

## DOES HIGHER EDUCATION GUARANTEE SOFT SKILLS COMPETENCE? EVIDENCE FROM EMPLOYED GHANAIS

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### Abstract

*The increasing integration of automation and artificial intelligence into the workplace has intensified the importance of soft skills for employability and career sustainability. While higher education institutions are widely expected to foster these competencies, questions remain regarding the extent to which tertiary education enhances soft skills readiness, particularly in developing economies. There is also limited data on the effect of demographic factors such as gender, age, and work experience on these skills.*

*Data were collected from 256 employed individuals using a quantitative cross-sectional survey design across various sectors in Ghana. Descriptive statistics and non-parametric inferential tests, including the Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests, were employed to examine differences in perceptions across educational levels and demographic variables.*

*The findings indicate that employees perceive tertiary education as more effective than senior high school education in developing soft skills. The respondents generally reported high levels of soft skills, and the study observed no significant differences based on gender, age, or work experience for soft skills developed during tertiary education. This suggests that in Ghana, soft skills are viewed as foundational competencies primarily shaped through formal education rather than demographic or experiential factors.*

**Keywords:** soft skills, higher education, employability

**JEL:** I23, J23, J21, O15

### Introduction

In the current labor market climate, artificial intelligence and automation are increasingly taking over the traditional roles that trained professionals have previously held. The recent COVID-19 pandemic caused businesses to invest heavily in automation and artificial intelligence measures to meet the gap caused by lockdowns and labor shortages. Though these measures have been beneficial in the short-term, they have become so efficient that they are now able to perform technical tasks previously handled by employees. To ensure that they remain indispensable, employees are seeking skills that set them apart from their counterparts and roles that cannot be performed by artificial intelligence and automation systems and processes (Poláková et al., 2023). Technical skills need to be supplemented to give employees a competitive edge in the labor market. The addition of soft skills such as communication, leadership, and emotional intelligence to technical skills is considered crucial to an employee's career success (Goulart et al., 2022; Hamid & Younus, 2022). Hard skills refer to the technical ability and factual knowledge required to perform a job, while soft skills refer to the ability to use those technical abilities and knowledge more effectively in practice (Laari et al., 2022).

Soft skills are less tangible and notoriously more difficult to identify, but they are essential in determining the sustainability or deterioration of an employee's career. Soft skills play an indispensable role in the career of employees by enabling them to effectively apply their knowledge in real-world contexts. Soft skills encompass interpersonal and behavioral attributes that influence how individuals interact with others and respond to challenges (Fernandes et al., 2021). Research consistently shows that soft skills play a critical role in career sustainability, promotion prospects, and job performance (Albandea & Giret, 2018; Kumar et al., 2022). In an era where employees must constantly adapt to evolving demands of the labor market, soft skills have become a key determinant of professional resilience and success. Kumar et al. (2022) defined communication as the ability to interact with people in various contexts or places competently without tension, using mediums such as speech and/or written methods. During these interactions, challenges may arise, and employees need the ability to calmly and efficiently find ways to resolve these challenges. This skill is referred to as problem-solving. Lastly, the ability to inspire and discipline employees to create a desired culture in the workplace is known as leadership. It involves meeting the needs of employees and influencing their behavior to meet company goals (Kumar et al., 2022).

Educational institutions are widely regarded as having the potential to provide training and guidance for the development of both technical and soft skills. Traditionally, educational institutions have focused on imparting technical competencies to their students. However, increasing employer dissatisfaction with graduate readiness has compelled higher education institutions to recognize the need to incorporate soft skills in their curricula to meet the evolving needs of the labor market (De Prada et al., 2022). Pedagogical approaches in the form of compulsory internships, presentations and group projects can be employed to foster skills such as communication, leadership, and problem-solving (Arthur & Koomson, 2024). In Ghana, the government enforces a compulsory one-year program that requires tertiary graduates to work in various sectors to enhance their employability skills (Riswanto et al., 2022). Despite these efforts, questions remain on whether higher education produces graduates with the required soft skills.

In Ghana, graduate unemployment remains a persistent challenge despite rising enrolment in tertiary education, and employers have reported skill mismatches in their requirements of employees and the graduates they employ (Damoah et al., 2021). While the Ghanaian education system has made progress in expanding access to education, concerns persist in relation to whether these institutions sufficiently prepare individuals for the realities of the labor market. It is therefore crucial to understand how employees perceive the role that education plays in developing soft skills, to align educational outcomes with labor market needs.

Existing literature on employability and soft skills in Ghana and Sub-Saharan Africa has largely focused on employer perspectives or on national service personnel with limited work experience (Damoah et al., 2021; Segbenya et al., 2023). The study by (Damoah et al., 2021) investigated the proficiency of higher education institutions in equipping graduates with employability skills from the perspective of employers in Ghana. The study noted the lack of information on employability skills in Sub-Saharan Africa and the propensity of previous researchers to research these skills in more developed countries such as the USA, Europe, and Australia. Another study by Segbenya et al. (2023) grouped respondents into employers and National Service personnel in their analysis of soft skills development. This study was valuable because it included employees, but was limited because the employees involved were undertaking a compulsory one year of work required after graduation. This means that their work experience was limited, and results did not factor in long-term career sustainability and success.

Despite growing research on soft skills in Ghana and the broader Sub-Saharan Africa context, existing studies have predominantly focused on employer perspectives or individuals with limited work experience, such as national service personnel. As a result, there remains a lack of empirical evidence that incorporates the views of experienced employees regarding the role of higher education in soft skills development. This study advances previous literature by focusing on individuals employed across varying levels of experience, thus providing a more comprehensive understanding of how soft skills are viewed and developed. To bridge the current gap, this study aims to determine the effect of tertiary education on soft skills and to examine the influence of demographic factors on these skills from the employees' perspective. The following objectives were established to guide the study:

- To assess the soft skills of employees.
- To determine whether educational institutions play a role in soft skills development.
- To analyze whether high school education or tertiary education plays a more substantial role, if any, in the development of soft skills.
- To analyze the effect of gender, age, and work experience on employees with tertiary education.

## Literature

Soft skills are generally defined as non-technical competencies that enable individuals to interact effectively with others and adapt to diverse professional contexts (Fernandes et al., 2021). Skills like communication, leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, emotional intelligence, and adaptability are a few such skills that employers require from employees in recent times (Kumar et al., 2022). Unlike hard skills, which can easily be taught and assessed through standardized examinations, soft skills are intangible and context-dependent, which makes them more difficult to measure. In spite of this, the importance of soft skills in determining job performance and career progression has been widely acknowledged in academic and practitioner literature.

The increasing integration of artificial intelligence into workplaces has reshaped skill requirements across industries. Tasks involving data processing, routine analysis, and repetitive procedures are increasingly automated, reducing the demand for purely technical roles (Poláková et al., 2023). In contrast, skills that require human judgement, creativity, empathy, and interpersonal skills are in demand because they are the least automatable. Consequently, employees equipped with strong soft skills are better positioned to remain relevant amid technological disruption.

Educational systems play a pivotal role in shaping employability skills, and tertiary institutions are increasingly expected to provide structured opportunities for soft skills acquisition through curriculum design and experiential learning (Behle, 2020; Botha & Botha, 2022). While some studies report positive results from such initiatives, others highlight gaps between employer expectations and graduate capabilities (Kreemers et al., 2022). This raises the question of the role that tertiary institutions play in the acquisition and development of soft skills.

Empirical research on soft skills in Sub-Saharan Africa is limited relative to studies conducted in developed economies (Amoah & Marimon, 2021; Damoah et al., 2021). Available research suggests that employers frequently express concerns about graduates' readiness for the workplace in areas related to interpersonal skills (De Prada et al., 2022). In Ghana, studies have identified gaps in

employability skills despite the formal education of the employees (Damoah et al., 2021; Segbenya et al., 2021). These factors underscore the need for context-specific research into how tertiary education shapes soft skill readiness and how factors such as age and work experience affect the perceptions of individuals in relation to the role education plays in soft skills.

Previous literature focuses on the perspectives of employers and the assessment of graduate skills based on the expectations of the organization (Damoah et al., 2021). Few studies have explored the perceptions of employees on soft skills and how they are developed. It is important to consider the perceptions of employees as they influence their performance and career sustainability. This study fills this gap by focusing on employee viewpoints in the assessment of soft skills.

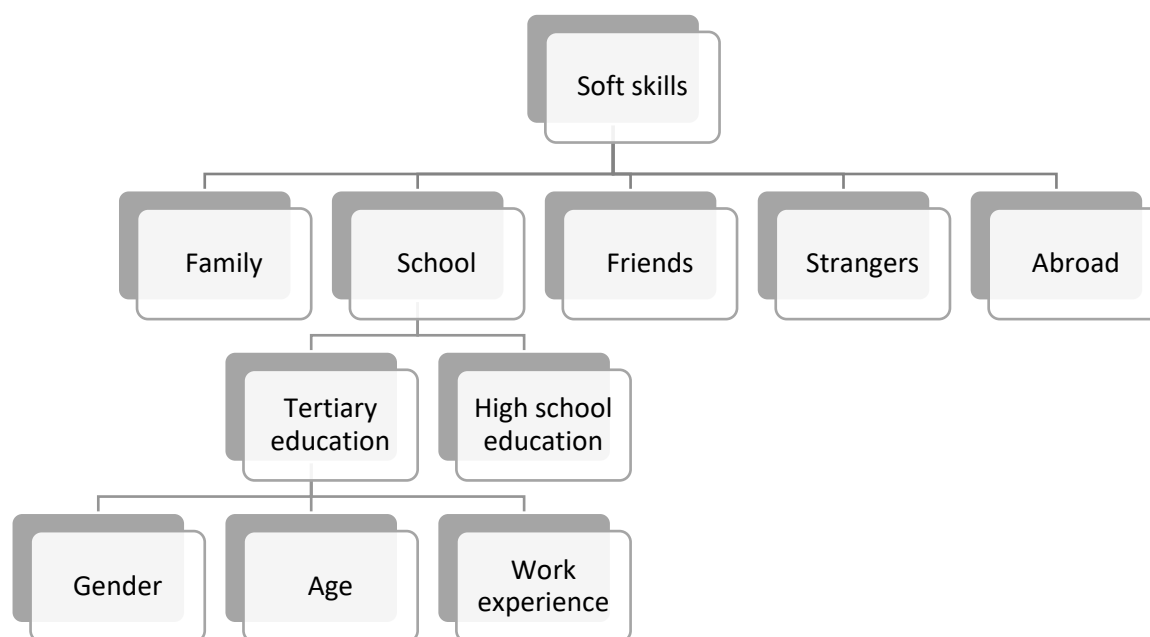
### ***Demographic factors and soft skills***

The role of gender in soft skills is one that has been widely debated over time. Some studies suggest that men are often perceived as more dominant in leadership roles, while women exhibit more interpersonal and communication skills (Segbenya et al., 2023). These differences have been attributed to factors such as cultural and societal expectations. In the Ghanaian context, examining the impact of gender on soft skills provides valuable insight into how societal norms may shape employability outcomes.

In the Ghanaian culture, age is often associated with maturity and cumulative learning experiences. Older employees are assumed to demonstrate stronger soft skills from their prolonged social and professional interactions. On the other hand, younger employees are believed to still be developing their skills. Empirical findings on age-related differences remain inconclusive, highlighting the need for further investigation (Amponsah et al., 2024; Aryani et al., 2021).

Work experience is widely regarded as a critical avenue for the development of soft skills. Employees refine their interpersonal skills over time through interactions at work and solving problems in the course of their duties (Azizah et al., 2021). Experiential learning theories emphasize that many soft skills are acquired through practical experiences rather than through formal instruction. Assessing the role of work experience, therefore, provides a more comprehensive understanding of soft skill readiness.

The reviewed literature highlights the growing importance of soft skills in modern labor markets, the evolving role of education in skills development, and the influence of demographic factors on employability outcomes. Unfortunately, gaps remain in understanding how these dynamics play out in Ghana, particularly from the perspectives of employees with varying educational backgrounds, work experiences, and ages. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining whether higher education influences soft skills development and by analyzing the roles of gender, age, and work experience in shaping soft skills readiness among Ghanaian employees.



**Figure 1. Research model**

*Source: Author's research*

### ***Theoretical Framework***

The study is grounded in a multidimensional perspective of skills development that integrates insights on formal education, experiential learning, and individual diversity. These perspectives are guided by the Human Capital theory, the Capability approach, and Experiential Learning theory.

The Human capital theory posits that investment in education results in enhanced productivity and economic value of employees (Becker, 2010). Within this framework, higher education is expected to contribute significantly to the development of both technical and soft skills required to sustainable employment. The expectation, therefore, is that individuals who attain higher levels of education will demonstrate stronger skills. This contrasts with the experiential learning theory, which emphasizes that skills, particularly soft skills, are developed through reflection and interaction gained through experience obtained within real-world contexts (Kolb, 1984). It suggests that individuals refine their interpersonal abilities through continuous interactions with diverse situations and challenges. The capability approach views skill development as the product of individual diversity and contextual realities rather than a uniform or purely technical process. It assumes that the acquisition and development of skills depend on how well the skills align with individuals' aspirations, environment, and lived experiences, and not solely on access to education (Thapa, 2021). These differences shape the individuals and reflect their unique circumstances, opportunities, and constraints.

This combined framework provides a comprehensive basis for examining whether higher education plays a dominant role in developing soft skills or whether these skills are equally influenced by demographic and experiential factors.

## Materials and Methods

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to investigate employee perceptions of soft skills readiness and the role of higher education in developing these skills in Ghana. This design enabled researchers to capture comparative perceptions across demographic groups and educational experiences at a single point in time. Data were collected from 256 respondents employed across various sectors in Ghana. The respondents were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that the respondents met the criteria of the researchers, and the snowball technique was used to reach more respondents through referrals. Subgroup comparisons were possible because respondents varied by age, gender, and work experience (Table 1). The respondents consisted of 58.6% males, and females made up 41.4% of the group. The respondents ranged in age from those below 20 years, workers between 21 to 50 years, and those above 50 years. To ensure the respondents included workers who had worked for more than the one year required by the government for national service, the number of years worked was requested. 78.52% of the respondents have over a year of experience in various fields.

Data was gathered using a structured questionnaire, and responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 29 software. Both descriptive and inferential techniques were adopted. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were used for analysis.

**Table 1. Sample characteristics of respondents**

| Sample characteristics |                    | Number | Percentage |
|------------------------|--------------------|--------|------------|
| Gender                 | Male               | 150    | 58.60%     |
|                        | Female             | 106    | 41.40%     |
| Age                    | 20 years and below | 3      | 1%         |
|                        | 21-30 years        | 112    | 44%        |
|                        | 31-40 years        | 66     | 26%        |
|                        | 41-50 years        | 38     | 15%        |
|                        | Above 50 years old | 37     | 14%        |
| Work experience        | Up to one year     | 55     | 21.48%     |
|                        | Over one year      | 201    | 78.52%     |

*Source: Author's research*

## Results

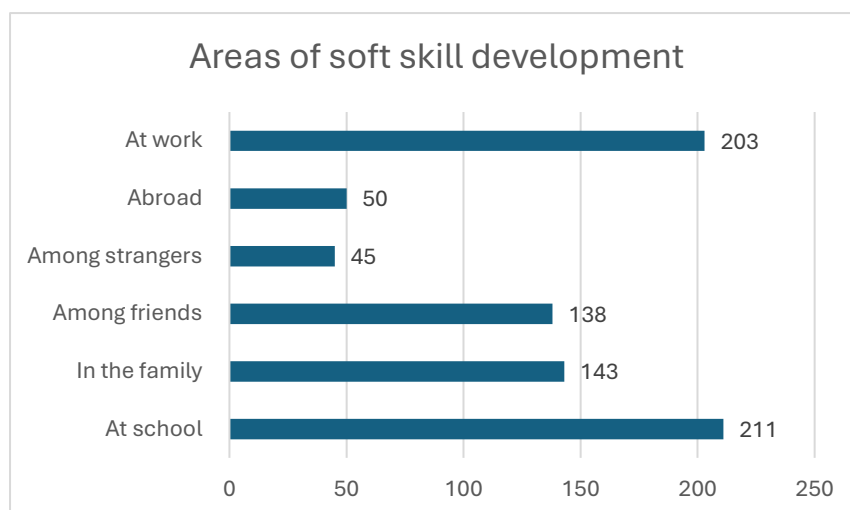
To ensure that the respondents possessed adequate soft skills and could provide informed responses, the respondents were asked if they possessed soft skills and asked to rate their skills on a five-point Likert scale. The results (Table 2) showed that respondents possessed high levels of communication skills ( $M = 4.44$ ), problem-solving skills ( $M = 4.37$ ), and leadership skills ( $M = 4.30$ ) and standard deviations of 0.585, 0.625, and 0.762, respectively.

**Table 2. Sample characteristics of respondents**

| Soft Skills Possessed  | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|------------------------|------|----------------|
| Leadership skills      | 4.30 | 0.762          |
| Problem-solving skills | 4.37 | 0.625          |
| Communication skills   | 4.44 | 0.585          |

*Source: Author's research*

Respondents were asked to identify the areas in which soft skills can be developed and could choose multiple responses (Figure 3). The analysis showed that most of the respondents believe that soft skills can be developed most effectively at school (211), followed closely by work (203). This result is important as it supports the work of the researchers who aimed to analyze the role that education plays in the development of soft skills.

**Figure 2. Areas of soft skills development**

*Source: Author's research*

Respondents were then asked if they believe that education in Ghana prepares individuals for the challenges of the labor market, and their responses were given on a five-point Likert scale. One indicated that they absolutely did not agree that the education system in Ghana prepared individuals for the labor market, and five indicated that the respondents believed that the Ghanaian education system adequately prepared individuals for the labor market. The results showed that 21.5% of the respondents were neutral on the effects of education on soft skills development, and 9.8% did not think that education helps in the development of soft skills. A majority of 68.8% acknowledged that soft skills can be developed in Ghanaian educational institutions. To narrow down the section of the education system where soft skills are most efficiently developed, the respondents were asked what they believed the expectations of employers were in soft skills possessed by individuals who had completed senior high school and those who had completed tertiary education.

The results showed that tertiary institutions are expected to produce individuals who are better trained in all the soft skills analyzed (Table 3). Individuals are expected to communicate better after

tertiary education ( $M = 4.52$ ) than after high school ( $4.21$ ) and solve problems more efficiently after tertiary education ( $M = 4.34$ ) than after high school ( $M = 3.98$ ). Lastly, individuals who have completed tertiary education ( $M = 4.15$ ) are expected to display more leadership skills than those who have completed only high school ( $M = 3.57$ ).

**Table 3. Soft skills after High school versus Tertiary education**

|                 | High school |                    | Tertiary education |                    |
|-----------------|-------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|                 | Mean        | Standard deviation | Mean               | Standard deviation |
| Communication   | 4.21        | 0.78               | 4.52               | 0.638              |
| Problem solving | 3.98        | 0.861              | 4.34               | 0.755              |
| Leadership      | 3.57        | 0.999              | 4.15               | 0.878              |

*Source: Author's research*

Lastly, the study aimed to analyze the effect of demographic factors, namely gender, age, and work experience, on the soft skills that employees believe individuals who have completed tertiary education should have. A Mann-Whitney test was performed to determine the effect of gender on soft skills. The results showed that there was no significant difference between males and females on the issue of soft skills for tertiary education (Table 4).

**Table 4. Effect of gender on soft skills**

| Gender                 |       | N   | Mean Rank | Sum of Ranks | Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) |
|------------------------|-------|-----|-----------|--------------|------------------------|
| Communication skills   | 1     | 150 | 129.32    | 19397.50     | 0.816891               |
|                        | 2     | 106 | 127.34    | 13498.50     |                        |
|                        | Total | 256 |           |              |                        |
| Problem-solving skills | 1     | 150 | 126.85    | 19028.00     | 0.648868               |
|                        | 2     | 106 | 130.83    | 13868.00     |                        |
|                        | Total | 256 |           |              |                        |
| Leadership skills      | 1     | 150 | 126.35    | 18952.00     | 0.554176               |
|                        | 2     | 106 | 131.55    | 13944.00     |                        |
|                        | Total | 256 |           |              |                        |

*Source: Author's research*

A Kruskal-Wallis test was performed to assess the impact of the ages of the respondents on skills. The ages of the employees range from at least 20 years old to those who were older than 50 years old. The results showed that in the Ghanaian context, age does not affect the soft skills of employees with tertiary education (Table 5).

**Table 5. Effect of age on soft skills**

| Null Hypothesis        | Test                                    | Sig. <sup>a,b</sup> | Decision                    |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| Communication skills   | Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test | 0.152               | Retain the null hypothesis. |
| Problem-solving skills | Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test | 0.183               | Retain the null hypothesis. |
| Leadership skills      | Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test | 0.204               | Retain the null hypothesis. |

*Source: Author's research*

Since the workplace was considered one of the prime places where employees could develop their soft skills, an analysis was performed to assess the impact of work experience on the soft skills of tertiary graduates (Table 6). The null hypothesis was accepted and showed that there was no significant difference in the soft skills of tertiary students based on the years that they have worked for leadership and problem-solving, and communication skills of the tertiary graduates. These results suggest that employee perceptions of soft skill competence are not shaped by their work experience, implying that these skills are viewed as foundational rather than dependent on experience.

**Table 6. Effect of work experience on soft skills**

| Null Hypothesis        | Test                                    | Sig. <sup>a,b</sup> | Decision                    |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| Communication skills   | Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test | 0.268               | Retain the null hypothesis. |
| Problem-solving skills | Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test | 0.612               | Retain the null hypothesis. |
| Leadership skills      | Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test | 0.708               | Retain the null hypothesis. |

*Source: Author's research*

## Discussion

The study aimed to examine the role of higher education in the development of soft skills in Ghana, while also assessing the influence of demographic factors. To establish a baseline, the researchers first determined the areas where soft skills could be developed. After determining that education is believed to play an essential role in the improvement of soft skills, the researchers then focused on determining if the education system in Ghana prepares potential employees for the labor market. The findings indicate that soft skills can be developed within the Ghanaian educational system. Since the researchers were aiming to ascertain the role that higher education played in soft skills development, further analysis was conducted to determine if there was a difference in the effect of secondary education versus higher education in soft skills development. The expectations of employers were used as a basis for this analysis, and the results show that when employees believe that employees who have completed tertiary education are better equipped to handle the soft skill demands of the job than employees who have completed high school education.

The findings indicate that higher education is perceived to contribute more to soft skills readiness, particularly in communication. This supports existing literature and aligns with the expectations of the human capital theory, which emphasizes the role of tertiary education in fostering interpersonal skills through activities such as presentations and group projects. In contrast, leadership skills, although positively rated, received comparatively lower levels of agreement. From the perspective of experiential learning, this could reflect limited opportunities for Ghanaian students to engage in authentic leadership experiences during their education. Leadership skills often require practical engagement, responsibility, and decision-making, which may not be readily available within traditional classroom environments.

The absence of significant differences across gender, age, and work experience suggests that perceptions of soft skills are relatively stable. It shows that employees view soft skills as competencies which are primarily acquired through education and early socialization rather than substantially enhanced through prolonged work exposure. It can also be interpreted through the lens of individual capability by suggesting that the demographic factors in Ghana are not significant because employees are exposed to similar educational structures and labor market expectations, which created a shared understanding of what constitutes soft skills competence.

### ***Limitations***

The study encountered some limitations, which are explained subsequently. Firstly, the use of self-reported data may have introduced response bias, as participants may have overestimated their soft skill competencies. Secondly, the use of purposive and snowball sampling may limit the generalizability of the findings, as the sample may not be fully representative of the broader population of employees in Ghana. Lastly, the cross-sectional design of the research does not allow for causal inferences or the observation of changes in soft skills over time. Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs and probability sampling techniques.

### **Conclusion**

The study provides empirical evidence on employee perceptions of soft skills readiness among higher education graduates in Ghana. The results suggest that higher education plays a meaningful role in developing key soft skills, namely, communication and problem-solving abilities. However, the relatively weaker perceptions of leadership skills challenge the simplistic human capital theory interpretation that formal education uniformly enhances all skills necessary for employability. The results align with the capability and social-learning perspectives, which emphasize that certain soft skills are context-dependent.

Ghanaian tertiary institutions are evolving and incorporating both soft and hard skills in their curriculum. This can be seen in efforts such as those by the University of Ghana in organizing a workshop with key stakeholders aimed at enhancing the employability skills of their students (University of Ghana, 2025). These efforts contribute to producing graduates who are better equipped with the skills necessary for career success. The lack of significant differences between gender, age, and work experience highlights the essential role of tertiary education in Ghana in shaping the long-term perceptions of soft skills and their development and the role of labor market expecta-

tions in shaping individuals and their skills. This highlights the need for higher education institutions to adopt intentional and inclusive pedagogical strategies, particularly for leadership development, such as leadership development programs and student-led initiatives, project-based learning and groupwork to enhance collaboration and teamwork, internship and industry partnerships to bridge theory and practice, and standardized continuous assessments to evaluate soft skills. It is also essential for policymakers to support curriculum reforms that integrate employability skills more explicitly into tertiary education frameworks.

By focusing on employee perspectives rather than employer or early-career viewpoints, the study contributes to the limited body of literature on soft skills development in Sub-Saharan Africa, Ghana specifically. Further studies can be undertaken to examine how soft skills evolve and how specific educational interventions influence long-term career success.

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