Soft skills development through active learning in postgraduate studies: An action research study

Hidaya Mohamed Zahir[1]

Abstract

The objective of the action research study presented in this paper was to teach postgraduate students the soft skills they find valuable and believe are challenging for them to learn, and to gain knowledge of their learning experience. Convenience sampling was used to recruit fifteen Master of Science in Accounting and Finance (MScAFM) students, who voluntarily enrolled in a stand-alone, soft skills education module offered to them, which was delivered through collaborative learning and case method. The learning approaches and content were designed based on a pre-assessment task where students identified their existing knowledge and learning needs. Data was collected using a survey questionnaire, field observations and semi structured interviews. The findings show that the students in this study most highly valued leadership skills, time management, and communication skills and believed that having these traits will make it easier for them to achieve their goals in both their professional and personal lives. Students found it difficult to use critical thinking skills, and to work collaboratively. They are also unable to transfer their knowledge and skills effectively in work-related situations. Hence, soft skill qualities, such as creativity, adaptability, and collaboration should be developed as part of educational activities that strongly emphasize their practical application in different contexts. Engaging in this action research project gave the students the confidence to have a voice, as was described by the students. Students' voluntary completion rates for the module indicate the high value students place on gaining soft skills.

Keywords: higher education, action research, soft skills development, experiential learning, active learning

---

1 Hidaya Mohamed Zahir is a senior lecturer at Centre for Postgraduation Studies, Villa College. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Hidaya Mohamed Zahir, Villa College, Male', Maldives. Email: hidaya.mohamed@villacollege.edu.mv

Introduction and Background

The term "soft skills" is used in this study to refer to essential skills for work readiness, which are broader than the technical skills and knowledge students gain from a business education curriculum. Soft skills include advanced communication skills, creativity, adaptability, critical thinking, collaborative teamwork, problem-solving, conflict resolution, growth mindset, and decision-making capacities that support the student to find work, and to adapt to future changes in workplaces (Zahir, 2021; Salmi, 2017).

It is essential for educators to conduct action research in order to improve their teaching and research abilities. This practice serves two essential functions: first, it allows teachers to develop their capacity for self-reflection regarding their teaching methods. Second, it provides a valuable opportunity to develop their research skills. These two goals are essential for higher education providers to transition from passive teaching and transmission of information to involve students in their own understanding of knowledge and skills development. In essence, action research is a vital aspect of an educator's professional growth.

Hence, the researcher initiated an action research project with funding from the Institute for Research and Innovation (IRI) at Villa College. The primary objective of the action research was to teach postgraduate students the soft skills they find valuable and believe are challenging for them to learn, and to gain knowledge of their learning experience. The initial phase of this action research project consisted of an evaluation of course materials, an assessment of students' existing knowledge and skills, and an examination of the instructional methods utilized in the Master of Science in Accounting and Finance program at the Faculty of Business Management at Villa College.

The structure of the modules and the extensive content requirements within a single semester present significant challenges in prioritizing the development of soft skills and the adoption of active learning techniques as their primary teaching methods, despite the commitment of lecturers. In order to overcome these challenges, lecturers must make a conscious commitment to incorporating active learning strategies into their pedagogies.

As higher education becomes more established in the Maldives, the focus is shifting to improve the quality of teaching to meet student and prospective employer expectations. Developing and improving teachers' capability through reflection and research into practice is at the heart of improving quality of

teaching and facilitating student learning (Gibbs, Angelides & Michaelides, 2004). Since Maldivian students are more accustomed to lecture-based passive learning, I knew that adapting to active learning strategies would be challenging at first. Nevertheless, as a life skills instructor, trained in active learning strategies, I decided to explore how students in a post graduate studies program would respond to soft skill instruction in a module designed to support active learning. Examining which skills students' value, employ, and find challenging would enable the program coordinators to modify the program accordingly.

Literature Review

What are soft skills?

Soft skills are social, personal, transversal, or transferable skills which a student can employ not only in their work but also in their personal lives as citizens, as family members and as individuals. The World Economic Forum's (2020) *The Future of Jobs Report* 2020 revealed that problem-solving skills, interpersonal skills, working with people skills, management and communication activities are desirable traits that employers demand. These are skills that can be learned and developed the same as hard skills (technical and professional skills required to do a job). In the LinkedIn report 2019 *Global Talent Trends: The 4 Trends Transforming your Workplace,* creativity, persuasion, collaboration, adaptability, and time management were considered a key trend influencing recruitment, workplaces, and human resource management.

Desirable traits include skills in self-management such as active learning, resilience, stress tolerance, and flexibility (The Future of Jobs Report, 2020). Thornhill-Miller et al. (2023), while acknowledging that soft skills are too many to list, condenses them to four key skills: higher ability skills of creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration.

Osborn and Pearson (2000) assert how crucial it is for university students to develop soft skills if they are to develop both their own professional careers and their entire work community. Providing qualified people for the current workforce is a crucial goal for colleges and universities (Salmi, 2017). Graduates are assessed by employers with a focus on their soft skills, which have a significant impact on their potential for employment and career achievements, as noted by Velasco (2014). Recruiters actively seek out graduates who possess these valuable attributes, as indicated by Jones et al. (2016). However, the effectiveness of organizational training in cultivating these skills is often found

to be lacking, as highlighted by Boreham (2018). Eikenberg (2018) further argues that a transformation of workplace cultures is necessary to create an environment that allows these essential skills to thrive.

Active Learning and Experiential Learning

Any teaching strategy involving pupils in the learning process is known as "active learning" (Deslauriers, Schelew & Wieman, 2011). Activities which make it easier to employ reflective learning techniques promote active learning (Chavan, 2011). In contrast to passive learning, where students are only consumers of knowledge, active learning requires that students engage in the design of learning activities and reflect on what they are doing (Kolb, Boyatzis & Mainemelis, 2014).

According to the constructivist learning theory, active learning entails students actively debating and criticizing ideas generated by their own or others' experiences, with the guidance of a teacher who nurtures the crucial cognitive conflict (Ford, 2010). Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning, is now widely regarded as an effective educational model of learning that is used in higher education, which includes elements of independent learning, learning by doing, work-based learning, and problem-based learning. Scholars assert that experiential learning, sometimes called learning by doing, is a continuous process that occurs across four stages: learning by doing something before reflecting on, discussing, analyzing, and assessing the experience (Chavan, 2011; Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2014).

The learner must initially be able to recognize, represent, or comprehend knowledge before progressing to the building stage of the learning process, as outlined by Kolb. The assimilation of knowledge and its transformation into a mental model through experience lead to the construction of this structure. As per Kolb, learning should involve a cycle of active inquiry, doing something, observation of and reflection on that tangible experience, which leads to abstract concepts, the learning from which can then be applied in a range of future situations (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). The four phases of the Kolb's model—concrete experience ability (CE), reflective observation ability (RO), abstract conceptualization ability (AC), and active experimentation ability (AE)—must be adhered to in order to increase effective learners (EL). Learners must have a good balance of the four stages during their learning experience for optimal learning to occur (Kolb, Boyatzis & Mainemelis, 2014).

Experiential learning activities include cooperative education placements, practicum opportunities, and classroom-based hands-on laboratory activities that are suitable for giving hands-on experience and preparing students for real-world work environments. Students can gain more practical experience while enhancing their communication skills through case method, and role-playing activities, using authentic tasks that will help them gain new knowledge and improve their social skills. Experiential learning fosters understanding of theoretical concepts and improves student performance (Cano, 2005; Chavan, 2011; Leal-Rodríguez & Albort-Morant, 2019).

Using an action research model in designing the course

The action research presented in this paper was based on the theories of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning and Piaget (1954) and Vygotsky's (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978) constructivist theories of learning. Constructivist theories emphasize the active participation of learners in the learning process, the significance of direct experiences, and social interaction in the construction of knowledge. Kolb's experiential learning theory emphasizes development of critical thinking and transferability of skills to future opportunities through engagement in the learning process and through assessments which challenge the students' thinking.

The selection of an action research design was deliberate, as it enables the researcher to assess the efficacy, applicability, and pedagogical components of teaching soft skills through active learning in postgraduate courses. According to Gibbs, et al. (2016), action research is a type of investigation conducted by educators that involve students in reflective practice; active participation in course design and delivery, developing student ownership of the teaching and learning process; enabling the students to mutually engage with peers and lecturers in cross curricular discourse and collaboration. Action research is distinguished by its extensive interaction with participants, promoting participation and empowerment to bring about desired changes.

McTaggart (1994) defines action research as participatory research that involves planning, acting, observing, and reflecting in a spiral of self-reflective cycles, to inform and substantiate work we do, to gain experiential knowledge, and to empower our students for informed action. This paper is based on the findings of the first cycle of an action research project. This research approach's ultimate objective is to cultivate a continuous process of self-improvement and equip students with essential skills that will positively influence their academic and future professional endeavors.

In the early stages of this action research project, a baseline survey questionnaire was developed and distributed to students. This survey's primary objective was to evaluate the students' comprehension of soft skills. It intended to determine which soft skills were deemed most valuable for academic pursuits and to assess the difficulty of acquiring and implementing these skills. The survey utilized a six-point Likert scale extending from 0 to 5 to indicate the perceived importance of each soft skill. A score of 0 indicated the least significance, while a score of 5 indicated the greatest significance. In addition, students were asked to identify any soft skills in which they felt deficient and to exhibit interest in learning particular soft skills. The survey served as a foundational step in the planning phase, providing valuable insight into students' current soft skills proficiency and guiding the development of an effective soft skills teaching module.

The information from the survey was then used to design a training program for soft skills that addresses the specific requirements and preferences of the students. The pre-assessment survey revealed that business students lacked essential soft skills such as interpersonal skills, communication, leadership, and adaptability. The skills they valued the most were interpersonal skills of leadership, communication, and time management. An earlier investigation of the Master of Science in Accounting and Finance Management (MScAFM) had revealed a significant deficit in the MScAFM curriculum in terms of the effective instruction of student-centered soft skills, such as problem-solving, decision-making, and critical thinking.

As part of the planning process, how to implement active learning techniques such as case studies, group discussions, and role-playing to promote the development of soft skills among business students was researched, reflected upon, and effective case studies developed (For example, Abrami et al., 2015; Bruner, 2002; Brooks, Brant, & Lamb, 2019; Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2005; Hoffer, 2020; Obasi, Ellis, & Hubbard, 2019; Nohria, 2021). Figure 1 shows a snapshot of the curriculum planning process for the developed module.

The "Teaching Soft Skills through Active Learning" module used a student-centered approach, to create an engaging and interactive learning environment. Teacher observations and student feedback on group projects and presentations were used to gain insight into students' communication skills, problem-solving, and conflict resolution skills, allowing for the development of these skills on an ongoing basis.

Table 1: A simplified representation of the course outline (does not include all the details and subtopics covered in the module)

Content	Pedagogy	Assessment	Course evaluation
Interpersonal skills Advanced Communication Skills Creative and critical thinking Problem-solving Flexibility & resilience Leadership	Student centred active learning: Role plays group discussions student presentations and case studies	Teacher observation during group work and presentations to assess student's communication, teamwork, and leadership skills Role-playing simulating real-life scenarios to assess application of communication, problem-solving, and conflict resolution skills Verbal and written student feedback on sessions	Student feedback

Once the module was approved by the program coordinator, an information session was held for the fifteen students enrolled in the Master of Science in Accounting and Finance Programme of Study, using an interactive PowerPoint presentation. All fifteen students volunteered to participate. To ensure effective communication, a social media group was created after obtaining student consent to share their phone numbers with peers. The workshop style session schedule was carefully planned to accommodate student preferences and availability. The workshops were held five days a week from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m., for two weeks.

The entire cohort of fifteen students completed the soft skills program, with only two students unable to attend two sessions. The retention and completion rate of 100 percent indicates a high level of interest and commitment among the students, with all of the students completing the module.

Data Collection Methods

The study employed multiple data collection techniques, including pre-assessment survey questionnaire, participant observations, and individual face-to-face interviews. The interviews were conducted with semi-structured interviews that highlighted crucial aspects of the training program for soft skills. The interviews were scheduled two weeks after the conclusion of the program to provide students with ample time for reflection and application of the skills in their daily lives. The purpose of this deliberate delay was to induce more precise and pensive responses from the participants as they gained a greater understanding of the soft skills components and their impact on their personal and academic lives.

Additionally, a formal college form was modified and used to collect student feedback on the specific soft skills they had learned and how these skills had positively impacted their lives following the completion of the workshop sessions. This feedback form served as an essential instrument for gaining valuable insights into the participants' experiences, perceptions, and real-world benefits from the soft skills training. Field notes, lesson evaluations and daily reflections were kept in a journal format.

Prior to conducting the research, ethical approval from the Center for Postgraduate Studies was obtained and informed consent was acquired from each student participant. Participants were informed of the purpose, procedures, and how the research will be used, as well as assured of anonymity, voluntary participation and right to withdrawal from the research without any penalty.

Findings and Discussions

Following a comprehensive thematic analysis of student responses, eight distinct themes were identified. Soft skills valued and utilized by Maldivian students were (a) leadership skills, (b) advanced communication skills, and (c) time management for productivity. Soft skills students found challenging to acquire were (a) critical thinking, (b) adaptability, and (c) experiential learning skills. The study also found that students benefited from an active learning approach, particularly collaborative group activities and the case method.

Soft skills students valued and utilized in their workplaces

The three soft skills which students valued the most and had been enhanced through learning are described below.

Theme 1: Leadership Skills

The ability to manage teams, operations, and making complex decisions are skills that students valued and believed they needed further training to achieve competence.

In this regard, one respondent had the following to report:

"I believe my leadership skills need to be developed through more training to help me get promoted or reach closer to my career goals. Leadership skills would enable me to do any kind of job given to me internally. It will also boost my teamwork skills and my confidence. It is good to be a leader so that others can count on me."

Another respondent added to this statement, demonstrating awareness of importance of leadership training:

"Good leadership skills will enable me to delegate tasks and responsibility to my core workers. Also, through my leadership skills I can provide timely guidance and feedback to my team members."

These results are consistent with my previous research (Zahir, 2021) on Maldivian college students, which similarly emphasized the significance of soft skills such as adaptability, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving abilities. The findings are also consistent with international research which highlight the important role leadership skills play in achieving personal and organizational success, through the quality of decision making; ability to attract and develop top talent; to influence people through effective communication, negotiation and persuasion; to develop collaborative relationships; leading to increased job satisfaction of employees, and enhanced team performance (Abbas & Asghar, 2021; Smith, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020).

The participants' expressed desire for personal and professional growth through the development of leadership skills underscores their awareness of the multifaceted benefits that such personal growth can confer, including increased self-awareness, self-assurance, courage, empathy, and adaptability in

leadership positions. While courage, honesty, and empathy are innate talents, developed since early childhood, other leadership skills such as complex decision making, collaboration, negotiation and persuasion can be learned in higher education settings and continued on in organizational settings.

Theme 2: Advanced Communication Skills

Importance of inclusion of advanced communication skills in their study program was emphasized by all of the students, indicating that students were aware of the value of effective communication to address complex issues in the workplace and felt that it was necessary for employment. According to the students, good communication skills are essential for obtaining and keeping a job. Some of the obstacles that students encountered when learning and implementing communication skills in the workplace were related to the discrepancies in communication styles of their coworkers, and inability to change their communication style appropriately. Additionally, some students reported feeling apprehensive or unsure about their ability to communicate effectively, which negatively impacted their confidence and ability to participate in group discussions and to deliver presentations.

> *"I believe both oral and written communication must be taught in college as it will help me to get a good job. I do my best to learn oral and written communication so that I will be able to use it in my workplace. I also believe that effective communication skills are in demand in the workplace. To be successful in my career, I need to communicate effectively both orally and in writing."*

Students also believed that effective workplace communication creates a healthy work environment, guarantees that people have the knowledge they need to perform well, and gets rid of inefficiencies. Information should be communicated accurately and effectively while preserving and enhancing interpersonal relationships.

> *"Communication skills are important for me because they boost my morale, engagement, and productivity with my team members. I believe effective communication will drive better results for me and my teams and eventually help my organization achieve their targets. I also believe that students who lack communication skills will find it difficult to get a job. Additionally, I think it will be challenging for students with poor communication skills to obtain and stay in employment."*

Findings from this study emphasize the undeniable significance of effective communication skills in the workplace. Students acknowledge that these skills are not only desirable, but necessary for obtaining and retaining employment. This is consistent with existing research which highlight the high value employers place on communication skills during job recruitment and for overall job success (Du-Babcock & Yang, 2021).

The participants' responses demonstrate a multifaceted comprehension of the significance of communication skills. They acknowledge that effective workplace communication is a catalyst for positive outcomes, such as improved collaboration, increased productivity, and a conducive work environment. Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognize that not all students found it easy to acquire and utilize these skills. Different communication patterns among colleagues, cultural distinctions, language barriers, and a lack of self-confidence presented obstacles for the students' communication skills enhancement. This highlights the need for ongoing support and training to assist students to confidently apply their communication skills in real-world work settings, and to challenge themselves, that they can use words, tone, expressions, and gestures for effective communication, to listen, to observe, to share information, to empathize, to develop trust, to negotiate, and to persuade others by connecting with them at their level. University training can help students to use communication not only for understanding what is being said, but also to understand what is not being said (Krizan & Herdman, 2020).

Theme 3: Time Management for Productivity

In light of the findings, it is evident that prioritizing training in time management within the soft skills module benefited the students significantly. By informally teaching time management skills, students gained a deeper understanding of their own work habits and learned how to effectively allocate time not only to academic tasks, but also to leisure and family activities. To develop efficient time management habits, sufficient time need to be allocated to learn good habits from peers, colleagues, and instructors.

Students identified the importance of time management by stating:

"I believe that time management skills are crucial in my workplace. When I manage my time, it helps me to do my work productively, and stress free. I know the difference between urgent and important matrices. The matric helps me to prioritize tasks that I should focus on at the present. I am able to distinguish between what needs to be done now and the consequences of not doing it."

This finding is consistent with the increasing recognition by employers of the value of time management skills for dependability, reliability, and for meeting deadlines (Demirtas & Ozen, 2019; Vojtko, Rusnáková, & Pirošková, 2018). Time management extends beyond improved academic performance and work success; it is also crucial for personal, family, and work integration (Chuang & Huang, 2021). Hence, students' recognition of importance of time management needs to be integrated with the skills to work towards emotional connection with family and friends, and generosity towards engagement with community activities for their wellbeing and optimal personal growth.

Time management extends beyond individual achievement. It promotes collaboration and trust among students, thereby enhancing group projects and enhancing team dynamics. Effective time management ensures that each team member contributes proportionately and that the group as a whole remains on track to achieve its goals. This collaborative aspect is increasingly relevant in today's work environments, where collaboration and cooperation are often essential for accomplishing organizational objectives. The formal instruction of time management skills could result in a better understanding of work habits and time allocation for various activities (Lee et al., 2020).

Soft skills students found challenging to acquire

Critical thinking skills and adaptability skills were identified by the students as the most challenging.

Theme1: Critical Thinking

Most of the students believed that it was challenging for them to apply critical thinking in their everyday lives and work environments. They also believed that the world in which they live is packed with issues on a variety of fronts, including social, economic, political, racial, religious, educational, scientific, and technical ones; therefore, they need to be equipped with critical thinking skills

and be capable of reflective thought in order to pinpoint the underlying causes of the issues and develop workable solutions. One student critically reflected on her own critical thinking skills demonstrating awareness of the need for additional training:

"I do not know how to think rationally from different angles. I think I do not have the ability to analyze and look at problems in a creative and constructive manner. I am not a very good problem solver, especially when I write, I am deficient in my ability to back my arguments by facts, deduce and infer conclusions from evidence. I find it hard to solve difficult problems. Maybe I do not know how to do it because we don't solve problems practically in class."

The students perceived that developing critical thinking skills is challenging to master and requires lots of effort to become proficient. Students specifically struggle with seeing all sides of an argument, the skill of assessing several viewpoints on a matter and figuring out how ideas relate to one another (Alsaleh, 2020). Another student asserted that:

"I feel that I lack the necessary skills to ask the right questions from the lecturers, read critically, and synthesize information. I need more guidance and support from my lecturers to help me develop and improve my critical thinking abilities."

This student's perspective underscores the awareness of the need for critical thinking skills training, especially in terms of analysis, synthesis and arguments supported by evidence. It is evident that students are aware of the need but haven't had enough experience in school, or in a college setting to enhance this skill using the four-stage cycle of learning proposed by Kolb and Kolb (2005). Critical thinking needs to be developed across the curriculum through challenging learning activities and assessments designed to address multiple levels of advanced thinking, inference, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of multiple points of view (Braun et.al, 2020).

Students admitted that it is challenging to develop novel answers to challenging complicated problems that span multiple fields. The idea that critical thinking is necessary for analyzing complex issues and coming up with viable solutions is consistent with it.

Existing literature emphasizes that critical thinking is a skill that takes cultivation and practice, and the students' recognition of the challenges in developing

the skill and their conviction that competence requires considerable effort are consistent with this. This is consistent with Alsaleh's (2020) conclusions about the challenges students have when fully evaluating various points of view and making connections between concepts. The significance of educators aiding the development of critical thinking skills is echoed by the student's acknowledged need for guidance and assistance from lecturers. The focus on cultivating critical thinking skills in real-world settings (Duplass & Ziedler, 2002; Hemming, 2000) is consistent with the alignment of these results with instructional techniques that encourage higher-order thinking.

The research findings highlight the usefulness of particular instruction in critical thinking skills, especially in terms of improving students' overall critical thinking skills. Furthermore, encouraging students to participate in critical thinking exercises helped them internalize methods for problem-solving and teamwork tactics for dealing with complicated challenges. This shows that via focused education, critical thinking is a skill that can be learned, maintained, and improved.

Theme 2: Adaptability

The findings from the interviews indicate that adaptability is one of the most difficult skills for students to implement in their daily lives and at work. Despite recognizing the significance of adaptability, students encounter obstacles when attempting to implement it due to difficulties in adjusting to change and managing their workload and studies effectively. Recognizing the challenges encountered by students can guide the development of targeted interventions and strategies to equip them to navigate change and improve their adaptability skills. One of the students explained the complexity of their academic and professional social emotional lives and the necessity for learning adaptability skills:

> *"For me, it is hard to maintain, improve, and monitor my workload and study. I find it difficult to adjust my work to accommodate changes and complete my college work. My job is challenging, and I feel that I am not good at adapting therefore it is difficult for me. I try but I am not ready for the changes. I cannot function very well in new situations when I am not prepared. I feel stressed and overwhelmed to complete the tasks."*

The lack of adaptability skills among graduate students is an issue of concern that requires attention. Adaptability is essential for successfully adjusting to changes in the dynamic and evolving business environment of today (DeVoe,

2019). The business environment is characterized by constant changes in technology, markets, and consumer preferences, necessitating students' adaptability to remain competitive and acquire new skills (Brennan et al., 2020). Adaptability is also closely related to innovation and entrepreneurship, as business requires individuals who can identify opportunities and innovate to achieve competitive advantage (McGrath, 2019).

The challenges of adversity in the form of difficulty are evident in the way that adversity is handled in the classroom. They experience tension and feelings of inadequacy when confronted with new situations due to their inability to manage their workload and studies. However, students use coping mechanisms such as seeking support from peers and instructors, utilizing online resources, and employing time management tools to effectively surmount these challenges.

Theme 3: Experiential learning skills

The workshop sessions utilized a combination of case studies and role-playing activities to create an experiential learning environment. The case method activities presented students with authentic situations from the real world, requiring them to apply their knowledge and critical thinking skills to analyze and solve problems. The case method activities were designed to improve students' problem-solving skills and to develop a deeper understanding of the consequences of their decisions by engaging with these cases.

The findings of the study indicate that the case study and role-playing approach was effective in fostering the development of critical thinking, conflict management, and resiliency skills among students. The case study method provided students with an opportunity to analyze complex real-world situations and enhance their problem-solving, communication, and collaboration skills including empathy and adaptability.

Theme 3a: Collaborative Group Project

The students stated that collaborative group projects provided valuable opportunities to develop teamwork, effective communication, and time management skills. Students developed a sense of interdependence when they worked together to achieve shared goals in a group setting, which results in mutual support and assistance. In addition, students valued the open communication and diplomatic resolution of conflicts that result from collaborative teamwork. The following two quotes from students demonstrate this:

"Team-based learning is helpful and enjoyable because it gives me the opportunity to work on difficult tasks with my fellow classmates and understand them well through discussions. Group work also challenges me to read more and understand the task well so that I can explain it to my team members. I believe my communication also improves when I explain to my fellow students."

"When the work is distributed among all of us, I feel more relaxed, and do not feel overburdened to do it alone. I like how my group works together to achieve the target, although our opinions sometimes differ. In the end, I see the accountability of all my fellow students to learn and complete the task."

The feedback of students demonstrates both the challenges and benefits of group work and group projects. Conflicts resulting from differing viewpoints, incomplete assignments, time management issues, and varying levels of commitment among group members were identified by students as obstacles. In some instances, group work became unbalanced, with one student assuming the majority of responsibilities, or appearing unable to include others and to assign roles to others.

Collaborative group work has the potential to be a successful learning technique, but its success depends on a number of variables, which was challenging to meet during the sessions. Tasks assigned to the group needed to be meticulously designed to foster interdependence among group members and meaningful collaboration. To ensure that all members actively contribute to the project, it is essential to balance the time allotted to collaboration skills and individual responsibility. Students struggled with collaborating and communicating with each other effectively when they were expected to demonstrate the skills outside of a classroom context.

This demonstrated that students need further training in identifying their own strengths and weakness, develop their ability to communicate their needs, and to assign roles and responsibilities productively. Despite the challenges of weaknesses in collaborative work, students recognize that group work enhances their understanding of the subject matter by encouraging comprehensive investigation and incorporating new perspectives from peers.

As a tutor, identifying potential challenges when assigning group work to students, finding ways to overcome problems, and to teach students collaborative work techniques, and to provide both tutor and peer constructive

feedback during group work is an area which was challenging and need reflective pedagogical practice. Effective group work implementation requires cautious planning and management (Barkley et al., 2005). Managing prospective challenges, such as conflicts and time management issues, makes for a more productive and harmonious group learning environment, and is an essential soft skill for students to acquire.

Theme 3b: Case-method

Students reported that authentic case studies provided them with an opportunity to think critically and consider difficult decisions based on the data presented, sparking their curiosity, and encouraging independent investigation. Students' understanding of the subject matter is enhanced by the interactive nature of case studies, which encourages them to consider multiple perspectives and generate multiple solutions to open-ended queries through techniques such as role play. As one student explained:

"Since each case includes a query or a problem that needs to be solved, it allows me to think about things differently. I enjoy the process of solving the issue by coming up with many solutions to the open-ended questions in the case from different perspectives. I appreciate it when the facilitator allows us to role play since it improves my understanding of the circumstance. I also like the different perspectives and answers that different groups have for the conflict or problem in the case."

Students recognized the significance of being proactive and accountable for their own learning when utilizing case studies. They valued the structured nature of case studies that require them to make difficult decisions based on incomplete data and uncertain outcomes.

The following quote summarizes development of several soft skills through attending the taught sessions, most importantly the development of confidence and ability to have a voice:

"Case studies allowed me to use my own knowledge as well as from case readings to examine the evidence presented and make my own deductions. It enabled me to understand the importance of asking the right questions. Although my opinions frequently differ from those of my classmates, case studies gave me the courage to voice them. I think my confidence has grown."

The findings of this study are in line with international research literature which shows that case studies can improve students' critical thinking skills by exposing them to realistic and ill-structured problems that require analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of information from various sources (Porzecanski et al., 2017). Additionally, case studies may help students develop the drive, self-control, and metacognition necessary for critical thinking (Ghanizadeh, 2017). Likewise, case studies may improve students' comprehension of the subject matter by stimulating their interest and encouraging further research (Alsaleh, 2017).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This action research study focused on examining how to effectively teach soft skills to postgraduate students. The findings revealed that communication, time management, and leadership skills were highly valued by the students due to their significance in attaining professional as well as personal goals. Student attendance, engagement in the sessions and their feedback showed that the chosen pedagogical methods including cooperative group work, role play, and the case method were effective to develop interpersonal skills, verbal communication, and problem-solving skills. However, the students struggled with the practical implementation of critical thinking and adaptability skills. Though they learned the skills through explicit instruction in this one-off module, they need ongoing additional opportunities to exercise essential soft skills such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication in a variety of contexts, enabling them to deal with unforeseen circumstances, evaluate opposing viewpoints, establish conceptual connections, and to apply them to novel and diverse situations.

In order to improve teaching and make it more relevant and engaging for students, it is essential for educators to undergo training in active learning methodologies or experiential learning strategies, and to seek peer support and mentoring to improve pedagogic practice, as continuous professional development. Adaptability, connections with others, partnerships with industry, real life and global perspectives, information, media and technology skills, data analytics, dynamism in life and career preparation, are additional essential life skills which can be taught only through collaborative pedagogical innovation and creativity (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023).

Recommendations for colleges and universities include the incorporation of soft skills into modular courses, the provision of structured opportunities for work-based learning and internships. Incorporating soft skills sessions such as interpersonal skills, advanced communication skills, collaborative team-work

skills, and time management skills into orientation programs at the beginning of each semester would allow students to develop vital skills for the world of work from the beginning of their academic careers and enable them to seek help to boost their skills acquisition.

This action research cycle needs to be expanded, to include additional valuable skills such as teamwork and collaboration, complex decision-making, networking, and relationship building. Sharing these findings and collaborating with other staff to integrate and expand the skill set of students need to be the next cycle of action research innovation practice.

Acknowledgements

References

Abbas, Q., & Asghar, I. (2021). Impact of leadership on organizational performance. *International Journal of Management and Human Science*, 5(1), 1-101.

Abrami, P. C., Bernard, R.M., Borokhovski, E., Waddington, D. I., Wade, C. A. Persson, T. (2015). Strategies for Teaching Students to Think Critically: A Meta-Analysis. *Review of Educational Research,* 85: 275–314.

Alsaleh, N. J. (2020). Teaching critical thinking skills: Literature review. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 19(1), 21- 39.

Barkley, E.F., Cross, K.P., and Major, C.H. (2005). *Collaborative learning techniques: A handbook for college faculty.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Boreham, T. (2018). Soft skills are so hard to nurture. *The Australian*. 28th June.

Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., & Terry, G. (2020). A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Quality & Quantity*, 56, 1391-1412.

Brennan, M., Beekhuyzen, J., & Shannon, H. (2020). Nurturing adaptive expertise: Assessing adaptability skills development in an innovative transdisciplinary entrepreneurship course. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 58(3), 593-620.

Brooks, E., Brant, J., & Lamb, M. (2019). How can universities cultivate leaders of character? Insights from a leadership and character development program at the University of Oxford. *International Journal of Ethics Education*, 4(2), 167-182

Bruner, R. (2002). *Socrates' muse: Reflections on effective case discussion leadership*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Cano, J. (2005). Creating experiential learning. *Agricultural Education Magazine*, 78(3), 2.

Chavan, M. (2011) Higher Education Students' Attitudes Towards Experiential Learning in International Business. *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, 22:2, 126-143, DOI: 10.1080/08975930.2011.615677

Chuang, Y. L., & Huang, Y. H. (2021). The association between time management skills and academic achievement among college students: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 33(1), 47-74.

Demirtas, O., & Ozen, A. (2019). The impact of time management on students' academic achievement. In Vong, S & Tan, R. (Eds.), *Handbook of research on academic success and the education of migrant students* (pp. 1-19). IGI Global.

Deslauriers, L., Schelew, E., & Wieman, C. (2011). Improved learning in a large-enrollment physics class. *Science*, 332(6031), 862-864

DeVoe, S. E. (2019). Adaptability as a key outcome in management education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 18(4), 617-620.

Du-Babcock, B., & Yang, Y. (2021). *English as a business lingua franca: A framework of integrative approach to future research in international business communication*. Springer.

Duplass, J. A., & Zeidler, D. I. (2002). Critical thinking and the role of logical argument in social studies education. *International Journal of Social Education*, 15(1), 113-127.

Eikenberg, D. (2018). Why Soft Skills Are Harder Than They Look. *Forbes*. 12th July.

Ford, M.J. (2010). Critique in academic disciplines and active learning of academic content. *Cambridge Journal of Education 40(3): 265–80*

Ghanizadeh, A. (2017). The interplay between reflective thinking, critical thinking, self-monitoring, and academic achievement in higher education. *Higher Education*, 74(1), 101-114.

Gibbs, P., Angelides, P. & Michaelides, P. (2004). Preliminary thoughts on a praxis of higher education teaching. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 9(2), 183-194.

Gibbs, P., Cartney, P., Wilkinson, K., Parkinson, J., Cunningham, S., & James-Reynolds, C. et al. (2016). Literature review on the use of action research in higher education. *Educational Action Research*, 25(1), 3-22. DOI: 10.1080/09650792.2015.1124046.

Hemming, H. E. (2000). Encouraging critical thinking: "But... what does that mean?". *Journal of Education for Business*, 75(3), 160-164.

Hoffer, E. R. (2020) Case-based Teaching: Using Stories for Engagement and Inclusion. *International Journal on Social and Education Sciences*, 2(2), 75-80.

Jones, M., Baldi, C., Phillips, C.R., & Waikar, A. (2016). The Hard Truth about Soft Skills: What Recruiters Look for in Business Graduates. *College student journal*, 50, 422-428.

Kolb, D. A., & Kolb, A. Y. (2005). Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 4*(2), 193-212.

Kolb, D. A., Boyatzis, R. E., & Mainemelis, C. (2014). Experiential learning theory: Previous research and new directions. In Sternberg, R. J. & Zhang, L. (Eds.), *Perspectives on thinking, learning, and cognitive styles* (pp. 227-247). Routledge

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as a Source of Learning and Development.* Prentice-Hall; Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Krizan, A. C., & Herdman, A. O. (2020). Teaching and learning communication skills in business education: A review of the literature and research agenda. *Journal of Education for Business*, 95(7), 455-465.

Leal-Rodríguez, A. L., Albort-Morant, G. (2019). Promoting innovative experiential learning practices to improve academic performance: Empirical evidence from a Spanish Business School, *Journal of Innovation & Knowledge*, 4(2), 97-103.

Lee, C. L., Chang, H. L., Chuang, S. S., & Hsu, M. C. (2020). Impact of time management on college students' stress and academic performance: A moderated mediation model of self-efficacy and perceived control. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11,* 2067.

McGrath, R. G. (2019). The end of competitive advantage: How to keep your strategy moving as fast as your business. *Harvard Business Review Press*.

McTaggart, R. (1994). Participatory Action Research: issues in theory and practice, *Educational Action Research*, 2:3, 313-337, DOI: 10.1080/0965079940020302

Nohria, N. (2021). What the case study method really teaches. *Harvard Business Review*. December 21

Obasi, E. M., Ellis, R. L., & Hubbard, J. D. (2019). Graduate business students' leadership development through experiential learning: A multi-institutional study. *Journal of Education for Business*, 94(4), 207-215.

Porzecanski, A., Gifford, M., & Sengupta, N. (2017). Case studies in conservation science: Active learning in large classes. *Journal of College Science Teaching*, 46(4), 64-70.

Piaget, J. (1954). *The construction of reality in the child*. (M. Cook, Trans). Basic Books

Salmi, J. (2017). *The Tertiary Education Imperative: Knowledge, Skills, and Values for Development.* Cham: Springer.

Smith, J. (2020). *Leadership skills for the 21st century*. Routledge.

Thornhill-Miller, B., Camarda, A., Mercier, M., Burkhardt, J., Morisseau, T., Bourgeois-Bougrine, S., Vinchon, F., El Hayek, S., Augereau-Landais, M., Mourey, F., Feybesse, C., Sundquist, D., & Lubart, T. (2023). Creativity, Critical Thinking, Communication, and Collaboration: Assessment, Certification, and Promotion of 21st Century Skills for the Future of Work and Education. *Journal of Intelligence*, 11.

Velasco, M. S. (2014). Do higher education institutions make a difference in competence development? A model of competence production at university. *Higher Education*, 68(4), 503–523. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43648735

Vojtko, V., Rusnáková, V., & Pirošková, V. (2018). Competence in time management as a factor determining work efficiency. *Human Resources Management & Ergonomics, 12*(1), 49-57.

Vygotsky, L. S., & Cole, M. (1978). *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes.* Harvard university press

World Economic Forum. (2020). *The Future of Jobs Report 2020*. https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2020

Zahir, H. M. (2021). Soft skills valued by Maldivian college students as they prepare for lifelong learning, career success, and citizenship. *International Journal of Social Research & Innovation*, 5(1), 47–65. https://doi.org/10.55712/ijsri.v5i1.27

Zhang, Y., Wang, L., Liu, X., & Chen, J. (2020). The influence of leadership skills on interpersonal communication and conflict management: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Business Communication*, 57(4), 545-572.