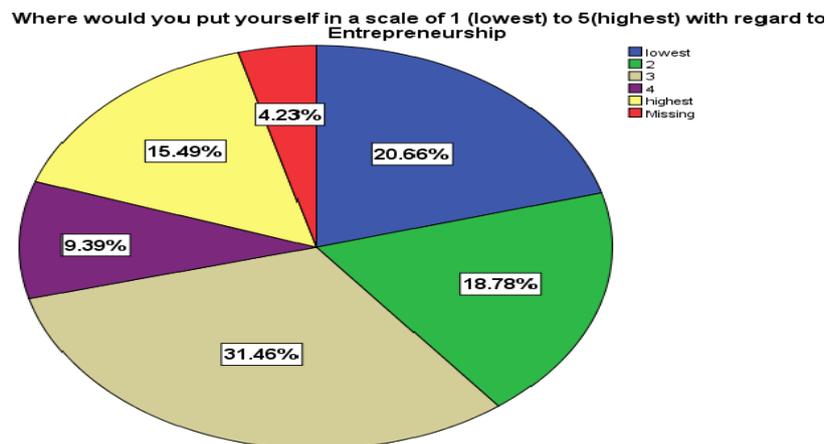


Figure 4: Entrepreneurship

Teamwork and leadership

Figure 5 demonstrates students' self-assessment in teamwork and leadership. The scales show appreciable variation as nearly similar number of students stand each scale except

scale 2 (10.80%). As a whole, the students self-rating may termed as mixed ranging from the lowest to the highest; however, the those who stand in the lowest scales such as 1, 2 and 3 are relatively large in number than those scoring the highest such as 4th and 5th scales.

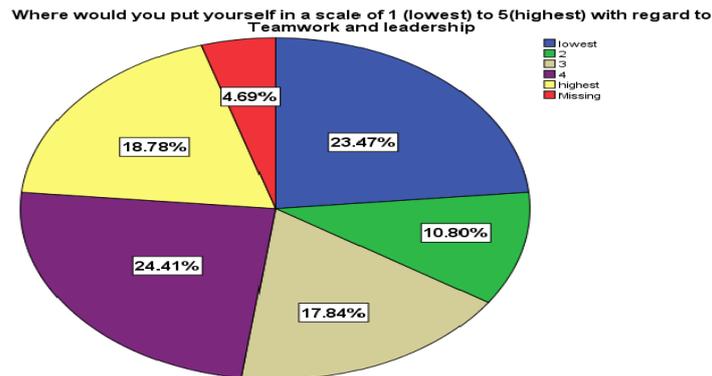


Figure 5: Teamwork and leadership

Professional ethics

Figure 6 below demonstrates where students’ self-assessment of professional ethics stands in terms of the suggested five scales. The highest ratio of (25.82%) students suggest the highest scale while a noticeably significant number of the also suggest the lowest scale (21.60%). The other scales such as 2nd, 3rd, and 4th also suggest significant ratios. Therefore, one can suggest that scales again represent appreciable variation as students approximately ending up in all the suggested scales. Thus, their soft skills in the form professional ethics are of multiple levels ranging from the lowest to the highest.

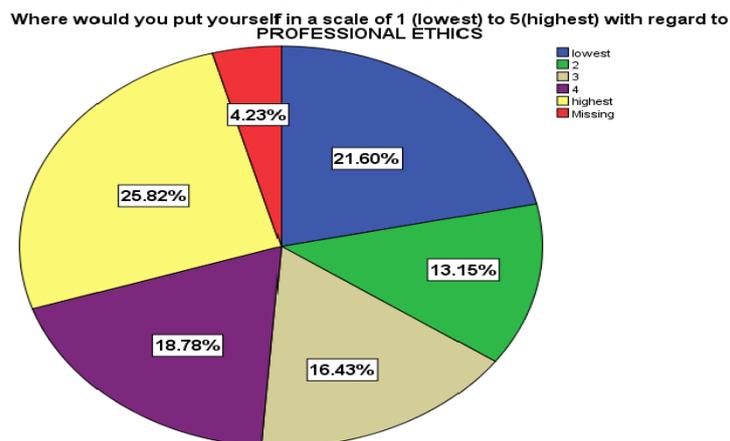


Figure 6: Professional ethics

Summary of the findings

In view of the growing importance of soft skills and their employability prospects, the present study sets to examine soft skills of 426 graduating students of four degree-awarding universities in Pakistan. Although, the Higher Education Commission (HEC), the governing body of all public as well as private universities, enforces a centralized curriculum across the country, which includes some general courses, but not necessarily all what we know as the soft skills. The importance of soft skills is yet to be emphasized in the curriculum. There is also missing a strategic plan or specific policy agenda, which may be described as soft-skills oriented as observed in some countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines and so on. Therefore, given the significance of the soft skills and the lack of any obvious specific policy framework about the soft skills, this study can be an important contribution toward exploring the situation within the universities. The main thrust of the study is to address three prominent areas concerning the soft skills—policies and practices towards soft skills, students' self-assessment of soft skills and based on the emerging data and themes, and an examination of employability challenges and opportunities of university graduates in Pakistan. Thus, the study is to show the extent at which the universities in Pakistan provide with an enabling environment, and endow students with the demanding needs of the market, who may be fully equipped with both specialized knowledge as well as additional soft skills. Soft skills, which are also called transferable skills, employability skills, key skills and generic skills, serve both horizontally as well as vertically across organizations/industries and jobs. The focus of the study shall stay on the following soft skills: communication skills, critical thinking, and problem solving skills, lifelong learning and information management, entrepreneurship, teamwork and leadership and professional ethics.

Having employed a survey questionnaire and interviews as data collection and analysis instruments, the study makes the following findings:

The quantitative data suggests that policies and practices about application of different soft skills in the classrooms and outside appear to be a regular feature as the students receive exposure to the use of different soft skills in their courses and activities. Figures largely show that the majority of students show awareness about the importance of soft skills, and realize its potential in their career advancement. However, in sharp contrast to the quantitative data, the interviews and relevant literature suggest that the classroom environment, curriculum design, and pedagogical approaches are not fine-tuned to the steady development of all soft skills.

For instance, 31.9% and 24.8% students which collectively makes 56.7% suggest that they always and often use English language and exercise communication skills in the class; however, the interview contradict these figures. Urdu rather than English is

generally used for classroom transaction by both teachers and students. The use of English is rare in the lecture delivery, classroom discussion, question/answer, or other activities. English largely stands confined within the textbooks and is limited to formal examination. Only, in subjects such as Functional English or Communication Skills, teachers may employ English as a tool for communication.

Similarly, quantitative data may signal towards higher degree of exposure and use of critical thinking and problem solving skills, but in practices, teacher-centered methodologies afford limited opportunities to students for honing their critical thinking or problem solving skills. In some of the subjects, students still resort to rote learning and memorization; therefore, the higher ratios of quantitative figure appear to be elusive. Almost identical figures surface in entrepreneurship as in other soft skills where students suggest considerably higher degree of exposure to entrepreneurship activities. On contrary, actual policies and practices show that except for students of Business studies, none other field of study offers entrepreneurship as a subject. Therefore, the students' level of understanding and use of the technical nuances and academic knowledge of entrepreneurship can be considered limited.

Conclusions and the way forward

Based on questionnaire survey, interviews, general observation of classroom pedagogies and curriculum design from the Higher Education (HEC), the figures with regard to the use of different soft skills may be high in quantitative terms; however, there still appears a wide gap between policies, classroom practices and the goal for acquisition of soft skills. It is also found that lack of comprehensive and soft-skills-specific research in Pakistan. Some observations are made about the policy with regard to soft skills. It may be argued that although the HEC prescribed curriculum incorporates some of the general skills such as Functional English, Communication Skills, Technical Report Writing, Basic Computer, Critical Reading, or Human Resource Management; however, one finds a lack of clear policy direction and instructional guideline about integration of soft skills in actual classroom teaching and practices. In addition, some of the vital soft skills such as entrepreneurship is nearly absent from the curriculum, so is the systematic education of professional ethics. For instance, a large number of students still do not understand plagiarism and its avoidance strategies. On a border level, is it high time HEC formulated a broader curriculum framework that particularly addresses soft skills and provides a clear instructional manual about optimizing exposure to soft skills in practices. Without establishing a comprehensive policy framework, a soft-skill-driven curriculum accompanied by a systematic instructional integration of the same in classrooms, the graduating students are likely to encounter potential obstacles in finding reasonable job in this age of cut-throat competition and knowledge-based globalized market trends (BBC, 2014; Bhatnagar, 2011; Chan, 2011; C. a. Knight, 2012).

Therefore, the academia should produce graduates who would adjust to the demands of industry and needs of the market, and contribute toward their individual as well collected well-being of the country. In this case, hard skills or technical knowledge of the subject may rise because of hard skills, but they are likely to ultimately fall due to their lack of soft skills (Rao, 2010). As Tan and French-Arnold (2012) aptly observe that the fast-tracking shift to high-technology industries and an information technology economy entails sustained human resource development and training. Therefore, an appropriate higher education system is critical for preparing a competent workforce. The same may be recommended for the policymakers about the appropriate policymaking mechanism at the higher education level to facilitate youngsters to train into a sustained and competent human resource, employable in the global economy, which favors thorough professionals equipped with knowledge, informational technology, and equal expertise in both technical(hard skills(as well as human skills (soft skills).

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