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The Role of Soft Skills and Short Courses in Enhancing Career Improvement and Job Readiness among University Graduates in Somaliland

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Abstract *The transition from university to employment remains a critical challenge for graduates in developing nations, particularly in post-conflict contexts such as Somaliland. While technical competencies are emphasised in higher education, soft skills development and participation in short professional courses are often neglected. This study investigated the role of soft skills and short courses in enhancing career improvement and job readiness among graduates from three universities in Hargeisa, Somaliland. A descriptive research design with a mixed-methods approach was employed. A sample of 150 graduates (50 from each university) from the Class of 2025 was selected using convenience sampling. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews and analysed using SPSS version 26. Graduates demonstrated low overall soft skills ($M = 2.28$ on a 5-point scale), with leadership ($M = 1.95$) and critical thinking ($M = 2.08$) the lowest. A significant positive correlation was found between soft skills and job readiness ($r = 0.682$, $p < 0.01$). While 36.7% had not attended short courses, participants reported better employment outcomes (44.2% vs. 16.4%). A moderate positive correlation was found between short course participation and career improvement ($r = 0.548$, $p < 0.01$). The majority (68.0%) were unemployed, with 78.7% attributing this to insufficient soft skills. Soft skills and short courses significantly enhance graduate employability. Higher education institutions must integrate soft skills training into curricula, and coordinated interventions are needed to address the employability crisis.*

Keywords *Career Improvement, Graduate Employability, Job Readiness, Short Courses, Soft Skills, Somaliland.*

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Introduction

The relationship between higher education and employment outcomes has attracted sustained scholarly attention over the past two decades, with particular emphasis on the role of non-technical competencies in shaping graduate trajectories in the labour market. As economies become increasingly knowledge-driven and technologically sophisticated, the attributes that distinguish successful professionals extend far beyond disciplinary expertise to encompass interpersonal effectiveness, adaptive capacity, and continuous learning orientation [1, 2]. These attributes, broadly classified as soft skills, have emerged as critical determinants of employability across diverse industrial and geographical contexts.

In the Horn of Africa, where post-conflict reconstruction has catalysed rapid expansion of higher education institutions, the employability of university graduates presents a particularly urgent policy and research concern. Somaliland, which declared independence from Somalia in 1991 and has since developed a functioning governmental and educational infrastructure, has witnessed significant growth in its higher education sector. Institutions such as Golis University, New Generation University, and Admas University now collectively produce thousands of graduates annually, yet youth unemployment remains disproportionately high, with estimates exceeding 60% [3]. This paradox of educational expansion alongside persistent graduate unemployment demands careful empirical investigation.

Existing evidence from employer surveys in Hargeisa indicates that a substantial proportion of graduates, while technically qualified in their respective fields, demonstrate significant deficiencies in communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and professional conduct [4]. These observations align with broader patterns documented across Sub-Saharan Africa, where the disconnect between university curricula and labour market requirements has been identified as a structural barrier to graduate employment [5, 6]. Concurrently, short professional courses, which offer targeted instruction in employability-related competencies, represent a potentially valuable but underutilised resource for addressing these skills gaps.

Despite the apparent importance of soft skills and professional development opportunities for graduate employability, empirical research examining these issues within the specific context of Somaliland remains limited. The present study addresses this gap by investigating the levels of soft skills possessed by graduates from three major universities in Hargeisa, examining their participation in short courses, and assessing the relationships between these variables and their job readiness and career improvement. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the level of soft skills possessed by graduates from Golis University, New Generation University, and Admas University?
2. What types of short courses have the graduates attended?
3. What is the relationship between soft skills and job readiness among the graduates?
4. What is the relationship between short courses and career improvement among the graduates?
5. What challenges do graduates face in the job market due to lack of soft skills?

Literature Review

Soft Skills and Graduate Employability

The concept of soft skills, while lacking a universally accepted definition, is generally understood as encompassing the constellation of personal attributes, interpersonal competencies, and behavioural tendencies that enable individuals to interact effectively with others and navigate complex social and

professional environments [1]. Schulz [7] characterises soft skills as the integration of personality traits, social graces, communication abilities, language proficiencies, and personal habits that collectively define an individual's capacity for relational engagement. Unlike hard skills, which are typically job-specific, measurable, and amenable to formal instruction, soft skills are more diffuse, contextually variable, and developed through experiential learning, practice, and reflective engagement [8].

The significance of soft skills for employment outcomes has been documented across diverse national and sectoral contexts. Andrews and Higson [9], in a European study of graduate employability, found that employers consistently valued communication, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities above technical knowledge when evaluating candidates. Similarly, the National Association of Colleges and Employers [10] annual employer survey in the United States has repeatedly identified communication skills, critical thinking, and teamwork as the most sought-after attributes in new graduates. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report [2] further reinforces this trend, identifying analytical thinking, creativity, resilience, and emotional intelligence among the fastest-growing skill demands across industries globally.

In developing country contexts, the soft skills deficit among graduates assumes particular significance. Hassan et al. [11] found in their Malaysian study that graduates with well-developed communication, teamwork, and leadership competencies enjoyed superior employment prospects and accelerated career advancement. Mahmud et al. [12], examining generic skills among Bangladeshi university students, reported widespread inadequacies in communication, problem-solving, and leadership, prompting recommendations for curriculum-integrated skills development. More recently, the British Council [5], in a comprehensive study of graduate employability across Sub-Saharan Africa, identified soft skills deficiencies as a primary barrier to graduate employment, with consistent gaps in communication, teamwork, and critical thinking reported across multiple countries.

Short Courses and Professional Development

Short courses, also termed professional development programmes, continuing education offerings, or vocational training modules, constitute condensed educational experiences designed to impart specific competencies within abbreviated timeframes [13]. Ranging from several days to several months in duration, these programmes focus on practical, immediately applicable skills rather than broad theoretical foundations. Their proliferation has been driven by accelerating technological change, the imperative for workforce upskilling, and increasing demand for flexible learning modalities [14].

The effectiveness of short courses in enhancing employment outcomes has received empirical support. Finch et al. [15], investigating work-integrated learning and professional development in Australia, found that graduates who participated in short courses and related programmes demonstrated higher job readiness and were more likely to secure employment within six months of graduation. Singh and Singh [16] reported that Indian students who received soft skills training through workshops exhibited significantly improved communication abilities and interview performance. A meta-analysis by Blunch and Castro [17] found positive effects of vocational training, including short courses, on employment outcomes for young people, although the magnitude of impact varied according to programme relevance and quality.

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Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon three interrelated theoretical perspectives. Human Capital Theory, developed by Becker [18] and Schultz [19], posits that investments in education, training, and skill development yield economic returns through enhanced productivity and employability. Soft skills represent a form of general human capital, valued across industries and transferable between contexts. Social Learning Theory, articulated by Bandura [20], emphasises the role of observation, modelling, and experiential practice in skill acquisition, providing a theoretical basis for understanding how short courses facilitate competency development through interactive and practical learning approaches. Career Development Theory, as conceptualised by Super [21], frames the school-to-work transition as a critical developmental stage in which the integration of self-concept with occupational roles determines employment success, with soft skills and professional development serving as enabling resources for this transition.

Materials and Methods

Research Design and Approach

This study employed a descriptive research design with a mixed-methods approach. The descriptive design was chosen to characterise the existing state of soft skills, short course participation, and employment outcomes among the target population [22]. The mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interview insights, enabled triangulation of findings and a more comprehensive understanding of the research phenomena than either method alone would permit [23].

Population and Sample

The study population comprised graduates from the Class of 2025 at Golis University, New Generation University, and Admas University in Hargeisa, Somaliland. Golis University, founded in 2004, has a total enrollment exceeding 4,000 students across multiple campuses [24, 25]. Admas University College-Hargeisa, which commenced operations in 2006, accommodates over 3,000 students and has produced more than 7,000 graduates since its establishment [24]. New Generation University College, founded in 2010, operates three campuses in Hargeisa, Buroa, and Gabiley, with an estimated total of over 10,000 graduates across 13 batches and currently employs over 300 teaching staff [26].

Since no exact official records of graduate numbers for the Class of 2025 were available from the three institutions, the population was estimated at approximately 500+ graduates per university, totalling approximately 1,500+ graduates. This estimate was derived from consultations with alumni offices and academic registrars, based on provisional graduation lists and enrollment data for the 2024/2025 academic year. The sample size was determined using Slovin's formula:

$$n = N / (1 + Ne^2) = 1,500 / (1 + 1,500 \times 0.06^2) = 234.4.$$

The calculated minimum sample was approximately 235 respondents. Due to practical constraints including time, resource limitations, and the dispersal of graduates after completion, a final sample of 150 respondents was determined to be feasible and adequate. The sample was equally distributed across the three universities (50 respondents each), reflecting the approximate parity in their estimated graduate populations and ensuring equitable representation. Convenience sampling was employed, with respondents selected based on availability and accessibility [27].

Instruments and Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising five sections: demographic information (Section A), soft

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skills assessment using a 5-point Likert scale (Section B), short course participation history (Section C), job readiness indicators (Section D), and career improvement measures (Section E). The questionnaire was reviewed by two subject matter experts for content validity, achieving a Content Validity Index of 0.78. Reliability was assessed through a pilot study (n = 20), yielding Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from 0.79 to 0.87 across the instrument's subscales. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 15 respondents (5 from each university), exploring their employment experiences, perceptions of soft skills importance, and views on professional development opportunities.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were computed to summarise respondent characteristics and variable distributions. Pearson correlation analysis was employed to examine relationships between soft skills and job readiness, and between short course participation and career improvement. A significance level of 0.05 was adopted for all inferential tests. Qualitative interview data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's [28] six-phase process.

Results

Demographic Profile

A total of 150 graduates participated in the study, equally distributed as 50 respondents from each university. The demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 150)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	87	58.0
	Female	63	42.0
Age	20-24 years	78	52.0
	25-29 years	52	34.7
	30+ years	20	13.3
University	Golis University	50	33.3
	Admas University	50	33.3
	New Generation University	50	33.3
Employment	Employed	39	26.0
	Unemployed	102	68.0
	Further studies	9	6.0

The gender distribution reflected typical patterns in Somaliland higher education, with male respondents comprising 58.0% of the sample. The majority (52.0%) were aged 20-24 years, consistent with the typical graduation age. Most notably, 68.0% of respondents were unemployed, underscoring the severity of graduate unemployment in the region.

Soft Skills Levels

Table 2 presents the mean scores for each soft skill dimension, measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

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Table 2. Soft Skills Levels among Graduates (N = 150)

Soft Skill Dimension	Mean	SD	Level
Communication Skills	2.30	0.92	Low
Teamwork and Collaboration	2.65	0.88	Moderate
Problem-Solving Ability	2.15	0.95	Low
Critical Thinking	2.08	0.91	Low
Time Management	2.42	0.87	Low
Leadership Skills	1.95	0.89	Low
Emotional Intelligence	2.12	0.93	Low
Adaptability	2.58	0.85	Moderate
Overall	2.28	0.78	Low

The overall mean score of 2.28 indicated low levels of soft skills across the sample. Leadership skills recorded the lowest score (M = 1.95), followed by critical thinking (M = 2.08) and emotional intelligence (M = 2.12). Teamwork (M = 2.65) and adaptability (M = 2.58) scored relatively higher, though still below the scale midpoint. These findings indicate pervasive soft skills deficiencies among the graduate population.

Short Course Participation

Table 3 summarises the types of short courses attended by respondents.

Table 3. Short Courses Attended by Graduates (N = 150)

Course Type	n	%
ICT/Computer Skills	35	23.3
Business Management	22	14.7
Entrepreneurship	20	13.3
Communication Skills	18	12.0
Project Management	15	10.0
Leadership Training	12	8.0
None attended	55	36.7

A significant proportion (36.7%) had not attended any short courses. Among participants, ICT skills training was most common (23.3%), while communication skills courses, despite being highly relevant to identified gaps, were attended by only 12.0%. Of those who attended courses, 63.2% rated them as effective or very effective for enhancing employability.

Correlation Analysis

Table 4 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients between soft skills dimensions and job readiness.

Table 4. Correlation between Soft Skills and Job Readiness

Variable	r	p-value	Effect
Communication Skills	0.712	< 0.01	Strong positive
Problem-Solving	0.698	< 0.01	Strong positive
Teamwork	0.654	< 0.01	Strong positive
Emotional Intelligence	0.645	< 0.01	Strong positive
Critical Thinking	0.621	< 0.01	Strong positive

Leadership	0.603	< 0.01	Strong positive
Adaptability	0.589	< 0.01	Moderate positive
Time Management	0.578	< 0.01	Moderate positive
Overall Soft Skills	0.682	< 0.01	Strong positive

All correlations were statistically significant at $p < 0.01$. The overall correlation between soft skills and job readiness was strong and positive ($r = 0.682$). Communication skills demonstrated the strongest association with job readiness ($r = 0.712$). Additionally, a moderate positive correlation was found between short course participation and career improvement ($r = 0.548$, $p < 0.01$). Graduates who attended short courses reported an employment rate of 44.2%, compared to 16.4% among non-participants.

Challenges in the Job Market

Table 5 identifies the challenges graduates reported facing in securing employment.

Table 5. Challenges Faced by Graduates in the Job Market (N = 150)

Challenge	**n**	**%**
Lack of soft skills required by employers	118	78.7
Curriculum-market mismatch	105	70.0
Limited job opportunities	92	61.3
Inadequate practical training	82	54.7
Poor interview preparation	76	50.7
Lack of professional networks	71	47.3
Insufficient digital literacy	65	43.3

The lack of soft skills was the most frequently cited challenge (78.7%), followed by curriculum-market mismatch (70.0%). Notably, graduates identified soft skills deficiencies as a more significant barrier than limited job opportunities, suggesting that employability challenges extend beyond structural labour market constraints.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer important insights into the employability landscape confronting university graduates in Somaliland, with implications that resonate across the broader Sub-Saharan African context. The pervasive low levels of soft skills documented among respondents (overall $M = 2.28$) confirm that the gap between educational outputs and labour market expectations is not merely anecdotal but empirically substantiated. This observation aligns with the conclusions of Andrews and Higson [9], who argued that universities typically excel in developing technical knowledge while neglecting the interpersonal and professional competencies that employers prioritise. The particularly low scores for leadership ($M = 1.95$) and critical thinking ($M = 2.08$) are especially concerning, as these competencies underpin independent professional judgment and initiative, qualities increasingly valued in contemporary workplaces.

The strong positive correlation between soft skills and job readiness ($r = 0.682$) provides robust empirical support for Human Capital Theory [18, 19], which posits that investments in general human capital yield returns through enhanced employability. Communication skills emerged as the strongest predictor of job readiness ($r = 0.712$), a finding consistent with the National Association of Colleges and Employers [10] employer surveys and the observations of Robles [1], both of which identify communication as the paramount soft skill for workplace success. This result carries particular significance for Somaliland, where the Hargeisa Chamber of Commerce [4]

reported that over 70% of employers found recent graduates deficient in communication abilities.

The study's findings regarding short course participation reveal a paradox: while 36.7% of graduates had not attended any professional development programmes, those who did reported substantially better employment outcomes. The employment rate differential between course participants (44.2%) and non-participants (16.4%) represents a compelling indicator of the practical value of targeted skills training. This result supports Social Learning Theory [20], which emphasises the efficacy of experiential, practice-oriented learning environments in developing transferable competencies. The moderate positive correlation between short course participation and career improvement ($r = 0.548$) further corroborates the findings of Finch et al. [15] and Blunch and Castro [17], who documented positive employment effects associated with vocational and professional development programmes.

The finding that 78.7% of respondents identified soft skills deficiencies as their primary employment barrier challenges simplistic explanations of graduate unemployment that attribute the problem solely to limited job creation or economic stagnation. While 61.3% of respondents also cited limited job opportunities, the primacy of soft skills as a self-identified barrier suggests that even where employment vacancies exist, graduates may be unable to secure positions due to inadequate preparation for workplace demands. This interpretation is reinforced by employer reports from the Hargeisa Chamber of Commerce [4], which documented that 65% of employers found graduates lacking in teamwork abilities, and by the British Council [5] study, which identified similar patterns across multiple Sub-Saharan African countries.

The curriculum-market mismatch identified by 70.0% of respondents points to a systemic issue requiring institutional intervention. Higher education programmes in Somaliland, as in many developing countries, have historically emphasised theoretical knowledge transmission over applied competency development. The integration of soft skills training into curricula, experiential learning opportunities, and employer engagement in programme design represent potential avenues for addressing this disconnect. Career Development Theory [21] provides a useful lens for understanding these dynamics, conceptualising the school-to-work transition as a developmental stage in which the integration of self-concept with occupational competence determines success.

Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that soft skills deficiencies and limited participation in professional development programmes constitute significant barriers to graduate employability in Somaliland. The strong correlation between soft skills and job readiness, combined with the substantial employment differential between short course participants and non-participants, underscores the critical importance of addressing these gaps through coordinated institutional and policy interventions.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are offered. Universities should integrate soft skills development into core curricula across all programmes, establishing dedicated courses in communication, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving, while incorporating experiential learning approaches such as group projects, case studies, and simulations. Career development centres should be established to provide guidance, interview preparation, and skills assessment services. Partnerships between universities and employers should be strengthened to ensure curriculum relevance and facilitate work-integrated learning opportunities. Graduates should be encouraged to proactively pursue short courses and

professional development programmes, leveraging both institutional offerings and online platforms. Employers should invest in on-the-job soft skills training and mentorship for new hires. Finally, government agencies should support the establishment of vocational training centres and develop national qualifications frameworks that formally recognise and certify soft skills competencies.

The study's cross-sectional design and reliance on convenience sampling represent acknowledged limitations that suggest directions for future research. Longitudinal studies tracking graduates' career trajectories over extended periods, comparative analyses involving larger and more diverse institutional samples, and intervention studies evaluating the effectiveness of specific soft skills training programmes would extend the evidence base in this critical area.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of New Generation University College, Hargeisa, Somaliland. All respondents provided informed consent prior to participation, and their anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions

Mumin Omar: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review and Editing.

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