



BRIDGING THE GAP:  
INTEGRATING HYBRID LEARNING INTO THE CURRICULUM TO ENHANCE SOFT  
SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN ZIMBABWEAN PRIVATE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Doctorate of Education (EdD)

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## Abstract

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This dissertation investigates the effect of digital and hybrid learning in the development of soft skills in Zimbabwean private secondary school learners, specifically interpersonal, cognitive, and self-management skills such as communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence, leadership, problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, organisational skills, and work ethic, situating the study within the COVID-19 pandemic-induced shift to digital education. The aim of this study is to analyse the attitudes of instructors, learners, and alumni about the relevance and development of soft skills prior to and following digital integration, with an emphasis on how these experiences affect views on soft skills in educational contexts.

Utilizing a mixed-methods design, quantitative data was collected through surveys administered to learners, instructors, and alumni from three diverse private secondary schools. Open-ended responds provided qualitative insights, allowing for a more in-depth knowledge of soft skill perceptions. Descriptive statistics and analysis of themes were mainly used to examine the results.

The study reveals a large disparity between instructors' and learners' assessments of the relevance and learning of these critical abilities. The findings show that, while instructors often emphasise the significance of soft skills, learners frequently undervalue them, perceiving technical abilities as more crucial to academic achievement, revealing a disconnect that must be addressed within educational frameworks. Following digital and hybrid learning, both groups' perspectives shifted, with instructors noticing improved learner flexibility and digital literacy. However, difficulties in developing interpersonal skills in digital settings continued, emphasising the necessity for instructional methodologies that successfully promote soft skill development.

Quantitative investigations further show that some curricular aspects, particularly those promoting digital literacy and practical applications, are good predictors of soft skill development. Qualitative findings suggest that real-world applications, collaborative projects, and experiential learning activities enhance learners' abilities, but excessive instructor interaction might undermine independence and critical thinking skills.

The findings highlight the importance of modifications to the curriculum that focus on incorporating soft skills into existing academic programmes using active learning methodologies. Furthermore, these findings argue for focused professional development opportunities for instructors in order to establish an environment conducive to soft skills development.

Future research should investigate the long-term effects of hybrid learning on soft skill retention and application in a variety of educational settings, the role of parents and the larger community in skill development, the role of educational attainment, gender, and school type in shaping perceptions, the impact of cultural influences, and, finally, the identification of gaps in instructor training.

This study adds to the larger discussion on educational reform in Zimbabwe by emphasising the necessity for institutions to modify their methods of instruction in response to the needs of a fast-changing employment market.

## Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

## AI Acknowledgment

### **Use of AI:**

I acknowledge my use of Quillbot – Grammar Check (<https://quillbot.com/grammar-check>) and Galaxy (<https://galaxy.ai/ai-proofreader>) to proofread the grammar and syntax of my research project. This action was completed on 23.03.2026.

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## Dedication

To my family, whose unwavering support, love, and encouragement have been the foundation of my journey. Your belief in me has fuelled my determination and inspired me to reach new heights. This achievement is a reflection of your sacrifices and dedication. I am forever grateful to have you by my side.

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As I sit down to pen this acknowledgment section, I'm reminded of a quote I once heard: "Behind every successful doctoral student is a table filled with empty coffee cups." If that's not the truth, I don't know what is.

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In closing, as I bask in the warmth of completion, I recognize that this dissertation wouldn't have seen the light of day without my tribe—those in it for the jokes, the coffee runs, and the heart-warming moments, as well as those who patiently endured my occasional bouts of confusion and despair. Here's to sunny days, endless coffee, and the wonderful people who remind us that we're never alone, even when our eyes glaze over from reading endless journal articles. To all those mentioned and to those who have supported me in ways both big and small, thank you from the bottom of my heart. I am forever grateful for your love, encouragement, and belief in me.

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**List of Abbreviations**

ATS	Association of Trust Schools
C21st	Twenty first century
CHISZ	Conference of Heads of Independent Schools in Zimbabwe
HR	Human Resource
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development
TPACK	Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The increase in emphasis from hard skills to soft skills has been driven by a movement in the economic framework from the manufacturing sector to the service sector. The development of large international companies has been a major driver of the expansion of the service sector (Seetha, 2014; Owusu et al, 2021). Due to the swift pace of advancement in technology and the widespread use of automated processes, the technological expertise necessary for the majority of industries were quickly antiquated. According to academics, the requirement for individual's employability has changed as a result of trends including the aforementioned heightened globalization, increasing job uncertainty, the massification of college and university education, and the transition to a knowledge-driven economy (Bauman 2020; Sin and Neave 2016; Jackson and Wilton, 2020; Bennett and Deal, 2021). Soft skills make an individual a human being in a world of automated and impersonal existence. Incorporating digital and hybrid learning practices - as compelled by the COVID-19 pandemic - has contributed another part to this skill development. In virtual and hybrid environments, students need to deal with technology, collaborate remotely, regulate their own time and solve problems online. These conditions promote adaptability, communication and resilience: the competences required in modern-day professional settings (Frontiers in Education, 2024; MDPI, 2024; JDS, 2023).

The World Economic Forum (2020) anticipates that in the coming ten years, innovation would likely alter over a billion occupations, or over thirty percent of all employment opportunities worldwide. Further, they also ascertained that no fewer than 54% of all workers would

already require retraining or upgrading by 2022 in order to keep up with evolving job demands. According to predictions made by Zahidi (2020), 42% of critical competences in regular employment are anticipated to have already changed (by the end of 2022). This trend is already apparent to be taking place. The abilities required to accomplish a job will change as the work itself does.

We have good grounds to take immediate, large-scale action in light of the Covid-19 slump. There is a clear association between joblessness and educational attainment, notwithstanding the outbreak's indiscriminate effects (Kumar, 2020). The International Labour Organization (2020) estimates that since COVID-19 struck, 305 million permanent employment opportunities have been ravaged internationally. Young people have been especially heavily struck. Soft skills are essential in many fields in the 21st Century (C21st). Organizations generally believe that newly graduated learners have fallen short of the market's requirements and are thus falling behind (Seetha, 2014). The high graduate rates of unemployment is just one of the factors credited with creating the soft skill imbalance. This shifting world necessitates a change in the way we see education. Children and adolescents must "learn to learn" if they are to acquire the adaptability and relevant soft skills that will enable them to find employment. Researchers have paid comparably less attention to soft skills, which play a significant role in defining personality traits and tend to ensure employability (García, Lee, 2021). Digital and hybrid learning presents as well both possibilities and limitations regarding this subject: such environments can support adaptability, virtual collaboration and technology literacy but may limit authentic interpersonal interactions if the pedagogy fails in the intent of encouraging it. As such, particular efforts should be made in guaranteeing that pupils engage in the whole range of soft skills (MDPI, 2024; *Frontiers in Education*, 2024).

Soft skill sets can take on numerous forms depending on the situation, but they all serve the same function. That is, to organize, facilitate, and improve three concepts—personal growth, academic engagement, and occupational success—that are thought to be intimately related. In contemporary education, the development of these types of soft competences is frequently taking place in the setting of on-line and hybrid learning settings by which students have to self-regulate, interact online, carry out collaborative tasks as well as resolve problems in authentic contexts representing actual requirements of hybrid work settings. Therefore, technology-mediated learning can be regarded not only as a medium for delivering educational content but rather as a mechanism for fostering soft competences required for successfully operating at the workplace (JDS, 2023; *Frontiers in Education*, 2024).

Soft skills are frequently referred to as character attributes for the workplace, including collaboration, management, and interpersonal skills. Soft skills are "personality traits, goals, motivations, and preferences that are valued in the labour market, in school, and in many other domains," according to Karoly and Bigelow (2021). They constitute "a blend of dispositions, understandings, attributes, and practices." They are referred to as 'wicked competences' because they are difficult to articulate, as they can take on multiple forms in different circumstances and develop over the course of an individual's life.

The following basic definition can be utilized for the purposes of this research paper: "Soft skills" are a dynamic fusion of cognitive and metacognitive capacities, as well as social, intellectual, and functional skills. Soft skills aid individuals in adapting and behaving constructively such that they may successfully navigate the obstacles of both their professional and personal lives. According to Deloitte Access Economics (2017), soft skills refer to a broad

spectrum of interpersonal and social abilities and competencies that are applicable throughout all economic sectors and businesses.

The soft skills in question encompass interpersonal interaction, collaboration, problem-solving abilities, critical and creative thinking, inventiveness, self-assurance, moral comprehension, the capability for continuous development, a capacity to contend with ambiguity, in addition to the a readiness to assume accountability (Reay and Ball, 2020; Jackson and Wilton, 2020; Bennett and Deal, 2021).

Furthermore, soft skills are differentiated through their nature: that their utilization depends on an individual's viewpoint on problem-solving abilities, approaches, and techniques, in addition to their capacity to connect and adapt between and within a variety of settings (Caggiano et al, 2020). Hard skills, contrasted with soft skills, are characterized by the reality that their uses have an obvious connection to a relevant profession or a business.

The goal of developing soft skills is to facilitate and improve one's own development, educational engagement, and professional achievement (Miller and Rose, 2021).

With that said, it remains the case that individuals continue to spend the initial thirty percent of their life attending educational institutions to get careers (Kumar, 2020). These educational credentials serve as the stepping stones for the final sixty percent of their employment journeys. This suggests that the essence of employment, as well as the skills and expertise needed to carry it out, remain constant for an entire lifetime, though this is obviously nowadays not the case.

Evidently, occupational skills rather than academic credentials will determine success in the workplace for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, if we put more emphasis on skills rather than degrees, it will be possible to create a labour force that more accurately reflects the variety and diversity of the community and reduce the all too well-known opportunity and employment

disparities. This entails changing to a continuous skills-based learning and employment framework that values accomplishments such as employment preparedness and job opportunities over merely diplomas and certifications.

Many businesses, such as EY, Google, and IBM, have adopted this way of conceptualizing issues and have boosted recruiting from diverse talent sources in recent times. Several more are making investments in staff ongoing education. Lifelong learning is becoming more and more intriguing as a topic of soft skills development. Digital and hybrid learning platforms are needed in lifelong learning in order for workers and students to be able to periodically update their competences to further their career, remotely continuing professional development through adaptive learning techniques which are becoming indispensable in employment in today's technologically changing economy (Frontiers in Education, 2024; JDS, 2023).

The goal of developing soft skills is to facilitate and improve individual development, educational engagement, and career success (Gibbs, 2019).

In recent years, there seems to be an increased emphasis on soft skills since they are seen to be essential for organizational effectiveness. Although the hiring industry seems to believe that colleges and other educational institutions teach these abilities, there is evidence that this is not actually the case in practice.

Academic institutions are under more pressure to develop highly adaptable learners who can meet the demands of the modern industry, which continues to evolve. This has led to concerns being voiced over the overall state of the job market for graduate students and graduates' capacity to satisfy expectations from employers (Andrews, 2008).

The environments of educational institutions, work environments, and businesses are evolving toward greater complexity and competition. People who are trustworthy, innovative, and

conscientious have a greater likelihood to be hired, retained, and promoted by organizations. They are also more likely to have strong interpersonal abilities, be independent thinking, be eager to work hard and acquire knowledge, and to display a positive mind-set (Obilar, 2019).

Soft skills are inextricably characterized by the communal component of learning, social inputs, and social outputs. Since involvement, interaction, and collaboration are the cornerstones of development and advanced skill efficiency, soft skills are inevitably social and crucial (Miller and Rose, 2021).

The calibre of learners and their deficiency of soft skills, which are crucial in today's labour market as they serve to enhance individual employment prospects, constitutes one of the subjects that is most frequently discussed in current research on college and university administration (Bennett and Deal, 2021). Throughout the past thirty years, there has existed a "blame game" amongst employers and academic institutions about who is accountable for graduates' lack of job readiness. Even while academic institutions appear to have addressed this critique over time and have gradually dealt with this problem, advancement in learner achievement of transferable abilities still doesn't appear to be occurring.

In the opinion of De Leon (2020), learners who are proficient in C21st skills possess the capability to be more successful in an extensively unrelenting labour force. As a result, instructive structures should begin much sooner to ensure competence by the time learners integrate into the job market, especially since these competencies are challenging to modify or begin enforcing in their later years.

For young individuals to react to this harsh reality with the resourcefulness necessary to generate revenue, they need the abilities to learn quickly, adapt, develop resilience and adopt mind-sets that promote entrepreneurship.

This research adds to the current discussion by directly incorporating learners and by making the case that learners perceive job readiness differently than both academic instructors and organizations do.

### **Statement of the problem**

According to a Workforce Solutions Group poll, over 60% of business owners believe that new managers lack the requisite abilities to communicate and interact with others. Modern recent graduates lack the ability to reason logically and imaginatively, resolve issues, or communicate clearly, according to the vast overwhelming majority of organizations.

The significance of soft skills among organizations was validated by the International Employee Barometer (IEB) investigation, according to Williams and Smith (2021). They contend that businesses place more value on soft skills than on learners' educational credentials. In a comparable manner, according to the World Economic Forum, 10 out of 16 "crucial proficiencies in the twenty-first century" are linked to employees' soft skills (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017).

Although it has become a well-known truth that organizations are placing greater focus on soft skills, it is just as crucial for learners to recognize the importance of soft skills and put forth a deliberate attempt to develop them (Obilar, 2019).

The purpose of an educational institution therefore acts like a polestar. Everyone works toward but never fully accomplishes the intended goal, comparable to how a vessel travels toward but never truly arrives at its guiding star. This is due to the reality that for as long as the world is changing, so will the needs of our learners' requirements, which means that educators must continually come up with fresh approaches to address them (Johnson and Smith, 2021).

In addition to the acquisition of soft skills, studies claim that traditional teaching methods do not inculcate in learners a drive to think critically or deal with complicated problems (Seibert, 2021). As a result, the focus shifts to the idea that instructional and learning strategies are motivated by assessment and reporting systems, and that if the acquisition of soft skills is to be accomplished, there must be a shift away from the current dependence on content mastery. In order to supply what is necessary in modernized curriculum, this may eventually encourage instructors to evaluate their previous educational concepts. The majority of studies concentrate on imparting technical knowledge and frequently use instructor-centred strategies that are exam-oriented. In addition, researchers believe that the use of hybrid education was also not beneficial. Hybrid learning has become very relevant in Zimbabwean private secondary schools in order to address school closure challenges as well as technology shift changes in education. In combining online and offline teaching styles, learners need to navigate being responsible for their own learning path; they should also be able to communicate both nearly and physically and collaborate with peers on varied platforms. Such situations call for needed soft skills in learners such as collaboration, problem solving, adaptability and self-regulation both academically and professionally. The relevance of hybrid learning in the Zimbabwean educational setting can serve as a pragmatic tool to addressing the soft skills gap identified by educators and employers alike. If not adequately facilitated, a learner's time use may grow in a virtual learning environment, but with less social interaction which is what assists in developing many soft skills (Ibrahim, 2017).

As a result, instructors may need to consider if existing assessment and reporting methods need to be supplemented or replaced in order to satisfy C21st educational needs and ensure that key stakeholders can find evidence of these skills. This raises concerns about the stigma associated

with the present academic systems and career paths as well as the shortcomings of our educational system as a whole.

Although the majority of executives believe that developing soft skills yields a larger return on investment than hard skills, since they are intangible, they are more challenging to quantify. This may help to explain why, despite the fact that developing soft skills should be a priority, organizations frequently prioritize training for hard abilities. Soft skills are far too often neglected, but they could either result in definite success or definite failure in one's career. They assure sustained employability. They are essential abilities that need to be developed (Beltron, 2021).

This study therefore intends to examine the perspectives of instructors (confirmed with alumni perceptions and experiences) and learners about the recognized importance and uptake of soft skills in private secondary schools in Zimbabwe.

### **Purpose of the study, research aims and objectives**

Education in Zimbabwe and, beyond any doubt, virtually anywhere in the globe, has altered significantly over the past few years as a result of the corona virus epidemic – for educators as well as learners. It has quickly transitioned from an instructor-centred custom in which learners are "spoon-fed" content during classes and participate through retention and recall to one in which learners have been required to adapt to receiving digital training from their homes almost immediately. Educational institutions are returning to the classroom more frequently, yet certain digital aspects are still present, creating a sometimes partially integrated environment for instruction.

In order to take an active role in their learning experience and show a commitment to reasoning independently, performing under pressure and fulfilling requirements, carrying out investigations independently of orders, and modifying their educational and research approaches to the changing classroom environment, this has meant forcing learners to make their knowledge acquisition and investigations more self-centred, with much less complete dependence on instructors. This is a considerable divergence from the norm set by educators and institutions, where there has traditionally been a mismatch between expectations for the amount of effort, dedication, responsibilities, and skills put out by each group.

In order to alter their attitudes towards soft skill education, learners need to have new experiences in their lives. If they fail to realise how important soft skills are to hiring managers as competencies in the workplace, they will not recognise the significance in learning them or put forth the effort to do so.

Taking into account the issues mentioned in the previous section, the current study research aims to examine how instructors, current learners in secondary schools, along with individuals who have graduated from secondary school since the close of 2020 interpret the perceived worth and degree of acquisition of the specified soft skills.

While the opinions of instructors are crucial to the creation and incorporation of any given skill into educational programmes, learner engagement and beliefs on the incorporation of soft skills traits is a crucial factor to be taken into account. As education becomes more learner-centred to allow the integration of life skills, learners must take the initiative and drive change. In order to make progress with learners understanding and embracing the role they play in the adjustments, instructors and developers of the curriculum and the associated assessments would benefit from understanding how learners view the issue and how they can effectively communicate it to them.

Given the significance of developing soft skills for learner achievement in the C21st, this research study's precise goals are divided into two categories.

The initial phase is to ascertain how the addition of digital and hybrid education throughout and following the corona virus pandemic affected groups of learners and instructors in Zimbabwean private secondary schools' views regarding the significance of soft skills, in addition to the degree and balance of their soft skill acquisition.

Secondly, by contrasting these perceptions, it is hoped to show the potential for any shared fundamental opinions that could be used to establish the rudimentary groundwork for both pedagogical and assessment methods that may not only help develop soft skills but also serve to increase synchronisation and streamlining where learners and instructors are united in a common understanding of their responsibilities while proactively working on them. This would serve as a starting point for potential future studies going forward.

The objectives of this study, therefore, are as follows:

1. To determine learners' and instructors' impressions of soft skills prior to the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities within Zimbabwean private secondary schools.
2. To ascertain how the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities has transformed *instructor* perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gaps.
3. To further ascertain how the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities has transformed *learner* perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gaps.
4. To identify whether learners and instructors share a clear understanding of their respective roles in the development of soft skills, and how this understanding can inform curriculum design.

## **Research questions and research hypotheses**

Whatever the soft skills administration wants to develop, the process begins with self-awareness and knowing how others perceive them. As a consequence, individuals may receive guidance and engage in deliberate practice (Christensen, 2020). Learners and instructors frequently want practical information to illuminate a shift in perspective towards soft skills education and application. There is a firm view that the learning changes mentioned earlier in this section provided sufficient "life experience" for the duration needed for previous convictions to transform, permitting a probability that secondary school learner and instructor acknowledgement and awareness of soft skills may indeed show the early signs of synchronization, enabling an incentive shared notion of both learners and instructors that could be applied to the modification of course material, together with its delivery and assessment, with increased possibilities of success due to its mutual cooperation.

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

### ***Research Question 1***

*What were Zimbabwean private secondary school learners' and instructors' impressions of soft skills prior to the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities?*

**RQ1 H0:** Learners and instructors are likely to have equal impressions of soft skills prior to the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities.

**RQ1 H1:** Learners find soft skills acquisition to be irrelevant and unimportant compared to the importance that instructors place on the skills.

*Expected findings RQ1:* It is expected that whilst instructors find the acquisition of soft skills valuable, learner impressions will be that of less importance within the scope of their educational journey than rote memorisation and recall.

### **Research Question 2**

*How have the differences in **instructor** perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap transformed as a result of the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities?*

**RQ2 H0:** Instructors perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap have not altered.

**RQ2 H1:** Instructors perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap have shifted in balance in levels of acquisition of various soft skills but still indicates a larger skills gap.

*Expected findings RQ2:* It is expected that instructors feel that very few learners actively took part in their learning journey through digital and hybrid learning opportunities to fully make use of skills opportunities available in soft skill acquisition and that whilst the balance of acquisition is likely to have changed with some soft skills - soft skills such as adaptability and organisational skills, may have improved whilst others, such as emotional intelligence and

interpersonal communication, would have regressed - there will still be a noticeable gap between levels of importance versus acquisition. The impressions of the given soft skills importance between learner and instructor impressions post-pandemic may be more similar and with less deviance than prior to the pandemic and the use of digital and hybrid learning.

### ***Research Question 3***

*What are the **learner** perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and the perceived skills gap as a result of the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities?*

**RQ3 H0:** Learner perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap have not altered.

**RQ3 H1:** Learners perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap have shifted in the direction of a narrowing gap.

***Expected findings RQ3:*** It is expected that learners have little comprehensive knowledge of the importance of soft skills and their place in their future success. It is also expected, however, that learners have an inflated perception of their levels of acquisition if these skills.

### ***Research Question 4***

*What underlying ideas may be effectively used in the curriculum development, its presentation, and evaluation that can support the acquisition of soft skills in Zimbabwe's private secondary schools?*

**RQ4 H0:** There are no shared ideas between learners and instructors to be used to streamline and emphasise respective roles in the learning process.

**RQ4 H1:** There are several shared ideas between learners and instructors in regard to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that can be used to streamline and emphasise respective roles in the learning process.

*Expected Findings RQ4:* It is the general feeling that there may be some new fundamental shared ideals that could be utilized to further streamline educational processes with both learners and instructors both backing newly realised roles in the educational journey with an emphasis on soft skills, particularly for the less academically gifted learners.

It should be noted that all predicted outcomes have been founded on the researcher's personal experiences and interactions with various other Zimbabwean private secondary school instructors.

### **Nature and significance of the study**

This component gives a brief overview of the intended research strategy for this project, including data collection processes, analysis techniques, respondents, and the sampling tactics that are going to be utilized to choose them.

### *Study design*

The proposed study should begin with a thorough review of the literature on learners and instructors' views on soft skill development and relevance. This would next be narrowed down to Zimbabwean private secondary school instructors for a direct ideological comparison to form consequences.

The following is mixed methods research (primarily quantitative but finding confirmation of results through qualitative) that employs deliberate random sampling. This method employs deliberate sampling, followed by a randomizing procedure. The scenario helps to acquire a better comprehension of participant impressions. Randomization also raises the likelihood of reliable findings since it supports the depiction of the population and allows for the collection of vast data and specifics from responders.

Further to this, data will be collected by way of a survey. This involves the gathering of knowledge by posing inquiries to respondents. A survey is a flexible method for data gathering since it is adaptable and enables consistent comparability of findings and quantitative systemization. It also allows for gathering large volumes of data in a relatively short period of time which will allow for sufficient sample sizes to be examined whilst being able to realistically meet research timelines.

### *Participants*

There are to be three main groups of participants to take part in the study in order to answer the given research questions. Participants were intentionally chosen for their firsthand experience with soft skills development and hybrid learning in Zimbabwean private secondary schools. This

group included learners, instructors, and alumni to gather insights from those currently navigating the curriculum, those who are teaching it, and those who have moved on from school and can reflect on how these skills apply in the long run.

The first is the learner population and the study will take into consideration only current over-age learners in the Lower 6<sup>th</sup> form (18 years old), learners in the Upper 6<sup>th</sup> form (18 years old) and over-age learners in the Upper 6<sup>th</sup> form (19 years old) in the given private schools. This is the senior most age group of secondary students in Zimbabwean secondary schools. Any learners aged below 18-years-old will be excluded from the study. This group consists of the oldest learners in Zimbabwean secondary schools, who are at an age and stage of learning where soft-skills learning, and deployment become important in their transition to higher education or employment and are considered mature enough to reflect their own soft skills learning.

Next, alumni from the same institutions having graduated between December 2020 and December 2023 will also be included in the study as a group independent from current learners. One of the particular benefits of alumni is that they can share a retrospective perspective on how well institutions are developing soft skills. They are able to in many ways reflect on issues including current learning experience relevance for higher education, job selection and projections, as this reality is possibly beyond the full grasp of current learners. Alumni provide a comparative perspective between what curriculum aims to achieve and outcomes and serve to validate perceptions of soft skills development from both learners' and instructors' perspectives. Further, alumni within this year range experienced both digital and hybrid learning and are therefore able to give a direct assessment on how helpful that experience was in shaping skills that they have since required in tertiary education or the workforce.

Lastly, the instructor population is to be examined and will take into consideration only instructors in the given private schools. Instructors in a range of subject areas are preferred to allow a variety of perceptions based on given curricula and examination methods, as well as the perception of soft skills that they feel their subjects impart. This ensures a diversity of perspectives on curriculum delivery, teaching methods, and the role each subject may play in fostering soft skills. Administrative staff are excluded because they are not directly responsible for teaching and assessing soft skills within the curriculum.

This study focuses exclusively on private secondary schools in Zimbabwe, comprising an all-girls school, an all-boys school, and a co-educational institution. These schools were selected for several interrelated reasons. Firstly, private schools in Zimbabwe predominantly follow the Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) curriculum, which is distinct from the national curriculum employed in public schools. This focus allows the study to examine soft skills development within a structured, internationally benchmarked curriculum, where digital and hybrid learning strategies were actively implemented, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Secondly, the researcher's professional engagement within the private ATS (Association of Trust Schools) system provides direct access to learners, alumni, and instructors, as well as an informed understanding of the institutional resources, pedagogical advantages, and constraints inherent in private education. Such access enhances the reliability and contextual depth of the data collected.

Finally, although this study is situated within the Zimbabwean context, the emphasis on the Cambridge curriculum enhances the potential transferability of findings. As CIE schools operate across Zimbabwe and internationally, insights regarding the facilitation of soft skills within

hybrid and digital learning contexts may hold relevance for other institutions adhering to similar curricular frameworks, thereby extending the broader applicability of the research.

### ***Methods and materials***

The investigation is meant to collect and analyse data via surveys through the use of questionnaires. The survey will be administered using Responster, an online questionnaire platform, in order to gather and evaluate comments in real-time. The questionnaires will be divided into two sections. Section one will utilize a Likert 5-point scale (Patacsil, 2017) to analyse and place the previous and current level of significance and attainment of the specified soft skills in order to assess the change in the balance of these skills, as well as to find levels of deviation between the two research groups.

The second section will utilize open-ended questions about the learners' and instructors' perspectives and notions about soft skills, pedagogical methods and assessment methods. These responses will be converted to quantitative data in order to make direct numerical considerations and to find any potential deviations in feedback from not only learners and instructors alone but also between learner gender and school culture.

### ***Significance of the study***

The research has the potential to have far-reaching implications beyond Zimbabwe's private secondary schools. The worth and functioning of soft skills in the C21st is a global concern, with research on the issue being conducted all around the world (Groh, McKenzie and Vishwanath, 2015; Prince, 2017).

Few studies have been conducted to investigate and recommend effective applications based on syllabi and curricular elements (Soares, 2017). This suggested study is intended to contribute to providing useful and productive input for additional courses of action and measures to be implemented by school stakeholders. If instructional designers and education institutions can help both learners and themselves obtain sufficient pertinent awareness of C21st skills, they could indeed cooperate endeavours to map out and conceptualize applicable educational procedures and regulations in order to effectively merge soft skills into routine pedagogical practices in an era where learners might have recently come to a place of comprehension and share in several underlying beliefs of learning and their roles in it - something that is unfamiliar to the educational sector, particularly within the region.

In addition to these broader concerns, the focus on hybrid learning is particularly significant in the context of this study due to the unprecedented disruption to education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period of time, many institutions in Zimbabwe were required to rapidly transition between traditional face-to-face instruction and digital and hybrid learning environments. This extended disruption effectively created a natural experiment in which learners and instructors were exposed to both digital and hybrid forms of teaching and learning over a sustained period. As a result, hybrid learning environments provide a unique opportunity to observe how shifts in instructional delivery may influence the development and perception of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving. Examining these dynamics allows the research to explore whether hybrid learning environments encourage greater learner independence, digital collaboration, and self-management, all of which are increasingly relevant to contemporary educational and workplace contexts. This context makes hybrid learning

an important lens through which to examine evolving perceptions of soft skills within secondary education.

Given the scarcity of research on the significance and methodology of soft skills development in learners attending secondary schools, this research project aims to provide insight and direction to appropriate key players regarding the adoption of a suitable school systems, teaching practices used by instructors, and their appropriate assessment and evaluation procedures with the goal of providing vision for learners who may now subsequently embrace, or are in the early stages of comprehension and holding value, in the values and perceptions after recent life experiences, while also contributing evidence-based insights into how digital integration within hybrid learning environments influences the development and perceived relevance of soft skills in secondary education, particularly within the Zimbabwean context where limited empirical research currently exists.

Surveys, on the contrary, have minimal contact with participants and, as a result, lack the openness to data associated with approaches such as focus groups. Any approaches chosen for further evaluation would also need to be tested for scalability over a substantial duration of time.

### **Summary and organisation of the remainder of the study**

The purpose of this research study is to determine whether private secondary schools in Zimbabwe are adequately preparing learners for today's workforce, and additionally to investigate how transformations in soft skill perception and acquisition and viewpoints throughout the duration of the pandemic have been influenced by digital and hybrid classroom opportunities.

Chapter 1 has given a brief outline and introduction to the topic at hand and will be followed by a review of the relevant literature in Chapter 2.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The need for integrating social and emotional skills, or "soft skills," as well as cognitive talents in educational institutions is becoming more widely recognised. Despite it being commonly acknowledged that organisations are putting a larger emphasis on soft skills, it is equally important for learners to recognise the relevance of soft skills and make a concerted effort to acquire them (Obilar, 2019).

In this study, soft skills are defined as interpersonal, cognitive and self-management abilities that aid in interacting with others effectively and adapting to different environments where they may be studying or working. This study examines the characteristics of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving and interpersonal adaptability, adaptableness, time management (precision), digital literacy, collaboration, and self-management. The literature recognizes these abilities as vital for achieving success in both academic and professional arenas.

Traditional teaching techniques, according to studies, do not instil in learners a desire to think critically or solve complex issues (Seibert, 2021). As a result, the emphasis moves to the assumption that evaluation and reporting systems encourage instructional and learning practices, and that if soft skill development is to be accomplished, there must be a movement away from the existing reliance on content mastery and rote learning. This may ultimately inspire instructors to reassess their past educational theories in order to offer what is required in a modernised

curriculum. The bulk of studies focus on conveying technical information and usually employs instructor-centred, exam-oriented methodologies.

It is then that the need arises to understand how the move towards digital and, later, hybrid learning experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic has changed not only the skills gap in schooling systems but also perceptions around soft skills among both main stakeholders of those systems - instructors and learners.

For the purposes of this research, hybrid learning refers to an instructional approach that combines traditional face-to-face classroom teaching with online or digital learning components. Hybrid learning environments allow learners to engage with educational content through both in-person interaction and technology-mediated platforms, creating flexible learning structures that integrate physical and virtual instructional spaces.

Within the context of this study, digital integration refers to the deliberate incorporation of digital technologies, online platforms, and technology-mediated learning tools into teaching and learning practices in the private secondary schools in question, that is, Zimbabwean ATS secondary schools. Digital integration extends beyond simply using technology; it involves embedding digital tools into pedagogical approaches in ways that influence learner interaction, collaboration, and skill development.

In this study, the concepts of soft skills, hybrid learning and digital integration are therefore closely connected. The shift toward digitally integrated hybrid learning environments provides a new context within which the development and perception of soft skills among learners and instructors can be examined.

Such change brought various alterations to the didactic environment such as overarching dependence on self-learning, less face-to-face communication, enhanced integration of e-

communication tools as well as an increase in demand for well-developed self-monitoring and time management skills. On the other hand, learners were also made to adapt to virtual collaboration, and instructors had to change their approach towards content delivery and learner engagement.

These changes can influence both the development and acquisition of soft skills and how they are perceived - either positively or negatively. Whilst digital learning environments might promote adaptability, technological proficiency and independent problem-solving, they could also constrain opportunities for interpersonal interaction and the formation of communication skills as one might find within traditional social contexts.

As a result, it becomes necessary to examine whether these shifts have contributed to a redefinition of what constitutes essential soft skills, and whether hybrid learning environments provide viable opportunities for their development. This 're-shaping' is reflected in the pedagogical methodologies employed within the classroom settings, particularly in how knowledge is delivered and subsequently assessed. Consequently, instructors may need to consider whether existing assessment and reporting methods should be adapted to align with C21st educational expectations and to ensure that key stakeholders can identify and evaluate evidence of these skills.

Although predominantly North American and European inspired (Schindler et al., 2021) discussions on soft skills development and digital learning, the impact of these variables within Zimbabwe's secondary education context also needs to be explored, especially considering the infrastructural characteristics, institutional limitations and socio-economic circumstances prevalent in the country.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Learning theory is an effort to define how individuals acquire knowledge, thereby assisting in understanding the complexity involved in the learning process. In broad terms, learning is defined as an instructor's purposeful endeavour to assist learners in acquiring knowledge in accordance with their areas of interest and requirements (Khasawneh, 2023). The better the quality of learners, the more knowledgeable and skilful the instructor is in the educational environment, and inversely. Another expression used in association with knowledge in the present effort is theory. The approach is usually coupled with a collection of thoughts, theories, and procedures that may be learnt, evaluated, and verified (Clark et al, 2021). As a result, learning theory is a collection of concepts, ideas, procedures, and other characteristics related to instructional processes that define how to carry out the learning procedure between the instructor and the learner (Chuang, 2021). Learning theory is defined as a framework that provides strategies for how an instructor implements instructional and educational activities to learners within as well as outside of the educational setting (Muhajirah, 2020). It is critical to determine which perspectives are relevant to various environments. This level of comprehension is required to increase the quality of learning.

## **Current learning theory frameworks**

The behaviourism theoretical framework perspective of learning has traditionally been used in Zimbabwe's educational learning systems. Behaviourism exclusively considers "physical phenomena" and ignores intellectual components (Devi, 2021). In essence, behaviourism ignores

learner intelligence, aptitudes, hobbies, and emotions in research. Learning experiences develop reflexes in such a manner that they establish habits that individuals master. Behaviouristic psychologists pioneered the notion of learning behaviourism psychology. They contend that incentives or reinforcement from the environment regulate human behaviour. Thus, there is a strong association between behavioural reactions and stimulus in the practise of learning (Rogti, 2021; Saracho, 2023).

### ***Behaviourism in the classroom***

In 1898, Edward Thorndike pioneered behaviourism in the initial phases of developmental psychology. The phrase 'operant conditioning' was coined by B.F Skinner in 1937. Skinner employed a behaviourist teaching technique as an educator to implement Thorndike's ideas in an educational setting. It is possible that it is more widespread in today's schools than we realise. Most school curriculum, including those in Zimbabwe, are based on behaviourist philosophy.

Behaviourism is a learning theory that states that information acquisition occurs via the use of incentives and punishments provided by instructors, resulting in behavioural modifications in learners (Loughran, 2023). Behaviourism investigates learners' apparent activities further to assess whether they are gaining knowledge as effectively as possible. The main idea of behavioural psychology is that adolescents acquire knowledge by means of reinforcement - constant communication that informs them whether or not what they are demonstrating is appropriate (Singh, 2023). Examination outcomes, assignment ratings, and other additional details are

included. This uses identical behavioural reinforcement tactics advocated by Skinner to educate learners how to conduct themselves or push towards a higher performance.

Behaviourist ideas might additionally be apparent in how we urge learners to prepare for examinations. The monotonous repetition of assignments and testing in order to improve assessment scores and, ultimately, earn a higher grade is plainly behaviouristic. Learners understand and think that the more frequently individuals work on it, the more individuals can expect to be commended for performing effectively and receiving more favourable scores.

However, behaviourism does not come devoid of critics. A number of individuals contend that the technique overlooks learner uniqueness and personal characteristics (Lockey, 2021; Zajda, 2021), while other researchers claim the method studies actions of the physical body as opposed to the activities of the cognitive system, rendering it ill-equipped to evaluate what is actually being learned (Ahmad et al, 2020). Researchers contend that just because a learner is interested and engaged does not imply that they are acquiring and retaining knowledge (Lichtman, 2021). He maintains that the educational process is far more ingrained than behaviourists ever envisioned. Herein lies a typical critique levelled about behaviourism: learning is far more than just behavioural patterns.

Regardless, institutions continue to use behaviourist approaches in the classroom on a daily basis. Given changes occurring in the contemporary workforce, an amendment is required in the frameworks used by instructors to connect educational aims with the needs of business in order to eliminate skill gaps while maintaining school leavers' employability and competitiveness. The challenge herein is that if behaviourism and the resulting rote learning systems are not proving to be effective, what concepts are necessary in order to establish frameworks that enhance learner participation as well as applicable soft skills?

## **Combining modern learning theory frameworks**

Modern education requires learners to be proficient in C21st skills in order to attain future success in the workforce. A list of the soft skills to be reviewed has been taken from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation (2017) in order to maintain the selection as current and to offer a solid starting point for research. The following contains the elements of these soft skills to be studied: 1. Teamwork and cooperation; 2. Leadership; 3. Problem solving and critical thinking; 4. Work ethic and perseverance; 5. Organizational skills; 6. Creativity; 7. Interpersonal communication; 8. Emotional intelligence; 9. Relationship management; and 10. Adaptability.

In light of creating an environment in which potential digital and hybrid elements are discovered to be viable and useful, and incorporated with in-classroom pedagogical practices to be utilised and exercised to promote the creation and acquisition of soft skills in secondary school learners, a blend of theoretical learning frameworks is being proposed in order to achieve the desired results and outcomes, moving away from the traditional use of behaviourism frameworks. These include the combination of connectivism and constructivism theoretical learning frameworks.

### ***Connectivism***

Prensky (2005) defines contemporary learners as people who are disinterested in and reluctant to participate in educational contexts which are not indicative of how they function in their lives outside of school. Learners join their educational settings with their mobile

devices and computers, ensuring that they remain in contact with the quickly changing world as a result of the continuous information exchange given by these devices; they are driven and prepared. Learning in digital environments changes power relations. Independent use demonstrates an appreciation of adaptability, independence, and authority in participatory environments, encouraging "deliberate learning actions" and being a part of the whole. As a result, technology's potential to normalise actions in flexible learning contexts is included in the connectivism age (González, Lee, 2021).

In accordance with this concept, education is a deeply networked procedure that requires learners to perceive external information holistically. As learners develop autonomy in inquiry and reflection, the lesson shifts towards a constructivist approach. Whenever learners obtain information via exchanges with other learners and infrastructure, their learning setting shifts towards connectivism. These paradigms should not be regarded as fully distinct. They may cohabit while functioning in the real world (Boyras, Ocak, 2021; Kirkwood and Price, 2020). Technology has altered the way we interact with one another, communicate, and learn during the last two decades. Educational demands and concepts describing procedures for learning along with its values should reflect the fundamental characteristics of the current social context. The connectivism notion is based around a notion of how choices are made on continually changing grounds (Yi, Lei, and Jian, 2014). As a consequence, the capacity to identify and select the most relevant ones becomes increasingly vital. Similarly, the capacity to identify whether freshly acquired knowledge will influence previous ones, reorient information, and reconstruct learning is highlighted (Alam, 2023).

Connectivism, according to Williams (2008), is a pedagogical theory rather than a learning theory unlike constructivism. Connectivism, according to Siemens and Tittenberger (2020), is a

teaching paradigm that allows learners to interact with one another using social networking or collaborative technologies. According to Siemens (2020) the instructor's responsibility is to establish learning ecologies, shape communities, and release learners into the environment.

Siemens and Tittenberger (2020) further emphasise the limits of course settings, which are given as a single point of view on a subject. Furthermore, the researchers emphasises that connectivism is built on connections in which learners should engage with aspects that expand the learning practise outside the classroom and enable them for real-life experiences.

One of its most significant benefits is that it enables learners to quickly track their personal development. Furthermore, the usage of Web 2.0 technologies has dramatically enhanced peer input and cooperation. These aspects are supposed to promote learner engagement and self-regulation, resulting in learners being more actively involved in the process, which boosts motivation and, eventually, achievement.

While digital learning has numerous benefits, such as enhanced accessibility and adaptability, there are also drawbacks to this style of education. Various studies on digital learning have been undertaken, and their findings indicate that digital learning has its own set of specific obstacles that might lead to drawbacks.

Respondents from a study done by Hermanto and Srimulyani (2021) expressed a lack of motivation, and this lack of incentive has grown more critical when it comes to learner responsibilities. Another major issue with digital education is the integration of many different elements such as learners, instructors, instructional materials, and technologies. The seamless integration of these elements is important to the virtual classroom's effectiveness. If any of these elements are not correctly incorporated, the virtual educational experience could be negatively impacted. Additionally, Mahyoob (2020) reported that the disadvantages of digital

learning commonly included technical difficulties such as video and audio recordings, virtual classroom accessibility, and virtual platforms in general as well as scholarly and social obstacles. While digital learning is convenient and flexible, its limitations in terms of technology issues, academic challenges, and communication barriers may restrict certain learners' academic opportunities.

However, in this scenario, most of these problems are to be addressed in the sense that connectivism will be used in a more hybrid sense where the presence of instructors and peers will outweigh the downsides described above.

### *Constructivism*

Constructivism is an educational philosophy that emphasises learners' engaged involvement in developing their own knowledge. Learners ruminate on their educational experiences, create illustrations, and incorporate emerging ideas into their personal models as opposed to just receiving data, as in rote learning techniques. This facilitates deeper understanding and acquisition of knowledge. Constructivism is therefore defined as a "learning approach that holds that people actively construct or make their own knowledge and that reality is determined by the learner's experiences" (Elliott et al, 2000).

Advocates of the constructivist learning framework claim that the learner should have a greater influence over their own educational experience and that people learn best when they discover things for themselves. It may be contended that in some cases, it would prove far simpler for an instructor simply to provide a learner with the solution rather than helping a learner to find

the solution on his or her own. Constructivist advocates, however, feel that the act of choosing an appropriate response for oneself, or at minimum, creating a concept and analysing the topic, is an essential part of the learning process.

As they interact the environment and deliberate on their observations, learners construct personal descriptions and incorporate newly acquired facts into their pre-existing knowledge (schemas) (Cockerill et al.2024). This is connected to the processes of assimilation and accommodation. The process of absorbing newly acquired information into an established paradigm is known as assimilation. The process of updating and redeveloping an old schema using newly acquired information is known as accommodation (Hanfstingl et al.2021; Samandar, Azizbek, 2024).

There are several key parts to a general constructivist framework. The first is that the core notion of constructivism is that human cognition is created, and that learners develop additional knowledge on the base of existing understanding. This past information impacts the new or amended understanding that an individual constructs as a result of new educational encounters (Saleem et al.2021). It is argued that this requires higher levels of academic experience and background knowledge in order to be successful. However, it can be said that secondary level learners, particularly those in the higher ranks of the schooling processes possess enough background knowledge in the subjects that they are carrying out in order for constructivism to be a success.

Another important premise is that learning is a dynamic process rather than a passive one. According to constructivism, learners produce significance only by active interaction with their surroundings, such as exploration or solving real-life issues. Knowledge cannot be gained

passively because important relationships must be created between current information, new knowledge, and the actions that comprise learning. John Dewey highlighted real-life situations and problems as an educational experience. He stated that if learners just see a problem without feeling its consequences in a substantial, emotional, and analytical sense, they are improbable, or would only do so superficially, to alter and change present habits or establish new ones.

It is also worth noting that acquiring knowledge is an interpersonal process in which we interact with others, rather than an abstract concept (Kucharska, Erickson, 2023). Collaboration, according to Vygotsky (1978), is crucial in the process of "making meaning." Vygotsky asserts that the environment in which people grow affects both what they do and the things they think about. As a result, every educational and instructional action involves dealing with and negotiating socially produced knowledge. Adolescents and their peers co-construct knowledge as a result of social interactions from targeted education within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978; Tilak et al.2023; Benvenuto, 2024).

In contrast to traditional instruction, in which knowledge is passively transferred by instructors to learners, the notion of constructivist learning underpins a variety of learner-centred instructional approaches and behaviours (Thomas, Schweisfurth, 2021). Constructivism is a system of teaching that involves instructors motivating learners to think for themselves as opposed to merely telling them what to think (Tan, Ng, 2021). It suggests that instructors have to believe that learners possess the ability to make decisions independently and generate concepts of their own. The instructor's primary purpose is to establish an atmosphere for cooperative problem-solving in which learners evolve into proactively involved individuals in their own learning experiences. According to this concept, a "teacher" is a coordinator of learner achievement rather

than an "instructor." Constructivism further fosters a feeling of individual responsibility by allowing learners to take control of their educational experiences and evaluations.

Learners study curriculum material while also finding their own ability to think and investigate a particular subject in this sort of environment. In other words, teaching learners how to produce knowledge. This form of instruction is relevant to the circumstances that the learner would confront after graduating from academia. In the business world, there are times when there is not anyone readily available and/or able to give an immediate solution - an instructor may not always be present to deliver or acknowledge an appropriate response to an issue. Alternatively, there might possibly be many right answers. The learner who has learnt to acquire understanding for themselves becomes more equipped to reach a conclusion and recognise the supporting mechanism that led to it. This will offer the learner a competitive edge in a variety of scenarios. In order to better integrate learning into their experiences, learners must participate in higher thinking activities such as analysing, synthesising, and assessing. Another benefit of constructivist learning is the way it helps to establish the principle of lifelong learning (Alt, Raichel, 2022). Because the constructivist model of learning demands the learner to be more actively involved in having influence over the process of learning, it aids in the development of the learner's capacity to learn on an individual basis and promotes the notion of lifelong learning.

The most important criticism levelled against constructivism is its lack of structure (Stewart, 2021; Musundwa, 2024). Some learners require highly structured atmospheres for learning in order to reach their full academic potential. It additionally replaces traditional marking with learners determining their own advancement, which may result in learners lagging behind given that instructors are unable to determine which learners have been affected with no uniform assessment. Without doubt, this is an area that could use some additional concentration; however,

it is felt that the benefits greatly outweigh the downfalls with its offering and that assessment would be a significant factor for revision regardless of the educational frameworks enlisted.

Furthermore, whether the course content is fact-based or procedure-oriented, it is frequently more effective for the instructor to just tell the learner the solution rather than the learner spending a significant amount of time conducting research only to reach the same result. It has been demonstrated, nevertheless, that when a learner arrives at a conclusion for themselves, they are inclined to retain that information for a longer amount of time.

It is also worth noting that constructivism frameworks are useful when the instructor has fewer learners that they can properly supervise throughout the class time. Numerous educational institutions may not be able to recruit additional instructors to teach a bigger number of classes due to time and money restrictions, yet the truth remains that many subjects would benefit from following the constructivist paradigm. The availability of current technology may help to give at least a partial answer to this dilemma. Constructivism may be used to design hybrid courses (Rankapola, Zuva, 2023). The use of the internet could enable constructivist approaches to enter the instructional process at academic institutions.

The constructivism range of thought tends to be divided into three fundamental groups: cognitive constructivism, founded on Jean Piaget's work; social constructivism, centred on Lev Vygotsky's work; and radical constructivism. For the purposes and objectives of this study, focus will be made only on cognitive constructivism and social constructivism.

## **Cognitive constructivism**

Cognitive constructivism holds that knowledge is created by mental processes like attention, perception, and memory (Fouriea, Schlebusch, 2024). Whilst the learner is a problem-solver who builds understanding through cognitive processes, the instructor gives knowledge and tools to allow the learner to develop their own perspective. According to this viewpoint, learning is a personal activity including mental functions such as focus, perception, and retention.

It is essential to establish classroom settings as well as tasks that promote personalised learning. Jean Piaget developed this technique. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, individuals cannot be provided with knowledge that they instantly grasp and utilise. Instead, individuals must generate their individual understanding (Piaget, 1953). Assimilation and accommodation are practices that learners must undertake to attain stability or "equilibration" (Gibson et al.2023).

"Equilibration occurs when children shift from one stage to another and is manifested with a cognitive conflict, a state of mental unbalance or disequilibrium in trying to make sense of the data or information they are receiving," according to Piaget's theory. "Disequilibrium" is defined as "a state of discomfort in which one must adjust the way they think (schema) to resolve conflict and become more comfortable". According to Piaget (1953), assimilation occurs when learners incorporate new knowledge into their schemas, but accommodation occurs when learners must adjust their schemas to "accommodate" the newly acquired understanding or knowledge. When learning, this adjustment process happens when one processes new knowledge

to fit into what is already in one's memory. This process must be facilitated in the classroom by instructors.

His ideas on equilibration, assimilation, and accommodation are all centred around learners' capacity to create intellectually or autonomously new knowledge within their developmental phases and resolve conflicts (Piaget, 1953). Understanding that this approach happens at a different pace for each individual learner helps the instructor facilitate constructivist learning. The cognitive constructivism hypothesis of Piaget underlines the need to understand what each learner requires to absorb knowledge and learn at the rate that suits them. During this method, it is vital to watch learners and identify their level of ability.

### **Social constructivism**

Social constructivism holds that understanding is formed via social relationships and cooperation with peers. Whilst the learner is actively engaged in knowledge formation, and learning is a social activity, the instructor supports learning through facilitating social contact and cooperation. Cooperation, negotiating, and introspection are all part of the social process of learning.

Social constructivism is a very successful method of instruction that benefits all learners since it incorporates teamwork and social engagement (Hayden et al.2021; Saleem et al.2021; Le, Nguyen, 2024). After Piaget had outlined his theories including individual or cognitive constructivism, this form of constructivism emerged.

The social constructivism primary founder, Lev Vygotsky, believed that social interaction was an important part of learning. Social constructivism is determined by the learner's interactions with fellow learners in the learning environment as well as his or her own thinking and reasoning abilities. Intellectual conversations, the zone of proximal development, interaction with others, culture, and internal speech are all jointly engaged in Vygotsky's investigations and concepts (Vygotsky, 1962). Adopting his ideas or developing an environment for learning that encourages interaction contributes to the creation of excellent educational institutions. One of Vygotsky's fundamental assumptions is the zone of proximal development, or ZPD.

This aspect of child development determines how a young person acquires knowledge. Vygotsky (1962) defined ZPD as a zone of learning in which an individual is assisted in understanding a concept in the classroom. Many theorists and educators have demonstrated that Vygotsky's theory works by supporting adolescents in learning. Adolescents often learn best when they are surrounded by others. When pupils complete the original exercise, their zone expands, and they can do more. This utilises the social constructivist technique, in which learner's first act on what they can accomplish on their own, and then, with instructor aid, they learn the new idea based on what they were doing individually. Learners should not just work one-on-one with instructors, but also with other learners as well. Learners have a great deal to offer one another. When learners grasp the execution of group projects or activities, internalisation of information occurs at a variable rate for each individual based on their unique experience. Vygotsky argued that when there is social connection, internalisation happens more efficiently.

### **Connecting the elements to create a theoretical framework specific to this study**

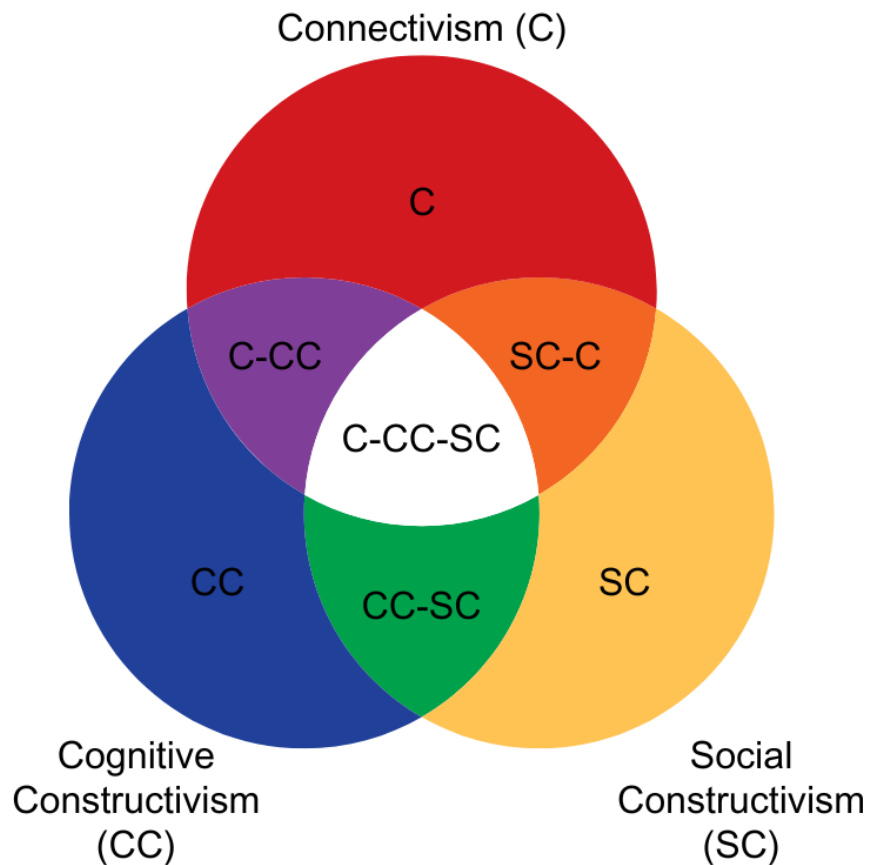
The blending of connectivism and constructivism helps to modernise a framework on both the pedagogical methodology and learning theory sides, emphasising the roles of both instructors and learners in the modern educational setting.

Providing hybrid instructional resources using technology that learners are already using in their everyday lives gives them greater access to the material being covered. Learners are absent from classes for a number of reasons. Even in class, they might become side-tracked and overlook important information. A hybrid programme with asynchronous materials that interest the learner gives them access to the contents as many times as they need to understand the contents. Materials can be accessible when a learner is better prepared for study, rather than when the instructor and other learners can gather in a particular classroom at a variable time.

When developed and performed properly, hybrid courses have significant benefits over regular educational programmes. Hybrid courses support the constructivist educational approach and foster more individualised learner contact, which benefits the learning process. Hybrid courses with equivalent or faster levels of learning can be more cost-effective than conventional programs with the right design.

Learners use smartphones and tablets to connect with their surroundings. They function on the idea that whatever resources they require, such as communicating with peers, may be obtained on command via the internet. When instructional materials are available in the same manner that other resources are, they will acquire greater amounts and be more involved in their educational experience.

The constructivist learning approach is aided by information technology and, therefore, connectivism. Learners have more influence over the learning process since they may obtain course information on their own and have a higher inclination to contact the instructor directly. This is critical in the constructivist learning methodology. In a hybrid course, interaction has been demonstrated to grow and become more effective. A high degree of communication is required for constructivist/connectivist-style education to be effective.



*Table of components to the new theoretical framework*

CC	CC-SC	SC	SC-C	C	C-CC	CC-SC-C
Learn to learn	Knowledge is constructed	Learning is social	More flexible	Multi-directional communication	Builds on what is already known	Broad soft skill development and acquisition
Knowledge is dynamic	Contextual	Promotes social inter-communication skills	Requires more student input	Multiple sources of information	Blended styles of learning	Active learning
Affected by experience	Increased dialogue between instructors, learners and peers	Knowledge is personal	Proactive	Increase in collaboration	Problem centred	Alternative assessment
Assimilate via mental models	Suited for all levels of academic ability	Assimilate via social exposure and discussion	Increases discipline	Develops time management, communication, adaptability and responsibility		Research skills development
Tailored to the individual	Safe environment to encourage questions	Zone of proximal development	Blended materials and resources	Ability to find connections between concepts		Transferrable
Develops critical thinking and adaptability		Develops inter-personal communication, emotional intelligence and relationship management skills.	Allows for diversity of opinions	Theories of technology		Student-driven
High quality learning		Individual interaction with the environment is vital				Learn by doing
Prepares for real-life experiences		Gradual release of responsibility by instructors to learners				Deeper understanding and longer retention of materials
Begins with complex problems						

While constructivist and connectivist perspectives provide the core theoretical foundation for this study, additional frameworks within educational technology and skills development literature further support understanding of how hybrid learning environments influence soft skill development. These are: Social Learning Theory, the TPACK Framework, the SAMR Model and the 21st Century Skills Framework.

## **Supporting Frameworks**

### ***Social Learning Theory***

Social Learning Theory, originally proposed by Albert Bandura, emphasises that learning occurs through observation, interaction, and modelling within social contexts. According to Bandura (1977), individuals acquire behaviours and skills by observing others and engaging in shared activities. Within educational environments, this theory highlights the importance of collaborative learning experiences where learners develop interpersonal competencies through interaction with peers and instructors.

In the context of hybrid learning environments, social learning theory provides a useful lens for understanding how learners develop soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and leadership through collaborative activities, peer discussions, and group-based problem-solving tasks. These interactions enable learners to observe and practise socially valued behaviours, reinforcing the development of transferable skills required in academic and professional settings.

### ***Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) Framework***

The TPACK Framework (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge) was established by Mishra and Koehler (2006) and is focused upon a model to conceptualize the use of technologies in teaching and learning. The TPACK emphasizes three types of knowledge and how they interact within digital learning environments: technological knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and content knowledge. All components are necessary for the instructor to strike a balance in order to create meaningful learning environments.

In a mixed-learning environment the TPACK model can be used to emphasize the importance of teachers in planning activities that integrate technology and pedagogy ensuring soft skill development. Examples of such activities may include collaborative digital spaces, web-based discussions or interactive assignments.

### ***SAMR Model of Technology Integration***

The SAMR Model by Ruben Puentedura is based on conceptualizing technology being used as part of an educational solution that evolves through four different levels of technological enhancement, and this can be a useful model for the use of technology in the classroom. The levels include substitution, augmentation, modification and redefinition. At the higher levels technology allows experiences that would not have been possible within the classroom before.

When considering the use of hybrid environments for learning, the SAMR model proposes that technology should be used in such a way as to not simply substitute for activity that could take

place in the classroom itself (redefinition). In designing technology supported learning environments, part of the motivation should be for soft skill development, through the use of collaborative, creative and problem-based activities.

### ***21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills Framework***

According to the 21st Century Skills Framework, Collaboration, Communication, Creativity and Critical Thinking are four of the skills that learners will need to develop so they are ready to enter today's workplaces. Given that this framework was created through international educational projects, it understands that today's worker needs both technical skills and transferable soft skills in order to succeed.

In hybrid-learning environments, the focus on collaboration, adaptability, and digital literacy is strongly associated with the development of the soft skills discussed in this research. Schools that embed these skills into the curriculum will have their pupils well prepped for the work demands of a modern globalized job market.

### ***Integration of Theoretical Frameworks***

Together, these frameworks reinforce the theoretical foundations of the present study by highlighting the importance of interaction, experiential learning, and purposeful technology integration in developing soft skills. While constructivist and connectivist perspectives explain how learners construct knowledge through interaction and digital networks, complementary frameworks such as social learning theory, TPACK, SAMR, and the 21st Century Skills Framework provide further insight into how instructional design and technology integration can

support the development of transferable competencies within hybrid learning environments. In this way, these frameworks collectively provide a comprehensive perspective on how hybrid learning environments can support the development of soft skills by combining social interaction, digital engagement, and learner-centred pedagogical practices.

### **The soft skills gap**

The present circumstance demonstrates that learners are becoming increasingly confronted with many difficulties and must confront the real world by accepting entry-level roles or professions that fall beyond their chosen field of expertise (Bennett and Deal, 2021). In past decades, an advanced educational certification was considered as a certain path toward achievement and job placement (Koutsouba and Petridou, 2021). Any organisation would agree that acquiring not just the right employees, but individuals with the proper talents and mentality, is a significant problem for companies. However, using a four-year degree as a benchmark for career readiness implies a dependency on a capability with potentially obsolete abilities as opposed to lifelong learners with always-relevant skills. The current focus on university degrees alienates already disadvantaged job candidates even more (Friedman, 2025). Moreover, many of these first-grain positions are now in short supply. This presents a prospect for the overwhelming majority of individuals in the most vulnerable positions. That said, with 70% of these individuals required to look for employment opportunities beyond their present industry, these adjustments need more secure safety nets and private-sector commitments (Razavi, 2022; Rodrik, 2022).

People who lack the necessary abilities when they are young adults frequently experience difficulty in many facets of adulthood. In particular, when situations do not seem to be going

satisfactorily, individuals require an awareness of self-efficacy to put into practice what they know continually, persistently, and skilfully. According to Obilor (2019), schools regrettably do not give the necessary attention to the acquisition of soft skills that our learners require, despite the fact that these abilities have a significant impact on their academic performance.

Although career readiness for learners has attracted greater scrutiny in recent years, the complexity of this notion continues to be understudied in current academic literature (Bennett and Deal, 2021), and there is no definitive consensus on what exactly qualifies as competencies for employment. The employment prospects of learners are defined as 'the information, abilities, and attitudes that graduates are expected to be able to demonstrate they have gained via higher education'.

The academic literature on employability has comprehensively examined the influence of on-going alterations in the external environment on the labour market and job readiness of learners (Ng, 2022; Simpungwe, 2024). Critics observed that trends involving increasing globalisation, heightened job instability, the massification of educational institutions, and the move to a knowledge-driven economy have contributed to the requirement for learners to be marketable (Bauman, 2020; Bennett and Deal, 2021; Collins, Jones, 2022; Hassock, Hill, 2022).

Previously, receiving a college diploma was seen to be a definite path towards achievement and recruitment (Koutsouba and Petridou, 2021). The present context demonstrates that learners increasingly find themselves dealing with multiple problems and must confront realities by embracing lower-level professions or vocations that fall outside their field of expertise (Jackson and Wilton, 2020). Researchers emphasise that recent graduates may not solely depend on their post-secondary qualifications (Succi, 2019) but must be adaptable and able to respond to variations

in the labour market by establishing and accomplishing a competitive edge over their peers who share comparable educational and class socioeconomic backgrounds.

Numerous papers produced by various human resources practitioners (Cappelli and Keller, 2020; Kell and Vaidya, 2021) highlight the importance of soft skills in determining employment prospects, notably for recent graduates stepping into the workforce. Organisations, in accordance with the aforementioned records, require workers who are more knowledgeable, and young individuals deserve to be provided with prospects to acquire soft skills which include business acumen, coping mechanisms, the capacity to acquire knowledge, and various other competencies - such as being capable of collaborating with groups, corresponding in a straightforward manner, adapting to a variety of environments, resolve issues, regulate disagreements, and demonstrate perseverance and comradeship.

Whilst it is obvious that soft skills are important, learners may have additional concerns if they are unsure of what a potential employer understands by soft skills (Juhász et al.2023). Organizations and learners have different ideas about what qualifies as important soft skills (Williams, 2015). Goh and Williams (2021) found that there may be considerable variances in how people perceive the impact of soft skills on job performance in a different situation. In accordance with this, it has been discovered that while corporations and academic instructors value soft skills highly, learners frequently exaggerate their own talents and readiness, as well as the assumption that soft skills are unique characteristics that cannot be improved upon or supplemented. They additionally lack the motivation to employ their understanding of soft skills consistently as learners do not regard them as essential for success. Findings in further studies reveal that corporations place a lot more value on soft skills than learners do, with 86% of those surveyed indicating a rise in focus on soft skills in organizations over the past five to ten years (Succi, 2020).

It has been suggested that learners are required to cultivate and gain a variety of abilities, particularly hard skills and soft skills, in order to obtain a positioning benefit (Jackson and Wilton, 2020; Bennett and Deal, 2021). The exploration of soft skills has received much less attention over the past few decades than has the study of hard skills and knowledge essential for employment opportunities (Ng, Burke, 2021).

There is no consensus on what qualifies a talent as "soft," despite the fact that nearly all employers place an equal or higher value on soft skills than technical ones (Ibourk, El Aynaoui, 2023; Spyridakis, 2025). Organizations may no longer define soft skills, but they are still able to recognize them once they are there. As academics look for methods to up skill their whole workforce on them, this poses a severe dilemma. Soft skills are the differentiating factor that helps individuals maintain and improve their jobs, but there are limited insights into how to teach people in them successfully. As we acclimatize to digital and hybrid learning and education, this will probably hold truth even more. Social soft skills are reportedly among the most appreciated and highly sought after capabilities, according to studies (Kretchmer, 2020). In addition, it is advised that learners should start cultivating a strong work ethic at a young age because it is difficult to change a work ethic later in life.

Thi Van Pham and Thi Thu Dao (2020) further back up the skills gap by simply confirming that learners lack soft skills that are important to organizations. They are just one in several parties confirming the lack of soft skills in learners and recent graduates. In support of this claim, U.S. Secretary of Education, Anne Duncan, stated in 2010 that learners' academic performance is not increasing sufficiently quickly and that they are not achieving the essential advancements necessary for success in the global marketplace. The learners are not on a trajectory that leads to

graduation from secondary school prepared to thrive in university and working life (U.S. Department of Education, 2010b).

93% of employers believe, according to research by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, that a potential employee's proven skills are more significant than their academic background. According to research by the Carnegie Institute of Technology, character and an individual's ability for leadership, negotiation, and communication account for 85% of their financial achievement. Amazingly, just 15% may be attributed to technical proficiency. The idea that soft skills are only "nice to have" in the job market is obsolete. These skills have become crucial and frequently determine job success in terms of promotion prospects.

Further investigations by the Manpower Group revealed that over 20% of Human Resource (HR) managers blamed their inability to fill open positions on a shortage of soft skills. The two soft skills that recruiters most frequently recognized as deficient were interpersonal skills and ambition. In previous research, 67% of HR managers stated that they were willing to employ a candidate who lacked technical expertise but had good soft skills including organizational communication, collaboration, innovative thinking, and diplomacy. 93% believe it is simpler to teach these technical abilities than soft ones.

More than 85% of the 261 HR managers polled by Al Asefer and Zainal Abidin (2021) in collaboration with the HR Research Institute, concurred that soft skills are particularly crucial for long-term achievement, but they also acknowledged that the company they worked for was more inclined to prioritize hard skills education. They went on to say that personnel soft skills are the key ability in almost all occupations, including technological settings. Ibrahim (2017) found that acquiring soft skills has a large beneficial influence on employment outcomes by 79%, and that instructional methodology has a favourable impact on acquiring soft skills by 51%.

54% of UK-based businesses believe learners are exceptionally qualified but lack soft skills, culminating in many vacant employment opportunities. Further to this, according to a poll conducted by the staffing strategies department at St Louis Community College, over 60% of business owners believe young workers and managers lack the requisite interpersonal and communication abilities, representing a 10% rise in the past two years. The overwhelming majority of companies agree that contemporary learners lack the capacity to reason strategically and imaginatively, resolve issues, or write effectively.

Soft skills have become so vital in numerous occupations and sectors that these abilities are considered as among the most significant criteria for prospective employment hiring. Additionally, the notion of conflict, as discovered by Huang and Johnson (2021), has an impact on how diverse groups of people, especially employers, employees, and instructors, are able to gain authority and opportunity. In the capital-labour disputes, researchers noticed the fact that there currently exists a persistent dispute over the employer's role in conveying soft skills, as well as employees' inability to adapt skills to the training supplied by the employers. Subsequently, there is the employer-educator dispute, in which employers agree that educational institutions of learning are not delivering enough programmes to impart these abilities to learners. The competing hypothesis calls for businesses to assume the obligation of equipping learners with job experience while requiring instructors to adapt curricula and pedagogical strategies with the goal of closing the soft skill deficit amongst recent graduates.

In accordance with an academic and employment poll conducted by York College in Pennsylvania (2013), respondents estimate that over 53% of newly hired employees have an inadequate work ethic. According to the poll, negative workplace behaviours include idleness, an inflated sense of superiority, and an unprofessional workplace mentality. Among the problems

contributing to regional learners' underemployment is a lack of soft skills. They went on to say that soft skills shortcomings account for 70 to 80% of the issues (Seetha, 2014).

According to an inquiry carried out by the Association of Graduate Recruiters in the United Kingdom, 40% of major businesses will have difficulty filling vacant positions as a result of candidates who lack the necessary skills which include collaboration, perseverance, and interpersonal interaction, despite being academically competent (ARG, 2015).

According to Seetha (2014), 83% of individuals polled believed that soft skills are critical for success and progression opportunities in their present work. According to further study of the responses, 81% of the participants claimed that soft skill abilities assist in achieving speedy recruitment. It is also worth noting that when it was queried whether they were pleased with the soft skill ability of new hires, just 12% of the respondents said yes.

When asked about the calibre of prospective hires entering the job marketplace currently, just 29% claimed they have the required soft skills needed for a successful career at work. Regarding soft skill proficiency, 68% of respondents believed that there were disparities between industry-wanted learners and learners themselves. On the issue at hand, a convincing majority of 89% agreed that the courses of study and academic institutions must be improved in order to prepare and develop industry-preferred and useful individuals.

Noah (2020) posited that soft skills traits do not develop naturally. As with any other technical topic or skill, they must be taught and developed instead. For improved mastery, learners need more chances to practice their soft skills (Kostikova et al, 2021; Volkova et al, 2022). Researchers contend that learners may really be taught soft skills, regardless of whether they are incorporated into the current curriculum or taught independently. According to research completed by Baker and Thompson (2022), social skills may be taught. 95% of learners are capable of

mastering a topic or skill if given enough time and the right kinds of assistance. Soft skills may be learned through both formal education and self-education. The issue with the classroom training technique is that learners frequently revert to their old habits and routines of behaviour and the information and abilities they have learned are not translated to the workplace (Ibrahim, 2017).

Learner involvement and confidence in developing soft skills are important factors to take into account. To be free to participate in life beyond school without restrictions, learners must set the stage for larger collaborations, become much more engaged in their learning, and create the optimal environment. As a result, instructors would benefit from knowing how learners feel about the issue in order to find meaningful and productive methods to convey its importance and begin setting up procedures so that learners understand and take responsibility for the required adjustments.

The labour market of the C21st has experienced great transformations, and soft skills are required in every industry domain; yet employers regularly remark that recently graduated learners are lacking in these soft skills. Even though the importance of these skills is increasingly acknowledged, they aren't always cultivated or given top priority. Secondary school learners' lack of soft skills may have a severe impact on their academic achievement, employment prospects, and individual well-being. Establishing a link between the soft skills that employer's value and those that learners graduate with is essential. These changes in perspective examine the significance of what were once thought of as "soft skills," and moving ahead, these abilities are no longer going to be classified as "soft"; rather, they are going to become elements of achievement more and more. To be successful on the international stage, learner development must advance. According to Patacsil and Tablatin (2017), developing learners into the workforce that industries

will require in the years to come should be a collaborative effort between learners, educational institutions, and the business sector.

There is an obvious cost that comes with doing nothing. Learners who lack soft skills might have difficulty academically to meet the expectations of higher educational institutions (Mwita et al, 2023), such as autonomous study, analytical thinking, and investigation. They might additionally find it difficult to complete tasks, participate in lectures, and collaborate in teams. They may also be less motivated, less confident, and less satisfied with their learning outcomes. Learners who lack soft skills may have difficulty getting and retaining a job in today's dynamic and changing labour market (Singh Dubey et al, 2022). They may also struggle to adjust to new work settings, cultures, and technology. They might additionally have poorer levels of efficiency, inventiveness, and job quality. They could also have fewer prospects for advancement and growth in their careers. Learners who lack soft skills may struggle with their psychological and social well-being (Ellena et al, 2021; Saman,Wirawan, 2024). They may struggle to build and sustain connections that involve their close companions and coworkers. They may also struggle to manage and express their emotions in suitable ways. In addition, they may have reduced self-esteem, contentment, and perseverance.

Failure to fulfil the skills needs of the new technology era might jeopardise 11.5 trillion dollars in potential GDP growth over the next decade across G20 nations (Zahidi, 2020). The human cost is far greater. Consequently, irrespective of the field in which individuals are employed, soft skills are exceedingly necessary for success; and soft skills are widely sought after by recruiters as they firmly believe these abilities are required in order to offer more effective performance on the job (Ibrahim, 2017).

Researchers discovered that the primary reasons for the unsuccessful acquisition of soft skills were large class sizes and academic focus coupled with inadequate instruction duration (Tang, 2020). One other expected rationale of soft skills deficits among learners in secondary schools is a discrepancy between the curriculum and the expectations of the C21st. The educational programme may excessively concentrate on topic knowledge and mental capacities like literacy and numeracy while neglecting the acquisition of soft skills like perseverance and creativity. Furthermore, the curriculum may be overly rigorous and standardised, with little flexibility and diversity that allows learners to pursue their talents and interests. Additionally, the curriculum may be overly reliant on conventional approaches of teaching and evaluation, such as lectures and examinations. It may need more creative and engaging alternatives, such as project-based learning and peer-to-peer feedback.

Another significant reason for secondary school soft skill learners gaps is a shortage of exposure to and engagement in extracurricular activities such as athletics, performing arts, and societies (Nawaz et al, 2024; Wang et al, 2024). Other extracurricular pursuits can help learners develop and practise soft skills such as collaboration, management, innovation, and self-regulation. However, owing to many hurdles such as expenses, accessibility, location, travel, time, parental backing, and social pressure, not all learners have comparable access to and involvement in extracurricular activities. Furthermore, certain learners may be unaware of or uninterested in the benefits of extracurricular activities for soft skill development (Fakhretdinova et al, 2021; Norman, 2023).

The effect of digital technology, such as cell phones, social networking sites, and online gaming, is a further likely rationale of soft skills disparities among learners in secondary schools. Digital technology may have beneficial as well as adverse impacts on learners' soft skill

development (Medvedeva et al, 2022). On one hand, digital technology can improve learners' interaction, collaboration, imaginative thinking, problem-solving, and adaptation abilities by allowing them to obtain knowledge, interact with others, express themselves, discover novel concepts, and manage transition. Digital technologies, on the other hand, can impair learners' interaction, teamwork, inventiveness, problem-solving, and adaptive abilities through decreasing their capacity for focus, diverting their attention from their assignments, separating them from other individuals, restricting their creative abilities, and rendering them reliant upon devices.

If it were feasible, parents and guardians would be primary instructors in educating adolescents at home in order to instil these soft skills. However, the educational institution remains responsible. As a result, institutions must successfully include soft skills instruction as a component of their curricula. This improves learners' educational achievement and ensures that they are successful in their preferred vocations (Obilar, 2019). It is worth noting that understanding soft skills will not make decisions related to business any simpler; in fact, they will grow more challenging; however, when soft skills become a component of the toolkit, individuals may enhance decision-making by taking a broader perspective of the consequences, both in immediate terms as well as the long run (Christensen and Knezek, 2020).

There are multiple viable approaches to addressing soft skills shortages in learners in secondary schools that may be adopted by various stakeholders such as educators, legislators, parental figures, and learners directly.

Through curriculum design and pedagogical approaches, educators may play an important role in cultivating and evaluating learners' soft skills (Matrinez, 2022; Zhigitbekova et al, 2024). They may include soft skills in the subject matter and goals of their instruction, aligning them with C21st norms and demands. Instructors can also employ creative and engaging instruction and

evaluation strategies that promote learners' interest, imagination, cooperation, problem-solving, flexibility, and emotional intelligence. Project-based learning, gamification, simulation, and peer-to-peer feedback are a few instances of such methods.

Learners may play an important role in developing and showing soft skills via their attitudes and behaviours (Feraco et al, 2022; Lamri, Lubart, 2023). They can look for and take advantage of available chances to develop and practise soft skills, including engaging in groups, assisting with mentoring or enrolling in online programmes. They can additionally reflect on and analyse their own soft skills capabilities and shortcomings and create objectives and methods to develop them. They can also use portfolios, presentations, or endorsements to demonstrate and share their soft skills with others, such as instructors, companies, and colleagues.

Notwithstanding the reality that there is an indication of widespread agreement and acceptance among academic and industrial experts about the importance of transferred knowledge, it suggests that managers, educational providers, and adolescents are unaware of each other's viewpoints. They exist in opposing dimensions, and it continues to be stated that throughout academic pursuits, adolescents frequently do not acquire an adequate repertoire that encompasses broad scale abilities. The first step in developing any soft skills is self-awareness and understanding the way other people view them (Carden et al, 2022; KOPHICHKO, 2023). This enables all involved stakeholders to be open to feedback and participate in purposeful development.

## **The progression of soft skills perceptions**

### ***Educational institutions***

Secondary school instructors are individuals tasked with imparting knowledge and preparing learners to make subsequent academic and career choices. As a result, they must have a firm awareness of the soft skills required for both their own and their learners' employability and achievement in the C21st. In accordance with their own encounters, views, and practises, secondary school instructors have varying viewpoints on soft skills and their significance for employment prospects. The following are some of the most prevalent concepts that surface in contemporary literature.

While they have become cognizant of the ever-evolving requirements and demands of the international marketplace and society as a whole, the majority of secondary school instructors see the significance and importance of soft skills for their learners' future academic and professional development. They also recognise that soft skills may help them advance professionally and operate better as educators (Bartel, 2018; Ağçam and Doğan, 2021; Sanders, 2023).

According to The Economist, however, the educational framework of "lecturing, cramming, and examination" has remained unchanged for generations. Still, educational institutions must evolve to meet societal evolving requirements by enhancing their "resources, challenges, and support relating to graduate identity and self-perception of employability, if graduates are to remain relevant in rapidly changing labour landscapes".

Sin and Neave (2016) emphasised the importance of institutions of learning in equipping learners for the present market for employment by building "ready-for-work" capabilities.

Learning institutions must provide programmes that proactively motivate learners to learn and improve soft skills (Succi and Canovi, 2019). Educational institutions appear to have focused mostly on the acquisition of learners' hard skills (Vieilandie, 2024). As a result, a range of interested parties have placed emphasis on educational institutions to place a greater focus on improving the soft skills of learners (Sin and Neave, 2016).

Learners are not considered equipped for their intended purpose, according to some (Sin and Neave, 2016), since educational institutions emphasise "too rigidly on academically oriented pedagogy and not enough on applied learning and functional skills". Despite this, instructors are increasingly expected to create and use instructional methods to assist learners in acquiring transferrable abilities across the course of their education (Reay and Ball, 2020; Williams and Smith, 2021). Conventional programmes and instructional methodologies are perhaps weak in transmitting the necessary soft skills to learners since most use teacher-centred techniques (Sulaiman et al, 2021; Bremner et al, 2022), where the instructor is the dispenser of knowledge and learners function as passive vessels (Ibrahim, 2017). Further to this, according to the findings of Succi and Canovi (2019), educational institutions neither successfully convey the importance of acquiring soft skills to learners nor appropriately equip them for the labour market. These outcomes are consistent with Andrews and Higson's (2008) research investigating the opinions of learners and organisations on career readiness for graduates.

Nevertheless, it has been suggested that the learners' difficulty in transferring instruction may be related not just to the instruction strategy but also to the approach to learning ingrained in the instructional technique (Chew, Cerbin, 2021). Developing values and social competencies is only feasible if instructors obtain the necessary information and abilities (Wijaya et al, 2023).

Several instructors at secondary schools, nevertheless, might encounter difficulties in cultivating and evaluating both their personal and their learners' soft skills owing to a variety of variables including an absence of sufficient instruction, supplies, support, and acknowledgment; an inconsistency between the educational programme and C21st skills; the complexity in quantifying and illustrating soft skills; and the impact of technological advances on learners' behaviour and collaboration (Bartel, 2018; Green-Weir, Anderson and Carpenter, 2021; Sanders, 2023). As a result, some secondary school instructors might utilise different approaches and techniques to incorporate soft skills into their instructional and educational processes, such as employing imaginative and interactive approaches to instruction and evaluation, such as project-based learning, gamification, simulation, and peer-to-peer feedback; engaging with professional growth initiatives and collaborations which concentrate on soft skills instruction; and joining forces with other interested parties, such as policymakers (Bartel, 2018; Green-Weir, Anderson and Carpenter, 2021; Sanders, 2023).

According to the findings by Tang (2019), collaboration and lifelong learning skills were the most crucial skills to employers. Furthermore, the research results suggested that significant parts of soft skill acquisition are: 1. the provision of efficient and quality instruction; 2. professional growth and enhancement; and 3. regulating abilities of learners (Tang, 2019).

According to Rohm et al. (2021), one strategy for supporting learners in acquiring soft skills is to include real-world encounters in the school's instruction. Personal experiences involving soft skills growth include learner participation in constructivism and connectivism frameworks (AlAfnan, Dishari, 2024; Pandya et al, 2024), experiential learning activities (Johnson and Smith, 2021), and mentoring programmes. Tang (2020) agreed, suggesting that a multifaceted approach will increase the incorporation of soft skills into course design. The acquisition of soft

skills through the course of education and learning cannot be considered an easy task, however the payoff is certainly worthwhile the time and effort required to ready learners for their futures (Fawcett et al, 2023).

As Annan (2023) considered the merits and downsides of specialised non-technical courses, the primary concern was the capacity to attract qualified instructors possessing the necessary competencies. A further worry identified by the statistical assessment and corroborated by Remedios (2012) was that certain instructors may struggle with soft skills. For instance, while some instructors claimed that existing curricula prioritised communication skills, data analysis revealed that abilities to communicate remained particularly weak in learners. The research available reinforces the notion that because learners had a poor understanding of soft skills, there was a need for a creative technique to increase soft skill absorption. To propose a study that supports the notion of incorporating or combining soft skills into existing hard skills curriculum for learners is to reinvent the wheel. Furthermore, experts believe that substantial work will be required to review and modify existing hard skill courses (Poláková et al, 2023). As a result, other approaches to improving soft skills should be explored. Furthermore, as Remedios (2012) noted, incorporating soft skills throughout the acquisition of hard skills necessitates an ideal style of instruction, and numerous instructors are confused as to who is responsible for assisting learners in developing soft skills. Remedios went on to say that, while combining soft and hard skills training is a great idea, the already saturated curriculum leaves little room to develop and stress soft skills. Makasiranondh et al (2011), in support of Remedios, stated that one disadvantage of utilising a technical context is a curricular limitation. Remedios (2012) backed up this idea of a coordinated strategy from all stakeholders in improving soft skills in learners. Employers and educational institutions are required to work together to assess the extent to which learners

demonstrate necessary soft employability skills prior to the end of secondary school (Asefer, Abidin, 2021; Young, Rooney, 2023).

To achieve success, many people believe that we must all become highly technological or scientific experts. While individuals will be required to become proficient with technological advances, there is also a rising requirement for individuals to gain specialised abilities for how they communicate with those around them. These include abilities linked to specialised sales, human resources, care, and education professions, as well as innovation, collaboration, and relationship dynamics.

Job preparation classes are a particular approach that use a purposeful and explicit manner of training soft skills (Ragusa et al, 2022). During the research of texts, it was discovered that most authors approached professional development in the context of education from the viewpoint of the instructor, whereas there is a dearth of material on professional development for learners.

Davis and Nguyen (2021), as well as Zhang and Nguyen (2022), claimed that a consolidated strategy may be used to teach soft skills. Furthermore, Makasiranondh, Maj, and Veal (2011) pointed out that soft skills should be delivered in an in-person environment using a combination of an integrated form or independent courses.

In a comparable manner Manasia et al (2021) suggested that educational institutions incorporate interpersonal interaction, organisation of time, choice-making, and various other soft skills into their curricula and establish techniques for assessing these soft skills.

Learners' ability to prioritise their time, ability to solve problems, interpersonal abilities, motivation to work, diligence, and eagerness to study all have a significant impact on their academic accomplishment. It was proposed, among other things, that governments, education administrators, and all interested parties make certain the acquisition of soft skills is an integral

part of the school's educational programme in order to improve the academic performance of learners and assure the availability of desired career paths (Obilar, 2019).

While the integrated curriculum was advocated in the research (Davis, Nguyen, 2021; Zhang and Nguyen, 2022), six of the seven employers surveyed suggested a straightforward restorative programme. In the long run, using an integrated curriculum will serve as an alternate strategy. "You have to have a lot of buy in and it takes a lot of giving from the teachers and the leadership to get it". Dannemiller (2019) stress that educational institutions focused on a plethora of student data and applauded teachers who were adapting innovative and effective instructional practices in response to it. These teachers then became role models for their peers and were expected to mentor their colleagues in their respective teams.

Moreover, there is an emphasis on the premise that people do what you inspect, and not what you expect (Drucker, 2020), suggesting that there should perhaps be measures in place to track the necessary developments.

### **Zimbabwean private secondary school instructor perceptions and their roles in the development process**

Duckworth (2020) carried out a study titled "Exploring The Importance of Soft Skills As Perceived By Zimbabwean Private Secondary School Teachers: A Gap Analysis" to determine the degree to which academic achievement outcomes must change in order to guarantee employability of school leavers, both locally and internationally, and whether educational institutions are willing to make the necessary modifications. The investigation uncovered the subsequent information concerning the regional opinions of educators which will become relevant to this research study.

The research findings in Zimbabwean private secondary schools are presented here.

The ages of instructors in the general population surveyed varied from 25 to 68. The average age of the entire group that took part was discovered to be 42 years old. This considerably impacts instructors' engagement with the inclusion of soft skills and, as a result, how they are acquainted with the undertaking.

This may be supported by looking at how Cambridge International (CI), the examining body used by Zimbabwean private secondary schools, approaches soft skills. In 2011, CI released a Cambridge learner qualities advancement guidance for institutions in response to the inquiry, "What are the learning habits students need to be successful in school, higher education, the workplace, and life in general?" In addition, CI published a piece titled "Broadening the Curriculum" in their Outlook publication (2019, Issue 32, p.16), presenting a curriculum designed to reflect contemporary society while embracing the addition of a number of subject options at various levels of education thought to provide the basis for acquiring contemporary C21st skills. These subjects comprised theatre at AS and A Level, as well as art and design, computer literacy, music, and physical education at elementary and lower secondary levels. CI is additionally currently implementing Global Perspectives at the elementary, lower secondary, and upper secondary levels, which has rapidly gained acceptance and is consistently praised for its student-centred approach. However, since these had been relatively recent advancements, occurring within the last 11 years, instructors in Zimbabwe aged 25-35 (34% of respondents) might represent the sole demographic that had had some kind of experience with soft skills incorporation at some point in their careers, although this cannot be altogether guaranteed. Despite these heightened expectations of competence and expertise, 83% of those surveyed in this age group believed they would want further instruction to feel competent.

While older instructors may allow for an expectation of expertise, they are extraordinarily rigid in their methods of instruction and ideas, and they are extremely resistant to modifications. Younger instructors might not possess comparable degrees of expertise and engagement to the profession of teaching as older instructors, but they had been better able to evolve and embrace changes as a component of their own educational journeys.

The soft skills investigated in the study effort were rated as "Very Important" with a mean rating of 4.52 out of 5.00. The most significant soft skills traits were assessed to be Problem Solving and Critical Thinking, with a mean average of 4.81, and Creativity, with a mean average of 4.24. The impression of soft skill qualities does not differ much throughout ages and is found to be relevant regardless of the analysed topic offers. The instructors were additionally asked about the amount of development of these same abilities at the Upper 6 (school leaving) level, which highlights the extent to which secondary education is important. School learners at that stage were believed to be achieving the ten stated soft skill traits with varying degrees of success, but with an overall mean of 2.88 out of 5.00.

96% of those surveyed said they thought Zimbabwe had a skills gap that needed to be addressed, which supported these deficits.

A large proportion of answering instructors (62%) agreed with Karoly's (2021) assertion that soft skills are acquired through teaching and learning regardless of a person's personality. This means that instructors as well as learners must integrate these skills, so it's critical that everyone is informed and accepting of their roles. This viewpoint is consistent with assertions put forward by Schultz (2008), who states that character modifications can occur if suitable guidance is offered as well as learners implementing the required commitment in order to improve their skill standings, especially if, in the future, these skill sets are going to sustain their occupations and livelihood.

Another 37% stated that they represent abilities that a person had internalised and that may be improved via the process of learning and instruction. The concern then becomes how they may be taught to learners within the educational system.

According to 75% of the participating instructors, there needs to be material in the curriculum meant to transmit these abilities that directs the instructor's understanding and readiness to convey these skills.

Instructors were subsequently prompted to indicate any additional soft skills they believed were important for achievement in the current industry. There were 15 more skills that were recognised. The capacity to take the initiative (16%) and lateral thinking (12%) were the most commonly reported, while negotiating abilities (3%) and multilingualism (1%) were the least frequently mentioned.

According to Gordon (2021), the responding instructors' lesson delivery strategies varied. Discussion was particularly prevalent (27%) among instructors who responded, subsequently followed by demonstration (25%) and problem-solving (22%). Discussion was commonly used across all ages and across all topic offers evaluated. Researchers warn against the use of discussion, claiming that "Fisheye Syndrome" occurs when just a handful of learners take an active role, leaving the remainder of the learners, whether reserved, uncertain of their understanding, or insecure and not having self-confidence, simply listening silently, thereby creating the appearance of an interactive exchange by concentrating on a chosen few individuals who are confident and loud-spoken. As an approach that involves talking "at" pupils, lecture had not been proved to foster soft skill qualities.

The remaining instructional techniques were mostly provided by Mathematics, Practical subject offerings, and Science instructors. One might contend that the conventional lesson delivery

approaches with the use of behaviourism teaching theories were not shown to be effective throughout the subject offerings, and that instructional convictions are required to be brought to light and instructors nurtured with contemporary pedagogical methods, particularly considering the median age of the instructors evaluated (42) which could suggest that the vast majority of instructors lack training in contemporary techniques and concepts.

The most frequent outcome goal mentioned by instructors is for learners to attain excellent grades through topic mastery (26%) and the development of skills necessary for future careers (21%). It is worth noticing that, of the objectives indicated, critical thinking was the only talent related to the initial list acknowledged at all by 4% of those surveyed. Continuing this pattern of inquiry, instructors were pressed about their attempts to convey any of the previously identified ten talents. Problem solving and critical thinking were the most listed skills, accounting for 24% of all replies. Presumably there is a link between the acquisition of soft skills and the ones that teachers consciously try to instil, such as critical thinking.

However, the fact that just one of ten abilities regarded highly crucial for future achievement is intentionally taught explains why there is such a large gap around the significance that they are believed to have and just how much growth they require. Remarkably, while critical thinking constitutes the talent that instructors had identified as the one in ten that they aim to instil, it is also the skill with the highest discrepancy between how essential it is and how much growth it required (1.95). If there is a genuine desire to acquire skills essential for the twenty-first century, the notion of a skills gap is called into question.

This can potentially be addressed by looking at instructor perspective regarding instruction being made accessible to them. 87% of those surveyed responded that receiving instruction would be not only advantageous, but also critical for supporting them in teaching these abilities, which

might indicate a knowledge gap of their own. Once more, based around their age groups, an estimate may be formed about the sort of training instructors had had. A lower proportion (34%) of participating instructors had finished their instructor's training, and therefore were more likely to be using more modern methods of instruction and learning within the previous 5 to 15 years, however even this may be regarded too recent for the adoption of such a contemporary philosophy.

However, the findings might be interpreted as a good step forward towards determining potential solutions to the present skills gap. Only 13% of those surveyed said they were not interested in retraining or believed it would prove ineffective for a variety of reasons. These explanations comprised a shortage of resources in the school system in order to undertake instruction (50%), a strong opposition to reform (33%), the belief that practise and theory are too dissimilar for instruction to be successful (13%), and a fear that regulation will stifle teacher innovation (4%). These views were mostly expressed by those between the ages of 46 and 50, and primarily in the areas of Mathematics and Heads. However, a shortage of funding had been seen as a disadvantage by the Heads who oversee financing. The substantial degree of aversion to change was supported by a majority of 25–35-year-olds across all topic offers. One can inquire if this is a view based on an individual's experiences.

Gordon (2021) expresses a strong view that the soft skills implanted in learners are greatly dependent on the abilities and class delivery techniques of instructors, as well as the extracurricular events offered in institutions. According to this viewpoint, instructors owe it to their learners to develop a thorough grasp of the subject matter, which, in turn, had a positive and significant impact on their academic achievement. This leads the investigators on Gordon's side to suggest that the most effective manner to integrate soft skills into contemporary educational institutions is by means of professional development programmes that guide instructors through the process of

instruction and learning, and in this instance, through the application of connectivism as well as social and cognitive constructivism learning theories. The concept had been backed by Ngang (2015), who indicates two ways of integrating soft skills into the educational process: 1) by means of independent topics; or 2) by incorporating the skills into existing educational institutions courses of study, which will additionally require instructors to grow increasingly competent in the acquisition of these skills.

The participating instructors indicated a substantial preference for interactive professional development as an instructional approach that could be desired and regarded as valuable and pertinent (63%), and this preference was shared across all age groups and topic offers. 21% of instructors responded to industry speaker seminars, which was repeated across all age groups and topic offers. The other training technique alternatives were provided less frequently and became more age and subject specific. Internally oriented instruction (7%) was most popular among 36–45-year-olds and 56-65+ year olds in language departments. Discussing concepts with fellow instructors (5%) was recognised primarily by Geography department 25–35-year-olds. Lastly, 25–35-year-olds from the Geography department gave proposals for exercises that were included in each topic syllabi prepared and offered by curriculum creators.

Following that, for the purpose of gauging attitudes about present curriculum material and evaluation processes, participants were asked to indicate how supportive they would feel if modifications were implemented. All 68 (100%) participants answered they would be in favour of the curriculum and evaluation technique improvements and commit to doing their share to see these modifications implemented. This demonstrates a strong desire, in addition to a readiness to attend training, to streamline the educational system and begin the lengthy process of correcting the gaps.

The participants were tasked to determine what modifications to the present curricula and educational programmes they believe are essential as a starting point in establishing what improvements are thought to be required. There is widespread agreement (34%) throughout age groups and topic offers that more broadly applicable practical subject programmes with current significance which may additionally accommodate less capable academic learners are needed. 19% believe that learners are overburdened by the sheer number of subjects that they must take in order to graduate, so an overall decrease in the quantity of subjects written by every learner was determined to be essential, particularly in areas that are considered insignificant to each learners future career goals. 12% agreed with the previous two groups but added that more work-related topic options were needed to be made accessible for learners in addition to the typical range of courses. An additional 12% agree that having elective brief practical skill development programmes available via school that allow learners to finish at their own leisure, including controlling stress, fundamental legislation, photography, and so on, is an appropriate way to proceed. It is worth noting that 11% of those surveyed say that no modifications are required and that the present curriculum is perfect as is, and that possibly what is needed is a mix of education for educators and an alteration in evaluation procedures. The remaining modified curriculum alternatives, including a greater emphasis on entrepreneurship (3%), practical technologically centred activities (3%), the possibility to begin practical courses in lower grades at the foundational level (3%), a rise in the quantity of foreign languages acquired and practised (1%), an introduction to hybrid-learning (1%), as well as more significant arts subjects (1%), had not been extensively opted for. The amount of material of a syllabus varies based on the phase of secondary school at which a learner learns. Forms 1 and 2 finish the junior internal curriculum and had 5 terms (12 weeks per term) from the commencement of those syllabi, plus 1 extra term at the conclusion of

the two-year time period in which assessments are conducted. Form 3 to 4 students who carry out and completing CI examinations had the identical amount of time. Lower sixth form learners had only two terms before a third of their assessments, while Upper sixth form learners had the same. Instructors as well as learners had been subjected to rote methods of learning and memory focused assessment systems that had shaped their personalities, so breaking these established routines will not be a simple or rapid exercise. As a result, there is unlikely to be enough time to add stand-alone subject offers in order to instil soft skills.

Instructors, as evidenced by the results mentioned above, might favour an integrated framework for education and instruction over independent initiatives, indicating more towards the use of the previously recommended modernised theoretical models of learning and instruction.

The next phase in establishing what modifications are considered to be required, instructors were given the opportunity to describe what adjustments they were inclined to see implemented to the ways they conduct evaluation, which is crucial in aiding in bridging the gap in skills and that there needs to be a departure from the present concentration on mastery of subject matter if the development of expansive interpersonal competencies and soft skills are to be achieved, resulting one to query, not just the course material and delivery, but also the methods used for evaluation. According to the Brookings Institute, there is much uncertainty about what and how soft skills are supposed to be introduced in the first place.

This renders it more challenging for instructors at all levels to understand how to include these abilities into established syllabi, as well as the curriculum as entirety, which had a main objective of developing and assessing hard skills. According to William (2011), evaluation is "central to learning." Evaluation enables learners to assess their current competencies, and it may also be used to establish future learning conditions or orientations. Broadfoot et al (as cited in

William, 2011) broadens this, stating that the use of evaluation to enhance education is dependent on providing helpful feedback, which includes learners assessing their educational achievement using assessments to determine effective instructional techniques, recognising the impact of evaluation on encouragement and self-esteem, and learners being involved consistently in self-evaluation.

The usage of these emerging methods of evaluation where the learner is more actively involved in the process of learning will need the use of soft skills traits. Development of, and reporting on, the growth of these C21st abilities must become an essential aspect of daily instructional practise in such a setting. In traditional cultures, the outcome had been observed in more instructional pedagogical techniques where learners are prepared for tests while instructors become concerned about accountability for school performance. Making investigation tasks (both independently prepared and through collaborative effort) an element of the overall evaluation, according to 40% of instructors, would be acceptable for offering an opportunity to evaluate how well learners had discovered verification of these extremely essential abilities. 22% indicated that increasing the number of practical assessments across all disciplines would be good and would aid in not just assessing but also attaining several of the required soft skills. 12% of instructors agree on the use of continuous assessment to divert attention away from rote learning techniques and mastery of information and memory. 9% advocated for an increase in the number of oral assessments, as well as for oral assessments to incorporate presentations by learners in addition to question and response exchanges. Finally, 4% of instructors agreed that if practical tests in the topic area were not practicable for any reason, there would need to be an increase in "alternative to practical" assessments that could be made accessible to a broader range of subject offers outside the discipline of science.

The current study's findings will be triangulated with the literature review and the previously collected information from the region to assess directly and clearly what changes in perception of importance and acquisition have occurred as a result of digital and hybrid learning experiences. The beneficial impacts can perhaps be regarded in the context of discovering techniques and paths that incorporate these characteristics in a modernised instructional setting with contemporary instructional and learning theories, namely connectivism and social and cognitive constructivism. It is important to note that the soft skills that instructors were questioned on are the same list of 10 soft skills to be further evaluated with instructors and learners in this research study for consistency's sake.

### *Learner perceptions on soft skills and their roles in the development process*

It is highly advised that learners' job readiness nowadays is largely based on the talents they believe they hold (Hoque et al, 2023). While researchers have discovered that many learners lack soft skills, some educational institutions incorporate these abilities into standard curricula. Nevertheless, in order to operate productively on the ground, learners might require additional instruction (Goh and Williams, 2021; Heimler, 2010). According to Heimler (2010), despite the increasing recognition that soft skills are important for effective retained employment and advancement in one's career, some learners think that extra soft-skills instruction is unnecessary (Williams, 2015; Tang, 2018; Mitsea, Drigas and Mantas, 2021). Orner (2009), found a similar pattern: individuals completed attendance at soft skill training courses, but the workshops had no positive influence on their willingness to learn soft skills. This has since been reinforced by Maren et al (2021) and Betti et al (2022).

While learners observe a limited association between their work ethic and professional development, instructors and HR executives recognise that work ethic is a valued trait for successful employment, according to Heimler (2010). Heimler (2010) also stated that a proper work ethic must be instilled in learners at a young age because it can be challenging to change over time. Soft skills may be offered to learners regardless of whether they are incorporated into the curriculum or taught individually (Betti et al, 2022). Baker and Thompson (2022) found that communication abilities can be taught in their studies. In a nutshell, it comes down to how active and engaged learners are in their educational experience and can be summarised by giving five distinct principles for contribution:

1. Make it interesting so that learning occurs;
2. Establish patterns so every individual understands what to anticipate;
3. Keep learners involved so that they avoid conflict;
4. Make it authentic so that learners remain intrigued;
5. When all parties work together, every person achieves more.

(Blackburn, Jarvis 2010)

According to Nicholas et al. (2019), learners who feel that they are able to demonstrate outstanding achievement are more inclined to pick demanding tasks, perform diligently, and persevere when challenges arise. It is thus critical to investigate the perspectives of learners and views of soft skills and their degrees of development. In accordance with the findings of the study done, learners in secondary school believe that soft skills are vital for their future job prospects and professional growth. They recognise that soft skills are highly regarded by companies and could assist them excel at work. Still, they might feel dissatisfied with their degree of soft skills and may experience difficulties in gaining and exhibiting them (Nicholas et al, 2019).

On the one hand, Majid et al. (2019) conducted a study of graduate students and observed that they prioritised soft skills such as a positive mental state, verbal interaction, motivation to succeed and autonomy, and problem-solving abilities for job opportunities and career progression. They also discovered that while companies expected newly graduated students to have these abilities, they were frequently disappointed with their standard of performance.

Feraco et al. (2023) went on to claim that soft skills like perseverance, inquisitive nature, perseverance, discipline, and time management are greater predictors of achievement than the intelligence score. Majid et al. (2019) discovered that learners ranked soft skills such as communication, cooperation, management, interpersonal abilities, and inventiveness as particularly significant when it came to their academic and professional lives. They also discovered adolescents learned soft skills mostly from family, peers, instructors, and extracurricular activities. In a comparable manner De Guzman et al. (2020) investigated the views of senior high school learners regarding their abilities as job applicants in the field of humanities and social sciences and discovered that interpersonal interaction, solving issues, creativity, autonomy in learning, and mathematical abilities were identified as among the most significant groups of abilities related to employment. They additionally discovered that adolescents mostly received these abilities via their instructors, parents, other children, and media sources.

On the other hand, different research on what employers want from learners nowadays frequently contradicts the learners' view (Seetha, 2014). Hard skills were formerly viewed as the sole kind of talent demanded of workers. Several recent graduates in Seetha's (2014) survey recognised hard core business abilities as an essential component of their repertoire. Yet, while several of the respondents felt exceedingly competent in terms of discipline-specific talents, they

viewed themselves as weak in presentation skills. Furthermore, learners believed they had not gained enough competence or experience in giving oral presentations (Andrews, 2008). This is mostly due to learners' lack of understanding of the need of strong soft skill abilities in the workplace.

In addition to this, numerous young staff members have been missing out on crucial face-to-face encounters as a result of their dependence on communication via the Internet, failing to gain an understanding of how to communicate in a professional manner, listen carefully, and understand another individual's expressions and body language. Learners fail to recognise the same significance in developing soft abilities as their professors do, yet once learners understand the benefits and influence on their lives, they become more ready to engage (Robinson & Haynes, 2011). The research has brought up a vital issue about how much accountability for job readiness and the acquisition of transferable skills is personalised (Sin and Neave, 2016; Rajaram, 2023; Enstroem, Schmaltz, 2024). Professionals have traditionally been in charge of their individual professional growth and education. This was possible when employment and duties stayed mostly unaltered or progressed at a modest enough pace to allow employees to adjust. That is no longer a reality in the C21st, where rapid technological advancements, shifting workforce priorities, economic instability, and political upheaval need a far more dynamic business approach (Verhoff, 2022). 77% of workforce members are eager to learn new skills, and 74% regard training as an independent duty. Creating a new skills programme might be stressful, but it is critical to start making little adjustments right away (McLeod, Dulsky, 2021). This is especially important when teaching entry-level abilities with no prior experience. While these recruits are critical to reducing the skills gap, it may take them up to two years to catch up to other employees in the same function

(Verhoff, 2022). As this study emphasises soft skills being gained in secondary school in order to minimise skills gaps in the job market later on, as well as placing pressure on learners to completely hone these abilities at the university level, one must ask, should learners accept themselves to be accountable regarding their employability? Personal accountability and dedication to improving these competencies have been emphasised by policymakers (Sin and Neave, 2016). In this case, educational institutions play a supportive role by raising the awareness of learners of labour-market needs and supporting them in gaining essential abilities (Williams and Smith, 2021; Nwakanma, 2024).

Succi and Canovi's (2019) observations also show significant disparities in organisations and the evaluations of learners of the value of soft and hard skills. When both of the groups were contrasted, substantial variations emerged. Interestingly enough, employers prioritise "professional ethics, adaptability to change, creativity and innovation, customer orientation, and teamwork," but learners prioritise contact networks and dispute resolution abilities. According to Seetha (2014) and Succi (2020), educational institutions must collaborate to raise the awareness of learners of the significance of soft skills while also guiding them to take personal accountability for acquiring and developing these necessary skills to be able to consistently adjust to changes in the job marketplace while enhancing their potential for employment. In today's professional and technological learning atmosphere, integrating the learning environment into industries is a continual call. Along with trade abilities, fundamental soft skills such as interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge, integrity, organisation, professional conduct, managing time, working together, and interpersonal interaction, amongst numerous others, dominate the demands of the modern workplace (McNamara, 2009). Organisations require "equipped for the future" specialists

from a system of education that has yet to catch up with contemporary industrial needs as the aims of innovation and flexibility change (McNamara, 2009; Terzieva et al, 2022).

It is thus vital to determine if soft-skills education programmes have been helpful in changing attitudes among learners at all. Wahyullah and Andriyanti (2019) evaluated pupils who benefited from participating in a soft skill bridging training programme. A few learners reported that they became more imaginative in certain circumstances, as well as more confident speaking in public, and they felt that they had the ability to address their difficulties. However, the investigator discovered multiple learners who were dissatisfied with the soft skill training programme. They claimed this programme was ineffective and an inefficient use of their time. Furthermore, many learners stated that they attended the programme just to meet graduation requirements. If learners weren't involved in this programme, they would be required to retake it to fulfil the needed sequence of soft skill bridging training criteria. What a few learners said casually piqued the researcher's interest in officially revealing what the learners thought of this soft skill training program.

This included the discovery of a variety of flaws in the execution of the supplied "Bridging Course for Soft Skills" at this juncture. These were connected to dull contents and presenters, unsatisfactory facilities, time constraints not affecting learners' soft skills, repetitive activities in the design, and expensive course costs. Secondly, learners were required to study soft skill resources and implement them in a single day.

Tsang (2010) also warns against thinking that learners would automatically absorb the soft skills the developers value throughout practise. Other scholars additionally cautioned against using

an unofficial or concealed curriculum strategy for demonstrating competence, arguing that an established programme of study emphasises the relevance of shared professional values and behaviours to learners (Peer and Schlabach, 2011; Johnson and Hammond, 2018).

Accepting the notion of "evolving professionals" implies that instructors seek to specifically incorporate professionalism into the course of study with the purpose of "supporting, influencing, motivating, and inspiring learners to become demonstrators of competence" (Peer and Schlabach, 2011). It is hoped to encourage vocational socialisation and aid learners in developing an effective professional persona that will strengthen them in a number of ways by specifically including content centred around developing soft skills at the start of their professional training program. Prior research revealed that early occupational socialisation promotes profound comprehension by demonstrating links and context to learners (Jiang et al, 2024). It fosters an awareness of affiliation and the development of an occupational identity, which may be a powerful motivator (Bowman and Dodge, 2011; Tsang, 2010).

A single participant in this investigation stated that they had not received any sort of formal soft skills instruction prior to taking part in this investigation. The findings of the pre-coursework assessment indicated that the majority of those taking part had an incorrect or insufficient grasp of what soft skills were and why soft skills are crucial. After completing the course materials, everyone who took part was capable of appropriately characterising the notion of soft skills and communicating the value of soft skills.

Many participants mentioned that acquiring knowledge about soft skills led to their own development. One learner, for instance, stated that the subject of confidence had a major influence

on them. When questioned what training programmes they believed they learnt the most from, participants gave an array of replies, with a recurring theme regarding consciousness and individual growth. Even the parts of the course that were less significant for them, according to a few individuals, were nevertheless beneficial.

Furthermore, Ramlan and Ngah (2015) discovered that abilities such as management of businesses, resolution of disputes, as well as time management are just some of the abilities that over 50% of those surveyed did not believe to have. This is most likely due to the fact that they have no exposure to such soft skills, for the reason that the courses covered in their study programme are largely technical in nature.

Over 50% of all respondents contended that soft skills are more difficult to acquire than technical knowledge. This is most likely owing to the characteristics of the subjects chosen by responders, which focuses on hard abilities rather than soft talents. When dealing with soft skills, learners discovered that they are tough to learn. Unless adolescents are involved in extracurricular activities, they may struggle to interact efficiently, collaborate with other individuals, be a role model, or resolve difficulties.

Only 61.3% of those surveyed said they had previously developed traits associated with leadership. It is most likely due to their active participation in extracurricular activities on or off the school's premises. The next soft skill they believe they have mastered is collaboration. A likely cause for the idea is a group task given by the instructor in the majority of the subjects undertaken. None of the respondents believed they already possessed writing abilities for business correspondence. This is undoubtedly due to learners and their lack of exposure to business

subjects. When asked about which soft skills which they believed needed to be improved, 94.7% of respondents identified negotiation skills, 81.3% identified critical thinking, and 76% identified routine knowledge as soft skills that need to be improved. These soft skills are seldom covered in the majority of secondary schooling curricula. As a consequence, learners could end up unable to develop these specific skills during their education.

### **Learner perceptions of digital and hybrid learning**

In a study conducted by Syauqi, Munadi and Triyono (2020) researching learner opinions on digital learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, several interesting findings were noted. With regard to the views of learners regarding the way their participation in acquiring understanding through the digital environment benefits them from elements of increased expertise, better efficiency and effectiveness, enhanced learning, and making it straightforward for them to learn, the findings show that 52.43% of respondents answered "disagree," and 39.58% stated "agree." This study suggests that the perspectives of learners with digital learning as an alternate learning paradigm did not have a significant impact on their understanding of the material. This study contradicts Kisanjara et al.'s (2017) belief that e-learning is good in boosting knowledge as well as abilities for efficacy, effectiveness in their education, and completing course activities rapidly (Kisanjara, Tossy, Sife, and Msanjila, 2017). These contributors also contend that a portion of the course material focuses on attaining techniques rather than soft skills. Furthermore, the instructor continues to disregard the targets that need to be reached while developing and preparing to learn. These outcomes are the result of the limited time available to create and arrange digital learning.

Cakrawati (2017) and Bizami et al (2023) assert that instructors need to be able to blend technology with material and pedagogy.

Further to this, the views of learners regarding the way the educational material is evaluated from the perspectives of being easy for them to comprehend and learn, the subject matter being neither overly difficult nor excessively simple, having the drive to complete tasks and learning materials, having sufficient time for reviewing the content, being in line with expectations, and material being laid out in vocabulary that is straightforward and simple to comprehend are discussed. The findings revealed that 46.66% of those surveyed agreed, while 43.39% disagreed. The findings imply that created and structured learner education resources are still not meeting the needs of learners, particularly at educational institutions that place a premium on mastery of skills in their respective disciplines. According to Al-alak and Alnawas (2011), learners that possess a good mindset towards technologies will embrace the usage of technological devices more readily. Furthermore, learners are engaged in acquiring knowledge that uses different forms, including audio, video, or other forms of technology that are meant to be more interesting and allow learners to react more effectively (Sun and Chen, 2016). The resource's reliability is an important variable since it affects the satisfaction of learners (Sun, Tsai, Chen, and Yeh, 2008; Aparicio, Bacao, and Oliveira, 2017; Ho et al, 2021). Furthermore, learners require several characteristics such as technological expertise, managing their time and organisation, and interactions with online technology (Joosten and Cusatis, 2020).

The usage of modern technology ought to culminate in enhanced learner educational outcomes so that learners continue to make use of platforms for learning online (Wu et al, 2022; Kalyani, 2024). The outcomes of this research contradict previous studies on

instructors, transferring knowledge, and instructors' material capacity to improve the quality of online digital training for learners.

According to the replies of the surveyed learners, a majority of these individuals believe that digital learning continues to be less efficient and in accordance with their expectations. The amount of learners' comments indicating disagreement demonstrates this. To be truly effective, both instructors and educational institutions must undergo development assessments and be thoroughly prepared for digital instruction. The enhancement is achieved by strengthening the instructor's competence to manage acquiring knowledge, learning resources, and knowledge transfer techniques in order to increase the understanding of learners, attitudes, and abilities. It would be worthwhile to investigate Zimbabwean private secondary school learners' impressions of soft skills and their development within digital and hybrid learning in order to identify and highlight positive aspects that could be used to further develop modern theoretical frameworks in local academic institutions.

### **Life-experiences and the perceptions and job market adaptations that followed**

Before the pandemic began, scarcely a day passed by without someone talking about how urgently organizations and academic institutions needed to transfer their activities to the virtual realm. Never has the phrase "adapt or die" appeared more pertinent (Orrell, Bishop and Hawkins, 2020). Following the declaration of a global pandemic in 2020, educational institutions have moved from in-person to distance learning, and then to hybrid delivery. This interruption impeded learners' development of both soft and hard skills. Through greater staff accessibility, there has been an increasing focus on soft skills advancement and growth, particularly focusing on those

that improve employment prospects, such as ingenuity, managerial skills, interpersonal skills, creativity, collaboration, ability to adapt, perseverance, managing one's time, organisation, self-drive, ability to perform well under stress, analytical skills and capacities for problem-solving, as well as organisational capacity (Brennan, 2023).

Nowadays, an increasing quantity of positions need prominent and refined soft skills as well as a certain degree of technological proficiency. The COVID-19 pandemic simply hastened the inevitable, and all stakeholders in education worldwide have had to continually keep up with several of the present accessible technologies and platforms. The pandemic not only had an impact on wellness and relationships with loved ones, but it also compelled society to adjust to new methods of doing business. Every employee confronted several problems on a daily basis, particularly in the medical and service sectors, in addition to those in manufacturing. Educators in the education sector are not considered immune. They have been obliged to explore and use new digital tools and strategies in the process of information transmission as a result of the pandemic and the ensuing closures (Pezer, 2021).

Despite remote employment being prevalent in many enterprises, it is not frequent in educational institutions, where contact teaching is preferred. Many problems confronted teaching professionals, including novel techniques of information delivery. Neither instructors nor learners were fully prepared for the sudden transformation in the educational and instructional setting, and the overall standard of education may have suffered as a result. It is critical to enhance understanding of the value of soft skills since collaboration, inventiveness, unity, and compassion have never been more vital or necessary (Kennedy et al, 2022; Allam, Raj, 2024).

Education is undergoing fast societal, political, economic, and technological transformation. As a result, educational institutions must be adaptable in order to deal with changing conditions and environments. Educational institutions and other educational facilities require a climate that is encouraging and favourable to further growth in global human resource competitiveness. As a result, it is impossible to deny that educational settings require synergy between instructors and the work environment in order to achieve ongoing advances in innovation and achievement (Novitasari et al, 2020).

Considering traditional methods of instruction had forfeited some of their efficacy in the online-learning paradigm, digital education made it necessary to create programmes for learning from a digital viewpoint in a very short amount of time. Most significantly, the modifications impacted disciplines focusing on the development of soft skills, such as interpersonal competencies, collaborating with peers, and people management. Another issue that has arisen as a result of the digitization of all parts of our life is the vast volume of readily accessible information. In this context, increasing learners' systemic thinking and improving their capacity to identify and apply knowledge has become a significant alternative to acquiring factual information (Volkov et al, 2022).

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions worldwide were compelled to adopt virtual and mixed educational designs, as well as substitute methods of instruction. (Bunakova, 2020; Khan et al, 2020; Tong et al, 2021). Even after the rigorous shutdowns, educational institutions were unable to completely get back to the former framework for learning; presumably they were deemed not to be acceptable, given the rapid development of new instructional practices to meet the changing circumstances of our time. At the same time, there

were numerous logical explanations why the process of education could not be restored. These causes were, primarily, the continuous tandem waves in which shutdowns were regarded as occurring on an ongoing basis while educational institutions had to maintain functional. For comparable reasoning, travelling abroad was still challenging for an extended period, and many significant institutions have international learners, a majority of whom were unable to make their way back to their institutions and resume full-time in-person education for many different reasons. This also impacted Zimbabwean private secondary schools which accommodate overseas pupils in boarding facilities.

The most crucial concept of the process of learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic was to preserve its viability in the midst of new obstacles (Khatun, Saadat, Ashraf and Taki, 2022). Without a question, the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the way learners were educated. Curriculum and individual subjects needed to be assessed to determine its relevance to the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to the viability of instruction in an atmosphere of hybrid learning.

Among the most pressing issues confronting educators in the contemporary classroom setting includes the development of learners' soft skills, encompassing interpersonal interaction, collaborative organisation, and the capacity to solve problems without consulting the general population for previously identified remedies (Siswanto, Prahani, and Suminar, 2020; Temnova, 2021; Shradhanjali, 2022). While this has remained a concern for some time now, these abilities have experienced substantial modifications, such as the ways of communicating with one another. During the lockdown phase, an individual's network of people with whom he or she may speak was confined to only their closest relatives; any additional communications in all spheres of life were made via electronic devices (Boboshko, 2020). Each of the above innovations, in some way,

affected adolescent social development and, as a result, schooling. The ability to respond to these changes establishes the quality of the process, which ultimately determines the significance of this inquiry.

At the outset of the C21st, many members of the international community realised that cognitive ability is a unique progressive component in the advancement of the modern world. Technology and learning are increasingly being regarded as main determinants of cognitive development (Stoyanova, 2021). According to Stoyanova's research, digital and hybrid learning are the most effective educational methods for fostering economic creativity. Digital instruction is a new type of instructional method that has emerged as a result of societal demands and advancements in current computing technologies. In actuality, this constitutes a complex collection of instructional tasks designed for a broad spectrum of learners and arranged using specialist computer and educational technologies (Stoyanova, 2021). Furthermore, Antón-Sancho et al. (2021) stated in their study that the global pandemic scenario has resulted in an approach of evaluation of the educational landscape with the aim of accomplishing the construction of high-performance technological environments that are attainable to every learner. Given the use of internet-based communication innovations, most experts today see digital instruction as an especially reliable approach, assuring the long-term sustainability and universality of the understanding achieved while retaining and developing the learner's particular cognitive processes (Abouhashem, 2021).

In accordance with a review of the available literature, researchers place a high value on the acquisition of soft skills in learners considered to be potential specialists (Antón-Sancho et al, 2021; Hirudayaraj, 2021; Sujová, 2021; Vergara-Rodrguez, 2022); nevertheless, finding papers

that describe this method from the perspective of a completely virtual learning environment can be difficult—and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the later surges, such an instructional practice constituted an urgent requirement.

It should be acknowledged that online and digital schooling existed prior to the pandemic (Navarro et al, 2021). By 2019, nearly all online and digital platforms utilised for instructional applications had already developed; these platforms offered both distance-learning courses as well as independent instruction in certain areas. Many educational institutions were already using systems like LMS Canvas or Moodle to organise the process of learning before the pandemic and are continuing to do so (Ochoa-Orihuel et al, 2020; Panda, 2020; Navarro et al, 2021). Universities, particularly, used these channels to distribute information needed for mastery of academic subjects, particular tasks, and limited-scope dialogue among instructors and learners. However, due to the pandemic, institutions were forced to entirely digitise their educational procedures. This necessitated the rapid adoption of innovative educational methodologies. The research provides insight into what is considered to be the greatest challenge emerging in a completely virtual variant of the learning process—particularly, the organisation of beneficial interactions between individuals in courses; this is considered to be one of the greatest adaptable abilities, in addition to difficulties in acquiring soft skills. Conversations among instructors about the abilities required for newly hired employees will undoubtedly continue when this group of people begin their work responsibilities in a digital age. To successfully combine the application of technological advances with an acquisition of soft skills, learners and employers must collaborate.

Many individuals throughout the world found the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown to be a tough and transformational event. It has had a variety of effects on their personal life, relationships,

job, schooling, medical care, and well-being. Learners were allegedly subjected to culture shock, impostor syndrome, isolation and loneliness, in addition to the challenges of studying online and adjusting to a new environment. According to reports, learners have realised the value of interpersonal interaction, self-motivation, and problem-solving abilities for academic achievement and personal growth.

Whilst digital and hybrid learning became essential at this point, learners would have had varied degrees of difficulties responding to the adjustments. They were said to have battled with a shortage of digital gadgets, internet access, and instructional resources. They also lacked their professors' and peers' social connection and feedback. Nonetheless, they allegedly learnt to be more self-sufficient, resourceful, and adaptable during the learning process. Through internet platforms, they also improved their communication, collaboration, and interpersonal abilities.

International learners were required to go back to their countries and finish their studies online. Time zone disparities, language limitations, cultural variances, and academic expectations were all obstacles. Learners additionally reported feeling homesick and estranged from friends and instructors. Learners in these circumstances learned to be more adaptive, self-regulated, and culturally sensitive in their educational setting. Through online assignments, they also improved their communication, cooperation, and problem-solving abilities.

These are only a few instances of how individual perspectives on soft skills may have shifted as a result of what they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. In the post-pandemic environment, soft skills are critical for dealing with uncertainty and change, preserving

productivity and creativity, building trust and engagement, and reaching personal and professional goals.

While, as previously stated, instructional and learning techniques have generally been focused on instructors, using largely lecture methods, this pattern is slowly shifting in the aftermath of the pandemic, and numerous instructors are now introducing group work. Even so, this "group work" centres primarily on reaching a goal, and therefore the manner in which the group managed its accomplishment may be immaterial (Davies, 2024).

Furthermore, implementing hybrid learning utilising systems for managing learning has not proved beneficial. Unless appropriately led, virtual organisation could improve the utilisation of learners' time, though may also decrease social interaction, which exercises their soft skills.

It is critical to mention that the COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the need of maintaining the instructional process in the face of new challenges (Khatun, Saadat, Ashraf and Taki, 2022). There can be not much question that the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on institutions. The overall curriculum along with specific topics, as well as the instructional approaches, must be revisited in order to assess their applicability in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic and to take into account the viability of guidance in a hybrid learning environment, especially within the context of soft skills acquisition.

The development of learners' soft skills, such as interpersonal interaction, group work organisation, and the ability to solve problems without referencing already published solutions, are perhaps the most essential difficulties in today's academic context (Siswanto, 2020;

Shradhanjali, 2022). Furthermore, these capacities have experienced major changes. Interpersonal communication skills, for example, have evolved tremendously. Individuals could only converse with their closest relatives during the lockdown; all other communications, in all aspects of life, were performed via digital gadgets (Boboshko, 2020). Each of these changes had an influence on education in some way. The success of adjusting to these changes defines the process's quality, which subsequently in turn establishes the investigation's relevancy.

Individual instructors' and institutions' expertise creates intellectual assets, which swiftly becomes a new emblem illustrating the economic significance of an institution. This is an updated worldview borrowed from the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The reliance on conventional productive resources such as buildings, constructions, land, and other tangible assets will no longer be a significant investment contribution in the future. Future productive and sustainable assets are intangible assets in the form of knowledge that the instructor possesses (Novitasari et al, 2020).

It is also worth noting that, in the aftermath of the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, changes in the educational systems would be accompanied by changes in the labour market.

Regardless of the reality that the world population is ageing, the median age in many nations is currently below twenty. Thousands of young people will join the job market throughout these "younger" economies over the course of the next ten years; it is critical to ensure they are prepared with the skills they will need to obtain jobs that even an undergraduate degree cannot offer. Although hard skills have historically been emphasised as the essential condition for career prospects, recent events have clearly demonstrated that technological talents alone do not ensure employability. Businesses are unanimous in their belief that young recruits need soft skills much

more than in previous years. Global development programmes include a soft skills curriculum to assist adolescents and instruction, as well as non-formal training programmes, but they lack two critical abilities for today (Belachew, 2020).

1. **Learn to learn** is the first skill. Learning to learn enables adolescents to swiftly acquire skills and information that will allow them to adapt to shifting circumstances and flourish. The expertise is especially vital when the COVID-19 pandemic creates drastic adjustments in accessible job options. When it comes to educational achievement, metacognition - organising and directing one's own educational steps, thoughts, and actions - accounts for 40%, but the majority of instructional processes do not prioritise these skills because they believe that learning is based on innate intelligence rather than developing one's own skills and habits.
2. **Learning how to differentiate** is the second skill. During the COVID-19 pandemic, adolescents are using internet-based information to make professional decisions. Healthy digital engagement skills are required for adolescents in order to study efficiently independently and prepare to be capable employees, executives, and innovators.

All adolescents, especially individuals representing economically disadvantaged backgrounds, can circumvent social signals that dictate which fields of study and incomes are beyond their reach if they are prepared with critical skills and innovative dispositions to seize available opportunities.

The abilities demand novel methods of understanding and affecting cognitive processes. To support adolescents in earning, instructors, educators, and curriculum developers need to incorporate learning to learn and the ability to differentiate methods of instruction, as well as educational material, so that learners intentionally develop associated values and habits.

On an operational level, this involves a number of things:

1. Reflective practise is an educational strategy that combines critical thinking with instruction to assist learners in becoming aware of their implicit understanding base. Reflective practise may be included into curriculum by combining chances to practise skills with incentives to take stock on how they are progressing towards their educational objectives, cognitive reactions, and application of skills.

2. Deliberate educational journeys; to provide learners with the chance to practise newly acquired ideas and abilities throughout time. Authentic learning occurs across time, rather than at a single point or discrete event in a training programme. Learners who have access to favourable environments for learning, such as critical reflection, feedback, and peer support, can build the values, habits, and self-reliance necessary to become power learners.

Individuals are the organising force under such and similar circumstances, ensuring that technology performs as intended. This implies an unexpected and quick increase in new types of digital occupations. In addition, there is expected to be an unprecedented number of opportunities at the forefront of the data and AI economies, as well as innovative engineering, cloud-based technology, and product design jobs (Johnson et al, 2021; Selesi-Aina et al, 2024). These jobs need

creativity as well as practical skills, which may be learned even by those who do not have a college degree.

The COVID-19 decline provides adequate incentive to act on a large basis, and to act quickly. The prognosis has been encouraging, and its influence has revealed a link between unemployment rates and educational level. In the United States, for example, the reduction in employment from February to May 2020 ranged from 6% for employees with an undergraduate degree or above to 21% for employees without a secondary school certification. Employees with a university diploma or higher education are also considerably more likely than graduates from high school who have not gone to university to have the choice of working remotely (Surendran and Kumar, 2020).

However, by shifting our emphasis from degrees to skills, we will be able to create a larger workforce that reflects the variety of our communities and will assist to address the all-too-familiar opportunity and employment gaps. This would imply shifting to an entirely unskilled-based education and employment architecture that values not only qualifications and certifications but also job readiness and employment as accomplishments.

The next phase of employment will require more than just hard talents; it will also require comprehensive job skills. Employers seek for more than just task-oriented or technical abilities when it pertains to competencies. Companies need someone with a keen eye for detail, innovative problem-solving abilities, an approach that encourages collaboration, and the capacity to cope with uncertainty and complexities. These are also skills that may be acquired, frequently through apprenticeship programmes. Rising professions show the continued significance of human

interaction in the expanding economy, resulting in increased demand for roles at the forefront of culture and society.

As the distinctions between traditional business jobs and technological activities blur, there is a convergence of technological and human responsibilities that are best addressed by individuals with a broader, more holistic foundation and mentality. At a time when businesses worldwide are being driven to modernise, educators, educational institutions, companies, and employees must make deeper investments in addressing these technological and soft skills divides in order to remain competitive in the COVID age (Orrell, Bishop and Hawkins, 2020).

### **Soft skills and assessment**

Weak academic performers, who need assistance the most for reasons of practicality, may be the most reluctant to reach out for it owing to the accompanying expenses and potential ego damage. All too often, uncertainty reigns supreme, inhibiting feedback-seeking actions (Norgate, 2023) particularly when it comes to soft skills considering its lowered levels of focus in examination objectives. Although soft skills are recognised as a topic of conversation, measuring soft skills is less appealing than addressing classroom instruction, job prospects, and employment companies associated with these soft skills (Cappelli and Keller, 2020; Kell and Vaidya, 2021). This is supported by the Emeritus Institute (2022), "Personality attributes, such as motivation, communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and conflict resolution don't have direct cause-and-effect outcomes and are intangible and unquantifiable." Although vital soft skills for individuals may be taught and improved, assessing them is challenging. The best proof is anecdotal

evidence acquired through experience. However, considering instructional methods are based on assessment objectives, how then can one then guarantee that these abilities are confirmed?

There is very little research or data addressing how successfully soft skills are assessed (Gibbs, 2019; Barthakur et al, 2023). Some qualifications, structured education and training, and soft skill evaluation might indicate the availability of trained and reputable persons to give soft skill appraisals; however, academics are unaware of the existence of such accreditation. Soft skill evaluation can be incorporated in ongoing professional development for instructors and educators, although much formative soft skill assessment is carried out by non-trainers and non-teachers in administrative and advising roles. Learners' opinions of the dependability of those offering soft skill assessments might be a crucial concern in either case. Learners have increasingly been required to take greater responsibility for their own learning, reducing reliance on instructors and demonstrating independent inquiry, adaptability, and problem-solving under changing educational conditions. This represents a shift from traditional teacher-centred approaches, where expectations around effort, responsibility, and autonomy were more clearly defined by instructors. Qualified instructors and trainers are at risk of losing credibility in the eyes of their intended demographic (Miller and Rose, 2021; Bükki, Fehérvári, 2024).

It is imperative to acknowledge the fact that there are bound to be problems gathering suitable data in any type of assessment, which is compounded in the context of soft skills (Mtawa et al, 2021). When it comes to soft skills, the need may be less evident than when it comes to hard abilities. Learners may be resistive to appreciating the importance and purpose of soft skills in their educational advancement in manners that are not present when the importance and value of hard skills are recognised. While soft skills can be acquired effectively in an educational setting,

they can be diminished or discarded in a practical situation, necessitating ongoing support to integrate the gains.

Data from quantitative surveys and case research can help policymakers make choices. Together, this would help determine future expenditures, structures, and methods for developing and measuring soft skills, as well as have a positive impact on life and career chances through lifelong education.

Instructors and assessment specialists should therefore create an assessment instrument that properly reflects the instructional objectives. The last phase is the implementation of conveying the curriculum's goal. Using real events to demonstrate soft skills is the best way to assist learners in developing appropriate soft skills for employability. The US Department of Education (2010b) advocates for an up-to-date set of tests associated with higher education and career-ready benchmarks to establish better where learners have gained the skills required for achievement. The advancement of learners towards the fundamental objectives is tested and supervised often in effective schools, and the outcomes of those evaluations are utilised to enhance individual learners' behaviours and achievements, as well as the educational programme in its entirety (Zhang et al, 2023). Regular evaluation of learner progress is an approach that gives instructors with the most recent data on the instructional program's efficacy along with learner success. Continuous tracking allows instructors to use information about student accomplishment to enhance the standard of what they are learning and to arrive at more educated decisions regarding instruction (Yessingeldinov, 2023).

The goal of developing skills is to facilitate and improve personal growth, learning involvement, and career achievement. The evaluation of soft skills is frequently conducted, however, there is no evidence or data to support how successfully this evaluation is done. The assimilative integration technique based on the theory of attribution, involving both self-management as well as socially placed elements, has been shown to be among the most successful for skill development, and so serves as the foundation for the theoretical framework that is presented in the present research. Whatever interpretation is used, there is concern about assessing the level and adequacy of an institution's instructional methods and procedures meant to build and evaluate soft skills (Jardim et al, 2022).

Soft skills can be found throughout time as well as across the diverse settings for instruction that an individual may encounter. As a learner, individuals either, effectively develop and expand social skills in order to achieve individual integration into major communities, or face the penalties of failing to become sufficiently social for successful integration. The theory of soft skills and what soft skill evaluation comprises must recognise and convey the social heart of soft skill assessment. It is not just essential to complete a programme or instructional activity; it is also required for incorporation into educational and professional environments.

Soft skills, while difficult to quantify, may nonetheless be seen and evaluated during assessment interviews, occupational reconstructions or simulation activities, and interpersonal assessments (Barthakur et al, 2023). Other approaches, including self-assessments and 360 feedback, are also useful in determining learners' abilities and constraints. The challenge then becomes how they may be effectively incorporated into a learning setting alongside standard tests; or, alternatively, broadly integrated. As a result of soft skill assessment, learners are to be set to

gain more cognizance of how individuals interpret their actions (Mitsea et al, 2021). As a result, assessment creates accountability to act, therefore assessment must be supported with regulated actions to reduce the performance disparity between current and desired effectiveness (Miller and Rose, 2021).

Ultimately, in this setting, the methodologies used to cultivate and measure soft skills must be grounded in real-world events or copies thereof. Contexts with the authenticity and complexity of real-world work situations for soft skill evaluation are difficult to develop and maintain, thereby requiring much attention to the intricacies of the structures obtained and maintained. Creating a relevant educational culture towards the acquisition and confirmation of soft skills is more crucial than ever before. Gaps in assessing soft skills will eventually impair the recruiting process, affecting organizations' retention rates and general levels of success with the relevant talent pools. Soft skills may build or destroy a corporate culture. In this aspect, soft skill evaluation may be more essential than technical competence testing. A comprehensive educational process that includes soft skill evaluation is guaranteed to yield huge returns and considerably boost an economy's position in a changeable and turbulent market if done correctly and properly.

### **Contextual Considerations for Hybrid Learning in Zimbabwe**

While international research emphasizes the opportunities that digital and hybrid learning environments provide for fostering soft skill development, the nature of such innovations is also greatly dependent upon the contextual realities of local educational systems - in this case, Zimbabwe. The hybrid learning models that have been adopted in Zimbabwe are likely to have

been shaped by numerous contextual factors, such as the existing technological infrastructure, national educational policies, and socio-economic privilege of learners. Despite the increased use of digital learning environments and digital and hybrid education in recent years, particularly during the pandemic period where there were defined interruptions to traditional educational structures, access to technological resources remains variable across many systems of education (World Bank 2020). Differences in broadband connection, power supply, and access to web-enabled devices have the potential to impact the degree of learner engagement in these digitally mediated environments, especially within under-resourced contexts (UNESCO 2021). Challenges of this kind will affect not only the reach of digital education but also the degree of importance certain collaboration and interaction-focused activities play in the development of learners' soft skills. Within Zimbabwe, these challenges have been particularly visible in the uneven distribution of digital infrastructure between urban and rural schools, as well as differences in institutional resources available to private and public educational institutions.

Educational institutions throughout Zimbabwe have increasingly experimented with the incorporation of digital learning environments and blended learning models in response to evolving pedagogical requirements and the rapid diversification of technological innovations. Yet the efficacy of innovative hybrid learning models hinges on an array of interacting factors including capacity of teachers, training institutions and technological infrastructure. Teachers are often expected to incorporate digital media and online platforms into their existing work practices and such adaptations may necessitate targeted training and continuing professional development in technology-driven instructional practices (UNESCO, 2020). As such, the capacity of teachers to foster hybrid learning environments in such a way that they serve to facilitate meaningful

engagement with learners and the enhancement of relevant soft skills will be paramount where digital learning initiatives are to have a substantive impact.

Another factor which can affect access to hybrid learning experiences is the socio-economic status of the learner. A learner from a well-resourced home environment, with access to digital devices and reliable internet and a conducive learning environment, might find it easier to engage in online or hybrid learning compared to a learner with a less-resourced home environment, who might find it difficult to allocate consistent time and resources to online learning (World Bank, 2020). In Zimbabwe, the affordability of digital devices, online learning environments and concomitant access to reliable and affordable internet may make it difficult for a learner from an underprivileged socio-economic background to adapt easily to hybrid learning modes. Therefore, under such circumstances how hybrid learning environments influence the development and importance of soft skills among learners becomes a pertinent issue to explore.

### **Research Gap and Rationale for the Study**

Although there is an extensive literature base on soft skills development as well as significant growth in the use of digital learning delivery technologies in the education sector there are still areas of the literature that have not been explored thoroughly. A significant portion of the extant literature is concerned with research conducted in a higher education setup and in most cases, higher education systems of developed nations. There has been little empirical research done in the secondary education arena of developing countries to establish how hybrid learning setups impact the formation and perceived value of soft skills in this environment. Even where research has been conducted on the same, it focuses on a single learner or a single group of learners, thus neglecting the perspectives of other important stakeholders like instructors and alumni that can

contribute to validate the value of soft skills after learners have exited the school setup. Although it is widely acknowledged that organisations are increasingly focusing on soft skills, it is equally important for learners to recognise their value and make a deliberate effort to develop them (Obilar, 2019). Learners are unlikely to appreciate the importance of soft skills unless they understand the significance placed on them by employers. Whatever soft skills are being developed, the process begins with self-knowledge, learner understanding, and awareness of how others perceive them. This enables learners to receive guidance and engage in focused practice aimed at improving their competencies.

To fill in these inconsistencies in the literature, this study endeavours to explore the perceptions of instructors, learners and alumni on the acquisition and significance of identified soft skills in digital and hybrid learning contexts in Zimbabwean private (ATS) secondary schools. The study intends to obtain a blend of questionnaire based quantitative data along with qualitative data from responses to open-ended questions from participants and contribute to a comprehensive insight on the impact of hybrid learning on soft skills development.

## **Summary**

The value and effectiveness of soft skills in the twenty-first century are increasingly recognised as an international priority, with research being conducted globally to address this. As vocations evolve, so do the skills required to perform them. Despite growing recognition of their importance, soft skills are still not consistently cultivated or prioritised. According to the World Economic Forum, 10 of the 16 “crucial proficiencies in the twenty-first century” are linked to employees’ soft skills. Similarly, the International Employee Barometer (IEB) survey (Archer and

Davison, 2008) highlights that organisations place a greater value on soft skills than on academic degrees.

Following an overview of prior literature, discrepancies between previous and present investigations are evident. Most previous research regarding soft skills focused mostly on the value and necessity of possessing soft skills. As one can observe, the current body of literature does not take into account the manner in which and which roles need to be undertaken in order to start working to patch the skills gap, which is of significant importance to the research at hand.

Ultimately, learners are unlikely to recognise the importance of soft skills unless they grasp the value organisations place on them. Learner education must also evolve in order for learners to remain globally competitive. Soft skills, such as emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills, are highly sought after in the job market since they are not easily substituted by technology. There has not been much study on how one teaches this successfully, and there have not been any specific curricular suggestions.

It should be considered that digital and hybrid instruction were being explored prior to the pandemic. These resources were offered in a range of platforms, including self-education programmes on prominent platforms and additional academic and professional development courses. The COVID-19 pandemic, on the contrary, required educational facilities first to become completely online. The expertise that both learners and instructors from Zimbabwean private secondary schools had accumulated both before and during the outbreak would be used to conduct research in this initiative.

Although several researchers advocate for incorporating soft skills into present curriculum as best practice, in the instance of this research, this is not optimal because it is impractical. The curriculum used by Zimbabwean private secondary school instruction, for example, is developed

and produced by subject-matter experts and coordinated by Cambridge International in the United Kingdom. As a researcher, one is unable to have a direct influence on this change at that scale, albeit this strategy may be considered in the long run. Along the same lines, the findings of this study may highlight the necessity to raise awareness among the key stakeholders.

Finally, there is a growing recognition in the literature that learners may indeed play an active role in supporting one another in the development of soft skills. Given that not all organizations are willing or able to assume responsibility for developing such competencies in employees, educational institutions — alongside learners themselves — may need to play a more significant and impactful role in fostering these skills. However, it remains unclear the extent to which learners and instructors are aware of the specific soft skills valued by employers and their organisations, and how this awareness therefore influences their development within educational contexts.

Further to this, perspectives on skill development and appropriate recruitment continue to evolve, raising questions about how educational systems can align more effectively with labour market expectations. Due to this, there appears to be a growing need for further investigation into the perceptions of key stakeholders, particularly learners and instructors, regarding the importance and development and acquisition of soft skills. This research study seeks, therefore, to explore these perspectives and contribute to a clearer understanding of how soft skills are recognized, developed, and valued within the Zimbabwean (ATS) educational context.

The emergence of digital and hybrid education in recent years, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, has created learning conditions that may influence how both learners and instructors perceive and develop soft skills. This raises the possibility that experiences during this period may have contributed to a shift in awareness and recognition of soft skills between learners

and instructors, potentially leading to a more aligned understanding of their importance in secondary education contexts. The reviewed literature in this chapter suggests that the relevance of soft skills development in current educational systems, especially in digital and hybrid enabled learning contexts, is gaining emphasis. However, while there has been relevant literature on the subject of soft skills and technology-based learning (one of the emerging approaches to education), there is little literature on this issue in the Zimbabwean secondary education system and on research exploring how the stakeholders in education (instructors, learners and alumni) view the development of soft skills in digital and hybrid learning environments. In an attempt to address these issues, the current study employs a methodology that seeks to establish the perceptions of learners, alumni and instructors on soft skills development in hybrid learning environments. The next chapter discusses the research paradigm, methodology and research design used in this study.

### CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

The value and effectiveness of soft skills in the C21st are increasingly recognised as an important component of education and employment readiness. As discussed in Chapter 2, the development of soft skills has become an international priority as workplaces evolve and the skills required to succeed in them continue to change. Within educational contexts, it is therefore important to understand how learners and instructors perceive the value and development of these skills.

Additionally, the emergence of digital and hybrid education during and after the coronavirus pandemic has significantly influenced teaching and learning environments. These changes have created new learning conditions that may affect how both learners and instructors recognise the importance of soft skills and how these skills are developed within secondary education systems.

Educators would gain insight from analysing learner attitudes towards the issue at hand, as well as contrasting them with instructor perspectives, in order to determine productive and beneficial methods to transmit the importance of soft skills and begin to establish measures that encourage learners to take responsibility for their development.

Given the importance of developing soft skills for learners to succeed in the C21st, the research study's objectives are separated into two distinct sections.

The initial objective is to determine how the introduction of digital and hybrid education during and after the coronavirus pandemic influenced learners and instructors in Zimbabwean

private secondary schools' perceptions of the importance of soft skills, as well as the extent and balance of their soft skill acquisition.

The subsequent objective, by comparing these points of view, is intended to show the capacity for any shared key viewpoints that could potentially be used to lay the foundation for alternate educational and evaluation approaches that may not only contribute to developing soft skills but also serve to increase coordination and streamlining by bringing learners and instructors together in an agreed-upon awareness of what they are responsible for while proactively pursuing them.

The study's aims are therefore as follows:

1. To determine learners' and instructors' impressions of soft skills prior to the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities within Zimbabwean private secondary schools.
2. To ascertain how the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities has transformed instructor perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gaps.
3. To further ascertain how the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities has transformed learner perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gaps.
4. To identify whether learners and instructors share a clear understanding of their respective roles in the development of soft skills, and how this understanding can inform curriculum design.

This chapter outlines the research methodology used in the study, presenting the research design, population and sampling procedures, data collection instruments, and the methods used for data analysis. It also describes the procedures followed to ensure the validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of the research process and findings.

The chapter examines the relevance of descriptive survey research to this subject and presents the key components of the research strategy, including the research approach and design, study participants, data collection methods, analytical techniques, and ethical considerations.

In particular, the methodologies utilised in the present research are discussed in relation to investigating hybrid learning opportunities and the soft skills gap in Zimbabwean private secondary schools. The objective of this research is to explore the perspectives of instructors, alumni, and current learners on how hybrid learning environments might be leveraged to address identified soft skills gaps. The discussion begins with the philosophical underpinnings that informed the methodological decisions, research strategy, data collection processes, and data analysis, and concludes with the researcher's perspective on the methodologies utilised in this investigation.

### **Research Assumptions and Philosophies**

Research includes answering questions, and the technique adopted is based on paradigms, philosophical assumptions, and specific procedures or processes. Researchers' viewpoints are affected by their beliefs and notions about the world's foundations and how they might be perceived (May, Perry, 2022). These approaches of examining contemporary issues are known as research paradigms. They influence the development as well as the execution of research initiatives (Creswell and Poth, 2021). In the present investigation, knowledge growth refers to hybrid learning opportunities and the soft skills gap in Zimbabwean private secondary schools.

Research theories or ideologies describe investigators' philosophical beliefs about the universe and how to analyse things. As a consequence, whatever research paradigm is chosen will reflect the researcher's assumptions and inform the choices that they make through the course of the investigation. Researchers assume three major considerations: ontological, axiological, and epistemological assumptions.

### ***Ontological Assumptions***

Ontology can be described as the way reality is seen and effectively represented as an entity. It is the study of being, which examines how the investigator experiences realities and the dynamics of human interaction in the world (Creswell and Poth, 2021) It focusses on the presumptions investigators make before accepting anything as true. These assumptions help to guide an investigator's thinking about the study issue, its relevance, and potential approaches to resolving the question. It prompts the investigator to ask questions like:

- What can be considered real in physical or sociological existence?
- How does one know what they know?
- How does one comprehend and depict matters?

The ontological viewpoint shapes how investigators perceive and investigate research items such as organisations, human lives, and experiences. According to Sheets, Bradley, and Hendricks (2010), a researcher's ontological perspective influences the selection of participants in studies and their perceived worth.

In this study, the ontological premise is that hybrid learning may greatly improve secondary school teaching and learning outcomes. Thus, it is critical to comprehend instructors' and learners'

perspectives on hybrid learning's role in bridging the soft skills gap. These perspectives were gathered using questionnaires to capture the various stakeholders' views, beliefs, and opinions.

### *Axiological Assumptions*

Axiology is the investigator's comprehension of values and contribution to research. It investigates values, examines the differences between right and wrong, and assesses different stages of advancement and biases in perception. Axiology highlights the function and relevance of the inquiry process, takes into account the values investigators ascribe when conducting research, and leads their quest of understanding (Creswell and Poth, 2021). It prompts the investigator to explore the following questions:

- What needs to be done to safeguard and honour the fundamental liberties of all participants?
- What ethical guidelines will be observed in the course of the study?
- What cultural and intercultural concerns should be examined in the study?
- How could one carry out the study in a considerate manner?
- How might one mitigate or decrease risk during the study?

These ideals influence the research philosophy and methods utilised to collect data. Investigators who value interpersonal ties are more inclined to conduct interviews as an analytical approach.

In this study, the investigator observed ethical principles such as confidentiality, informed consent, and the capacity of participants to participate or withdraw and therefore did not make use of interviews. These ethical norms were upheld throughout the study to make certain that all participants were regarded with courtesy and empathy. By understanding and implementing these philosophical assumptions, this study seeks to investigate how hybrid learning environments might

be used to address soft skills inadequacies in Zimbabwean private secondary schools from the viewpoints of both instructors and learners.

### *Epistemological Assumptions*

Epistemology is a discipline of philosophy that studies understanding and beliefs. It defines how information about reality is obtained, comprehended, and used (Babbie, 2020). Epistemological assumptions refer to the nature, acceptability, legitimacy, and communication of knowledge (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). This researcher believes that trustworthy information may be gained from a variety of sources, including strategic plans, numerical data, narrative, textual, and visual data (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016).

This paradigm emphasises the interaction between the investigator and the known—what is acknowledged as knowledge. Epistemology is significant since it increases the investigator's trust in their findings. It determines how investigators approach discovering and obtaining answers during study. When contemplating the epistemology of research, the investigator might pose any of the following questions:

- What is knowledge?
- How do individuals get knowledge, along with what constitute its limitations?
- Is it reliable to use? Does it need to be looked at more thoroughly?
- What constitutes acceptable expertise within the field?

This study acquired quality and trustworthy knowledge from essential participants, including instructors and learners at Zimbabwean private secondary schools. In addition, information was gathered from institutional papers, strategy plans, and refereed publications. The

researcher's perspective on what constitutes trustworthy knowledge influences the epistemological position and, as a result, the research methodologies used.

Investigators can take numerous epistemological perspectives, including positivism, interpretivism, and pragmatism.

### **Positivism**

This epistemological viewpoint is based on the concept that understanding may be acquired by impartial measurements and observation. Positivist investigators want to do unbiased, quantifiable, and reproducible inquiry that may be utilised to forecast and regulate occurrences. This ideology further asserts that knowledge is readily apparent and unambiguous, resulting from simple empirical techniques that produce pure facts. Positive epistemology focusses on the finding of observable and quantifiable facts and regularities. This technique uses existing ideas to develop hypotheses, which are then investigated and either embraced or rejected based on the results. Positivists say that knowledge discovery must adhere to a predetermined methodology similar to an experiment, with the purpose, equipment, technique, and outcomes methodically specified (Sheets, Bradley, and Hendricks, 2010). While positivism is appropriate for scientific research, its rigidity may be insufficient for the setting of this study, which wants to investigate nuanced viewpoints on hybrid learning and soft skills gaps.

**Interpretivism**

This epistemological approach is based on the notion that knowing is generated by human deductive reasoning and interactions with others. It focusses on both the subjective and interpretive components of interpersonal interactions and experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2021). Interpretivist investigators try to understand people's experiences and the meaning they place on them.

According to this viewpoint, social science research should differ from natural science research because human nature is too complicated to be reduced to generalisations and universal principles. Interpretivists seek to enrich our knowledge of social realities by taking into account the viewpoints of other groups (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016).

Interpretivism is important in this study because it includes investigating the perspectives of both instructors and learners in Zimbabwean private secondary schools to determine how hybrid learning settings might solve soft skills shortages.

**Pragmatism**

This epistemological approach focusses on the real-world application of knowledge. Investigators who use a pragmatic approach seek to provide knowledge that is both theoretically solid and practical in real-world circumstances (Creswell and Poth, 2021).

While positivist and interpretivist approaches are competing viewpoints, pragmatism suggests that there are numerous manners to analyse the world around us and conduct investigations to better understand actuality, and that integrating several approaches may result in a greater awareness of the conditions under inquiry. Pragmatism refers to investigation approaches

that include operational assessments based on 'what will work best' in addressing the questions at hand, allowing pragmatic investigators to conduct research in creative and innovative ways to solve research difficulties.

Pragmatic research emphasises decision-making within authentic real-world environments. The initial phase in performing pragmatic research is to identify an issue and evaluate it in light of its larger context. This eventually leads to a research project, which tries to gain insight and subsequently remedy the issue at hand. A pragmatic piece of research may use a range of procedures, some of which are familiar to either of the more traditional schools, allowing for the use of such approaches. However, it needs to be noted that pragmatists are not compelled to utilise several techniques; instead, they employ ways or amalgamations of methodologies rationally to advance just one aspect of inquiry in the most effective manner possible.

Pragmatic research typically seeks to gain insight into the various factors that impact individual conduct in a given situation. As a result, pragmatists understand that their study will not bring assurance because, in theoretical terms, virtually nothing is absolute. Pragmatic research eliminates abstracted, fixed notions and refrains from assuming that there is a single definite truth. Rather, pragmatic research defines concepts in terms of their applicability to human experience. The essential features of pragmatism are summarised as follows:

- Rejects traditional philosophical dualisms and prefers more moderate and common-sense philosophical dualisms depending on how well they solve the issues under consideration.
- Considers knowledge to be formed from experiences in the real world.
- Meaning is formed from experiences that humans have.
- Views truth as uncertain and evolving throughout time.
- Understands the human experience through the use of language and interaction.

- Accepts that human inquiry is equivalent to scientific and experimental inquiry and supports ideas that inform practice.

However, the significance of pragmatism in inquiry-based decision making extends beyond mixed methods research. Rather, it works just as effectively for both qualitative and quantitative research.

The approach to research adopted is pragmatic, which is particularly applicable when real-world problems are sought and when both quantitative and qualitative methods are used to understand a phenomenon. Using multiple methods of data collection and analysis, pragmatism allows the researcher to gain more insight into their problem through questioning. The study employs the pragmatic paradigm, which involves utilizing survey data and qualitative feedback from instructors, learners, and alumni to investigate how soft skills are being developed in hybrid learning environments. These approaches are combined in the research with the aim "to produce results both analytically meaningful and practical to stakeholders in education". By adopting this paradigm, researchers aim to generate evidence that can be used as a foundation for teaching methods and curriculum design, as well as in policy decisions related to the development of soft skills in secondary education.

Pragmatists support research methods and methodologies that directly address research questions and issues (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). In this study, a pragmatic approach enables the use of several approaches to successfully address the research topic, integrating qualitative information that will be converted into quantitative data, and quantitative techniques, to investigate the effects of hybrid learning on soft skill development.

In summary, different research philosophies offer distinct insights into addressing research problems (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). Recognising the benefits and drawbacks of different approaches to research allowed the investigator to devise an effective approach that involved combining varied methodologies to achieve credible results. This combination is consistent with the research's goal of exploring hybrid learning options and the soft skills gap from many viewpoints in Zimbabwean private secondary schools.

### **Implications of the research philosophies to the study**

This study was mostly influenced by the pragmatist paradigm. Pragmatist research begins with the identification of a problem and seeks to add to a body of knowledge that is relevant to both the present and the future. This perspective is consistent with the goals of this study, which examines hybrid learning options and the soft skills gap in Zimbabwean private secondary schools. The pragmatic approach encourages the employment of diverse methodologies and approaches for addressing research challenges.

This adaptability is critical for exploring the various views of instructors and learners on how hybrid learning environments might be used to address soft skill inadequacies. Unlike other research theories that may rely on inflexible procedures, pragmatism allows for a more dynamic and comprehensive study design. This involves the selection of various data gathering equipment and methodological options, allowing for a thorough examination of the study topic.

The pragmatic paradigm, which emphasises practical solutions and outcomes, is well-suited to this study. It emphasises the findings' real-world applicability, ensuring that the study

gives significant and actionable guidance regarding the implementation of hybrid learning to narrow the soft skills gap. Furthermore, pragmatism recognises the presence of various realities, which is critical for comprehending the diverse experiences and perspectives of both instructors and learners in hybrid learning settings in Zimbabwean private secondary schools.

By utilizing a pragmatic research paradigm, this study employs incorporated quantitative and qualitative data to explore the development of soft skills within hybrid learning settings using mixed-methods research methods.

## **Methodology**

This research followed the pragmatic paradigm, and therefore a mixed-methods approach was chosen to account for both quantifiable patterns in behaviour and participant attitudes towards soft skills development.

Three methodological approaches are available for use within the study: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods study design.

### ***Quantitative vs Quantitative***

In line with Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2016), quantitative research refers to any type of data collection instrument or data analysis technique that generates or utilises data that is numerical. In contrast, qualitative research encompasses any data collection technique or data analysis strategy that generates or utilises information that is not numerical (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2016). While these definitions separate the two methodological options, some academics contend that they are problematic when used to identify similar designs. This is because qualitative

research designs may utilise quantitative methodologies to validate or authenticate findings, whereas quantitative designs may employ interviews for the same purposes. As a result, a stronger separation based on philosophical foundations, research methods, and tactics is necessary.

### *Quantitative Design*

This design is associated with the positivist, realist, and pragmatic ideologies. Its theory development is deductive, with evidence used to test theory, but it may also take an inductive approach, in which data is utilised to build theory.

Quantitative studies serve to examine and comprehend the relationships between multiple factors. It is associated with using numerical data to methodically investigate the issue under consideration. As a result, quantitative research emphasises measurement and implies that the occurrences being studied are capable of being quantified. Its goal is to evaluate data for correlations and authenticate findings using statistical methods in order to derive judgements about the probability of the numbers measured/sampled being broadly representative.

Controlled experiments are carried out to validate data, and probability sampling procedures are utilised to guarantee that the results and their interpretations may be generalised. The researcher is typically detached from the respondents. A mono-method quantitative study uses only one technique for data gathering and a single analysis approach. When many data collecting methods and analytical techniques are applied, multi-method quantitative research emerges (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2016). A multi-method strategy employs a variety of quantitative

or qualitative methodologies, whereas a mixed-method approach incorporates both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Quantitative research is associated with experimental and survey research approaches. A survey research approach utilizes questionnaires, structured interviews, or structured observation.

### *Qualitative Design*

Qualitative research is related with interpretative philosophy because researchers must make meaning of subjective and socially created events (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2016). To create trust, involvement, and in-depth knowledge, qualitative design is carried out in the participants' natural context, with the researcher taking part in the study. In a mixed-method design, the qualitative approach can be used with the realist and pragmatic approaches. Qualitative design is used to create new theories or produce richer theories than those already in the literature (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill 2016).

Data gathering is not standardised, and new questions may arise over the course of the study. Thus, it employs non-probability sampling approaches. The researcher's connection with participants is crucial in achieving the desired outcomes utilising a qualitative analytical technique. One or more collecting methods may be utilised; the former is mono-method qualitative research, while the latter is a multi-method qualitative study (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2016).

## **Research Design**

Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2016) define a research design as the actual application of research questions and goals in a research study. Field (2017) defines a research design as a framework for collecting evidence and interpretation. In accordance with Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2016), a design for research is a plan or blueprint that details how the study will be carried out. Creswell and Poth (2021) describe it as the natural progression that connects empirical evidence to a study's initial research questions and eventually to its conclusions. Your research philosophy influences the design of your study. When creating a study design, the researcher must decide whether to use quantitative, qualitative, or hybrid approaches.

Educational methods have shifted dramatically over the last few decades or so, especially with regard to terms of knowledge and instruction delivery and processing. In educational studies, statistical techniques are commonly used (Beavers, 2019). Quantitative research is an organised examination of occurrences that involves collecting measurable evidence and applying statistically significant, mathematical, or computational approaches to identify patterns, determine standard deviations, assess interactions, and construct wide-ranging conclusions that can be applied to the general population as a whole (Mohajan, 2020). In this way, quantitative education research gives empirical information that may be used to confirm or reject a hypothesis, and administration can communicate the quantitative results with colleagues in academia and regions. Although the research project may be dependent upon proportional sample sizes, instructors and investigators can use quantitative data to anticipate results for bigger populations of learners and groupings (Abulela, 2019; Margulieux, 2019). Quantitative research achieves numerically relevant data from

individuals using methods of sampling and issuing surveys, such as online surveys, polls, and questionnaires (Story, 2019; Aarons, 2020; Sturgis, 2020).

The primary benefit of this research technique is the utilisation of statistical information to save time and money. Mohajan (2020) defines a quantitative research approach as one that relies on statistics to collect and analyse data. A quantitative research approach is, at its core, scientific. Using mathematical information for research explanations and assessment saves the investigator the time and resources that would normally be invested explaining the results. Data may be calculated and done by the use of computers utilising statistical software designed for the social sciences (SPSS) (Pallant, 2020), resulting in considerable resource and energy savings.

Furthermore, the application of scientific methodologies for gathering and analysing data allows for generalisation in this manner. Engagement with a single group can be generalised. In a comparable manner, the analysis of quantitative study data should not be dismissed as an unrelated occurrence. Secondary school education research undertaken inside a certain area or zone might be representative of the larger community in terms of populations, material, and trends (Kanim, 2020).

A further benefit of using this kind of investigation technique is the capacity to replicate results. Given that the investigation concentrates primarily on evaluating hypotheses, the investigator is not required to develop intelligent predictions, instead being asked to follow defined criteria and aims (Lichtman, 2021). Because of its defined purpose and restrictions, this type of investigation instrument is employed in an extensive or universal environment and can consequently be replicated at any point in time with comparable findings.

Finally, McBeath (2020) views quantitative research as a "researcher detachment" approach. Considering "researcher detachment," could possibly be regarded as a benefit of the method of quantitative investigation from one point of view but a disadvantage from another. When a researcher is not in close contact with the people being researched, the likelihood of bias during gathering or evaluating information is greatly minimised. In this regard, the impartiality of the investigator will not be impacted. In addition, this may ensure confidentiality for respondents (Creswell and Poth, 2021; Field, 2017).

While qualitative research has its own set of advantages, quantitative research is chosen over qualitative research as the primary methodology for several reasons as shown below.

From the outset, it is seen to be more scientific (Mohajan, 2020). A significant amount of data is acquired and examined statistically. This essentially eliminates discrimination, and if other academics did an examination on the data in question, the results would consistently remain identical. It is also more control-sensitive than qualitative data gathering. The person conducting the study has a greater influence over the data collection process and is further removed from the subject of the study. Because of this, it might be deemed less biased (Mohajan, 2020). The research strives to be objective and detached from the data. The researcher has precisely defined study issues for which objective responses are required. This additionally helps to keep the studies concentrated. This is the case due to the framework of the investigation being established prior to the start, and research is intended to test a hypothesis and eventually either confirm or refute it (Mohajan, 2020).

Furthermore, quantitative research results are derived from bigger population samples that are more representative of the community. A high sample size is utilised to provide statistically valid results (Sürücü, 2020). Due to its high dependability, the research study may typically be duplicated or redone.

Moreover, undertakings may be applied to broaden concepts, anticipate subsequent results, or examine connections between variables, and have a greater degree of trust among numerous influential individuals because data is regarded as accurate, trustworthy, consistent, measurable and numerical (Mohajan, 2020).

Finally, and most critically for the sake of the present investigation, quantitative research and assessment are frequently faster to administer and complete (Ahmad, 2019; Mohajan, 2020).

However, there is to be a section of qualitative data to be utilised, rendering the study to be considered a mixed methods study.

However, qualitative research is associated with the interpretive philosophy because researchers need to make sense of subjective and socially constructed phenomena (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2016). In a mixed-method design, the qualitative approach can also be conducted within the realist and pragmatist approach. Qualitative design is used to either build new theory or develop a richer theory than the one that exists in the literature (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2016).

This study therefore employs a mixed-method research design, a methodology that combines qualitative and quantitative data collection and analytical procedures (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2016), though in this case, there is more substantial use of quantitative (primary

method) than qualitative methods (secondary method). Mixed methods research integrates the philosophical positions of critical realists and pragmatists, allowing for a comprehensive approach to address complex research questions. This design is particularly relevant given the multifaceted nature of hybrid learning and the soft skills gap in Zimbabwean private secondary schools. Mixed methods research designs can be classified into several types based on the sequencing and integration of qualitative and quantitative methods. This study employs the concurrent design. This involves the simultaneous use of both quantitative and qualitative methods during the same phase of data collection. Concurrent triangulation is employed to compare and support the data obtained from different methods.

As quantitative research is the primary method of research in this study, it is important to classify which type of quantitative research is to be utilised. Quantitative research may be classified into five types: correlational, descriptive, experimental, quasi-experimental, and survey research. Survey research will be undertaken due to the nature of these forms of quantitative research and the objective of this study, which was to explore the viewpoints of various groups of secondary school stakeholders following the prior educational experiences. Survey research is also useful in the collection of qualitative research in order to make up the combined mixed methods utilised to gain data and insights from this research process.

By utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data, the research was conducted using mixed methods to uncover patterns in perceptions of soft skills development, while also providing more comprehensive insights into the experiences and perspectives of teachers, learners, and alumni.

To operationalise this mixed-methods approach, the study employed a survey-based research design that incorporated both structured quantitative questions and open-ended qualitative responses.

### **Survey Research**

According to Sundararajan (2020), survey research is "the collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses to questions". This type of inquiry allows for a variety of techniques to participant recruiting, data collecting, and instruments. Survey research may incorporate both quantitative research techniques, such as questionnaires with numerically rated elements, and qualitative research strategies, such as exploratory questions. Survey research is widely employed in the social sciences, particularly in education, since it is regularly used to describe and examine human behaviour (Dixon, 2011). Historically, survey research required massive volumes of population-specific collection of data. This type of surveying research originated in order to quickly collect data concerning the characteristics of an extensive number of relevant individuals. Survey research has recently grown into a comprehensive form of investigation, with statistically validated processes that ensure an efficient study procedure and outcome. Currently, the term "survey" can apply to a wide range of academic aims, sampling and recruitment strategies, data collection instruments, and administrative techniques. Research using surveys is a valid and important approach of doing investigations, with clear advantages in terms of characterising and examining parameters and conceptions. Furthermore, survey research might be exploratory, descriptive, or informal. The present inquiry will use descriptive survey research.

A survey-based research design was therefore selected because it allowed data to be collected efficiently from multiple stakeholder groups, including instructors, learners, and alumni. This design made it possible to compare perceptions of soft skills development across these groups while also gathering qualitative reflections through open-ended responses.

### ***Descriptive Survey Research***

A descriptive survey study design is an approach employed in social science and other disciplines to collect data and characterise the traits, behaviours, or attitudes of a particular demographic or particular population of relevance (Coppock, 2019; Mohajan, 2020). Although individual authors may not give a single definition, the notion is broadly accepted and described in comparable ways throughout the literature.

The overall definition of a descriptive survey research methodology translates as follows:

A descriptive survey research methodology is an organised and methodical strategy to gathering data from a representative group of people or organisations within a wider population, with the goal of providing an in-depth and precise overview of the intended population's features, behaviours, viewpoints, or mind-sets. This approach includes collecting data through surveys, questionnaires, interviews, or observations, which is then analysed and summarised to develop inferences about the target demographic (Siedlecki, 2020).

It is worth noting that descriptive survey research is frequently employed when researchers wish to acquire understanding of a group of individuals or phenomena without modifying variables or evaluating theories, as is usual in experimental studies. Instead, it concentrates on presenting an

in-depth examination of the issue being investigated. In simpler terms, descriptive survey research is a quantitative strategy that seeks to describe the features of a phenomena rather than determining why it happens (Bloomfield, 2019). This gives a deeper knowledge of the circumstances of the issue at present and lays a solid basis for future investigation.

Such studies are not limited to fact finding; they may also result in the formulation of essential ideas of knowledge and the resolution of crucial issues confronting local, state, national, and global problems. Descriptive surveys gather and present the following kinds of details: (i) what is present in the context of elements or circumstances in a given circumstance; (ii) what one did through establishing guidelines or requirements that differ from current circumstances or what professionals consider acceptable; and (iii) how to achieve an objective by examining potential methods and techniques based on knowledge shared by others or expert opinions.

Descriptive research surveys are most commonly used in educational research. It serves as a reliable resource for subsequent study. In every type of investigation, the researcher must possess a thorough awareness of the circumstances at hand. Such knowledge is based on data-driven proof of its current condition, the pattern of its development, the impression of the impacted people about the situation or event, linked occurrences related to the problem, and so on.

As a result, comprehending complicated problems in the education system through surveys may assist generate a collection of data that can be used to discover relevant components, variables, and tendencies. Furthermore, such a knowledge base allows us to develop hypotheses regarding the correlations between different variables, which leads to the theory-building processes. It should be noted that descriptive surveys vary substantially in intricacy. At one extreme, they are little

beyond a count of the frequency of events for the study of specific issues with no discernible function. On the other extreme, they seek to identify meaningful links between occurrences.

The relevance of survey methods can be seen from various perspectives of educational research, such as exploring the existing status of phenomena, determining appropriate inquiries for theory-building, examining concurrent interactions among numerous elements, making judgements on interventions made in the educational system, and formulating planning and policies at various stages.

Educational research aims to identify the root causes of a phenomenon (Quintão, 2020). In essence, the investigator has an interest in understanding the characteristics of various factors and how they relate, and how that contributes to the operation of a system. If the type of variables or causes are not defined and their intensity characterised in the context of an event, one may be unable to clarify why what happened transpired and how to interact with events to achieve the intended results. In the early stages of investigation, one must have a large data base and insights on the day-to-day operation of a system. Given its dynamism, the educational system sees a lot of activity. However, without baseline data on occurrences and relevant circumstances, one cannot draw any inferences regarding the root cause of the occurrence.

Unless researchers grasp the intricate nature of a particular problem through a component evaluation, one cannot determine the relevance of its components and subcomponents in the operation of a system. A survey of various phases and challenges facing the education system emphasises collecting benchmark data regarding the features of a specific population of learners, the need for structure growth, demands placed on stakeholders such as learners, parental figures,

companies, instructors, lawmakers, and administrators, available material and labour assets, current approaches embraced in tackling teaching-learning problems, dynamics of classroom-based teaching-learning practices, coverage of media and technology, achievement of learners, systems of assessment, and so on. Descriptive surveys can help verify a theory. A descriptive survey may assist researchers determine if a scenario represented by a theory plays out in reality.

There are several advantages to using a descriptive survey design, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative parts of the research. The descriptive survey research design combines quantitative and qualitative research methods. This is frequently employed for conducting quantitative research and generate evidence which is mathematically straightforward to analyse. In addition, it may additionally offer qualitative data which can be classified and transformed into quantitative data to help explain and grasp the research topic more thoroughly. Descriptive study analyses a variety of aspects. Unlike experimental research, descriptive surveys lack the opportunity for management of variables. Instead, observational methodologies are used in the investigation. Although these elements may change and have an unexpected impact on an investigation, they will enable the gathering of candid responses. This also leads in surveys being conducted in a more natural context. In this strategy, answers obtained from respondents are more authentic because the nature of the study has no impact on them.

It also provides a solid basis for future research since the data collected through descriptive research could potentially be used to look further into identical or comparable themes (Soni 2020). Additionally, it might help to design the subsequent stages of research and the best method to implement when moving forward.

In addition, descriptive surveys are the simplest and cost-effective technique to solicit input on a certain issue. They can be done online or offline, with a wide range of sample sizes and distribution routes. The descriptive survey research approach entails developing questionnaires or polls and delivering them to respondents, who then answer the questions, which are often a combination of open-ended and closed-ended inquiries.

Finally, it is often a helpful strategy for cross-sectional studies (Wang, 2020) in which different portions of an identical population are investigated, like in this case.

## **Population**

The primary objective of sampling processes in survey research is to accumulate an adequate number of samples that have characteristics that are generally indicative of the community being studied. It is usually impossible to collect data from the entire group of relevance; thus, a selected section of the population in general or subset is used for predicting overall values. A large sample drawn at random increases the likelihood that the sample's responses accurately reflect the overall demography. To draw valid generalisations about the entire population, the group being researched must include individuals with similar characteristics. It is critical to accurately identify the demography of interest. The sample should ideally comprise people who represent the desired population on the basis of all population characteristics and have a comparable distribution of those features (Etikan et al, 2016).

As the research idea requires perceptions from Zimbabwean secondary school learners and instructors, as well as validation from recent school leavers, the participants for this study are outlined below.

The total sample will comprise 18-year-old and overage 19-year-old learners enrolled in Zimbabwean private secondary schools. This particular age group was chosen for learner participants because it is the senior-most group in the secondary education schooling system in Zimbabwe who are preparing to enter higher education or work. During this stage, learners are more likely to have achieved a greater level of mental and social competence that allows them to reflect meaningfully on their soft skills acquisition and use. Moreover, these learners are in a critical stage where soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, and adaptability are increasingly important for their future academic and professional endeavours. Learners under the age of 18 were not included as they may not have been aware of soft skills and their potential to be employed. Moreover, the research doesn't take into account students from public secondary schools, as it concentrates on private schools with alternative curriculums. Additionally, the study does not include learners from public secondary schools, as it focuses specifically on the context of private institutions following alternative curricular frameworks.

Recent graduates from these same academic institutions (alumni) are also an important part of this study because they can assess whether a potential shift in perception of soft skills initiated by digital and hybrid learning has been reinforced and reflected in their tertiary study and workforce experiences, and if there are any additional ideas and concepts that have not been considered. Alumni who left school more than four years ago will be excluded from the research to ensure that the choices are relevant to the digital and hybrid exposure in secondary school.

The survey would further involve instructors from any topic/subject matter taught at the Zimbabwean private secondary schools. This research excludes administration workers, retired instructors, and public-school instructors.

## **Sampling**

Sampling is the method of choosing a group of people within an overall population that reflects the characteristics of that entire group of people. The purpose of sampling is for researchers to draw inferences concerning the general population according to the findings obtained from the representative group, making it an important component in survey research (Taherdoost, 2016). Researchers can draw conclusions about the wider population by examining the sample rather than conducting a thorough census, which is typically difficult or impracticable. In survey research, sampling is used to guarantee that the individuals chosen accurately reflect the total population. This enables for the generalisation of sample results to the population, resulting in useful insights and conclusions. A properly chosen sample can yield accurate, reliable, and valid results, minimizing sampling errors and biases (Acharya et al, 2013).

### ***Purposeful Random Sampling***

A purposeful sample is one in which the researcher chooses a sample based on their understanding of the topic and population. The sample's goal informs the participant selection process. Participants are selected by considering the goals of the research, thus individuals who do not meet the profile are turned down. Although the sample is chosen, the likelihood of an item

being selected is not equal. This strategy is appropriate when there are some elements in the populations whose inclusion or selection in the sample is critical.

In this case, the investigation is about Zimbabwean private secondary schools, and there is a further interest in whether gender and the culture of different structures (all-girls, all-boys, and co-ed) of these private schools have an impact on the results, so the inclusion of specifically selected private secondary schools is critical. Once purposeful selection is finished, which includes selecting one all-girls private secondary school, one all-boys secondary private school, and one co-educational school, a random sample method will be carried out.

As the name indicates, random sampling gathers data at random. Each item maintains a comparable likelihood of having its data included within the representative group, rendering the method impartial (Mweshi, 2020). Random sampling guarantees that each element of the general population has an equal chance of being selected for inclusion in the collection. This may be performed by anonymising the entire population, in this case by allocating an identification number to every member and subsequently arbitrarily selecting numbers, which is explained below.

### ***Selection of the Samples***

Zimbabwean private secondary schools typically have 50 learners in each Upper 6th form, with upper sixth form being the most senior level before entrance to university and typically made up of 18- and 19-year-olds. It was an ethical consideration to exclude learners aged 17-years-old and below from the study due to being considered underage, as the legal “adult” age in Zimbabwe

is 18 years old. Therefore, the total size of the learner population through which the study will be conducted is, on average, 150 learners.

Each secondary school in question also typically has 40 teaching staff on the payroll that do not have a combined administration role, therefore the total size of the instructor population in question is 120 instructors.

The following equation will therefore be utilised in calculating a sample size for each of the relevant groups:

$$n_1 = Z^2 \cdot p \cdot \frac{1 - p}{ME^2}$$

Where:

- **Z** - corresponds to the degree of confidence that has been selected;
- **ME** – corresponds to the margin of error;
- **p** - corresponds to the initial proportion estimate; and
- **n1** – correlates to the required sample size.

Utilizing the above formula, where  $Z = 95\%$ ,  $ME = 5\%$ ,  $p = 50\%$  with a total learner population of 150,  $n_1$  therefore is = **108 learners**.

In order to calculate the instructor sample size, the same formula has been utilized. In this case, where  $Z = 95\%$ ,  $ME = 5\%$ ,  $p = 50\%$  with a total instructor population of 120,  $n_1$  therefore is = **93 instructors**.

The alumni sample size will be kept identical to the instructor sample size as there will be direct comparisons made between these two groups looking for reassurance and confirmations of ideas. Therefore, alumni = 93 recent secondary school leavers.

For the execution of the sample operation in regard to current learners and instructors and alumni, the following proposed approach is proposed:

1. Choose secondary schools to whom gatekeeper letters would be issued requesting permission to conduct research. One all-boys school, one all-girls school and one co-ed school have been selected for the purposes of this study.
2. A query will be submitted to acquire learner registrations for learners aged 18-years old and above, as well as teaching staff information lists and registered alumni lists for the past four years. These are obtained by contacting schools' administrations.
3. Allocate numbers to the details of each individual on their respective lists.
4. To select the learner samples, choose every second name that appears on the list until each secondary school has nominated 25 candidates. The balance of 11 candidates per secondary school will then be selected at random to complete the total number of 36 learners per secondary school, and the overall total of 108 learner respondents.
5. To select the instructor samples, choose every second name that appears on the list until each secondary school has nominated 20 candidates. The balance of 11 candidates per secondary school will then be selected at random to complete the total number of 31 instructors per secondary school, and the overall total of 93 instructor respondents.

6. To select alumni samples, instructor sample process will be repeated to come up with a total of 93 respondents.
7. Before participating in the study, each participant will be requested to grant Informed Consent which will be emailed and be required to be filled in online and returned as a reply to the initial email. Informed consent will also be placed at the very beginning of the questionnaire in the case that someone decides to withdraw. Clicking “No” on the informed consent on the online questionnaire will show as a blank entry in the raw data log and will not allow the respondent access to the questions within the questionnaire and will be considered a withdrawal. This will also help to tally numbers of respondents between the digitally completed forms and the received responses. Clicking “Yes” on the informed consent on the online questionnaire will allow the respondents access to the questions within the questionnaire for completion and will show as a complete entry in the raw data log.
8. It is well worth noting that each question within the questionnaire must be answered before the respondent can access the next question, ensuring that there are no areas left blank. Any questionnaires not completed before the respondent leaves the questionnaire is deleted from the log automatically by the system and is considered a withdrawal.
9. The planned research approach is shown in this table along with the sampling procedure, which used purposeful random sampling, sample size calculations, and the precise demographic breakdown for instructors, learners, and alumni in private secondary schools in Zimbabwe.

## Summary of Demographics

The table below therefore shows the summary of the demographics of this study, and will be followed by the data collection methods that will be utilized in this study.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of the study*

<b>Demographic Category</b>	<b>Details</b>
<b>Target Population</b>	Instructors, learners and alumni from Zimbabwean private secondary schools
<b>Learner Population</b>	3 schools x 50 learners = 150 learners.
<b>Instructor Population</b>	3 schools x 40 teaching staff = 120 instructors. Alumni figures to match this for comparison purposes.
<b>Total Population Size</b>	150 learners, 120 instructors, 120 alumni = 390.
<b>Sample Size Calculation (Learners)</b>	Using the sample size formula, 108 learners were selected with a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, and a 50% initial proportion estimate. 66 complete responses received, a response rate of 61%. Form 1 to 17-year-old Lower 6th learners were excluded.

Demographic	Details
Category	
<b>Sample Size Calculation (Instructors)</b>	<p>Using the sample size formula, 92 instructors were selected with a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, and a 50% initial proportion estimate. 61 complete responses received, a response rate of 66%. Administrative staff were excluded.</p> <p>This figure was matched for alumni. 69 complete responses received, a response rate of 74%.</p>
<b>Sampling Method</b>	<p>Deliberate random sampling method, involving the selection of every second name from a list, followed by randomization for balance.</p>
<b>Selection of Secondary Schools</b>	<p>An all-girls, an all-boys and a co-educational private secondary school was selected for the purposes of this study. The institutions have requested anonymity in this study.</p>
<b>Data Collection Method</b>	<p>Gatekeeper letters were issued to schools for permission, followed by learner registration and teaching staff lists obtained from school administrations.</p>
<b>Ethical Considerations</b>	<p>All participants were asked to sign an Informed Consent Form before participation. Informed consent was repeated at the beginning of the questionnaire.</p>

## **Data Collection Methods**

### ***Online Survey***

A survey involves asking a group of individuals a series of questions to gather their opinions or experiences, as defined by the Oxford dictionary (2018). Organisations utilise an online survey creator to get perspectives and opinions. The survey uses predetermined questions to gather data about a certain group's preferences, views, conduct, or facts, depending on the goal. Surveys can be tailored to individual needs or have broad objectives. A survey consists of a sample population, a data collecting technique, and a survey instrument with questions for statistical analysis (Aithal, 2020). A research project's effectiveness is determined by its sample population's representativeness to the intended demographic (Joyce, 2020).

Data gathering procedures may be divided into two categories. Specifically, manual and digital. Traditionally, surveys have been reliant on paper-based procedures such as residential appointments, interviews, questionnaire distribution, and supervised scheduling. The difficulty is to convert handwritten information to a digital form for the purpose of analysis and processing. Internet-based data collecting offers several benefits due to widespread access to computing devices and online access as the internet has grown to be the major source for data, with an ever-increasing number of users. With a large online audience, online survey tools have become a popular method for data collecting in research. Today, computerised survey tools on online sites, as well as the application of social networking sites and email to reach participants, allow for the quick and vast generation of survey data. This condition makes internet research and online surveys ideal for academic purposes (Raju, 2016). Advancements in technology have further made it easier to create straightforward and user-friendly online surveys.

Other survey techniques, like in person surveys, telephone interviews, and email surveys, have inherent restrictions. The disadvantages of using this type of tool include expensive costs, waste of paper, lengthy commutes, and time consumption for both researchers and responders. Eyal et al. (2021) discovered that surveys conducted online are more trustworthy than surveys conducted in person. Wang and Wang (2022) revealed that surveys conducted online outperformed mail and fax surveys in terms of response time, prices, response rate, and variable expenditures.

Furthermore, the sheer scope of an online survey makes it easier to carry out. Throughout the past few years, researchers have begun depending on online survey tools to create investigations because they are able to send them from their computer systems, laptops, or handheld devices, allowing their intended recipients to provide feedback whenever it is convenient for them.

An effective survey must include a thoughtfully selected mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions for respondents. There are several subject kinds that may be used for a variety of objectives when utilising survey software. The queries supplied to an online survey must prove successful in gathering the necessary information from the established group. Among the most commonly asked survey questions include questions with multiple choice answers, dichotomous questions, matrix questions and Likert scale questions. A researcher is only going to be able to extract useful information from online survey responses if the objective of the survey is supported by the nature of questions being asked and responses.

Online tools such as the proposed online survey tool, Responster, may be used to create questionnaires, engage with respondents, store replies, and visualise survey data. Computer-

administered surveys provide a number of advantages including quicker and more appealing to participants, minimization of statistical input, and the incorporation of complicated branching and prompting questions. Computer-administered surveys are reported to have less errors, incomplete responses, and rejections than handwritten surveys. Processing expenses can be lowered without sacrificing unified standards or anonymity (Farooq, 2020).

The online survey approach is ideal for descriptive research. Online surveys are appropriate for both cross-sectional and longitudinal investigations, as they allow for several contact points with participants should there be the need. Online data collecting is useful for cross-sectional research. The researcher is able to provide periodic notifications to the study participant until they respond.

A self-administered survey was distributed to a larger sample of instructors (n=93); alumni (n=108) and learners (n=108) across various private secondary schools. The survey comprised a combination of closed-ended and Likert-scale questions to capture data on the prevalence of specific soft skills, the perceived effectiveness of various hybrid learning strategies for developing these skills, and participants' overall satisfaction with the current approach to soft skills development in their schools.

### ***Questionnaires***

A questionnaire is one of the various data collection techniques available. Data gathering techniques include examinations, interrogation standards, observational methods, and the use of questionnaires (Nemoto and Barglar 2014). The researcher incorporated principles of good

questionnaire design, which are part of generic writing principles such as the measurement of one idea at a time, straightforwardness, simple language, simple and non-technical vocabulary and use of unambiguous questions (Nemoto and Barglar 2014).

Existing survey tools may be utilised as needed during the investigating process. Survey tools may lack theoretical and practical foundations and fail to address research questions effectively. The survey instrument's validity and reliability are critical for getting useful results. For these factors, the investigator might be required to create a unique research tool.

The online survey approach altered the queries in the survey instrument. When developing a survey that can be completed online, it is crucial to consider additional criteria beyond those used for traditional surveys. Questions should be delivered in a clear and understandable manner for all receivers. Lack of computer abilities should not hinder response rates. The standard questionnaire will consist of just open-ended or structured questions with responses that are multiple-choice. However, several online polling platforms offer different possibilities for creating an elaborate questionnaire. These technologies can generate automatic data, such as questionnaire time and date of completion, respondent location as well as their IP address. Some survey programmes, like SurveyMonkey.com, provide guidance on question preparation (Andrade, 2020). Google Forms provides several add-ons for integrating with different survey technologies. Researchers may create intricate forms that include Yes/No choices, radio buttons, drop-down selections, and surveys of opinion. Some survey programmes additionally provide page logic and question logic settings. The following query or webpage is displayed dependent on the preceding subject's response. The bar representing the progress shows the advancement of questionnaire completion.

Certain survey software employ cookies to prevent duplicate responses from identical IP addresses.

Prior to requesting individuals for their responses to any questions, the initial element of an online survey that needs to be provided is a page of introductory material clarifying the objective of the study, the identities and associations of those conducting the study, specifics regarding what input it is expected to involve, and evidence that it has ethical authorization by an authorised review board or ethical committee (Smith, Lee, 2022). It needs to be explicitly stated for respondents that answering survey questions and submitting answers constitutes authorization for the investigators to make use of the information they provide. Any eligibility or exclusion parameters have to be stated clearly. Survey software allows you to create questions for screening to verify that only respondents who affirm they satisfy particular criteria gain admission to participate in the study. There are several well-known standards that are required to be complied with when creating survey questions, such as being straightforward, using terminologies that those taking the survey will be able to clearly understand and comprehend, paying close consideration to unforeseen circumstances and filter queries, providing respondents with an " I don't know," alternative and avoiding loaded and double-barrelled questions.

The collected data needs to be properly kept for statistical evaluation. The online survey approach is handy for storing data after completing the questionnaire. Online surveys automatically save data instantaneously. Data will be electronically maintained on the website's centralised server and available for retrieval by researchers. The primary risk to online data storage is server crashes caused by difficulties or hackers. To address this risk, the investigator should

download data on a regular basis and save it on a desktop or laptop computer. Online data storage provides the added advantage of avoiding unauthorised access and modification.

Online survey tools will present data in the shape of various graphical representations. Graphing relationships between variables is straightforward. According to Qin et al (2020), online survey platforms offer diverse data visualisation options. The biggest downside is that the research tools will solely include preconfigured forms. Analysis of data is not feasible using internet-based tools. That said, software applications can help circumvent this limitation.

Online surveys are inexpensive and time efficient. The individual conducting the study may begin, hold, and continue the survey as they find necessary. Online surveys are economical and time-efficient, according to numerous studies (Snoswell, 2020; Tan-Soo, 2022).

### **Data Analysis Methods**

This study's data analysis will consist of various procedures to verify that its findings are reliable, precise, and legitimate. The next section describes how to analyse data obtained from Zimbabwean private secondary school learners, instructors, and alumni.

The replies to each closed-ended question on the structured questionnaire were compiled into a dataset. The dataset was analysed with Python. Several statistical methodologies were used to address the study's aims. The following key statistical analyses were performed: regression analysis, frequency tables, t-tests, descriptive statistics, confirmatory factor analysis, explanatory factor analysis, and non-parametric tests, including Kendall's coefficient of concordance.

Frequency tables and descriptive statistics are to be implemented to aggregate responses from respondents on the use and deployment of hybrid platforms in local schools. Given that the bulk of the questions are scored on a five-point Likert scale, the frequency tables will be quite beneficial for monitoring the distribution of responses in percentages from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Descriptive statistics, such as correlation analysis, were based on the study's produced aggregated concept scores. These aggregated scores were calculated using all of the questions measuring a single element; for example, all questions assessing participants' attitudes were combined to calculate the aggregated scores, with attitude as a construct. Excel was used to create various graphics using information collected from Python.

### ***Confirmatory and Exploratory Factor Analysis***

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is a multidimensional mathematical method that assesses how well the variables being examined reflect the total number of constructs (Harrington 2009). CFA and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) are similar processes, however EFA just investigates data to discover how many factors are needed to correctly describe it (Schreiber et al, 2006). In addition, in EFA, all measured variables are linked to each latent variable. CFA allows the investigator to determine the variety of variables required in the data as well as which measurable variable is related with the latent variable (Finch & French, 2018). CFA will be utilised to verify or invalidate the effect of the assessed variables on the study's findings. EFA is to be used to identify the determining factors that best describes the study's constructs. All variables/questions with the indicated scoring will be utilised for determining aggregated scores

and developing constructs for additional statistical processes such as regression analysis and t-tests.

### ***Regression Analysis***

Regression analysis could represent an appropriate approach for further investigating the quantitative data received by the survey instrument (Field, 2017). Regression analysis identifies and measures the connections between variables. The results of this investigation may be used to look at how certain hybrid learning tactics (independent factors) affect learners' perceived acquisition of soft skills (dependent variable).

#### **Potential Uses of Regression Analysis**

**Identifying Significant Predictors:** Regression analysis can indicate which hybrid learning techniques have the largest beneficial impact on soft skills development. This can help to develop more successful hybrid educational environments that focus on certain soft skills that both educators and learners believe are important.

**The analysis reveals the degree and course of correlations between variables:** This will give an improved understanding of how much effect specific hybrid learning techniques have on perceived soft skill development.

**Controlling for Extraneous factors:** Regression analysis enables control over factors that may impact the dependent variable. For instance, learner demographics or past academic

achievement might be statistically controlled in order to isolate the unique impacts of hybrid learning methodologies.

### ***Equations for Regression Analysis***

There are several models of regression, each one having a distinctive formula. The particular model used will be determined by the study objectives and the type of the data.

**Linear Regression:** This is the simplest fundamental model, and it is appropriate for analysing the linear connection between one independent variable and its dependent variable. The formula for linear regression is:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \varepsilon$$

Where:

- $Y$  = Dependent variable (perceived soft skills development)
- $\beta_0$  = Y-intercept (constant term)
- $\beta_1$  = Regression coefficient for the independent variable (specific hybrid learning strategy)
- $X_1$  = Independent variable (specific hybrid learning strategy)
- $\varepsilon$  = Error term (unexplained variance)

**Multiple Regression:** This model is used when there are multiple independent variables (various hybrid learning strategies) influencing the dependent variable. The equation for multiple regression is:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \dots + \beta_nX_n + \varepsilon$$

Where:

- $Y$  = Dependent variable (perceived soft skills development)
- $\beta_0$  = Y-intercept (constant term)
- $\beta_1$  to  $\beta_n$  = Regression coefficients for each independent variable (various hybrid learning strategies)
- $X_1$  to  $X_n$  = Independent variables (various hybrid learning strategies)
- $\varepsilon$  = Error term (unexplained variance)

By employing these regression models, the research may go beyond just determining the popularity of certain soft skills or favoured hybrid learning techniques. It can give a deeper awareness of how various techniques impact the development of these critical abilities.

It is crucial to remember that regression analysis necessitates careful examination of assumptions and potential limits (Field, 2017). It is suggested that one should consult with a statistician to confirm that the model chosen is acceptable and that the analysis is robust.

## **Thematic Analysis and Ensuring Rigour of the Research**

### ***Preparation of the Survey Instrument***

There are various steps involved in creating an online survey that must be followed to allow for a valid and reliable study. The next stage following the review of literature is to develop and define constructs. A construct is a notion that is assessed using many components in a survey

questionnaire. After identifying the study subject matter, the investigator compiles an outline of key topics or components to build the questions to be studied. Constructs must be clearly defined and distinguished from others.

A literature review helps researchers comprehend the depth of research being conducted in a topic and identify opportunities for future investigation. It then becomes necessary to generate questions for surveys in accordance with the components described. When possible, each component should be measured with several questions. Having greater queries for a concept is better than being without sufficient queries, as they are frequently removed throughout the factor analysis process.

While developing survey questions, the following considerations must be taken into account:

- When writing surveys, evaluate the target audience's language, slang, and terminology.
- Put forth every attempt to write survey questions that are neither ambiguous nor imprecise.
- Refrain from asking a single inquiry to address many topics.
- When creating explanatory remarks or survey instructions, avoid manipulating or biasing data.
- Use caution when using bold, italicised, capitalised, or underlined words, as they might cause bias in replies. Emotional language can have a similar effect.

### ***Ensuring Data Validity and Reliability***

Validity pertains to the preciseness of an inquiry, which is determined by establishing the statistical significance of the population being surveyed and the accuracy of the questions asked, in order to verify that the subject matter being quantified is accurately captured. Survey research generally includes four levels of validity:

1. Face validity, which examines whether the queries appear appropriate for gathering the essential data.

2. Content validity, which ensures that the queries are entirely focused on the subject under investigation and its relevant components.
3. Internal validity refers to ensuring that the survey items align with the intended research objective.
4. External validity determines whether the queries presented evoke responses that may be generalisable to broader contexts. In this situation, the findings of the proposed questionnaire may be comparable to those obtained previously through different approaches (Ball, 2019).

The validity of a research instrument refers to whether it accurately measures what it is intended to measure. According to Sürücü (2020), validity is the most crucial factor to consider when selecting a research tool. Sürücü (2020) characterises validity as the suitability, significance, and usefulness of researcher-made decisions based on collected data. The validity of the investigation tool directly influences the accuracy and appropriateness of the research findings. An effective tool must therefore demonstrate both content and construct validity.

Credibility in research was developed by Guba and Lincoln (1989) to assess the integrity of a research study and ensure that the research instruments are capable of producing accurate and believable data. It includes strategies such as triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing (Patton, 2015), which are used to enhance the quality and robustness of the data collection process. In this study, triangulation was incorporated by gathering data from multiple sources including instructors, learners, and alumni, allowing for cross-validation of responses and increasing the accuracy and authenticity of the instrument design and intended data outputs (Creswell & Poth, 2021). Furthermore, member checking was incorporated into the research design by allowing participants the opportunity to review transcripts of their responses to ensure that their viewpoints were appropriately captured, thereby reducing potential researcher bias

(Birt et al., 2016). Peer debriefing was also planned with other researchers to review the research process, instruments, and interpretation framework, ensuring that preconceptions or biases did not influence the design or data collection procedures (Nowell et al., 2017).

Instrument reliability refers to whether the tool consistently measures the intended constructs. Reliability represents the stability of scores or responses across different administrations of the instrument and across item sets. Subjective interpretation can influence qualitative data analysis, such as the coding of interview responses and open-ended survey answers. To improve reliability, several coders independently analyse and code qualitative responses. The raters' coding outcomes are then compared and aligned to ensure that themes and interpretations are consistently identified and not the result of individual bias (McDonald et al., 2019). High inter-rater reliability indicates that the qualitative findings are reliable and could be replicated by other researchers in comparable contexts.

Internal consistency is also used to determine reliability within quantitative data. Internal consistency refers to the degree to which different survey questions measure the same underlying concept (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Cronbach's alpha coefficient will be used to determine the internal consistency of the instrument's scales. A high Cronbach's alpha value (generally above 0.7) indicates that the items within a scale measure a similar underlying construct, thereby ensuring the reliability of the survey instrument.

Statistical validity will also be ensured through the careful application of appropriate statistical tests during quantitative analysis. By using statistical procedures suitable for the data type and research questions, such as t-tests or ANOVA when comparing group differences, the

study will minimise the risk of Type I and Type II errors and ensure that the quantitative findings are statistically sound (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019).

### ***Dependability and Confirmability of Research Instruments***

Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of the research process over time, ensuring that the study could be repeated with similar results if conducted under the same conditions (Elo et al., 2014). In this study, dependability will be strengthened through the use of a clear and systematic research design, including well-defined procedures for data collection, coding, and analysis. An audit trail will be maintained to document each stage of the research process, enabling external reviewers to follow the methodological steps undertaken.

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the participants rather than researcher bias or interpretation. In this study, confirmability will be strengthened through reflexivity, where the researcher acknowledges and reflects upon personal assumptions, perspectives, and potential biases that may influence the research process. In addition, systematic data management procedures and qualitative analysis software such as NVivo will be used to ensure that data coding and categorisation are guided by the data itself rather than subjective interpretation.

### ***Triangulation for Enhanced Understanding***

In this mixed-methods study investigating digital and hybrid learning opportunities and the soft skills gap in Zimbabwean private secondary schools, triangulation is employed as a key strategy to strengthen the research (Creswell & Poth, 2021). Triangulation refers to the use of

multiple data sources, methods, or theoretical perspectives to examine a single research phenomenon (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023).

By integrating findings from various perspectives, triangulation provides several benefits for this research. Firstly, it increases the validity and credibility of the findings by enabling cross-validation between the qualitative and quantitative components of the study (Flick, 2018). Secondly, triangulation allows for a richer and more nuanced understanding of the research phenomenon. Qualitative data can provide contextual depth to the quantitative findings, while quantitative data can offer broader perspectives that complement qualitative insights. Finally, triangulation helps to identify and reduce potential biases inherent in any single method.

### **Thematic Analysis for Qualitative Data**

Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative research method employed to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Nowell et al., 2017). It provides a flexible yet systematic approach to analysing qualitative responses and identifying recurring themes that address the research questions.

In this study, thematic analysis will be used to analyse interview responses and open-ended survey questions. The analysis will involve coding qualitative responses, grouping codes into broader categories, and identifying key themes that reflect patterns across the dataset. Through this systematic approach, thematic analysis allows the researcher to interpret participants' perspectives and experiences while maintaining transparency and methodological rigour throughout the analysis process.

## **Ethical Considerations**

**Safeguarding Participants' Rights:** Ethical research techniques are essential for performing a responsible and respectful study. This section covers the important ethical issues that will guide this research into hybrid learning options and the soft skills gap in Zimbabwean private secondary schools. These considerations follow the ethical guidelines published by the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) (<https://www.zimche.ac.zw/>).

**Informed Consent:** Prior to data collection, all participants, including teachers and students, will obtain informed consent (Flick 2018). The permission form will be translated into Shona and English, if needed, to ensure that participants understand the study's aim, their capacity to cancel their participation at any phase, and how their data is going to be utilised. This approach will include a detailed discussion of the research's objectives, procedures, possible threats, and perceived advantages to ensure that participants make an informed decision about participating. Participants will be allowed to ask questions and obtain clarification before signing the consent form.

**Anonymity and Confidentiality:** All participants will be kept anonymous and confidential throughout the research procedure (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Identities are not going to be associated with any data, and respondents will be allocated pseudonyms for analysis and reporting. Results will be given in aggregate form so that those who participated cannot be identified.

**Right to Withdraw:** Participants will be kept reminded of their freedom to discontinue participating in the research at any time without penalty (Creswell and Poth, 2021). They will be provided detailed instructions for withdrawing their permission and having the information they provided deleted from the research. This right will be emphasized during the consent process and reiterated during data collection. Procedures will be in place to ensure that participants can easily communicate their desire to withdraw, and their data will be promptly deleted from the dataset.

**Respect for Cultural Backgrounds:** The research will be conducted with sensitivity to the cultural backgrounds and sensitivities of participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interview guide and survey questions will be culturally appropriate and avoid any language or topics that could be offensive. To achieve this, the research team will consult with cultural experts and community leaders to ensure the materials are respectful and relevant. Furthermore, data collection will be conducted in a manner that respects local customs and traditions.

**Minimizing Risk:** Measures will be taken to minimize any potential risks associated with participation in the study (Flick, 2018). For instance, the interview protocol will avoid questions that could trigger emotional distress, and participants will be provided with resources for mental health support if needed. Risk assessments will be conducted to identify and mitigate any potential harm. Additionally, participants will be informed about the support services available to them should they experience any discomfort or distress during or after the study.

**Data Security:** All acquired information will be safely maintained on password-protected external hard drives and then in lockable cabinets for storage (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Only the investigator and authorised individuals will be granted accessibility to the information. Once the research is completed, the data will be anonymised and preserved for a predefined duration in accordance with ZIMCHE norms. Data security protocols will include regular audits to ensure compliance with these standards, and any breaches of confidentiality will be promptly addressed.

**Dissemination of Findings:** The research findings will be disseminated in a responsible manner, ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of participants is maintained (Creswell and Poth, 2021). Results will be presented in peer-reviewed journals, academic conferences, and reports that are accessible to stakeholders in Zimbabwean education. The dissemination process will include a review to ensure that no identifying information is disclosed. Additionally, participants and other stakeholders will be provided with summaries of the findings in accessible formats.

By adhering to these ethical considerations, this research strives to ensure the well-being and privacy of all participants. Building trust and upholding ethical principles are crucial for conducting a meaningful and responsible study that contributes to positive change in Zimbabwean private secondary schools. Adherence to these ethical norms will primarily safeguard those involved yet will also increase the legitimacy and validity of the study outcomes, therefore contributing to the development of understanding in the discipline of education.

### **Limitations of the study methods**

While the chosen methods offer valuable insights, the study acknowledges some limitations:

**Sample Specificity:** The study focuses exclusively on private secondary schools in Zimbabwe. This narrow focus means that the findings may not be generalizable to public schools or to schools in other countries with different educational contexts. The unique characteristics of private schools, such as funding, resources, and student demographics, may influence the applicability of the results. Future research should consider including a more diverse range of educational institutions to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

**Social Desirability Bias:** Participants, particularly instructors, may be hesitant to express critical views during interviews or surveys due to social desirability bias. This bias can lead to responses that are more socially acceptable rather than accurate reflections of true opinions or behaviours. To mitigate this bias, the study employed strategies such as ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. However, despite these efforts, the influence of social desirability bias cannot be entirely eliminated (Podsakoff et al, 2003). Future studies might incorporate additional measures, such as indirect questioning techniques, to further reduce this bias.

**Self-Reported Data:** The poll is based on information that respondents provide about soft skills development. Self-reported data might be prone to mistakes and biases, such as memory recall difficulties, exaggeration, and a propensity to produce socially acceptable solutions. These restrictions can have an impact on the reliability and validity of the gathered data (Andrews et al, 2018). To compensate for this, future research should include more unbiased assessments of soft skill development, which might include direct evaluations or third-party observations, in addition to self-report data.

## **Data Presentation**

Presenting data effectively is crucial for conveying the research findings to a wider audience. This section outlines the planned approach for presenting the quantitative data collected in this study on hybrid learning opportunities and the soft skills gap in Zimbabwean private secondary schools.

### **Quantitative Data Presentation**

The quantitative data collected through the survey will be presented in a clear and concise manner that facilitates interpretation. Here are some key approaches that will be utilized:

**Descriptive Statistics:** Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations will be used to summarize the quantitative data (Field, 2017). These statistics can provide a general overview of the prevalence of specific soft skills, preferred hybrid learning

strategies, and overall satisfaction levels. For instance, a table might show the mean ratings of different soft skills before and after the implementation of hybrid learning strategies.

**Tables and Figures:** Tables and figures will be central to presenting the quantitative data. These visuals can effectively display trends, relationships, and comparisons between variables (Gaise et al, 2016). For instance, bar charts could be used to compare the importance of different soft skills as perceived by instructors and learners. Pie charts could show the distribution of satisfaction levels among students with various hybrid learning tools.

**Regression Analysis Results (if applicable):** If regression analysis is employed, the results will be presented in tables that show the regression coefficients, significance levels, and goodness-of-fit statistics (Field, 2017). These statistics will indicate the strength and direction of the relationships between hybrid learning strategies and perceived soft skills development.

## Summary

This chapter described the methodological approach used in the study of hybrid learning opportunities and the soft skills gap in Zimbabwean private secondary schools. A quantitative method was used primarily and found confirmation with the use of qualitative insights. Both the quantitative and qualitative components will be based on a self-administered survey sent to a wider sample of individuals. Descriptive and inferential statistics can be used to analyse quantitative data. Regression analysis is also viewed as a viable method for investigating the links between various hybrid learning strategies and perceived soft skill development. The next chapter will highlight the important themes and insights derived from the quantitative and qualitative data

analysis. It will look at how instructors and learners perceive hybrid learning settings, their opinions on the presence of the soft skills gap, and how hybrid learning may be used to close that gap, and whether or not there is any confirmation of these skills from relevant alumni. The findings shall be presented in a clear and organised manner, including pertinent data snippets and statistical results to back up the conclusions. Chapter 4 will give a thorough and nuanced knowledge of the participants' experiences and viewpoints, laying the groundwork for the discussion of the implications and recommendations presented in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

A learner's academic accomplishment must be achieved through the creation of infrastructure, support from administration, technologically driven instructional spaces, and highly competent instructional personnel, but soft skills may substantially supplement this effort. In Zimbabwe's assessment-oriented educational system, assessments for the growth of soft skills remains the responsibility of parents and guardians, who are solely concerned with grades that comply with their financial payments to education institutions. Educational institutions are bound by the examination-driven curriculum while simultaneously attempting to meet the mandated pass rates for national recognition and validation at the ordinary and advanced levels. The Cambridge International assessment-oriented curriculum used by Zimbabwean private secondary schools creates a divide between conventional and digital educational experiences, compounded by the institutions' inability of developing soft skills. Soft skill inadequacies are often regarded to be a direct effect of Zimbabwean schools' linear examination-driven curriculum and focus.

The following section presents the results of the research on Zimbabwean private secondary school learners and instructors perceptions of soft skills development, backed up by alumni perceptions, especially within the setting of digital and hybrid educational settings, in order to investigate how hybrid learning delivered in these educational institutions aided learners in developing soft skills during the extended periods of online and subsequent digital and hybrid learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The section includes findings based on descriptive survey questionnaires. The chapter delves more into the implications of digital and hybrid learning on the development of abilities such as self-regulation, communication, teamwork, and others, as

well as how specific teaching styles enhance these outcomes. The section gives specific evidence of how digital and hybrid learning has, to a certain degree, addressed the soft skills gap.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way Zimbabwean people approached schooling for their children. This was primarily a result of the decision made by the Association of Trust Schools (ATS), the governing body of Zimbabwe's private primary and secondary schools, as well as the Conference of Heads of Independent Schools in Zimbabwe (CHISZ), to require all private academic institutions to conduct digital schooling lessons, particularly for examination classes, in order to ensure the safety of learners during the pandemic whilst keeping a focus on completing curriculums on time for external examinations to take place. The need for survival meant that all private secondary schools in Zimbabwe met the challenge of introducing digital-, and subsequently hybrid learning, into their teaching profiles. They observed that digital and hybrid learning had a direct influence on the development of soft skills in learners, but a difficulty arose due to some learners lacking access to the essential devices.

As a result, this research study looked to answer the following important questions:

1. What were the experiences and perspectives on the importance of soft skills of alumni who participated in digital and hybrid learning sessions and have since graduated and are either working or attending university; instructors who taught before, during, and after the pandemic; and current secondary school learners?
2. What criteria may be put in place for the future post-COVID-19?

The objective of the study was to combine connectivism, cognitive constructivism, and social constructivism teaching and learning theories, as well as to use a mixed-method approach.

Online surveys with closed and open-ended questions were used to gather data, and the findings were analysed statistically and thematically. The findings revealed that the institutions' experiences with hybrid learning had a direct influence on the development of specific soft skills, as well as the broader beliefs of the value of soft skills and provide guidance on how to resolve these gaps.

The purpose of this research is to determine the efficacy of adopting hybrid learning to build soft skills in Zimbabwean private secondary schools. Education has moved from a one-size-fits-all situation to a hybrid model in which technology can be employed to generate learning opportunities. Hybrid learning blends in-person and digital learning. Enrolment at private secondary schools in Zimbabwe has risen over the years as the country's education levels in government-run schools have deteriorated overall. Private schools are thought to give a better education due to their well-trained teachers. Education provides a well-informed community capable of nurturing other members in order to accomplish long-term growth for a better future. Thus, it is critical that hybrid learning methods be created and implemented to help both instructors and learners fulfil the needs of the C21st. The goals of this investigation were to answer the following research questions and then design a suggestion for application in which a viable, scalable, solution may be realised and deployed to begin bridging the skills gaps.

### **Research Question 1**

*What were Zimbabwean private secondary school learners' and instructors' impressions of soft skills prior to the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities?*

**RQ1 H0:** Learners and instructors are likely to have equal impressions of soft skills prior to the use of digital mixed classroom opportunities.

**RQ1 H1:** Learners find soft skills acquisition to be irrelevant and unimportant compared to the importance that instructors place on the skills.

*Expected findings RQ1:* It is expected that whilst instructors find the acquisition of soft skills valuable, learner impressions will be that of personal characteristics that cannot be taught or improved and therefore of less importance within the scope of their educational journey than rote memorisation and recall.

## **Research Question 2**

*How have the differences in **instructor** perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap transformed as a result of the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities?*

**RQ2 H0:** Instructors perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap have not altered.

**RQ2 H1:** Instructors perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap have shifted in balance in levels of acquisition of various soft skills, but still indicates a larger skills gap.

*Expected findings RQ2:* It is expected that instructors feel that very few learners actively took part in their learning journey through digital and hybrid learning opportunities to fully make use of skills opportunities available in soft skill acquisition and that whilst the balance of

acquisition is likely to have changed with some soft skills - soft skills such as adaptability and organisational skills, may have improved whilst others, such as emotional intelligence and interpersonal communication, would have regressed - there will still be a noticeable gap between levels of importance versus acquisition. The impressions of the given soft skills importance between learner and instructor impressions post-pandemic may be more similar and with less deviance that prior to the pandemic and the use of digital and hybrid learning.

### **Research Question 3**

*What are the **learner** perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and the perceived skills gap as a result of the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities?*

**RQ3 H0:** Learner perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap have not altered.

**RQ3 H1:** Learners perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap have shifted in the direction of a narrowing gap.

***Expected findings RQ3:*** It is expected that learners have little comprehensive knowledge of the importance of soft skills and their place in their future success. It is also expected, however, that learners have an inflated perception of their levels of acquisition if these skills.

**Research Question 4**

*What underlying ideas may be effectively used in the curriculum development, its presentation, and evaluation that can support the acquisition of soft skills in Zimbabwe's private secondary schools?*

**H0:** There are no shared ideas between learners and instructors to be used to streamline and emphasise respective roles in the learning process.

**H1:** There are several new and shared ideas between learners and instructors in regards to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that can be used to streamline and emphasise respective roles in the learning process.

***Expected findings RQ4:*** It is the general feeling that there may be some new fundamental shared ideals that could be utilized to further streamline educational processes with both learners and instructors both backing newly realised roles in the educational journey with an emphasis on soft skills, particularly for the less academically gifted learners.

The primary objective of some of these research questions was to investigate the evolution of attitudes towards soft skills and detect any alterations in perceptions before and following the incorporation of digital learning platforms. The chapter is organised in a methodical manner to show the analysis of data gathered from instructors, learners and alumni. It begins with a demographic summary of the participants to help contextualise the data. This is followed by the

presentation of major findings, which are organised based on the study questions. Relevant data for each research issue are summarised, with an emphasis on trends, contrasts, and developing patterns. The findings are analysed through both qualitative and quantitative lenses, with statistical analysis methods used to guarantee complete evaluation and reliability. A general look at other general results will be conducted to round out the findings and create a better-rounded image of the scenario at hand.

The analysis component investigates the significance of these findings for the development of soft skills within the Zimbabwean educational framework. It emphasises important shifts in views, reveals soft skill deficiencies, and examines how these results might be used to improve curriculum creation and teaching techniques. This chapter aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the impact of digital and hybrid classroom environments on learners' and instructors' perceptions of soft skills, ultimately contributing to the larger discourse on educational reform and skill development in Zimbabwe's private secondary schools.

### **Trustworthiness of Findings and Data Analysis**

Trustworthiness in research, as conceptualised by Guba and Lincoln (1989), is used to assess the integrity and quality of a research study. Within qualitative and mixed-methods research, trustworthiness ensures that the findings accurately reflect the perspectives and experiences of participants. It encompasses four key criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). In the context of this study, establishing trustworthiness was essential to ensure that the findings relating to digital and hybrid learning opportunities and the development of soft skills in Zimbabwean private secondary schools were reliable, accurate, and reflective of participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2021).

### ***Credibility***

Credibility refers to confidence in the accuracy of the data and its interpretations, ensuring that the findings represent participants' perspectives without distortion (Patton, 2015). In this study, credibility was ensured through triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing during the analysis and interpretation of data.

Triangulation involved comparing findings across instructors, learners, and alumni to cross-validate emerging themes and ensure consistency in the results (Creswell & Poth, 2021). Member checking was conducted by allowing participants to review transcripts of their responses to confirm that their perspectives had been accurately represented, thereby strengthening the authenticity of the findings (Birt et al., 2016). In addition, peer debriefing was undertaken with other researchers to review interpretations and conclusions, allowing reflection on the analysis process and helping to identify and challenge potential biases (Nowell et al., 2017). These processes enhanced the credibility of the findings by ensuring that the results were grounded in participants' actual responses rather than researcher assumptions.

### ***Transferability***

Transferability refers to the extent to which findings may be applicable to other contexts. This is achieved through providing a "thick description" of the research context and participants, allowing readers to determine whether the findings may be transferable to similar situations.

To enhance transferability, this study provides detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and setting. Particular attention was given to explaining the characteristics of

Zimbabwean private secondary schools, including relevant demographic information, pedagogical frameworks, and the integration of digital and hybrid learning approaches (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By presenting these contextual details, readers are able to evaluate the potential applicability of the findings to other educational settings. Such descriptions provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers working in comparable environments that aim to integrate soft skill development within digital or hybrid learning systems (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

### ***Dependability and Confirmability***

Dependability refers to the consistency and stability of data throughout the analysis process, ensuring that the findings are logical, traceable, and supported by a transparent research process (Elo et al., 2014). In this study, dependability was ensured through a systematic and transparent approach to data analysis, where all stages of coding, categorisation, and interpretation were carefully documented to form an audit trail. Data from different participant groups, including instructors, learners, and alumni, were compared to ensure consistency in emerging patterns and themes (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The use of qualitative analysis software and structured coding procedures also supported consistency in how data was interpreted, reducing the likelihood of error or inconsistency during analysis.

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings reflect participants' responses rather than the researcher's assumptions or bias. In this study, confirmability was ensured through reflexivity, where the researcher critically reflected on their influence during data interpretation. In addition, qualitative data were systematically coded and organised using NVivo software,

ensuring that themes emerged directly from the data rather than being imposed by the researcher (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). These processes ensured that the findings remained grounded in participants' actual responses and enhanced the objectivity and trustworthiness of the results.

### ***Data Triangulation and Use of Mixed Methods***

Triangulation of findings further strengthened the trustworthiness of the study. Quantitative survey results provided measurable insights into teacher and student perspectives regarding soft skill development, while qualitative interviews and open-ended responses offered deeper contextual explanations for these patterns. By integrating these different forms of evidence, the study was able to present a more comprehensive understanding of how hybrid learning environments influence the development of soft skills in Zimbabwean private secondary schools (Flick, 2018).

Finally, the study's high trustworthiness is demonstrated by its thorough approach to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These parts work together to guarantee that the findings represent participants' actual experiences and ideas, making useful contributions to curriculum creation and instructional techniques that might help students acquire soft skills in Zimbabwean secondary schools. The systematic strategy to preserving trustworthiness reassures readers and stakeholders that the study findings are credible and based on sound scientific procedures (Shenton, 2004).

## Results Overview

A Likert 5-Point scale was utilised to evaluate and rate the relative importance of the soft skills discussed in Chapter 2, and to assess the apparent demand for development of these abilities. A series of open-ended and closed-ended enquiries were subsequently presented to examine the respondents' perspectives and thoughts on soft skills and potential solutions. Questionnaires proved to be quite beneficial for quickly acquiring vast volumes of data, both quantitative and qualitative.

When executing the final review on the relative importance of the mentioned soft skills, intervals were established using Patacsil's (2017) table of determining intervals. This is shown below.

**Table 2**

*5-Point Likert interval ratings*

<b>Description</b>	<b>Range</b>
5 - Very Important (VI)	4.21-5.00
4- Important (I)	3.41-4.20
3 - Somewhat Important (SI)	2.61-3.40
2 - Less Important (LI)	1.81-2.60
1 - Least Important of All (LIA)	1.00-1.80

(Patacsil, 2017)

However, when conducting the final analysis on the relative observed values and the corresponding need for development of the stated skills, intervals were calculated using the

author's adaption of Patacsil's (2017) table of determining values suitable for the questions used in this study, as shown below:

**Table 3**

*Adapted 5-Point Likert interval ratings*

<b>Description</b>	<b>Range</b>
5 - No Improvement Needed (NI)	4.21-5.00
4- Little Improvement Needed (LI)	3.41-4.20
3 - Some Improvement Needed (SI)	2.61-3.40
2 - Considerable Improvement Needed (CI)	1.81-2.60
1 - More Significant Improvement Needed (MSI)	1.00-1.80

(Adaptation of Patacsil, 2017)

The study investigates how learners, instructors, and alumni perceive the value of soft skills in educational contexts, with a focus on online instructional settings. The results show a significant difference in how instructors and learners regard these skills, with instructors regularly rating them higher than learners. This disparity demonstrates a lack of knowledge among students about the long-term benefits of soft skills like as communication, collaboration, flexibility, and emotional intelligence, which instructors consider critical for future success.

### ***Perceptions of Soft Skills Overview***

Instructors rated work ethic and perseverance and problem solving and critical thinking highly, with mean scores of 4.70 and 4.60, respectively, compared to learners' scores of 4.20 and 4.50. Alumni ratings matched that of instructors, suggesting that there are real-world experiences

that may have influenced their perceptions. Creativity is another soft skill that was emphasized by instructors, receiving a mean score of 4.23 from instructors and 3.65 from learners, indicating a potential gap in the acquired levels of understanding and appreciation.

### ***Instructor and Alumni Perspectives***

Prior to and after digital and hybrid integration, instructors and alumni alike stress the value of soft skills in Zimbabwe's private secondary schools. The focus placed by instructors on adaptability, communication, and critical thinking is reflected in the feedback provided by alumni, who also highlighted the value of these abilities outside of the classroom. This consistency supports instructors' views that soft skills should be given priority in the curriculum and indicates that alumni benefited from the long-term advantages of the abilities they learnt from their digital and hybrid learning experiences.

### ***Impact of Digital Learning***

Soft skills have been reevaluated in the face of new digital and hybrid learning demands, as educators emphasize greater adaptability, flexibility, and digital literacy. Instructors found that adaptability and related skills were still highly rated in both pre-COVID and post-COVID, despite slight decrease of overall importance. Furthermore, qualitative results (RQ2.2) indicate an increased emphasis on instructors' ability to adapt and handle themselves in digital environments.

Nonetheless, the learners' attitudes have not changed too much. Although soft skills are still highly valued by learners (RQ3.1.3, Table 42), their perceptions of skill development in digital environments differ. The distribution of information was even for soft skills (RQ3.1.6) and a

majority (54 learners) had regressed some skills on the RQ1.1.7 test. Furthermore, the learners reported only moderate levels of proficiency (RQ3.1.5, Table 44), particularly in skills like teamwork and problem-solving, which are more challenging to develop in virtual environments.

### *Qualitative Insights*

Instructors' qualitative comments (RQ2.2) highlight the importance of soft skills for success in both educational and workplace settings. For example, one instructor stated:

*“Soft skills are as important as technical skills because they determine how students deal with difficulties, especially in online learning where group interaction and personal activation are needed”* (Instructor Response, 2024).

While learners expressed mixed views about the value of soft skills, frequently prioritising technical competencies for immediate academic performance, they still recognised certain soft skills in context. One learner remarked:

*“I realize teamwork is important, but I don't see it adding anything more to my grade than me trying harder on my own”* (Learner Response, 2024).

Instructors also emphasised the role of self-discipline and time management in digital environments:

*“With digital learning, learners are responsible for their participation, so flexibility and self-discipline are now critical”* (Instructor Response, 2024).

These qualitative insights from respondents directly support the quantitative findings showing that learners perceived acquisition of soft skills is moderate (RQ3.1.5, Table 44), and that hybrid learning had mixed impacts on skill development and acquisition (RQ3.1.6–3.1.7).

### ***Curricular Implications***

The research indicates that the development of soft skills is strongly influenced by curriculum elements, particularly digital literacy and the ability to apply practical skills (RQ4.1.5, RQ4.1.6). For example, instructors and alumni rated experiential learning methods, such as project-based tasks and real-world case studies, as highly effective for skill development, with mean ratings of 4.7 out of 5 (Table 54, Figure 25).

Most learners also recognised that instructors encouraged independence and self-management during hybrid learning, supporting critical thinking and problem-solving development (RQ3.1.12, Table 49; RQ3.1.13, Table 50). One instructor explained:

*“With digital learning, learners are responsible for their participation, so flexibility and self-discipline are now critical”* (Instructor Response, 2024).

To enhance soft skills further, instructors suggested using instructional modifications that emphasise group projects, collaborative problem-solving, and exposure to real-world scenarios (RQ4.1.3, RQ4.1.5). Alumni corroborated this, noting that teamwork and project work in school helped them develop interpersonal and problem-solving skills crucial for the workplace (RQ4.1.6).

Overall, the findings underscore the need to align instructional strategies with the demands of digital and hybrid learning environments, ensuring learners acquire essential soft skills for academic and future career success.

### **Overview of Key Findings**

1. **Integration of Project-Based Learning:** The findings demonstrate the potential advantages that could be seen by including project-based learning in the curriculum. This could improve learners' capacity to work on challenging assignments that call for cooperation, dialogue, and independent problem-solving. As learners tackle a variety of problems and consider several approaches, project-based learning cultivates resilience and adaptability.
2. **Cultural and Contextual Influences:** The cultural background of private schools in Zimbabwe has a big impact on how people think about skill development and how they teach. The degree of independence permitted in schools is impacted by the significant focus on deference to authority. This cultural viewpoint might be a factor in learners' perceptions of instructors as the main source of knowledge, discouraging autonomy.
3. **Shift Towards Learner-Centred Models:** In Zimbabwean educational systems, there is increasing support for a change to learner-centred teaching approaches. Since soft skills are essential for success in an increasingly globalised world, these models place a high value on critical thinking and self-directed learning. It is advised to take a well-rounded

approach that incorporates contemporary teaching techniques while honouring cultural values.

4. **Gaps in Instructor Training and Support:** The results suggest that instructors may not be well equipped to support the development of soft skills. Many learners believe that instructors have an inclination to intervene excessively. This emphasises the need for specific training programmes for instructors that concentrate on soft skill facilitation and give them the tools they need to promote learner autonomy.

These significant developments serve as a basis for the analysis that follows, which will go more deeply into how these findings affect curriculum development, instructional strategies, and instructor training—specifically, the research questions that were reviewed in this chapter's introduction. By approaching these topics, the following analysis hopes to provide understanding and practical suggestions for improving the development of soft skills in learning environments, ultimately equipping learners for success in a globalised society.

## Research Question 1

*What were Zimbabwean private secondary school learners' and instructors' impressions of soft skills prior to the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities?*

### **RQ1.1 Quantitative Analysis**

#### **RQ1.1.1 What do the mean figures point toward?**

**Table 4***Changes in Attitudes toward Soft Skills Post-Hybrid Learning Implementation*

<b>Attitude Metric</b>	<b>Learners (Mean, SD)</b>	<b>Instructors (Mean, SD)</b>	<b>Alumni (Mean, SD)</b>
Importance of Soft Skills	4.1 (0.2)	4.4 (0.2)	4.3 (0.3)
Confidence in Soft Skills	3.6 (0.9)	4.0 (0.5)	3.8 (0.7)
Attitude Toward Digital Tools	3.7 (1.0)	4.2 (0.6)	4.0 (0.8)
Perceived Skill Gaps	3.9 (0.8)	4.1 (0.7)	3.7 (0.9)

Instructors and alumni demonstrate an increased confidence in digital tools after exposure to digital and learning environments, with instructors rating their confidence in digital tools at 4.2 (SD = 0.6) and alumni at 4.0 (SD = 0.8). In contrast, learners showed moderate confidence in soft skills (Mean = 3.6, SD = 0.9) and digital tools (Mean = 3.7, SD = 1.0), indicating a developmental need for more focused training and development in the area. This aligns with recent studies suggesting that hybrid learning can effectively bridge soft skill gaps by providing learners with real-world digital applications (Nguyen et al, 2022).

#### **RQ1.1.2 How do the opinions compare for curriculum design?**

**Table 5**

*Comparison of Instructor, Learner, and Alumni Perceptions on Curriculum Design for Soft Skills Acquisition*

<b>Curriculum Feature</b>	<b>Learners (Mean, SD)</b>	<b>Instructors (Mean, SD)</b>	<b>Alumni (Mean, SD)</b>
Integration of Soft Skills	4.0 (0.7)	4.5 (0.5)	4.1 (0.6)
Relevance to Career Success	4.1 (0.8)	4.4 (0.6)	4.2 (0.7)
Practical Skill Application	3.8 (0.9)	4.3 (0.5)	4.0 (0.8)
Regular Assessment Feedback	3.7 (1.0)	4.2 (0.6)	3.9 (0.7)

Instructors view integrating soft skills within the curriculum as essential (Mean = 4.5, SD = 0.5), recognizing its relevance to future career success. Alumni, reflecting on their schooling experience, rated the curriculum relevance at 4.2 (SD = 0.7), aligning with studies indicating that skills like adaptability and communication are critical to employability in modern workplaces (Jackson, 2021). Learners scored lower on practical skill application (Mean = 3.8, SD = 0.9), indicating a gap that curriculum designers should address by incorporating hands-on learning approaches.

**Table 6**

*Paired Sample T-test (Pre vs. Post Perceptions of Soft Skills)*

<b>Soft Skill</b>	<b>Pre-Mean (SD)</b>	<b>Post-Mean (SD)</b>	<b>t-value (p-value)</b>
Confidence in Digital Tools	3.5 (1.1)	4.2 (0.8)	-5.41 (p < 0.001)
Instructors' Perception of Soft Skills	4.2 (0.6)	4.6 (0.5)	-3.86 (p < 0.001)

**T-tests** show that both learners and instructors had different perceptions of soft skills before the introduction of digital and hybrid learning opportunities, with instructors generally rating soft skills higher.

**Table 7**

*Chi-Square Test for Differences in Perceptions (Learners vs. Instructors)*

<b>Group</b>	<b>Pre-Perception of Soft Skills</b>	<b>Post-Perception of Soft Skills</b>	<b>Chi-Square (p-value)</b>
Learners vs. Instructors	6.52 (p = 0.04)	Similar perceptions post-intervention	0.04

The **Chi-Square Test** indicates a shift in perceptions, with learners and instructors aligning more closely on the importance of soft skills.

**Table 8***Multiple Regression Analysis (Curriculum Features Predicting Soft Skill Development)*

Predictor Variables	$\beta$ (Standardized)	p-value
Digital Literacy	0.35	< 0.001
Practical Skill Application	0.28	0.02
Relevance to Career Success	0.20	0.03

**Multiple regression analysis** suggests that curriculum features, particularly digital literacy and practical skill application, are strong predictors of soft skill development in private secondary schools.

## RQ1.2 Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis provides a thorough examination of how learners at private secondary schools in Zimbabwe perceived the instructor's methods for developing soft skills prior to the introduction of digital and hybrid learning environments. According to these results, learners believe that their interactions with instructors have a significant impact on how they develop

critical thinking, problem-solving, and resilience—all of which are important components of the larger category of soft skills.

### **RQ1.2.1 Independence and problem-solving opportunities**

A common theme among learners' responses was the appreciation of instructional methods that encourage independence. Many learners expressed that being allowed to find solutions independently fostered a sense of self-efficacy and resilience. For instance, one learner shared, *“I feel my instructor trusts my ability to figure things out on my own, which has given me more confidence over time”* (Respondent A). This perception aligns with findings from recent studies, where fostering learner autonomy is shown to enhance soft skill development, particularly in areas like critical thinking and problem-solving (Tate, 2023; Rahman, 2023). Encouraging learners to navigate challenges independently not only bolsters confidence but also promotes a growth mindset, essential for navigating complex real-world scenarios (Smith et al, 2023).

According to Swan et al. (2023), approaches that encourage learners to take on challenges independently build resilience and adaptability, essential for the rapidly evolving modern workplace. Learners in the current study appeared to value these skills, perceiving them as more beneficial in the long term than immediate academic success. One respondent emphasized, *“Learning how to solve problems without help is something I know will help me in future jobs and situations, not just in school”* (Respondent C). This sentiment resonates with broader educational theories that suggest empowering learners with problem-solving opportunities equips them to handle uncertainty and adversity (Baker, 2022).

### **RQ1.2.2 Direct intervention and support**

Conversely, several learners expressed that instructor intervention, while supportive, could sometimes limit the full development of critical thinking skills. A notable segment of learners described instances where Instructors would offer help too soon, diminishing the opportunity to explore independent solutions. One learner reflected, *“Sometimes, teachers give us the answer before we’ve even had a chance to think it through, which can make it feel like my own effort doesn’t matter”* (Respondent B). This observation is consistent with Larsen’s (2022) findings that excessive direct intervention may inadvertently stifle learners’ ability to develop initiative and perseverance. When learners are overly dependent on instructor guidance, they may not cultivate the self-reliance required to address challenges autonomously.

These reflections suggest a potential need for recalibrating instructional strategies in traditional classroom settings to strike a balance between support and autonomy. Studies have shown that this balance is crucial for developing what is often referred to as "grit" in learners—the perseverance and passion for long-term goals, which is increasingly recognized as a predictor of success beyond the classroom (Cheng, 2023; Adams, 2022). By providing guidance in a controlled manner, instructors can create an environment where learners are encouraged to explore solutions independently, with the reassurance of support when necessary (Jones & Simons, 2022).

### **RQ1.2.3 Perceived value of soft skills in traditional settings**

An additional layer of insight emerged around how learners perceived the importance of soft skills in traditional classroom settings. Several respondents indicated that while academic skills were heavily emphasized, they felt soft skills were acknowledged as secondary yet essential components of their overall development. For example, one learner shared, *“I know that school is about getting good grades, but it’s also about learning to communicate and work with others. I just wish there was more of a focus on these skills in class”* (Respondent D). This sentiment reflects current research that advocates for a stronger integration of soft skills within the curriculum, as these skills are increasingly essential in today’s collaborative and adaptive work environments (Nyoni & Dube, 2022; Rahman, 2023).

Educational frameworks that integrate soft skills alongside academic learning goals are becoming more prominent globally. According to Smith et al. (2023), when learners understand the relevance of skills like communication, collaboration, and adaptability, they are more likely to actively engage in their own development of these skills. Learners in this study expressed an awareness of the potential long-term benefits of soft skills, even if they felt the immediate classroom environment sometimes prioritized content mastery over holistic skill development.

#### **RQ1.2.4 Instructors' role in encouraging soft skills development**

Learners’ qualitative responses also underscored the critical role of instructors in shaping the perception and importance of soft skills. Many learners viewed their instructors as role models, especially in areas related to interpersonal skills. A respondent highlighted, *“When my teacher is patient and respectful, it makes me want to be the same with others, especially when working in groups”* (Respondent E). This observation aligns with recent research suggesting that instructors

who demonstrate patience, empathy, and effective communication in their interactions with learners can reinforce the importance of these skills (Brown et al, 2023).

Moreover, learners expressed that observing instructors' interpersonal skills provided them with practical examples of how to apply similar skills in peer interactions. According to Cheng (2023), modelling behaviour is a powerful tool in education, especially for soft skill acquisition. When educators demonstrate these skills in real-time, learners gain implicit instruction that is often as valuable as explicit content delivery. The learners' perceptions that instructors who modelled strong interpersonal skills contributed positively to their own skill development supports this theory, indicating a strong correlation between instructor behaviour and learner skill acquisition in non-digital learning environments (Larsen, 2022).

Thus, the qualitative data from learners suggests that before digital and hybrid classroom integration, the development of soft skills in Zimbabwean private secondary schools was influenced largely by instructors' approaches to learner autonomy and direct intervention. Learners valued both independence and support but expressed a need for a more balanced approach that would allow for self-discovery and problem-solving while still providing guidance when necessary. The emphasis on modelling behaviour by instructors also emerged as a significant factor, reinforcing that soft skills are not only taught but also observed and internalized by learners in traditional classroom environments.

Recent literature supports these insights, underscoring that instructor behaviours and instructional strategies directly impact learners' soft skill acquisition (Jones & Simons, 2022; Baker, 2022). As the educational landscape continues to evolve with digital tools, these findings

highlight the need to maintain intentional, balanced strategies for fostering soft skills, even as instructional methods become more technologically integrated (Tate, 2023; Rahman, 2023).

The analysis indicates that learners recognize and value the development of soft skills, particularly through methods that encourage independence. These findings suggest that, prior to digital integration, the Zimbabwean private secondary school context fostered an environment conducive to soft skill development, though improvements in instructional balance could enhance this further. Moving forward, integrating digital learning tools may provide new opportunities to advance these skills in more structured, measurable ways (Brown et al, 2023).

## Research Question 2

*How have the differences in **instructor** perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap transformed as a result of the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities?*

In examining the perspectives of instructors on soft skills prior to and following digital integration, quantitative and qualitative analyses reveal insights into the evolving relevance of these skills.

### **RQ2.1 Quantitative Analysis**

#### **RQ2.1.1 Age group distribution**

##### **Table 9**

**Table 9***Age group distribution*

<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>
Age Group 18-25	7
Age Group 26-35	11
Age Group 36-45	20
Age Group 46-55	13
Age Group 56-65	10

The majority of respondents are aged between 36 and 45, indicating a significant proportion from mid-career backgrounds. The significance of this lies in the fact that attitudes towards soft skills, digital learning, and hybrid classroom experiences are most likely informed by both professional experiences as well as recent exposure to educational environments. The relatively balanced distribution across other age groups also ensures that insights reflect a wider range of experiences, making the findings more generalisable across participants in Zimbabwe's private secondary school context.

**RQ2.1.2 Education level distribution****Table 10***Education level distribution*

<b>Education Level</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>
Undergraduate Degree	23
Master's Degree	15
Honours Degree	14
O' Level	4
A' Level	3

The data indicates a highly educated respondent pool, with a majority of instructors having pursued higher education. This could imply a focus on professional development and career advancement among the respondents.

### RQ2.1.3 Relationship between age groups and education levels

**Table 11**

*Relationship between age groups and education levels*

Age Group	Education Level
<b>Age Group 18-25</b>	Predominantly pursuing an Undergraduate degree.
<b>Age Group 26-35</b>	Mix of Undergraduate, Honours, and Master's degrees.
<b>Age Group 36-45</b>	Primarily Honours and Master's degrees.
<b>Age Group 46-55</b>	Combination of Undergraduate, Honours, and Master's degrees.
<b>Age Group 56-65</b>	Mostly Undergraduate and Honours degrees.

Younger respondents are more likely to be in the early stages of higher education, while older respondents have completed advanced degrees. As age increases, there is a noticeable trend towards higher education levels, indicating career advancement and experience.

### RQ2.1.4 What is instructor current level of knowledge on soft skills?

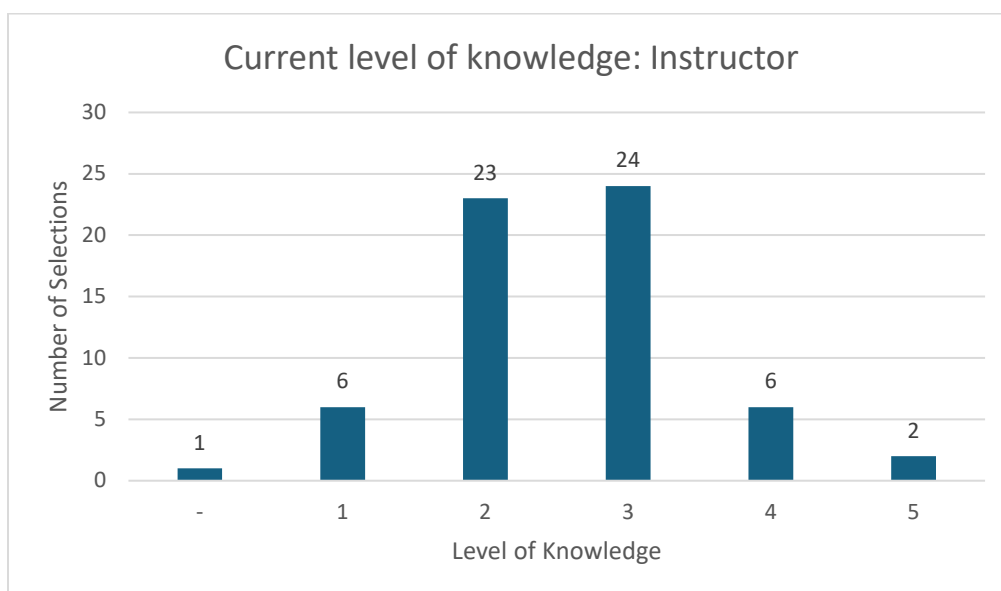
**Table 12**

*Instructor current knowledge on soft skills*

<b>Current level of knowledge</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>
-	1
1	6
2	23
3	24
4	6
5	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>2,59</b>
<b>Result</b>	<b>Considerable Improvement Needed</b>

**Figure 1:**

*Instructor current knowledge on soft skills*



This information suggests that most instructors perceive their knowledge of soft skills to be at a mean of 2, 59 out of 5 (Considerable Improvement Needed), with fewer individuals rating themselves at either of the extremes. This indicates that there may be a need for targeted training to elevate those with lower self-assessed knowledge and to challenge those who rate themselves highly in order to further develop their skills.

### RQ2.1.5 What is the overall perceived level of importance of soft skills?

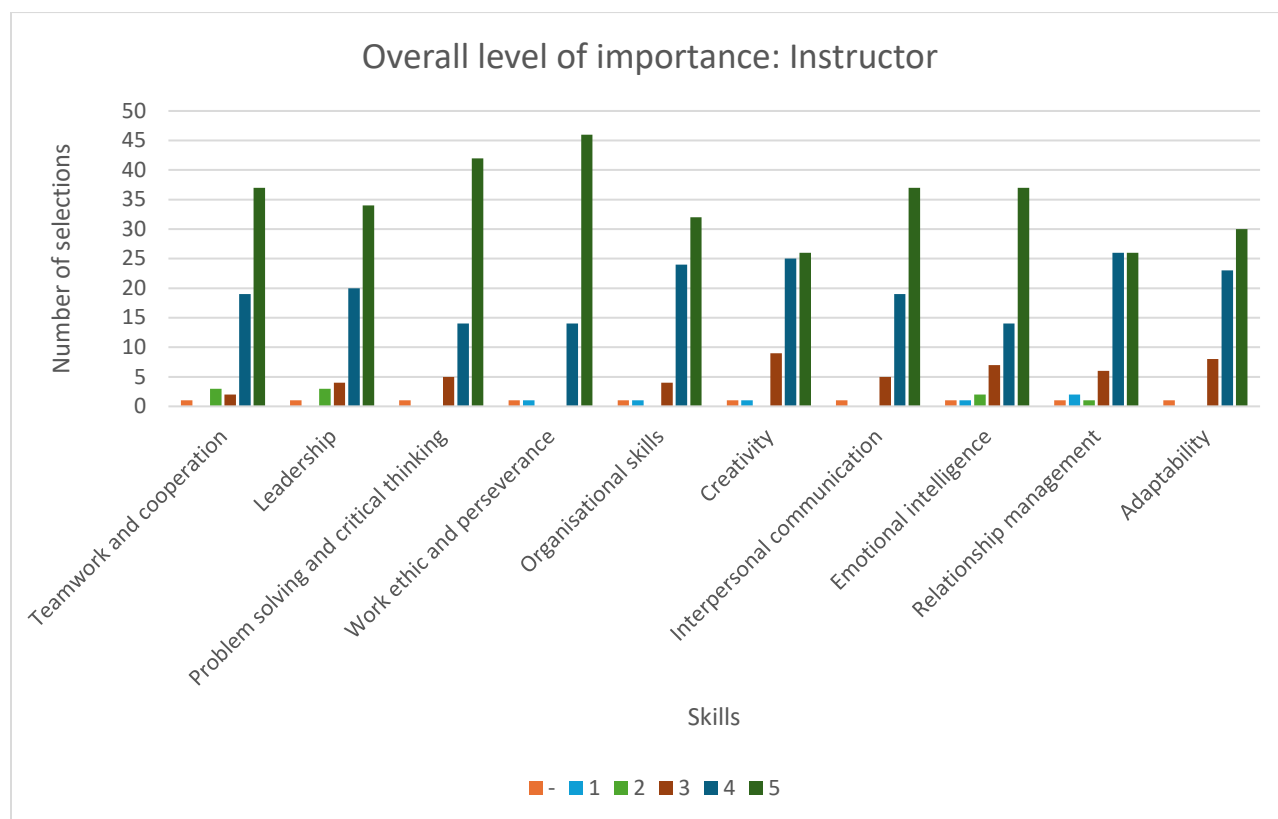
**Table 13**

Overall perceived level of importance of soft skills to instructors

<b>Skill</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Teamwork and cooperation</b>	1	0	3	2	19	37
<b>Leadership</b>	1	0	3	4	20	34
<b>Problem solving and critical thinking</b>	1	0	0	5	14	42
<b>Work ethic and perseverance</b>	1	1	0	0	14	46
<b>Organisational skills</b>	1	1	0	4	24	32
<b>Creativity</b>	1	1	0	9	25	26
<b>Interpersonal communication</b>	1	0	0	5	19	37
<b>Emotional intelligence</b>	1	1	2	7	14	37
<b>Relationship management</b>	1	2	1	6	26	26
<b>Adaptability</b>	1	0	0	8	23	30

**Figure 2:**

*Overall perceived level of importance of soft skills to instructors*



Work ethic and perseverance, problem solving and critical thinking, and interpersonal communication are seen as the most important soft skills. Skills such as leadership, organisational skills, and adaptability are also valued but to a slightly lesser extent. Creativity and relationship management, while still important, are perceived as less critical compared to other skills.

### RQ2.1.6 What are the mean levels of instructor importance?

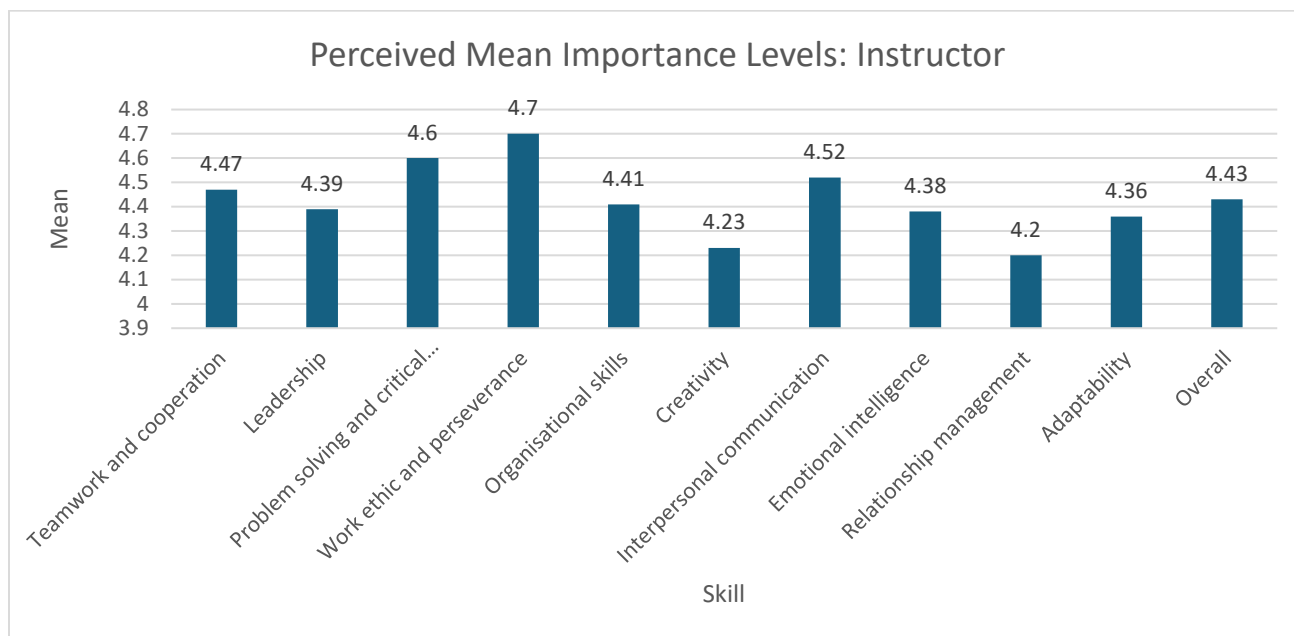
**Table 14**

*Mean levels of importance to instructors*

<b>Skill</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Result</b>
<b>Teamwork and cooperation</b>	4,47	0,8	Very Important
<b>Leadership</b>	4,39	0,8	Very Important
<b>Problem solving and critical thinking</b>	4,6	0,6	Very Important
<b>Work ethic and perseverance</b>	4,7	0,6	Very Important
<b>Organisational skills</b>	4,41	0,8	Very Important
<b>Creativity</b>	4,23	0,8	Very Important
<b>Interpersonal communication</b>	4,52	0,7	Very Important
<b>Emotional intelligence</b>	4,38	0,9	Very Important
<b>Relationship management</b>	4,2	0,9	Important
<b>Adaptability</b>	4,36	0,7	Very Important
<b>Overall</b>	<b>4,43</b>	<b>0,2</b>	<b>Very Important</b>

**Figure 3:**

*Mean levels of importance to instructors*



The mean overall perceived level of importance of soft skills for learner success is 4.43 (SD = 0.2) which, according to Patacsil (2017) table of intervals, equates to a result of “Very Important.”

**RQ2.1.7 What are the overall instructor perceived levels of acquisition of soft skills in learners?**

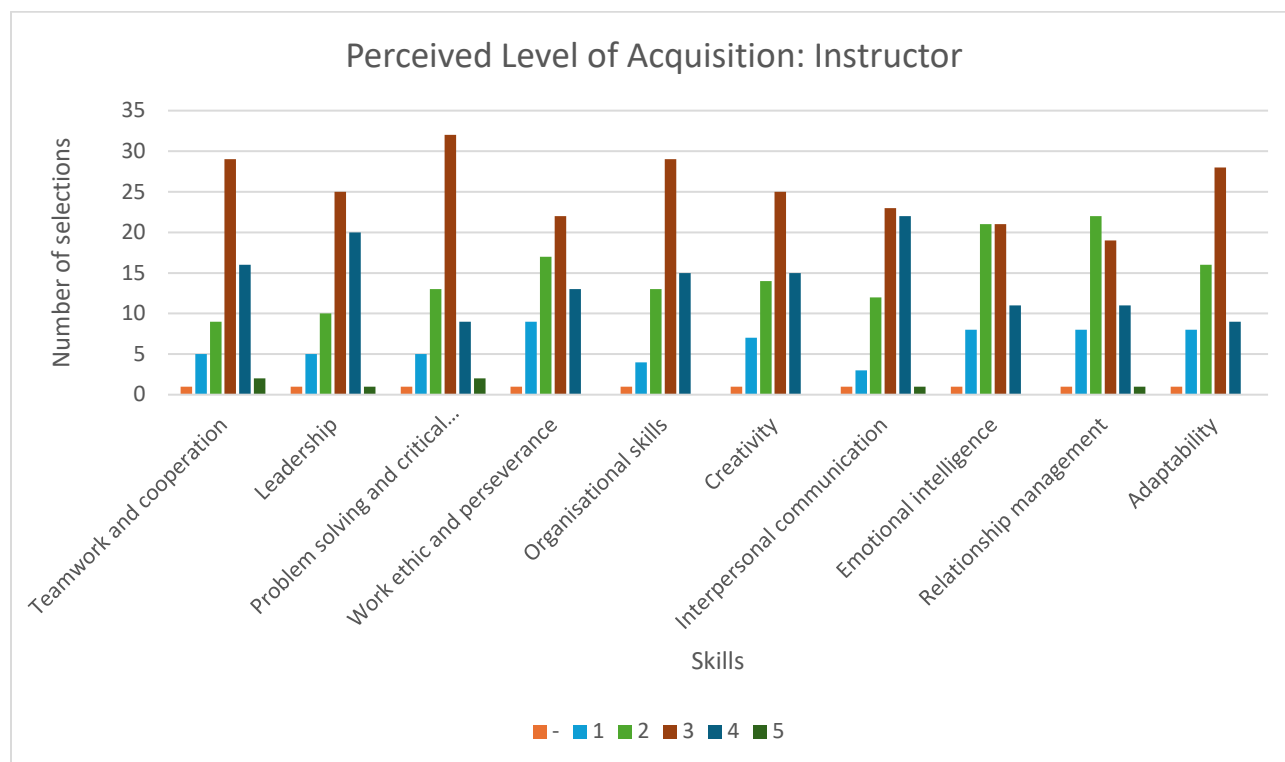
**Table 15**

*Overall instructor perceived levels of learner acquisition of soft skills*

<b>Rating</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Teamwork and cooperation</b>	1	5	9	29	16	2
<b>Leadership</b>	1	5	10	25	20	1
<b>Problem solving and critical thinking</b>	1	5	13	32	9	2
<b>Work ethic and perseverance</b>	1	9	17	22	13	0
<b>Organisational skills</b>	1	4	13	29	15	0
<b>Creativity</b>	1	7	14	25	15	0
<b>Interpersonal communication</b>	1	3	12	23	22	1
<b>Emotional intelligence</b>	1	8	21	21	11	0
<b>Relationship management</b>	1	8	22	19	11	1
<b>Adaptability</b>	1	8	16	28	9	0

**Figure 4:**

*Overall instructor perceived levels of learner acquisition of soft skills*



Interpersonal communication, leadership, and teamwork and cooperation are believed to be the better acquired soft skills. Skills like problem solving and critical thinking, organisational skills, and creativity are also thought to be acquired by learners to a reasonable level, but to a slightly lesser extent. Emotional intelligence and relationship management, while shown as having high levels of importance, are perceived as less developed compared to other listed skills.

**RQ2.1.8 What are the mean levels of learner acquisition of soft skills according to instructors?**

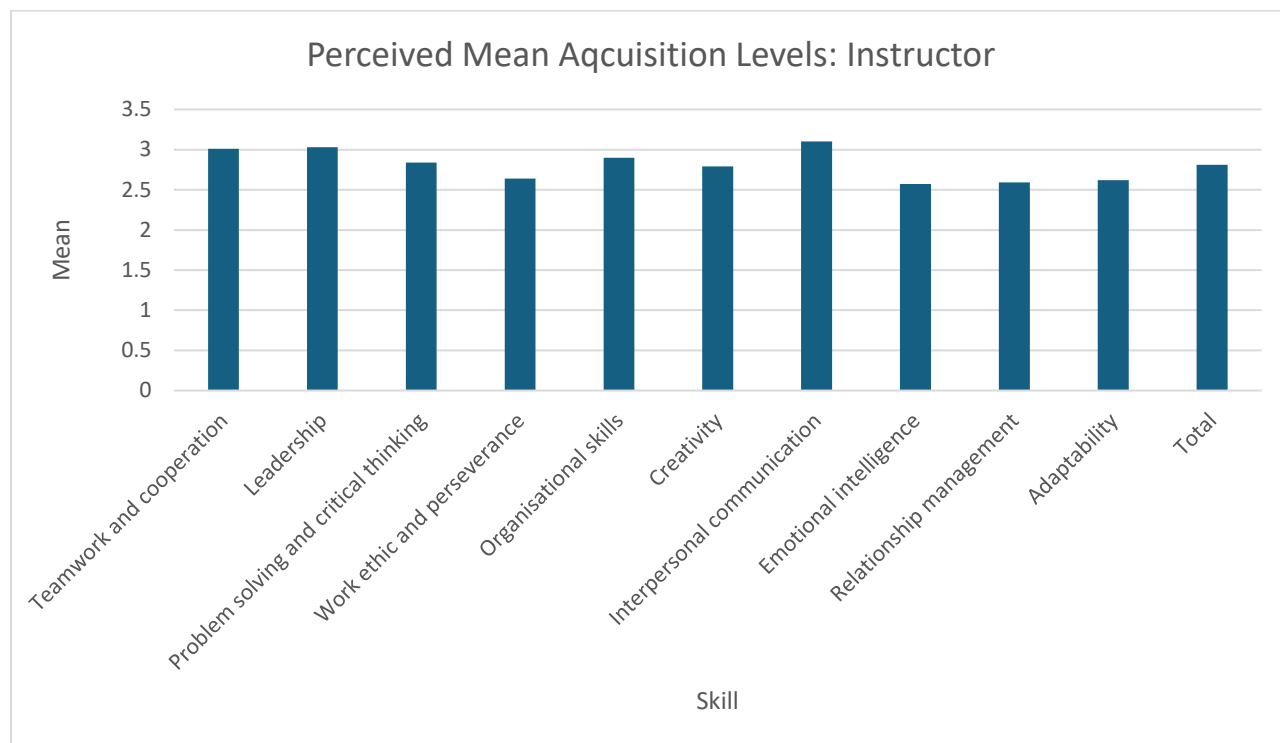
**Table 16**

*Mean levels of learner acquisition according to instructors*

<b>Skill</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Result</b>
<b>Teamwork and cooperation</b>	3,01	0,94	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Leadership</b>	3,03	0,95	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Problem solving and critical thinking</b>	2,84	0,9	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Work ethic and perseverance</b>	2,64	0,98	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Organisational skills</b>	2,9	0,85	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Creativity</b>	2,79	0,95	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Interpersonal communication</b>	3,1	0,91	Some Improvement Needed
			Considerable Improvement
<b>Emotional intelligence</b>	2,57	0,94	Needed
			Considerable Improvement
<b>Relationship management</b>	2,59	0,99	Needed
<b>Adaptability</b>	2,62	0,9	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,81</b>	<b>0,2</b>	<b>Some Improvement Needed</b>

**Figure 5:**

*Mean levels of learner acquisition according to instructors*



The mean overall perceived level of learner acquisition of soft skills is 2.81 (SD = 0.2) which, according to the adapted Patacsil (2017) table of intervals, equates to a result of the lower spectrum of “Some Improvement Needed.”

**RQ2.1.9 How have instructor perceptions of importance and acquisition changed from pre- to post-COVID and hybrid learning?**

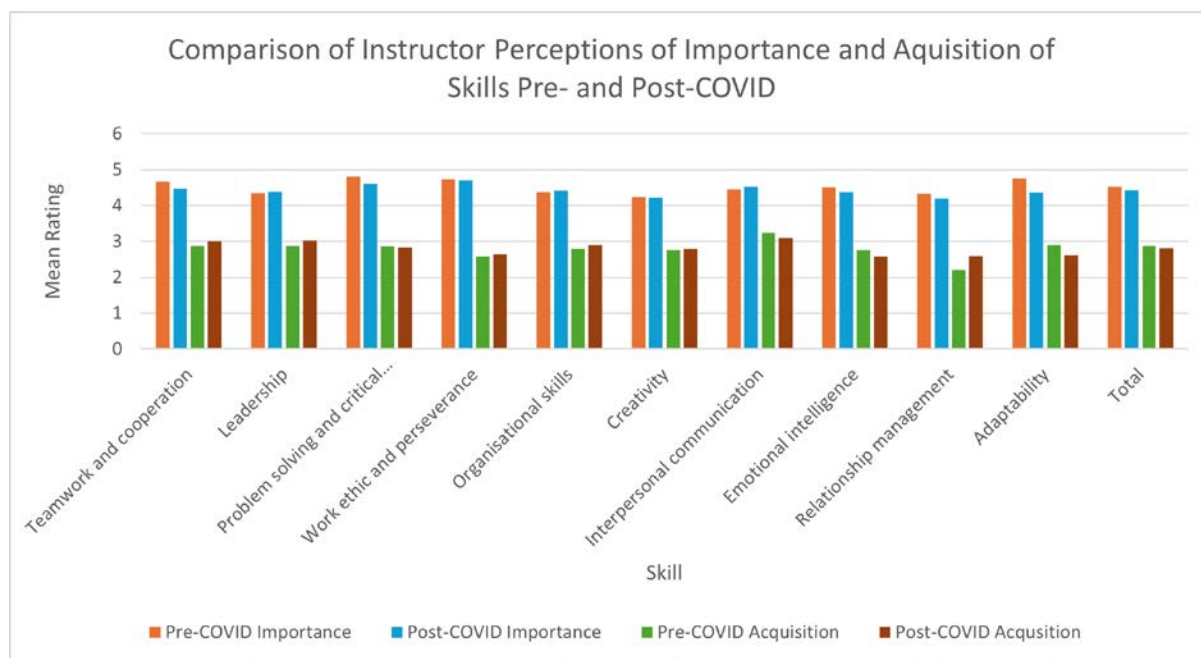
**Table 17**

*Comparison of instructor perceptions of importance and acquisition of skills pre- and post-COVID*

<b>Skill</b>	<b>Pre- COVID Importance</b>	<b>Post- COVID Importance</b>	<b>Pre- COVID Acquisition</b>	<b>Post- COVID Acquisition</b>
<b>Teamwork and cooperation</b>	4,68	4,47	2,88	3,01
<b>Leadership</b>	4,35	4,39	2,87	3,03
<b>Problem solving and critical thinking</b>	4,81	4,6	2,86	2,84
<b>Work ethic and perseverance</b>	4,73	4,7	2,57	2,64
<b>Organisational skills</b>	4,37	4,41	2,79	2,9
<b>Creativity</b>	4,24	4,23	2,76	2,79
<b>Interpersonal communication</b>	4,46	4,52	3,24	3,1
<b>Emotional intelligence</b>	4,51	4,38	2,76	2,57
<b>Relationship management</b>	4,33	4,2	2,21	2,59
<b>Adaptability</b>	4,76	4,36	2,9	2,62
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,52</b>	<b>4,43</b>	<b>2,88</b>	<b>2,81</b>

**Figure 6:**

*Comparison of instructor perceptions of importance and acquisition of skills pre- to post-COVID*



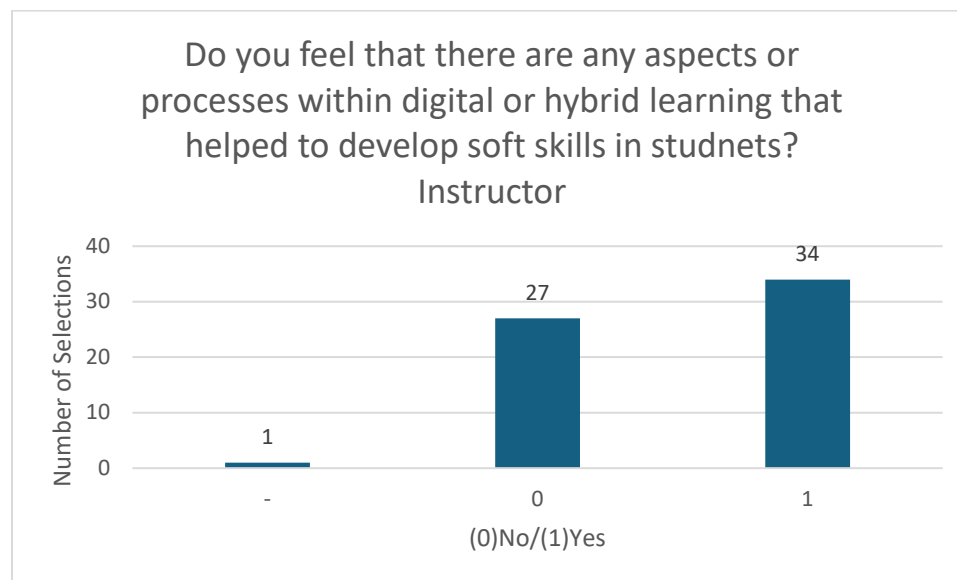
Overall, the perceived importance of most skills slightly decreased post-COVID, with the total average importance dropping from 4.52 to 4.43. Problem solving and critical thinking, work ethic and perseverance, and adaptability were rated as the most important skills both pre- and post-COVID, though their importance slightly decreased post-COVID.

There is a general trend of slight regression in the acquisition of most skills post-COVID, with the total average acquisition decreasing from 2.88 to 2.81. Teamwork and cooperation, leadership, and organisational skills showed a slight increase in acquisition post-COVID. Problem solving and critical thinking saw a slight decrease in acquisition, indicating a potential area for further development. Emotional intelligence and adaptability experienced a decrease in acquisition, suggesting more substantial challenges in these areas during the course of the pandemic.

**RQ2.1.10 Are there any processes that have developed learner soft skills during the digital and hybrid learning phases?**

**Figure 7:**

*Did digital and hybrid learning develop soft skills?*

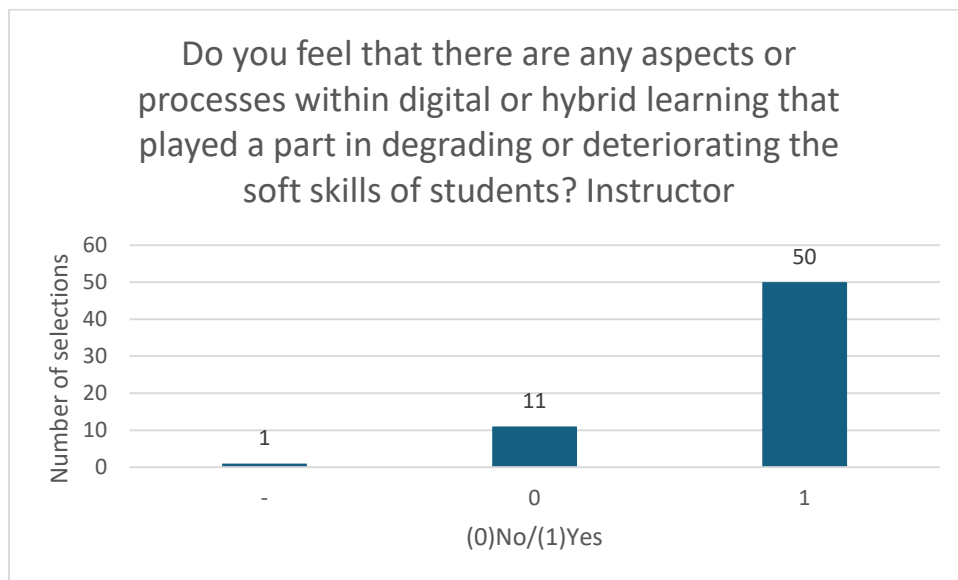


34 respondents confirmed that digital or hybrid learning does help develop soft skills. The remaining 27 instructors selected "No," indicating a more neutral stance or uncertainty about the effectiveness of these learning modalities in fostering soft skills. The high number of "Yes" responses suggests a strong belief among instructors that digital and hybrid learning environments can effectively enhance soft skills such as teamwork, communication, and adaptability.

**RQ2.1.11 Are there any processes that have regressed learner soft skills during the digital and hybrid learning phases?**

**Figure 8:**

*Did digital and hybrid learning develop soft skills?*



A significant majority of instructors (50) responded "Yes," that certain elements of digital or hybrid learning negatively impact learners' soft skills. A smaller number of instructors (11) selected "No," suggesting that they do not perceive any detrimental effects on soft skills from these learning modalities.

The high number of "Yes" responses reflects widespread concern among instructors about the potential shortcomings of digital and hybrid learning environments in fostering essential soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability. The results highlight the need for educators and institutions to critically assess and enhance digital and hybrid learning strategies to ensure they effectively support soft skills development.

**RQ2.1.12 How well are the skills currently being measured in examinations?**

**Table 18***Extent to which soft skills are being measured in examinations (Instructor)*

<b>Skills Currently measured</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Result</b>
<b>Teamwork and cooperation</b>	2,16	1,02	Considerable Improvement Needed
<b>Leadership</b>	2,26	0,96	Considerable Improvement Needed
<b>Problem solving and critical thinking</b>	3,49	0,99	Little Improvement Needed
<b>Work ethic and perseverance</b>	3,03	1	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Organisational skills</b>	3,08	0,88	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Creativity</b>	3,01	0,92	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Interpersonal communication</b>	2,66	1,01	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Emotional intelligence</b>	2,7	0,95	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Relationship management</b>	2,59	1,02	Considerable Improvement Needed
<b>Adaptability</b>	2,89	0,88	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Overall</b>	<b>2,78</b>	<b>0,4</b>	<b>Some Improvement Needed</b>

Teamwork and Cooperation and Leadership both have low mean scores (2.16 and 2.26, respectively), indicating a significant need for improvement in these areas. The standard deviations suggest some variability in responses, but the overall consensus is that these skills are underdeveloped. Relationship Management also falls into this category with a mean score of 2.59, suggesting that enhancing this skill is crucial.

Skills such as Work Ethic and Perseverance (3.03), Organisational Skills (3.08), Creativity (3.01), Interpersonal Communication (2.66), Emotional Intelligence (2.7), and Adaptability (2.89)

all have mean scores indicating a moderate level of proficiency. However, there is room for improvement to reach higher levels of competence. The standard deviations for these skills are relatively consistent, indicating a general agreement among respondents about the current level of these skills.

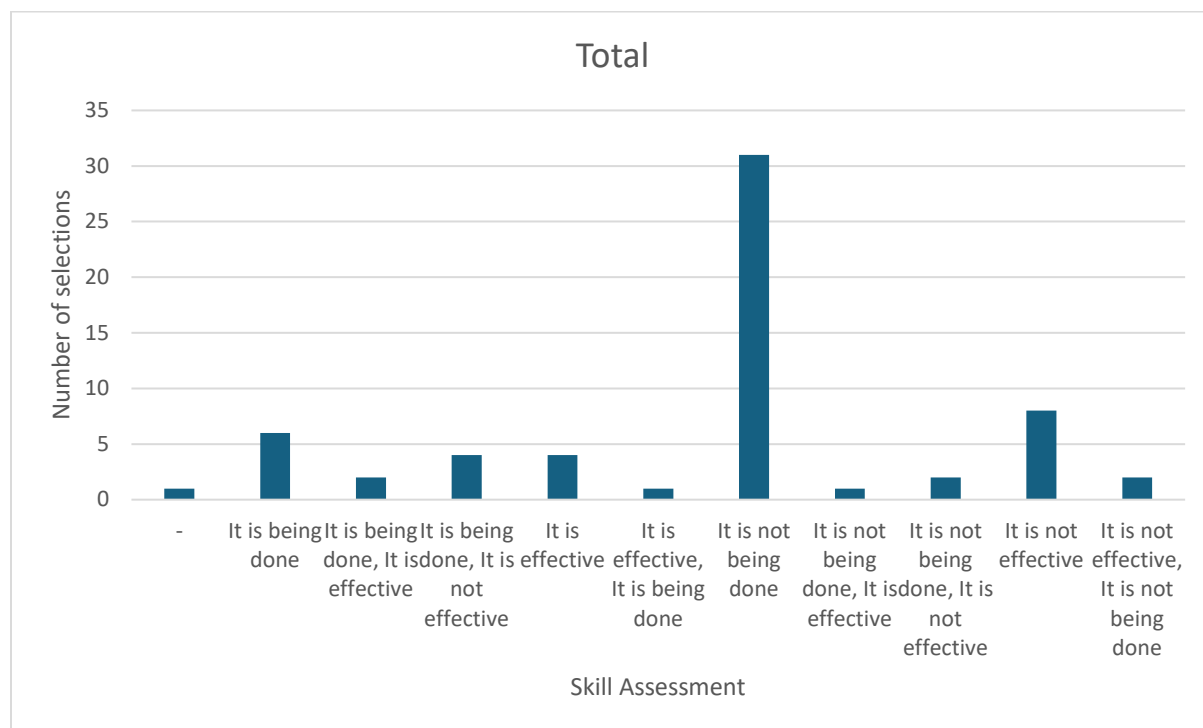
Problem Solving and Critical Thinking has the highest mean score (3.49), suggesting that it is the most developed skill among those measured. While it still requires some attention, it is closer to the desired level of proficiency compared to other skills.

**RQ2.1.13 How do you feel about soft skills assessment currently?****Table 19***How do you feel about soft skills assessment currently?*

<b>Assessment</b>	<b>Number of selections</b>
-	1
<b>It is being done</b>	6
<b>It is being done, It is effective</b>	2
<b>It is being done, It is not effective</b>	4
<b>It is effective</b>	4
<b>It is effective, It is being done</b>	1
<b>It is not being done</b>	31
<b>It is not being done, It is effective</b>	1
<b>It is not being done, It is not effective</b>	2
<b>It is not effective</b>	8
<b>It is not effective, It is not being done</b>	2
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>62</b>

**Figure 9:**

*How do you feel about soft skills assessment currently?*



A significant portion of respondents (31) indicated that the activity is "not being done," suggesting a lack of implementation in many cases. Only a small number of respondents (6) confirmed that the activity "is being done," with varying opinions on its effectiveness.

Among those who believe the activity is being done, opinions are split on its effectiveness: 2 respondents find it effective, while 4 do not. A total of 8 respondents stated that the activity is "not effective," regardless of its implementation status.

The assessment highlights a need for increased implementation and evaluation of the activity to determine its true effectiveness. Addressing these gaps could lead to improved outcomes and perceptions.

#### **RQ2.1.14 Should hybrid learning have a continued place in the learning environment?**

**Table 20**

*Continue hybrid learning?*

<b>Should hybrid learning have a continued place in the schooling</b>		
<b>Response</b>	<b>system?</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>No</b>		
<b>Response</b>	1	1%
<b>Yes</b>	44	71%
<b>No</b>	17	28%
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100%</b>

A significant portion of the respondents (71%) believe that hybrid learning should have a continued place in the schooling system. This indicates a strong level of support for the integration of both in-person and digital learning methodologies. A notable minority (28%) of respondents are against the continuation of hybrid learning.

This reflects a predominant predisposition of instructors towards maintaining hybrid learning within the educational frameworks, showcasing its perceived benefits. However, the

presence of a small number of instructors that are still in opposition to it suggests that there are still challenges and concerns that need to be addressed to make strides towards its implementation.

### **RQ2.1.15: How should these skills be incorporated?**

**Table 21**

*Incorporation methods (Instructor)*

<b>Which school activities?</b>	<b>Number of selections</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Both</b>	42	68%
<b>Co-curricular courses</b>	7	11%
<b>Existing classes</b>	13	21%
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100%</b>

A majority of the instructor respondents (68%) selected "Both," indicating a strong preference for integrating soft skills training into both co-curricular programmes and activities as well as existing classes. A smaller portion of respondents (21%) prioritized "Existing classes," indicating the remaining reliance on the importance of traditional academic subjects. A minority (11%) chose "Co-curricular courses."

The choices presented indicate a clear preference for a more comprehensive educational experience that includes both academic and co-curricular elements. However, there is still a notable emphasis on existing classes, reflecting the importance, and possibly a reliance, of core and traditional academic learning.

**RQ2.1.16: Is there a skills gap in Zimbabwe?****Table 22***Is there a skill gap in Zimbabwe? (Instructor)*

<b>Response</b>	<b>Does Zimbabwe have a skills gap?</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	55	89%
No	7	11%
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100%</b>

A majority of respondents (89%) believe that Zimbabwe has a skills gap. This indicates that there is a widespread perception that there is a disconnect between the soft skills available in the local workforce and those required by employers. A small number (11%) of respondents do not perceive a skills gap in Zimbabwe. The strong consensus on the existence of a skills gap highlights the need for targeted interventions in education and training programmes in order to better equip learners and the workforce with the necessary skills for economic growth and development.

**RQ2.1.17: Do learners and instructors view their roles in education differently?****Table 23***Do learners and instructors view their roles in education differently?*

<b>Response</b>	<b>Do learners and instructors view their roles differently?</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	55	89%
No	7	11%
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100%</b>

A significant majority of the respondents (89%) believe that learners and instructors view their roles in the educational journey differently. This suggests that there is a widespread recognition of differing perspectives and expectations between the two groups, which could impact teaching and learning dynamics. A small minority (11%) of respondents do not believe that there is a difference in how learners and instructors view their roles. The recognition of different perceptions in roles highlights the importance of fostering clear communication and mutual understanding between learners and instructors in order to enhance the educational experience and ensure effective collaboration between the relevant stakeholders.

**RQ2.1.18: What is your usual style of instruction?****Table 24***What is your usual style of instruction?*

<b>Response</b>	<b>What is your usual style of instruction?</b>	<b>%</b>
Demonstration	16	26%
Discussion	24	38%
Lecture	3	4%
Problem-Solving	14	25%
Other	5	7%
Total	62	100%

The most common instructional style is "Discussion," chosen by 38% of respondents. This suggests a preference for interactive and participatory teaching methods that encourage learner engagement and dialogue.

"Demonstration" is used by 26% of respondents, indicating a focus on showing practical examples or processes to facilitate the learning process.

"Problem-Solving" is employed by 25% of respondents, highlighting an emphasis on critical thinking and applying knowledge to real-world scenarios.

Only 4% of respondents use "Lecture" as their usual style of instruction, suggesting a move away from traditional, teacher-centred approaches in favour of more modern, interactive methods.

A small portion (7%) selected "Other," indicating the use of varied or unconventional instructional methods that may not fit into the predefined categories.

**RQ2.1.19: Did your teaching methods change after digital and hybrid learning came to a close?**

**Table 25**

*Did your teaching methods change after digital and hybrid learning came to a close?*

<b>Response</b>	<b>Did your teaching methods change after hybrid?</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	24	39%
No	38	61%
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100%</b>

A large number of instructor respondents (61%) indicated that their teaching methods did not change after transitioning to digital and hybrid learning. A notably small number (39%) indicated that they did make changes to their teaching methods following the integration of digital and hybrid learning. Whilst many instructors retained their traditional teaching methods, the small number who adapted their approaches highlights the need for more flexibility and added innovation in teaching practices where change is necessitated.

**RQ2.1.20: Is there adequate emphasis on soft skills?****Table 26***Is there adequate emphasis on soft skills?*

<b>Response</b>	<b>Is there adequate emphasis on soft skills?</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	14	23%
No	48	77%
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100%</b>

A significant majority of respondents (77%) believe there is inadequate emphasis on soft skills in local education. A smaller portion (23%) of respondents feel that there is adequate emphasis on soft skills. This indicates a strong consensus on the need for a far greater focus on soft skills development in our local schooling systems. This highlights a potential gap in educational or training programmes that could impact individuals' preparedness for the workforce as well as their potential ability to navigate more complex social and professional environments.

**RQ2.1.21 Do you think that soft skills should be taught and assessed in secondary school?****Table 27***Should soft skills be taught and assessed in secondary school?*

<b>Response</b>	<b>Do you think that soft skills should be assessed?</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	42	68%
No	20	32%
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100%</b>

68% of instructor respondents are of the opinion that soft skills should be assessed at secondary school level. A much smaller percentage (32%) of respondents do not support the idea of assessment of soft skills at this level. A majority support for assessing soft skills underscores a perceived importance within both education and the workforce. It suggests a need for developing more effective methods to evaluate these skills in order to ensure that individuals are well-rounded and prepared for a variety of challenges that they may face in tertiary education and in the workforce.

**RQ2.1.22 Do you find that when a learner is struggling, they try to solve the problem first or do they ask for help first?**

**Table 28**

*Do learners try to solve the problem first or do they ask for help first?*

<b>Response</b>	<b>Do learners ask for help or solve problems first?</b>	<b>%</b>
Ask for help	34	55%
Attempt to solve	28	45%
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100%</b>

According to instructors, 55% of learners are seen to prefer to ask for help when encountering problems with the given work whilst the remaining 45% of learners are seen attempt to solve problems on their own before seeking assistance. This perception reveals a fairly balanced

approach among learners, with a nearly even split between those who seek help and those who prefer to tackle problems independently.

**RQ2.1.23 As an instructor, when you see a student struggling, do you allow problem-solving time first or first offer help?**

**Table 29:**

*Do you allow problem-solving time first or first offer help?*

<b>Response</b>	<b>Do you offer help or let learners solve first?</b>	<b>%</b>
Offer help	17	27%
Solve first	45	73%
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100%</b>

A significant majority of instructors (73%) prefer to let learners attempt to solve problems on their own before offering them any help. A smaller portion (27%) of instructors say that they choose to offer help more proactively. The seemingly predominant preference for letting learners solve problems first highlights an educational focus on developing autonomy and problem-solving skills.

**RQ2.1.24: Have you received any training or support to enhance your ability to nurture learners' soft skills during digital and hybrid learning?**

**Table 30**

*Received training during digital and hybrid learning?*

<b>Response</b>	<b>Any soft skill training or support during digital learning?</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	6	10%
No	56	90%
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100%</b>

An overwhelming majority of instructors (90%) reported that there was no soft skill training or support during the period of digital and hybrid learning. Only a small fraction (10%) of respondents reported having received any form of soft skill training or support during digital and hybrid learning. This may highlight a critical area for development and instructor training and professional development in digital learning environments, to equip and make confident instructors who need to pass these skills along to their learners.

**RQ2.1.25: Have you received any training or support to enhance your ability to nurture students' soft skills after digital and hybrid learning ended?**

**Table 31**

*Received training after digital and hybrid learning?*

<b>Response</b>	<b>Any soft skill training or support after digital learning?</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	11	18%
No	51	82%
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100%</b>

Again, many instructors (82%) indicated that they did not receive any form of soft skill training or support after the digital and hybrid learning phases ended. A smaller portion (18%) of the instructors reported having access to soft skill training or support after digital and hybrid learning. This calls attention to the need for educational programmes to extend support for soft skill development beyond the digital learning phase and equip instructors more thoroughly to ensure these skills are realised in their learners.

**RQ2.1.26: Are collaborations with businesses necessary?**

**Table 32**

*Are collaborations with businesses necessary?*

<b>Response</b>	<b>Are collaborations with businesses necessary?</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	46	74%
No	16	26%
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100%</b>

A substantial majority of respondents (74%) believe that collaborations with local businesses are necessary to ensure the right soft skills are acknowledged. This indicates a widespread recognition of the benefits such partnerships can bring, including real-world experience, industry insights, and potentially enhanced employability for learners. A smaller segment (26%) of respondents do not see business collaborations as necessary for secondary school learners.

**RQ2.1.27 Do you feel that you, as an instructor, are adequately equipped with soft skills?**

**Table 33**

*Do you feel that you, as an instructor, are adequately equipped with soft skills?*

<b>Response</b>	<b>Do you feel that you are equipped with soft skills?</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	33	53%
No	29	47%
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100%</b>

Just over half of the respondents (53%) feel that they are adequately equipped with soft skills. However, that leaves what can be considered a fairly significant portion (47%) of respondents that do not feel equipped with soft skills. This indicates a substantial number of individuals who may lack confidence in their soft skill capabilities or recognize a need for further development in these areas.

The close distribution suggests that while many individuals feel prepared, there is still a considerable need for educational and professional development programmes to address gaps in soft skill training. This nearly even split in perceptions points to an opportunity for targeted interventions to support those who feel less equipped. As seen in the results to research question 1, learners often mimic soft skills they see in their instructors, so this confidence and ability to showcase these skills is vital for development.

**RQ2.1.28: How do different age groups perceive the importance of soft skills in affecting employability and success in the modern workforce?**

**18-25:** This group rates soft skills highly, particularly teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and interpersonal communication, indicating a strong belief in their importance for employability and success.

**26-35:** Respondents in this group emphasize adaptability, creativity, and emotional intelligence, reflecting an understanding of the dynamic nature of the modern workforce.

**36-45:** There is a focus on problem-solving, work ethic, and perseverance, suggesting that these skills are seen as crucial for long-term success.

**46-55:** High ratings for teamwork, leadership, and emotional intelligence show a broad recognition of their importance within this group of instructors.

**56-65:** Leadership, teamwork, and adaptability are highly valued, highlighting the importance of collaboration and guidance.



### *By Age Group*

**18-25:** This group, made up of instructors that are likely either recent graduates or early in their careers, emphasizes the importance of soft skills due to their recent educational experiences and early career needs.

**26-35:** With a few more years of experience, this group balances the importance of soft skills in both academic and professional settings.

**36-45:** More experienced, this group focus on the practical application of soft skills in the workforce and student development.

**46-55 and 56-65:** With extensive experience, these groups highlight the long-term benefits of soft skills and advocate for their integration into the curriculum.

### *By Educational Background*

**O' Level and A Level:** Focus on foundational skills and the role of soft skills in further education.

**Undergraduate and Honours Degree:** Emphasize the importance of soft skills in higher education and various fields.

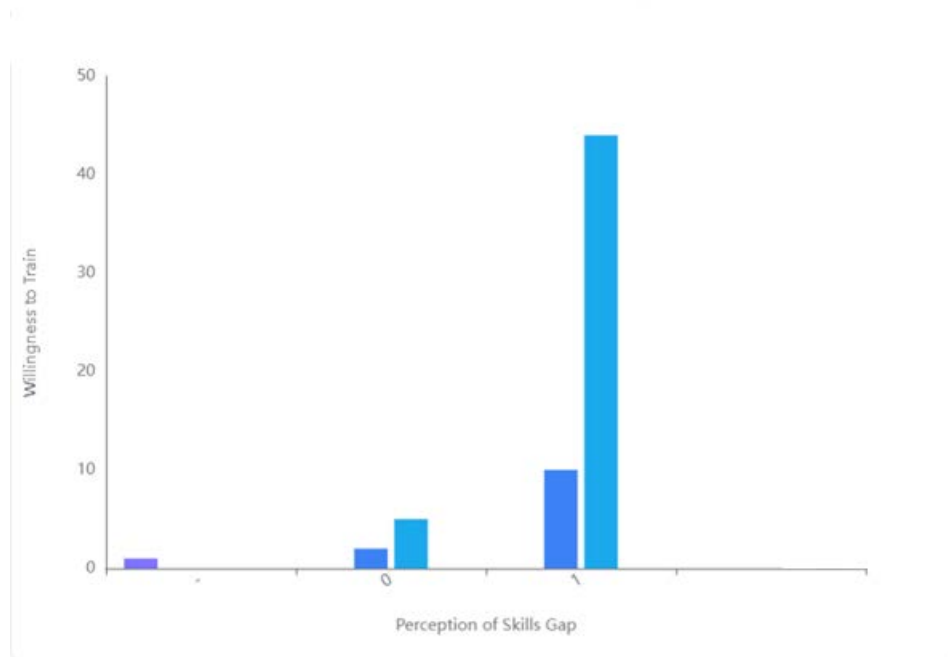
**Master's degree:** Highlight the role of soft skills in professional development and leadership.

Across all groups, there is agreement on the importance of soft skills, though emphasis varies. Younger and more educated instructors advocate for curriculum integration of soft skills, whilst older and more experienced instructors have a greater focus on more practical applications and furthering workforce readiness of the learners under their care.

**RQ2.1.30: How do instructors' perceptions of the skills gap in Zimbabwe relate to their willingness to undergo training to instil soft skills in students?**

**Figure 11:**

*Perception of skills gap related to willingness to undergo training*



Instructors' perceptions are categorized as '-', '0', and '1', showing the varying levels of the perceived skills gap. The indicated willingness to undergo training is reflected in different categories.

The bar chart above shows a significant number of instructors who perceive a skills gap ('1') and express a high willingness to undergo training to improve and develop their own soft skills and the ability to develop them in their learners. There are less instructors who do not believe that there is a skills gap ('0') but still show some level of willingness to undergo training and development.

Instructors who perceive a skills gap can be seen to be more likely to be willing to undergo training, which suggests that awareness of the gap motivates them to seek improvement. Some instructors are willing to train even without a skills gap, highlighting that there may be a general interest in professional development within the profession itself.

**RQ2.1.31: What are the common recommendations given by instructors to enhance learners' soft skills, and how do these vary by the instructors' age or educational background?**

**Integration into Curriculum:** Instructors suggest incorporating soft skills into the curriculum, either within existing classes or through co-curricular activities and programmes.

**Practical Application:** Real-world scenarios, group projects, and role-playing are frequently recommended to practice implementing and using relevant soft skills.

**Awareness and Communication:** Increasing awareness and open discussions about the importance of soft skills are frequently mentioned by instructors.

**Assessment and Feedback:** Regular assessments and feedback on soft skills are proposed, though measuring them effectively may prove to be a challenge.

**Collaboration and Teamwork:** Encouraging teamwork through group activities is a common suggestion amongst instructors.

**Parental Involvement:** Engaging parents through workshops or meetings to align efforts between home and school is recommended by many instructors.

### *Variations by Age*

**Younger Teachers (18-35):** This group emphasizes the use of technology and modern teaching methods, specifically integrating soft skills into digital literacy.

**Middle-aged Teachers (36-55):** This group of instructors focuses on practical applications, such as role-playing and group projects.

**Older Teachers (56-65):** More experienced instructors highlight traditional methods and systemic changes to integrate soft skills into the existing curriculum.

### *Variations by Educational Background*

**O' Level and A Level Educators:** This group emphasizes foundational skills, communication, and interpersonal skills in every lesson.

**Undergraduate Degree Holders:** This group suggests more practical, hands-on approaches like group work and real-life scenarios.

**Master's degree Holders:** This group focuses on curriculum integration and structured approaches to teaching and assessing soft skills.

Soft skills integration into the curriculum and practical application are common key recommendations across all of the abovementioned groups. Younger instructors are seen to prefer more modern methods, whilst older instructors focus more on traditional integration methods. Educational background seems to have an influence on the emphasis on practical versus structured approaches.

## RQ2.2 Qualitative Analysis

Instructors' open-ended responses indicate that certain skills, such as adaptability and communication, gained relevance due to the demands of digital learning environments. Emerging themes reflect the heightened importance of interpersonal and self-management skills, aligning with studies that emphasize adaptability in digital and hybrid learning environments (Mishra, Gupta & Shree, 2020). Instructors identified these skills as critical for the success of learners navigating hybrid environments.

These insights could reflect the global trend toward emphasizing soft skills in education, especially adaptability and problem-solving, which are increasingly valued in hybrid learning contexts (Sternberg, 2020).

### RQ2.2.1 Which skills were positively impacted, and which were impacted negatively?

#### *Positively Affected Soft Skills*

**Teamwork and cooperation:** This skill was frequently mentioned as being positively influenced by digital and hybrid learning.

**Leadership:** Leadership skills were perceived to have positive development from digital and hybrid learning environments.

**Problem solving:** Problem-solving skills were also highlighted as being positively affected.

**Organisational skills:** This skill was frequently mentioned as benefiting from the digital and hybrid learning contexts.

**Creativity:** Creativity was another skill that saw positive mentions.

**Relationship management:** This skill was noted for positive impacts, though it also appeared in negative contexts.

**Adaptability:** Adaptability was frequently mentioned as a skill that improved with digital and hybrid learning environments.

### *Negatively Affected Soft Skills*

**Relationship management:** Despite being positively mentioned, it was also frequently noted as negatively affected.

**Teamwork and cooperation:** Similar to relationship management, this skill was mentioned in both positive and negative contexts.

**Leadership:** Leadership was another skill with mixed mentions, appearing in both positive and negative lists.

**Interpersonal communication:** This skill was predominantly noted as negatively impacted by digital and hybrid learning environments.

**Emotional intelligence:** Emotional intelligence was frequently mentioned as being negatively affected.

Skills such as teamwork and cooperation, leadership, and relationship management were mentioned in both positive and negative contexts, indicating a mixed impact of digital and hybrid

learning on these skills (see Table 43 and Figure 21 for perceived levels of acquisition). Creativity and adaptability were more often seen as positively affected, with mean acquisition scores of 3.27 and 3.48 respectively, indicating “Some Improvement Needed” to “Little Improvement Needed” (Table 44, Figure 22). In contrast, interpersonal communication and emotional intelligence were more often perceived as negatively affected, with mean acquisition scores of 3.18 and 3.14, respectively, reflecting areas where learners feel more improvement is needed (Tables 43–44, Figures 21–22).

### **RQ2.2.2 How do different styles of instruction, such as lecture, discussion, and problem-solving, impact the development of specific soft skills in learners?**

#### *Lecture Style*

**Soft Skills Developed:** Primarily enhances listening, note-taking, and information processing.

**Impact:** Less effective for developing interactive skills like teamwork and communication.

#### *Discussion Style*

**Soft Skills Developed:** Boosts interpersonal communication, critical thinking, and adaptability.

**Impact:** Strongly supports the development of communication skills and emotional intelligence.

### *Problem-Solving Style*

**Soft Skills Developed:** Encourages critical thinking, creativity, and teamwork.

**Impact:** Highly effective in fostering creativity, leadership, and collaborative skills.

### *Combination of Styles*

**Soft Skills Developed:** Provides a balanced approach, enhancing a wide range of skills.

**Impact:** Comprehensive development of soft skills, preparing learners for diverse challenges.

Traditional lectures may not effectively develop interactive soft skills. Incorporating discussions and problem-solving significantly develops and improves essential soft skills. If this is, in fact, encompassing the majority of teaching methodologies that are currently being used, it begs the question as to why then the acquisition levels of soft skills are still so low.

**RQ2.2.3: How do instructors perceive the effectiveness of current methods used to assess soft skills in learners, and what improvements do they suggest?**

### **Effectiveness of current methods**

Many instructors perceive the current methods for assessing soft skills as ineffective, with responses indicating that assessments are either not being conducted or that there is a general lack of a formal structure. Some instructors acknowledge informal assessments through methods such as observations of learner behaviour, but these are neither standardized nor consistent.

## Challenges in assessment

Instructors find it challenging to assess soft skills due to their subjective nature and lacking in any clear metrics unlike traditional academic skills. There is an obvious noted lack of both time and resources, with a primary focus being held on academic syllabus completion for external examinations.

## Suggested improvements for assessment

**Incorporation into curriculum:** Instructors have suggested integrating soft skills development into the curriculum, either within existing subjects or as dedicated courses or programmes, to emphasize their development and assessment.

**Role-Playing and scenarios:** Recommendations include using role-playing, interviews, and real-life scenarios to assess soft skills in practical contexts which is viable in a wide range of subjects taught in the Zimbabwean context.

**Regular testing:** Suggestions have been made for regular, specific testing focused on soft skills to identify areas needing further improvement as well as monitoring of progression and maintenance.

**Instructor training:** Professional development sessions are recommended to equip instructors with skills to effectively teach and assess soft skills.

**Stakeholder engagement:** Engaging parents and stakeholders through workshops or meetings in order to align on the importance and nurturing of soft skills in our youth.

Instructors seem to have a general consensus that current methods for measuring soft skills are insufficient and lack formally structured structures. One instructor noted, “*Traditional exams do not show how well students can apply teamwork or communication skills; we need assessments*

*that reflect real-world applications*” (Instructor Response, 2024). The integration of soft skills into the curriculum has been emphasized by instructors, who suggest project-based learning, peer evaluation, and experiential tasks for developing or measuring these competencies effectively. (RQ4.1.7, Table 54). Another instructor emphasized, *“Students need to experience real problem-solving scenarios and group projects, not just written tests, to truly develop their soft skills”* (Instructor Response, 2024). Feedback from alumni also supports this perspective, highlighting the long-term value of applied learning: *“The group projects and case studies we did in school were what prepared me for collaboration and decision-making in the workplace”* (Alumni Response, 2024). The findings suggest that enhancing assessment techniques, training instructors, and engaging with stakeholders are necessary for developing soft skills. These findings should be considered in their entirety.

#### **RQ2.2.4 Attitudinal changes post-hybrid learning**

This objective evaluated whether the use of digital and hybrid learning has influenced instructors' perceptions of soft skills and their potential to teach effectively in digital environments. Hybrid learning responses are compared to reflect changes in attitude of instructors with positive, neutral, and negative feedback on soft skills. As an example, instructors stated that they prioritized adaptability and self-management after integrating with digital tools, with an average rating increase from 4.2 to 4.8 (RQ4.1.2). They recognized the significance of autonomy in digital education. Conversely, digital environments presented challenges for skills like interpersonal communication and collaboration.... Instructors have observed that less face-to-face interaction leads to a decline in students' ability to communicate effectively and manage group dynamics,

leading to concerns about potential regression in emotional intelligence and teamwork. In addition, a qualitative summary found recommendations for curriculum redesign to address these deficiencies, with instructors suggesting organized collaborative work, scaffolded online group work (RQ4.1.3) and experiential activities to sustain skill development in hybrid settings. These findings provide a clear indication that certain soft skills can be enhanced through hybrid learning while others require intentional instructional strategies to maintain their development.

Together, these findings underscore the ambivalence in current literature on hybrid learning's impact on soft skills, with recent studies reporting mixed effects on interpersonal competencies and teamwork abilities (Bonk & Graham, 2020).

### **RQ2.2.5 Curriculum and instructional design feedback**

The final objective addresses instructor feedback on curriculum design and instructional strategies to enhance soft skills acquisition in Zimbabwean private secondary schools. Analysis of instructor responses regarding curriculum support shows significant openness toward changes that integrate soft skills. Distributions indicate high support percentages for curriculum modifications that include collaborative and real-world application exercises. Research increasingly supports these preferences, suggesting that practical, real-world applications in education are effective in developing critical soft skills (Smith & Hill, 2020). Instructors suggested themes such as "increased collaboration" and "real-world engagement" as effective approaches to skill acquisition in hybrid learning. Feedback included suggestions for partnerships with businesses, aligning with findings that such collaborations foster practical skill development through mentorship and internships (Johnson, Lindbeck & Perez, 2021). Instructors recommended instructional changes

that focus on collaborative projects, adaptability exercises, and exposure to real-world challenges to strengthen learners' soft skills.

This analysis underlines the need for curricular adjustments, particularly emphasizing adaptability, problem-solving, and communication skills, which recent literature deems vital in a digitized educational landscape (Boyd & Brackmann, 2020).

### **RQ2.3 Alumni perceptions of soft skills importance as confirmation of instructor perceptions**

#### **RQ2.3.1: What are alumni current levels of knowledge on soft skills?**

**Table 34**

*Alumni current knowledge on soft skills*

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>
-	0
1	4
2	19
3	28
4	13
5	5
<b>Grand</b>	
<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>2,94</b>
<b>Result</b>	<b>Some Improvement Needed</b>

These figures show a mean knowledge of soft skills of 2.94 out of 5 which, according to the adapted table of deviation from Patacsil (2017), shows a result of “Some Improvement Needed.” This highlights a moderate self-assessment of soft skill knowledge among alumni respondents, with a clear indication that improvement is needed within this group. This could suggest an opportunity for educational and training programs to focus on enhancing soft skill proficiency to better equip individuals for various personal and professional scenarios.

### **RQ2.3.2: What are the alumni overall perceived levels of importance of soft skills?**

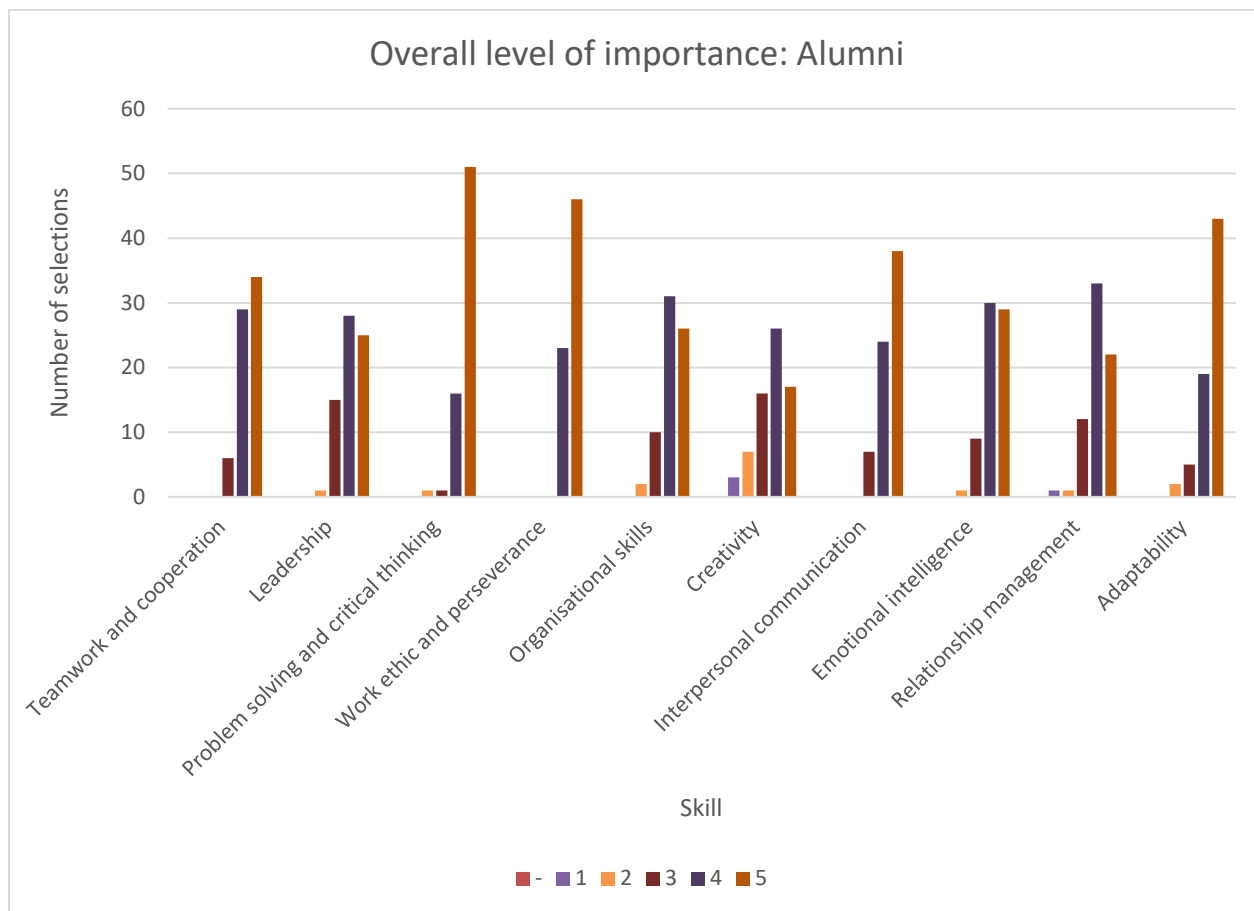
**Table 35**

*Overall perceived levels of importance of soft skills to alumni*

<b>Rating</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Teamwork and cooperation</b>	0	0	0	6	29	34
<b>Leadership</b>	0	0	1	15	28	25
<b>Problem solving and critical thinking</b>	0	0	1	1	16	51
<b>Work ethic and perseverance</b>	0	0	0	0	23	46
<b>Organisational skills</b>	0	0	2	10	31	26
<b>Creativity</b>	0	3	7	16	26	17
<b>Interpersonal communication</b>	0	0	0	7	24	38
<b>Emotional intelligence</b>	0	0	1	9	30	29
<b>Relationship management</b>	0	1	1	12	33	22
<b>Adaptability</b>	0	0	2	5	19	43

**Figure 12:**

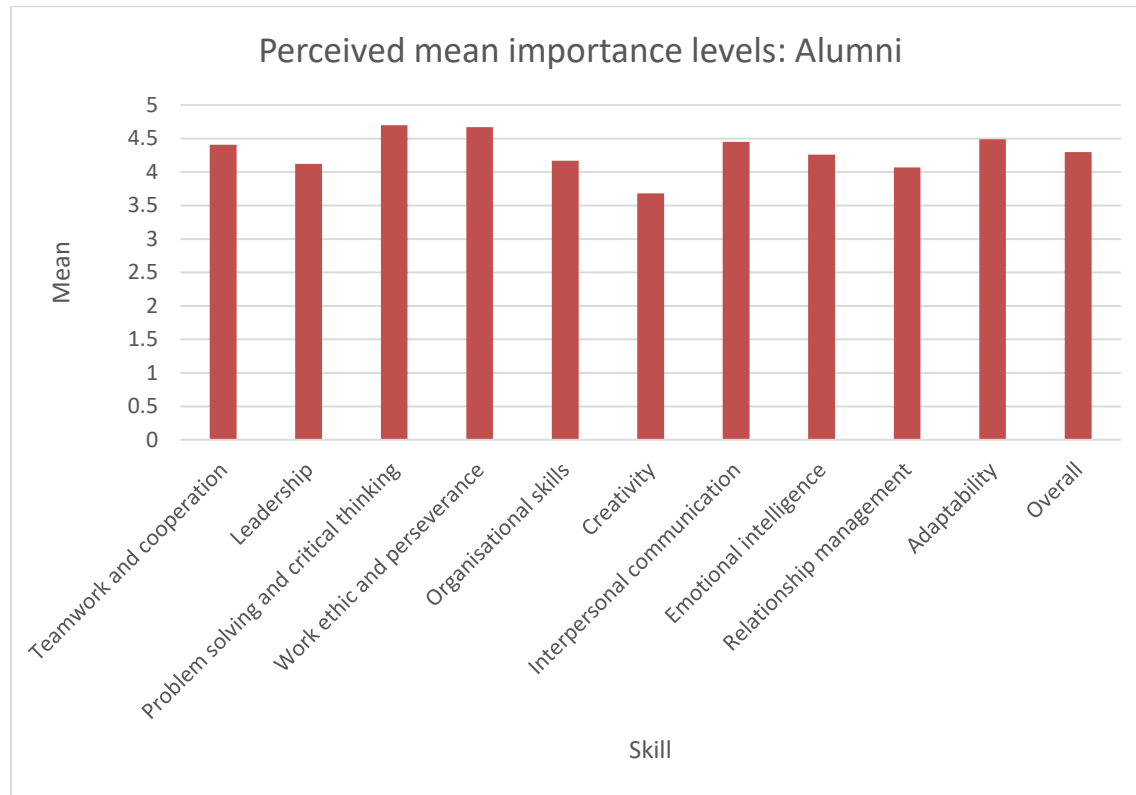
*Overall perceived levels of importance of soft skills to alumni*



This indicates strong perceptions of importance in problem-solving, work ethic, and interpersonal communication, with moderate to high importance in other soft skills. Creativity and relationship management show more variability than the others, which may suggest potential areas for further targeted attention and development.

**RQ2.3.3: What are the mean levels of alumni importance?****Table 36***Mean levels of importance to alumni*

<b>Skill</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Result</b>
<b>Teamwork and cooperation</b>	4,41	0,7	Very Important
<b>Leadership</b>	4,12	0,8	Important
<b>Problem solving and critical thinking</b>	4,7	0,6	Very Important
<b>Work ethic and perseverance</b>	4,67	0,5	Very Important
<b>Organisational skills</b>	4,17	0,8	Important
<b>Creativity</b>	3,68	1,1	Important
<b>Interpersonal communication</b>	4,45	0,7	Very Important
<b>Emotional intelligence</b>	4,26	0,7	Very Important
<b>Relationship management</b>	4,07	0,8	Important
<b>Adaptability</b>	4,49	0,8	Very Important
<b>Overall</b>	<b>4,3</b>	<b>0,3</b>	<b>Very Important</b>

**Figure 13:***Mean levels of importance to alumni*

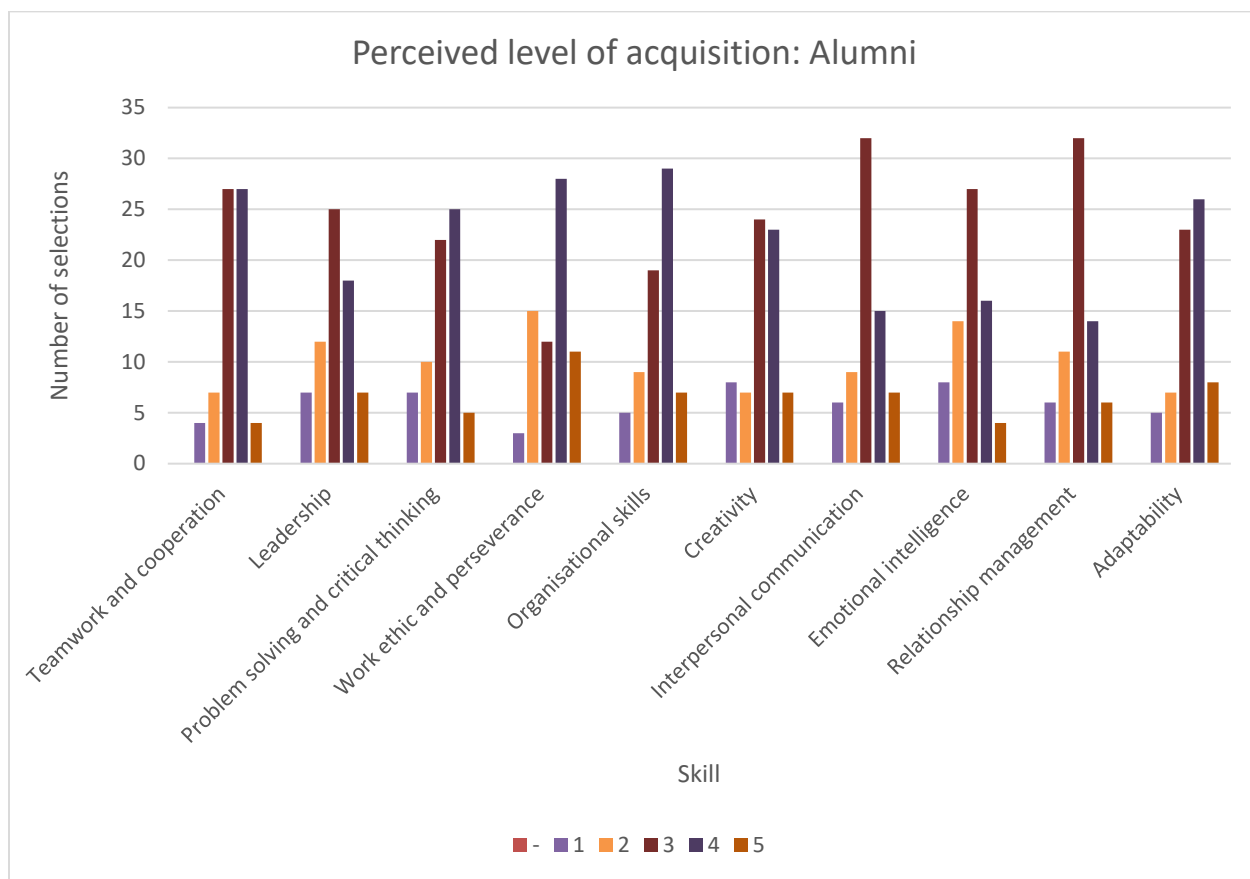
The results show clearly the perceived importance of soft skills amongst alumni, particularly problem-solving, work ethic, interpersonal communication, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. Leadership, organizational skills, relationship management, and creativity are also recognized as important, albeit with slightly more variability in perceived importance.

**RQ2.3.4: What are the overall alumni perceived levels of student acquisition of soft skills?****Table 37***Overall alumni perceived levels of acquisition of soft skills by learners*

<b>Rating</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Teamwork and cooperation</b>	0	4	7	27	27	4
<b>Leadership</b>	0	7	12	25	18	7
<b>Problem solving and critical thinking</b>	0	7	10	22	25	5
<b>Work ethic and perseverance</b>	0	3	15	12	28	11
<b>Organisational skills</b>	0	5	9	19	29	7
<b>Creativity</b>	0	8	7	24	23	7
<b>Interpersonal communication</b>	0	6	9	32	15	7
<b>Emotional intelligence</b>	0	8	14	27	16	4
<b>Relationship management</b>	0	6	11	32	14	6
<b>Adaptability</b>	0	5	7	23	26	8

**Figure 14:**

*Overall alumni perceived levels of acquisition of soft skills by learners*



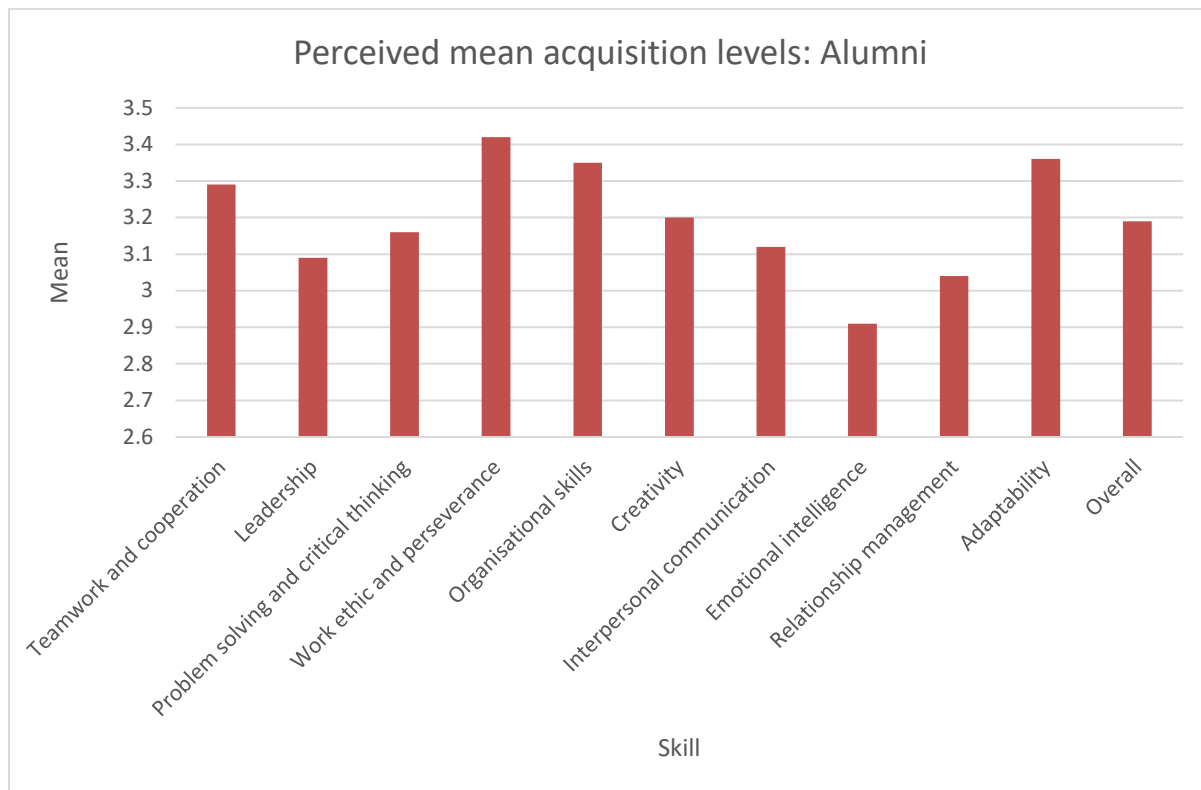
Overall, the results here indicate that alumni respondents generally feel confident in their teamwork, organizational skills, and adaptability, while there tends to be more variability in perceptions of leadership, problem-solving, creativity, interpersonal communication, emotional intelligence, and relationship management. This suggests opportunities for targeted development in these areas of educational incorporation.

**RQ2.3.5 : What are the mean alumni perceived levels of student acquisition?****Table 38***Alumni perceived mean levels of soft skills in learners*

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Result</b>
<b>Teamwork and cooperation</b>	3,29	0,94	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Leadership</b>	3,09	1,12	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Problem solving and critical thinking</b>	3,16	1,09	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Work ethic and perseverance</b>	3,42	1,13	Little Improvement Needed
<b>Organisational skills</b>	3,35	1,07	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Creativity</b>	3,2	1,13	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Interpersonal communication</b>	3,12	1,05	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Emotional intelligence</b>	2,91	1,07	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Relationship management</b>	3,04	1,04	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Adaptability</b>	3,36	1,06	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Overall</b>	<b>3,19</b>	<b>0,16</b>	<b>Some Improvement Needed</b>

**Figure 15:**

*Alumni perceived mean levels of soft skills in learners*

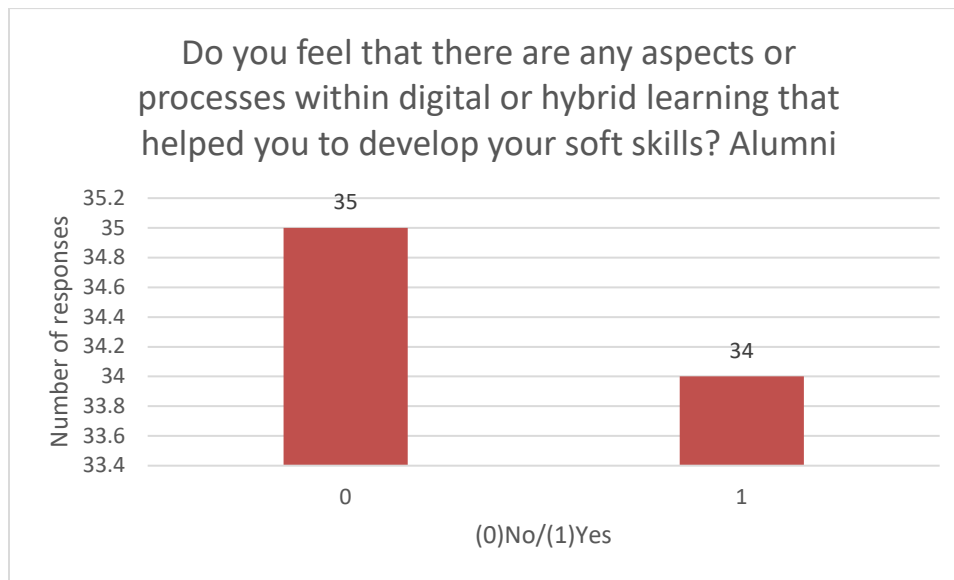


The results highlight a general need for improvement across most of the mentioned soft skills, with particular emphasis on emotional intelligence and interpersonal communication. Whilst work ethic and perseverance are perceived as being relatively stronger than the others, there is still room for improvement.

**RQ2.3.6 Are there any processes that developed alumni soft skills during the digital and hybrid learning phases?**

**Figure 16:**

*Did digital and hybrid learning develop soft skills? (Alumni)*

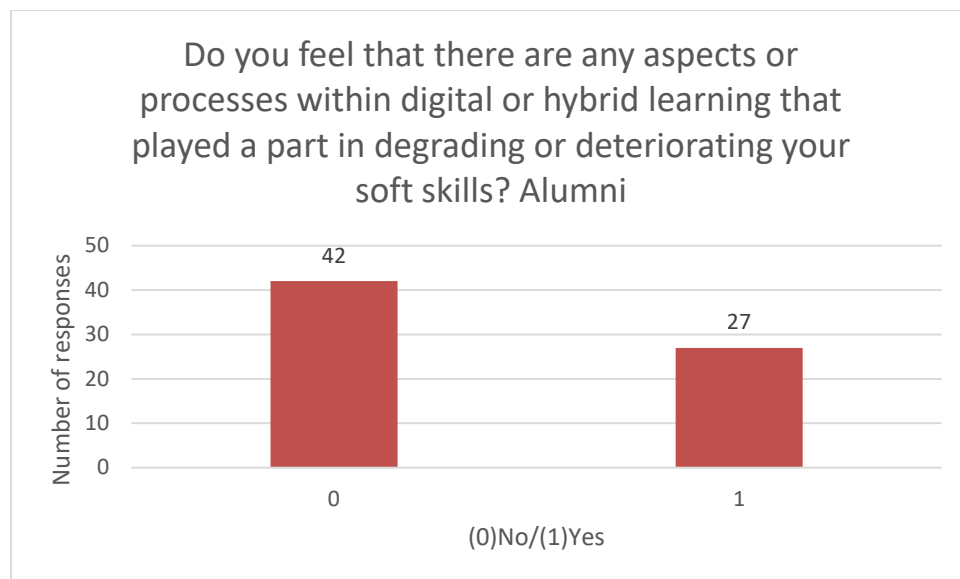


The nearly equal distribution of responses amongst the alumni suggests a divided opinion with regard to the effectiveness of digital and hybrid learning in fostering soft skills. Whilst a slight majority (No = 35) felt that these learning methods did not aid in their development, a substantial number (Yes = 34) still recognized some form of positive impact. This division may highlight the variability in individual experiences with digital learning environments.

**RQ2.3.7 Are there any processes that regressed alumni soft skills during the digital and hybrid learning phases?**

**Figure 17:**

*Did digital and hybrid learning regress soft skills? (Alumni)*



The predominant "No" (42) responses suggest that most alumni believe that digital and hybrid learning environments did not hinder their soft skills development. This could imply that these learning formats, when designed effectively, can support rather than detract from necessary skill acquisition. However, the 27 respondents who indicated "Yes" highlight a notable concern. This would require further research to clearly and accurately note the underlying reasons.

**RQ2.3.8 Have soft skills contributed to your success out of school?****Table 39***Have soft skills contributed to your success out of school?*

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Soft skills contribution to success outside of school?</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	59	86%
No	10	14%
<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>100%</b>

A significant majority of respondents (59) believe that soft skills have contributed to their success outside of school. A smaller portion of respondents (10) indicated that soft skills did not contribute to their success outside of school. The results strongly indicate that soft skills are a key component of success beyond the academic environment for most individuals.

**RQ2.3.9:Has hybrid learning been helpful or a hindrance in preparing you for life outside of secondary school?****Table 40***Has hybrid been helpful or a hindrance in life-preparations?*

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Helpful or Hindrance?</b>	<b>%</b>
Helpful	46	67%
Hindrance	23	33%
<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>100%</b>

A majority of alumni respondents (46) view hybrid learning as having been helpful in preparing them for life outside of secondary school. A notable minority (23) perceived hybrid learning as a hindrance and suggests that there may be specific conditions or contexts where these factors do not align well with individual needs or expectations.

**RQ2.3.10: Should hybrid learning have a continued place in the learning environment?**

**Table 41**

*Continue hybrid learning? (Alumni)*

<b>Should hybrid have a continued place in the schooling</b>		
<b>Responses</b>	<b>system?</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	55	80%
No	14	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>100%</b>

A significant majority of respondents (55) believe that hybrid learning should have a continued place in the schooling system. This highlights a strong endorsement of the hybrid model. A smaller group (14) are opposed to the continued use of hybrid learning. This minority view suggests that some individuals may have concerns about the effectiveness or implementation of hybrid models.

### RQ2.3.11 Do you feel that there is a skills gap in Zimbabwe?

**Table 42**

*Do you feel that there is a skills gap in Zimbabwe?*

Responses	Do you feel that there is a skills gap in Zimbabwe?	%
Yes	63	91%
No	6	9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>100%</b>

An overwhelming majority of respondents (63) believe that there is a skills gap in Zimbabwe. This strong consensus indicates a widespread recognition of the lack of relevant soft skills available within the workforce compared to what is needed. A small minority (6) do not believe that there is a skills gap in Zimbabwe. The results quite clearly point to the need for strategic efforts to align educational outcomes with market needs.

### RQ2.3.12: How does the current level of knowledge on soft skills vary across different educational levels?

The dataset includes various educational levels such as A Level, AS' Level, Undergraduate, Honours, and Master's Degrees. Knowledge levels are rated from 1 to 5, with 1 being low and 5 being high.

**A Level and AS' Level:** Typically show knowledge levels around 2 and 3.

**Undergraduate Degree:** Generally higher, with many ratings at 3 and 4.

**Honours Degree:** Often report levels of 3 and 4, some reaching 5.

**Master's Degree:** Predominantly higher, with ratings at 4 and 5.

There is a clear trend where higher educational attainment is associated with higher self-reported knowledge of soft skills. As education level increases, respondents have tended to report a better understanding or awareness of soft skills and their importance.

**RQ2.3.13 What are the differences in soft skill ratings between male and female alumni? Are there any notable trends or discrepancies in how each gender rates the importance of these skills?**

The dataset includes all 10 soft skills rated by both male and female alumni. Ratings are categorized by gender, with identifiers such as "Male" and "Female." Ratings range from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest.

**Teamwork and Cooperation:** High ratings from both genders, no significant discrepancies.

**Leadership:** Consistently rated as important by both genders.

**Problem Solving and Critical Thinking:** High ratings across the board, indicating universal importance.

**Work Ethic and Perseverance:** Similar high ratings from both genders.

**Organizational Skills:** Generally high ratings, no notable gender differences.

**Creativity:** Slight variation in ratings, but overall importance is recognized by both genders.

**Interpersonal Communication:** High ratings with minor variations, no significant gender trend.

**Emotional Intelligence:** Recognized as important by both genders.

**Relationship Management:** High ratings, no significant discrepancies.

**Adaptability:** Rated highly by both genders, indicating its importance.

Both male and female alumni rate the importance of soft skills similarly, with high ratings across most skills (see RQ2.2.2, Table 34). The consistency in ratings suggests a shared understanding of the importance of these skills in the workforce, with mean alumni ratings for key skills such as teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving all above 4.0. There is no notable gender-based discrepancy in the perceived importance of these soft skills amongst alumni respondents, as the variation between male and female ratings is minimal (RQ2.2.2, Figure 15).

### **RQ2.3.2 Alumni perceptions compared to instructor perceptions**

When examining both instructors' and alumni perceptions, the importance of soft skills in Zimbabwean private secondary schools prior to and following digital integration emerges as a consensus amongst both groups (see RQ2.3.2, Table 54; Figure 25). Alumni feedback mirrors instructors' emphasis on adaptability, communication, and critical thinking, with alumni further endorsing the relevance of these skills in real-world applications beyond the classroom. Aggregating responses from both instructors and alumni on skill relevance reveals strong alignment on skills such as teamwork and problem-solving, as shown in their generally high mean ratings (instructors: teamwork 4.43, alumni: teamwork 4.3; problem-solving instructors 4.5, alumni 4.2). This consistency suggests that alumni have experienced the long-term benefits of soft skills emphasized during their education, affirming instructors' perspectives on the need to

prioritize these competencies within the curriculum. Qualitative feedback supports this, with instructors noting, “*Alumni success stories show that skills like problem-solving and teamwork are critical in their jobs*”, and alumni reflecting, “*Adaptability and resilience learned in school have helped me handle unexpected challenges at work*”. These findings are consistent with studies highlighting how skills like adaptability and critical thinking provide lasting benefits in evolving work environments (Bonk & Graham, 2020). Together, these responses affirm the importance of soft skills across both current and former learners, echoing literature that identifies adaptability and collaboration as critical skills for success in dynamic environments (Mishra, Gupta & Shree, 2020).

### **RQ2.3.3 Attitudinal changes post-hybrid learning**

Alumni responses provide valuable insights into how attitudes toward soft skills have evolved following exposure to hybrid learning. While instructors observed positive shifts in learners’ attitudes toward self-management and problem-solving in a hybrid environment (RQ3.1.6, Figure 23; RQ3.1.12, Table 49), alumni feedback validates the sustained impact of these changes after transitioning into the workforce (RQ4.1, Table 54; qualitative alumni comments). By comparing instructors' and alumni [Ma7.1] responses regarding attitude changes post-hybrid learning, it becomes evident that both groups noticed an increased appreciation for skills such as independence and digital literacy, as reflected in the high mean ratings for adaptability, flexibility, and problem-solving (RQ3.1.10–3.1.15) and corroborated by alumni reflections on the application of these skills in professional contexts (RQ4.1.1–4.1.2, qualitative responses). Analysing the

percentages of positive vs. negative feedback [Ma7.1] on these shifts highlights a strong attitudinal alignment, reinforcing the importance of such relevant soft skills for ongoing adaptability (Bates & Poole, 2020). Alumni feedback indicates that hybrid learning fostered a greater appreciation for soft skills, particularly self-discipline and adaptability (RQ3.1.6, Figure 23; RQ3.1.12, Table 49). Alumni further shared that working within digital contexts during secondary education helped them transition more easily into professional environments that demand self-management and virtual collaboration skills (RQ4.1, qualitative alumni comments; RQ4.1.1, Table 54). This aligns with the instructors' observations that learners initially struggled with these areas, but over time, adapted well (RQ3.1.6, Figure 23; RQ3.1.15, Table 52)—a finding supported by research on digital learning's effect on soft skills development (Kearney et al, 2021).

These findings suggest that both instructors and alumni acknowledge hybrid learning as a catalyst for enhancing soft skills, supporting recent literature that advocates for hybrid models in skill-building (Sternberg, 2020).

### Research Question 3

*What are the **learner** perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and the perceived skills gap as a result of the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities?*

### RQ3.1 Quantitative Analysis

#### RQ3.1.1 : What is learner current level of knowledge regarding soft skills?

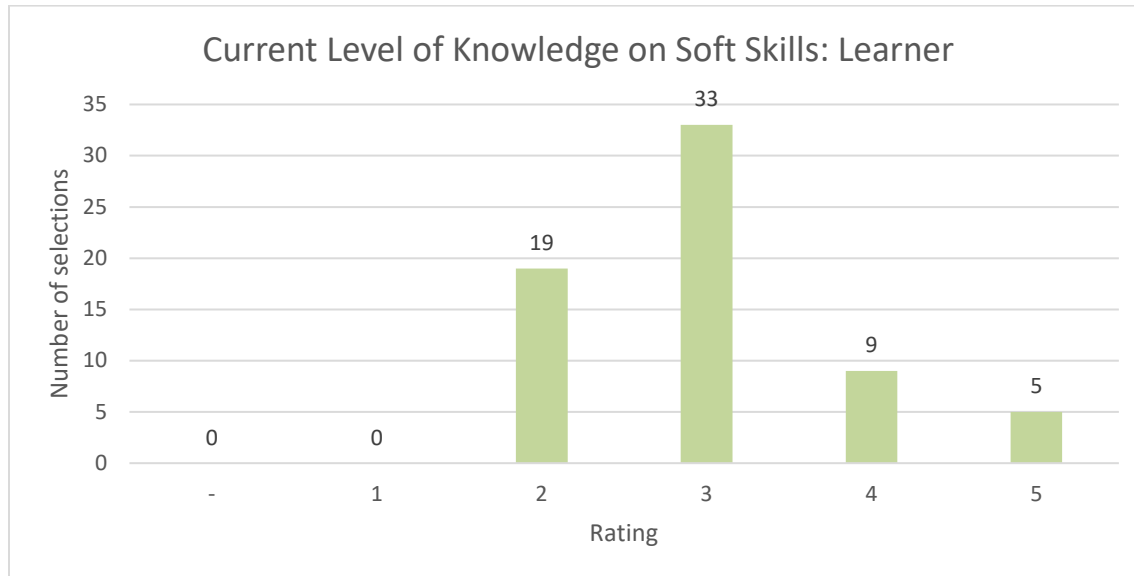
**Table 43**

*Learner current level of knowledge on soft skills*

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Learner Current Level of Knowledge on Soft Skills</b>
-	0
1	0
2	19
3	33
4	9
5	5
Total	66
<b>Mean</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Result</b>	<b>Somewhat Knowledgeable</b>

**Figure 18:**

*Learner Current Level of Knowledge in Soft Skills*



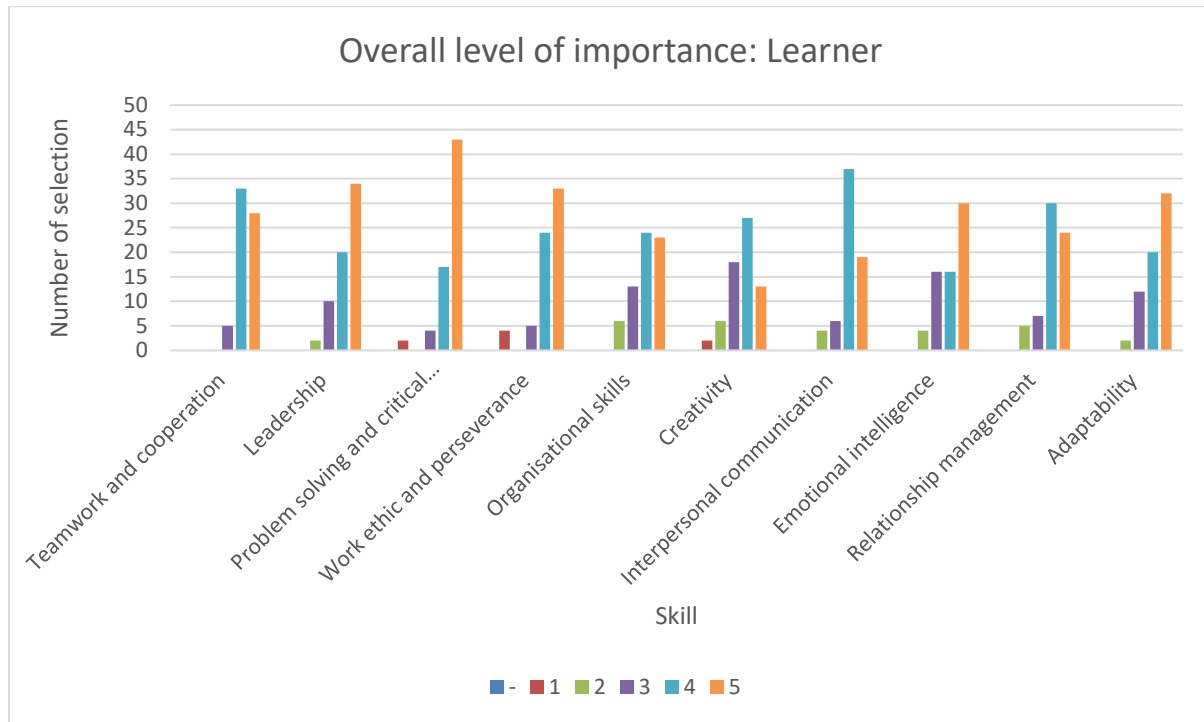
The majority of learners rated their knowledge of soft skills at level 3 (33), indicating a moderate level of understanding of soft skills. A significant number of learners (19) rated themselves at level 2, suggesting a basic understanding, while fewer learners rated themselves at the higher levels of 4 (9) and 5 (5), indicating more advanced knowledge. This averages out to a mean current knowledge of 3 out of 5, a figure that can be represented as “Somewhat knowledgeable.” Notably, no learners rated their knowledge at level 0 or 1, suggesting that all learner participants have at least some foundational understandings of soft skills.

**RQ3.1.2: What is the overall perceived level of importance of soft skills?****Table 44***Overall perceived level of importance of soft skills to learners*

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Teamwork and cooperation</b>	0	0	0	5	33	28
<b>Leadership</b>	0	0	2	10	20	34
<b>Problem solving and critical thinking</b>	0	2	0	4	17	43
<b>Work ethic and perseverance</b>	0	4	0	5	24	33
<b>Organisational skills</b>	0	0	6	13	24	23
<b>Creativity</b>	0	2	6	18	27	13
<b>Interpersonal communication</b>	0	0	4	6	37	19
<b>Emotional intelligence</b>	0	0	4	16	16	30
<b>Relationship management</b>	0	0	5	7	30	24
<b>Adaptability</b>	0	0	2	12	20	32

**Figure 19:**

*Overall perceived level of importance of soft skills to learners*



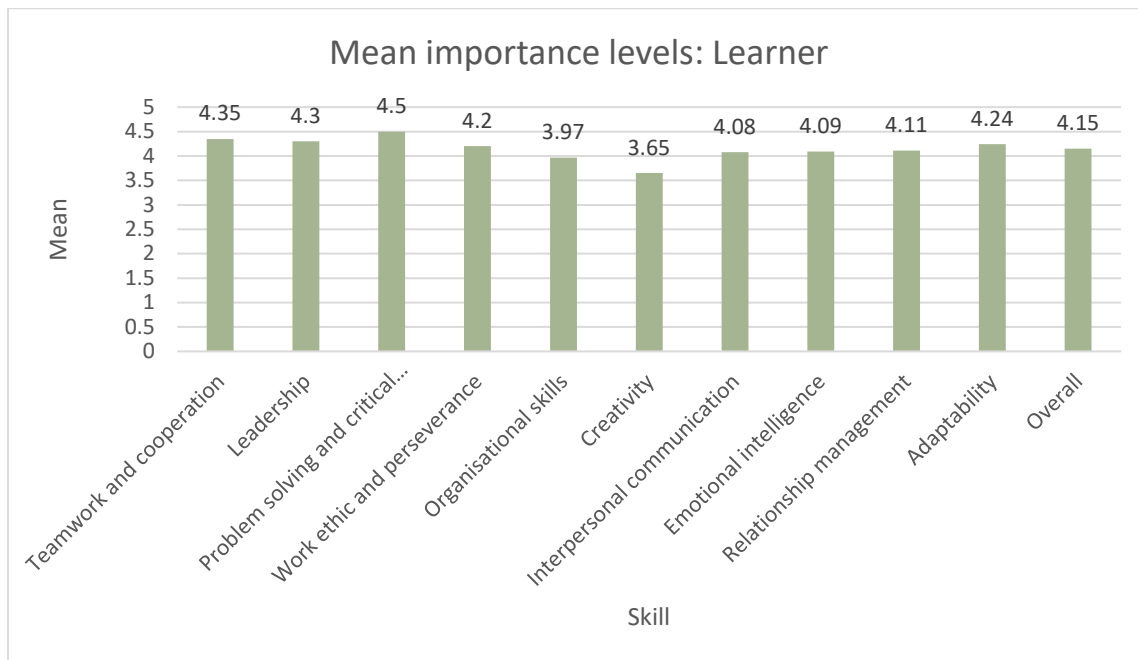
This result suggests that problem-solving, leadership, and teamwork are perceived by learners as the most critical or well-developed skills among respondents. Educational programmes might focus on enhancing these areas further whilst also addressing the skills which have more varied rankings, such as creativity and organizational skills.

**RQ3.1.3: What are the mean levels of learner importance?****Table 45***Mean levels of importance to learners*

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Result</b>
<b>Teamwork and cooperation</b>	4,35	0,62	Very Important
<b>Leadership</b>	4,3	0,84	Very Important
<b>Problem solving and critical thinking</b>	4,5	0,86	Very Important
<b>Work ethic and perseverance</b>	4,2	1,04	Important
<b>Organisational skills</b>	3,97	0,96	Important
<b>Creativity</b>	3,65	1	Important
<b>Interpersonal communication</b>	4,08	0,79	Important
<b>Emotional intelligence</b>	4,09	0,97	Important
<b>Relationship management</b>	4,11	0,88	Important
<b>Adaptability</b>	4,24	0,86	Very Important
<b>Overall</b>	<b>4,15</b>	<b>0,23</b>	<b>Important</b>

**Figure 20:**

*Mean levels of importance to learners*



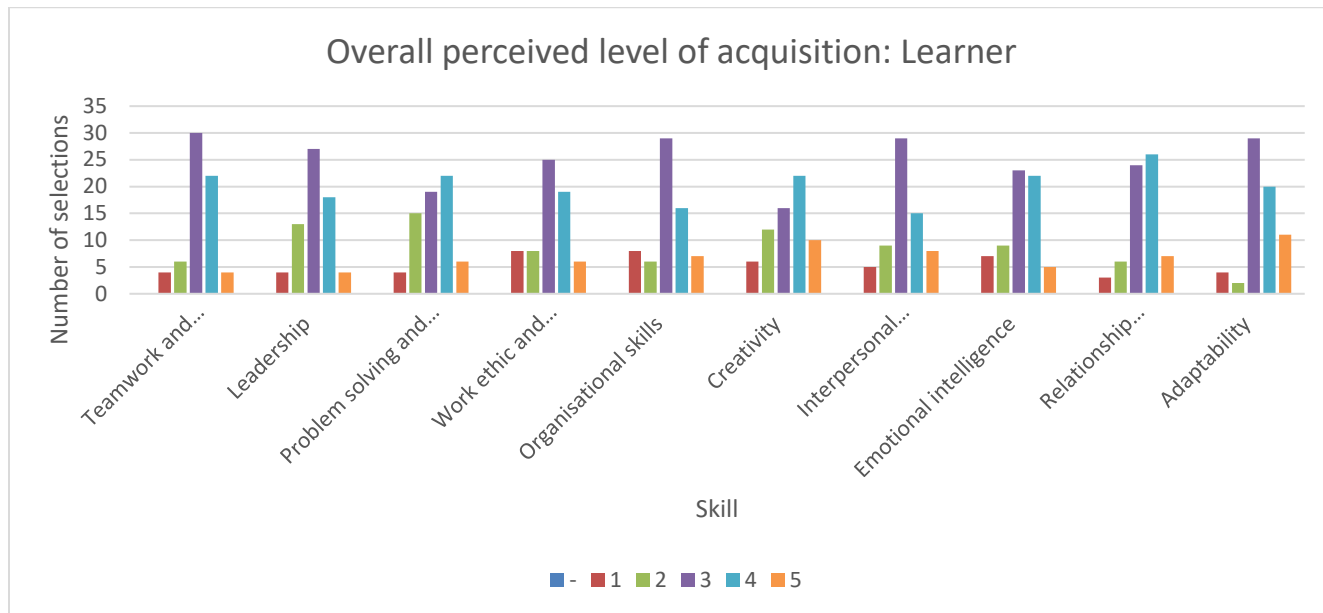
The analysis above highlights the critical importance of problem-solving, teamwork, leadership, and adaptability. Whilst all of the listed soft skills are valued in some way, these are prioritized as being more important than the others. Overall, the mean level of importance to learners is 4,15 out of 5, pointing to a result of “Important.”

**RQ3.1.4: What are the overall perceived levels of acquisition of soft skills?****Table 46***Overall perceived levels of acquisition of soft skills by learners*

<b>Rating</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Teamwork and cooperation</b>	0	4	6	30	22	4
<b>Leadership</b>	0	4	13	27	18	4
<b>Problem solving and critical thinking</b>	0	4	15	19	22	6
<b>Work ethic and perseverance</b>	0	8	8	25	19	6
<b>Organisational skills</b>	0	8	6	29	16	7
<b>Creativity</b>	0	6	12	16	22	10
<b>Interpersonal communication</b>	0	5	9	29	15	8
<b>Emotional intelligence</b>	0	7	9	23	22	5
<b>Relationship management</b>	0	3	6	24	26	7
<b>Adaptability</b>	0	4	2	29	20	11

**Figure 21:**

*Overall perceived levels of acquisition of soft skills by learners*



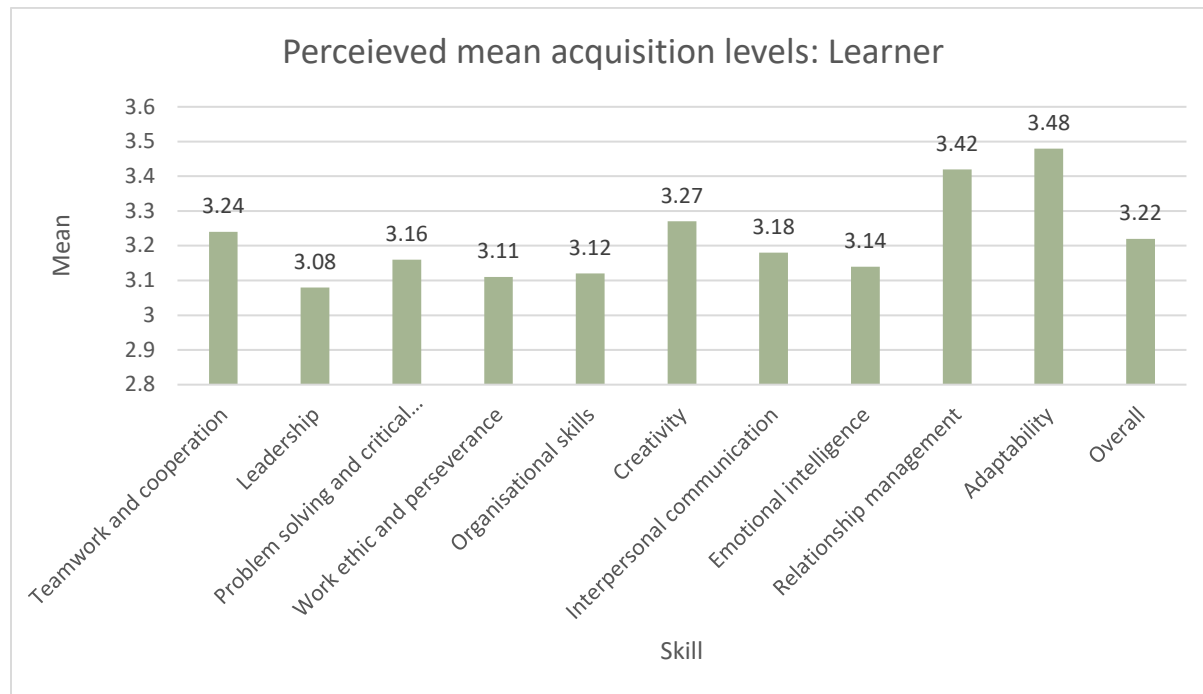
Overall, learners demonstrate strong acquisition in teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving, whilst skills like leadership, emotional intelligence, and creativity show more varied levels of proficiency.

**RQ3.1.5 What are the mean levels of acquisition?****Table 47***Mean levels of soft skill acquisition in learners*

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Result</b>
<b>Teamwork and cooperation</b>	3,24	0,93	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Leadership</b>	3,08	0,96	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Problem solving and critical thinking</b>	3,16	1,08	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Work ethic and perseverance</b>	3,11	1,12	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Organisational skills</b>	3,12	1,12	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Creativity</b>	3,27	1,2	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Interpersonal communication</b>	3,18	1,07	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Emotional intelligence</b>	3,14	1,09	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Relationship management</b>	3,42	0,96	Little Improvement Needed
<b>Adaptability</b>	3,48	1,01	Little Improvement Needed
<b>Overall</b>	<b>3,22</b>	<b>0,13</b>	Some Improvement Needed

**Figure 22:**

*Mean levels of soft skill acquisition in learners*

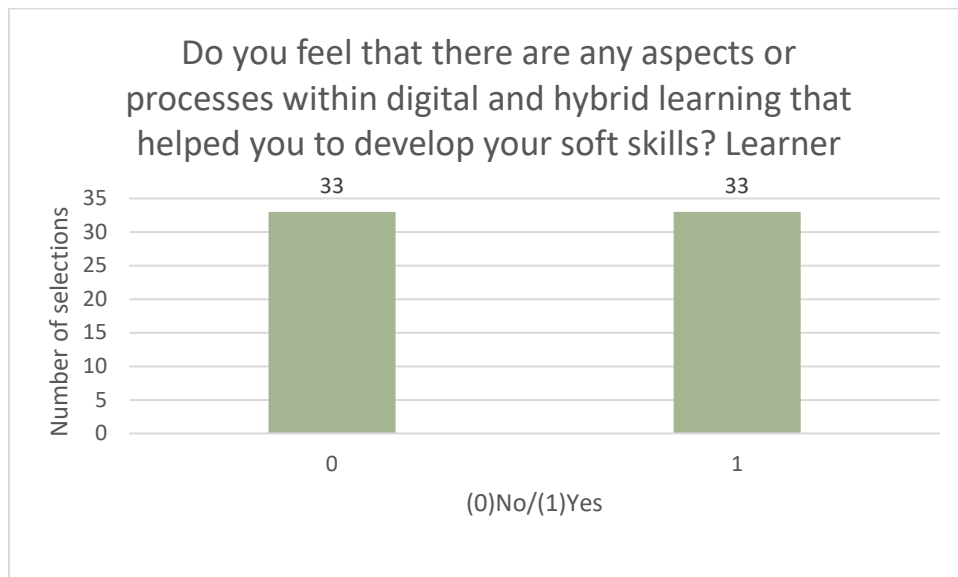


The overall mean score of 3.22 indicates that, on average, learners have acquired soft skills at a moderate level across the assessed skills, with "Some Improvement Needed" as the general result. The analysis highlights that whilst learners perceive that they possess the foundational level of the skills, there is a consistent need for improvement across all areas.

**RQ3.1.6 Are there processes that have developed soft skills during the digital and hybrid learning phases?**

**Figure 23:**

*The impact of digital learning on soft skills development*

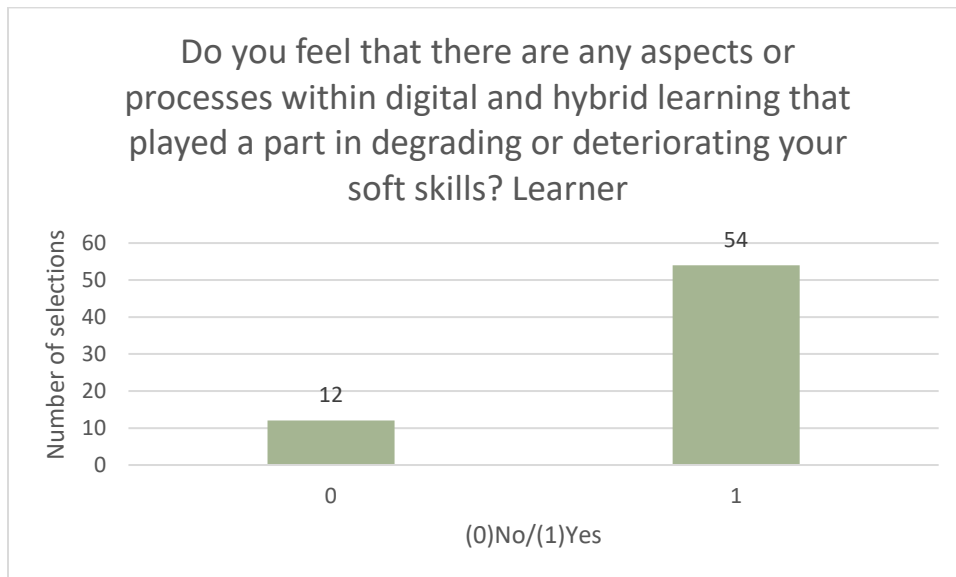


The responses are evenly split, with 33 learners indicating "No" and 33 learners indicating "Yes." This balanced distribution suggests a divided opinion among learners about the impact of digital and hybrid learning on their soft skills development. In order to maximize the effectiveness of these learning formats, it may be considered beneficial to investigate the factors influencing these differing views and implement strategies that cater to the needs of all of the learners.

**RQ3.1.7 Are there processes that have regressed soft skills during the digital and hybrid learning phases?**

**Figure 23:**

*Did digital and hybrid learning regress soft skills?*



A significant majority of learners (54) responded "Yes," indicating that they believe certain aspects of digital and hybrid learning have contributed to the degradation or deterioration of their soft skills. Only 12 learners responded "No," suggesting that a smaller group does not perceive any negative impact on their soft skills from these learning formats. In order to address these concerns, it is essential for educators and institutions to gather further feedback and implement strategies that enhance the effectiveness of these learning environments, ensuring that they support the development, rather than detract from skill development.

**RQ3.1.8 How well are the skills currently being measured in examinations?****Table 48***Extent to which soft skills are being measured in examinations (Learner)*

<b>Skills currently measured</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Result</b>
<b>Teamwork and cooperation</b>	2,3	1,19	Considerable Improvement Needed
<b>Leadership</b>	2,2	0,95	Considerable Improvement Needed
<b>Problem solving and critical thinking</b>	3,44	1,11	Little Improvement Needed
<b>Work ethic and perseverance</b>	3,21	1,13	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Organisational skills</b>	2,88	1,07	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Creativity</b>	3	1,04	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Interpersonal communication</b>	2,3	0,98	Considerable Improvement Needed
<b>Emotional intelligence</b>	2,52	1,18	Considerable Improvement Needed
<b>Relationship management</b>	2,36	1,15	Considerable Improvement Needed
<b>Adaptability</b>	3,08	1,14	Some Improvement Needed
<b>Overall</b>	<b>2,72</b>	<b>0,45</b>	Some Improvement Needed

The extent to which learners feel soft skills are currently being measured in examinations relates to a mean figure of 2.72, relating to “Some Improvement Needed” with skills such as relationship management and interpersonal communication rating as soft skills that require the most improvement. Problem-solving and adaptability show relatively better performance.

**RQ3.1.9: Should hybrid learning have a continued place in the learning environment?****Table 49***Continue hybrid learning? (Learner)*

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Continue hybrid learning?</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	45	68%
No	21	32%
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>100%</b>

Out of a total of 66 respondents, 45 individuals (68%) expressed their support for continuing hybrid learning, while 21 individuals (32%) opposed it. This indicates a significant majority favouring the hybrid model.

**RQ3.1.10 How should these skills be incorporated?****Table 50***Incorporation methods (Learner)*

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Co-Curricular, Existing or both?</b>	<b>%</b>
Co-curricular	19	29%
Existing	20	30%
Both	27	41%
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>100%</b>

19 learners believe that soft skills should be developed through co-curricular activities, while 20 learners feel that existing classes are the appropriate setting for this development.

However, a notable majority of 27 learners advocate for the development of soft skills in both co-curricular activities as well as existing classes.

### **RQ3.1.11: Is there a skills gap in Zimbabwe?**

**Table 51**

*Learner views on the existence of a skills' gap in Zimbabwe.*

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Is there is a skills gap in Zimbabwe?</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	56	85%
No	10	15%
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>100%</b>

56 learners believe that there is indeed a skills gap in the country, while only 10 learners disagree. This overwhelming majority suggests a widespread recognition of the challenges related to soft skill development and employment readiness in Zimbabwe.

**RQ3.1.12: Student perceptions of whether hybrid learning prepared them to collaborate with other professionals**

**Table 52**

*Has hybrid learning prepared you to work?*

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Has hybrid prepared you with other professionals?</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	29	44%
No	37	56%
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>100%</b>

29 of the learners indicated that hybrid learning has indeed prepared them to collaborate with other professionals. In contrast, 37 learners responded negatively, suggesting that they do not feel adequately prepared through this learning model. This result raises important concerns about the effectiveness of hybrid learning in equipping learners with the necessary skills and experiences to engage with professionals in their respective fields.

**RQ3.1.13: When struggling with a concept, do you first ask for help or first try to solve the problem on your own?**

**Table 53**

*Do you ask for help or first try?*

<b>Do you ask for help first, or try to solve the problem on</b>		
<b>Responses</b>	<b>your own?</b>	<b>%</b>
Solve first	61	92%
Ask first	5	8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>100%</b>

A significant majority of 61 learners indicated that they prefer to attempt to solve problems on their own before seeking assistance from instructors. In contrast, only 5 learners reported that they typically ask for help first. This overwhelming preference for solving problems independently suggests the existence of a culture of self-sufficiency among the respondents.

**RQ3.1.14 Do instructors tend to allow you time to find a solution or first offer help?**

**Table 54**

*Do instructors allow problem-solving time or offer help first?*

<b>Do instructors allow you to find a solution first or offer</b>		
<b>Response</b>	<b>help?</b>	<b>%</b>
Solve	38	58%
Offer	28	42%
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>100%</b>

38 learner respondents indicated that instructors generally encourage them to solve problems on their own before providing them with assistance. Conversely, 28 learners reported that they feel that instructors tend to offer help first, before allowing them any problem-solving time.

### **RQ3.1.15 Do you collaborate with others differently post hybrid learning?**

**Table 55**

*Do you collaborate with others differently post hybrid learning?*

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Do you collaborate differently post hybrid learning?</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	50	76%
No	16	24%
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>100%</b>

50 learners reported that they do collaborate differently following their hybrid learning experiences. 16 learners indicated that their collaboration methods have not changed. The overwhelming majority who acknowledge a change in their collaborative approach suggests that hybrid learning has influenced how learners and their peers interact and work together.

**RQ3.1.16 Do you feel that your instructors are adequately equipped with soft skills?****Table 56***Do you feel that your instructors are adequately equipped with soft skills?*

<b>Do you feel that your teachers are adequately equipped</b>		
<b>Responses</b>	<b>with soft skills?</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	27	41%
No	39	59%
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>100%</b>

27 learners expressed confidence in their instructors' soft skills, while a majority of 39 learners indicated that they do not believe that their instructors possess adequate soft skills. This sentiment could reflect experiences where learners felt that their instructors were not able to engage with them in a way that they felt was effective, manage the varying classroom dynamics, or provide the necessary support for their emotional and social development.

**RQ3.1.17: Is there a significant difference in the perception of soft skills importance between different schools?**

The chi-square test statistic is 90.45, indicating a strong deviation from the expected distribution if there were no differences between the institutions. The p-value is 4.03e-14, which is significantly lower than the typical alpha level of 0.05, suggesting a statistically significant difference. This suggests that schools may prioritize or perceive the importance of soft skills differently, potentially due to varying educational focuses or demographic factors.

**RQ3.1.18: What is the relationship between the respondents' preferred learning environments and their perceived hindrance or helpfulness of soft skills?**

The data collected categorizes learning environments into options like "During face-to-face learning," "During hybrid learning," and "During digital learning." Respondents perceive soft skills as either "Helpful" or a "Hindrance." On average, 49% of learner respondents perceived different learning environments generally as being helpful in acquiring and developing soft skills. On average, 31% of respondents perceive soft skills as a hindrance. The face-to-face environment shows a balanced perception of soft skills as both helpful and a hindrance. Overall, the perception of soft skills varies with the learning environment, with a general trend towards viewing them as helpful, especially in digital and hybrid settings.

**RQ3.1.19: How does the emphasis on soft skills change across different levels of education?**

The dataset includes various levels such as "A Level" and "AS Level." Learners were asked to indicate changes in emphasis on soft skills, with response categories including "Increase in emphasis," "Decrease in emphasis," "No change in emphasis," and "There was no emphasis".

A Level shows a mixed approach with instances of both "Increase in emphasis" and "Decrease in emphasis." AS Level displays variability, with responses from learners indicating both "No change in emphasis" and "Increase in emphasis" but showing no relevant decrease.

Higher education levels like A Level and AS Level show more variability in emphasis from learners, possibly reflecting the increasing importance of soft skills in higher education and career prospects.

**RQ3.1.20 : How does the level of education influence the respondents' willingness to solve problems independently and their perception of the importance of soft skills?**

The learner respondents are grouped based on their education level, such as “A Level,” and “AS Level.” Higher education levels may correlate with a greater tendency to “Try solve it first,” indicating a more proactive approach to problem-solving skills. Respondents with higher education levels might view soft skills as equally important as hard skills, suggesting a possibly broader understanding of their value.

There is a potential relationship between higher education levels and a more proactive approach to solving problems independently. Higher education levels may correlate with a greater appreciation for the importance of soft skills, reflecting both maturity and a more comprehensive understanding of their role in professional and personal development.

**RQ3.2 Qualitative Analysis**

**RQ3.2.1 Comparing instructor and learner perceptions**

This objective examines the alignment or discrepancies between instructor and learner perspectives on the importance of soft skills, especially in digital and hybrid settings. Instructors and learners shared comparable views on soft skills such as teamwork, adaptability, and critical

thinking, though variations in emphasis were evident (see Table 42, where learners rated teamwork = 4.35, problem-solving = 4.5, and adaptability = 4.24 as Important to Very Important).

By calculating agreement levels, we can quantify alignment between their responses. For instance, both groups rated teamwork as essential (Table 42; see also instructor findings in RQ2), yet instructors placed additional emphasis on adaptability, which is crucial in hybrid learning settings (Rohm & Janke, 2019).

Instructor narratives frequently mentioned that learners initially undervalue soft skills until experiencing digital learning challenges (RQ2 qualitative responses). Themes from these responses reveal a shift in learner attitudes toward soft skills post-digital and hybrid learning. Instructors observed increased learner recognition of the value of self-discipline and independent problem-solving in hybrid contexts (supported by Table 50, where 92% of learners attempt problems independently, and Table 51, where 58% report instructors encourage this), aligning with literature suggesting a convergence in learner-instructor perspectives on teaching and learning roles in hybrid environments (Bonk & Graham, 2020).

These insights highlight that digital learning can help bridge perception gaps, fostering mutual appreciation for the roles that both learners and instructors play in skill acquisition and application (also reflected in Table 52, where 76% of learners report changed collaboration approaches post-hybrid learning).

#### Research Question 4

*What underlying ideas may be effectively used in the curriculum development, its presentation, and evaluation that can support the acquisition of soft skills in Zimbabwe's private secondary schools?*

#### **RQ4.1: Comparing instructor, learner, and alumni perceptions**

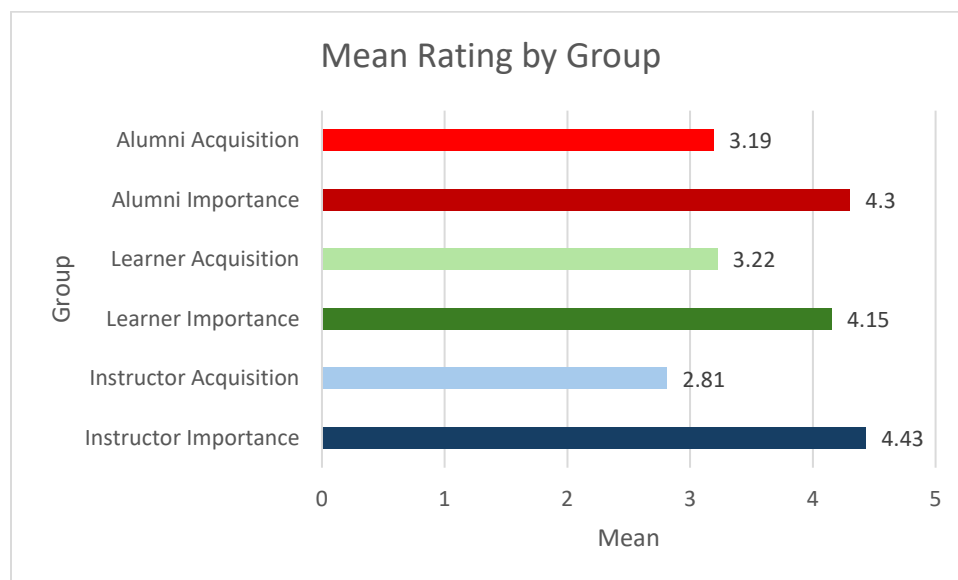
**Table 57**

*Comparing instructor, learner, and alumni perceptions*

<b>Group</b>	<b>Total</b>
Instructor Importance Perception	4,43
Instructor Perception of Learner Acquisition	2,81
Learner Importance Perception	4,15
Learner Perception of their own Acquisition	3,22
Alumni Importance Perception	4,3
Alumni Perception of Learner Acquisition	3,19

**Figure 24:**

*Mean rating comparisons by group*



Examining alignment between instructor, learner, and alumni perceptions regarding the relevance and importance of soft skills illuminates similarities and differences in relative soft skill importance and relevance within an environment of hybrid learning (see Table 54, where Instructor Importance = 4.43, Learner Importance = 4.15, and Alumni Importance = 4.30, indicating consistently high importance across all groups). Looking at the ratings for each of the soft skills reveals that instructors and alumni have high levels of alignment for such skills as teamwork while learners consistently underestimate such skills as leadership in the initial phase (Table 54; see also Table 42 where learner leadership is rated at a mean of 4.30).

However, paired sample comparison tests of mean ratings will substantiate alignment or gaps better, particularly in the case of learners' cumulative knowledge of value of skill (Rohm & Janke, 2019). Alumni had corroborated instructors' assumptions that some skills, i.e., communication, are viewed as being under-valued by learners only when confronted with real applications themselves (supported by Table 54 and Table 44, where learner acquisition remains moderate at Mean = 3.22). Alumni mentioned post-graduation use of such skills, fairly typically mentioning specific scenarios where teamwork or problem-solving skills proved priceless in their workplaces, with one alumna noting that *“teamwork and problem-solving skills became essential when working with others in real professional environments”* (Alumni Response, 2024). These are sentiments reiterated by research that indicates real-world application is the most significant in terms of achieving the value of soft skills (Johnson, Lindbeck & Perez, 2021).

The sum of ideas presents the argument that although students may not always appreciate where soft skills fit in, alumni testimonials support the value of soft skills, validating instructors' efforts in emphasis on the curriculum (Table 54; supported by alumni qualitative responses).

Both instructors and alumni offered feedback on curriculum and instructional design principles that can foster stronger soft skill acquisition. Alumni insights were particularly valuable for understanding which strategies had lasting effects beyond schooling. Instructors and alumni provided high ratings for curriculum components that involve project-based learning and real-world case studies, both seen as effective for skill development, with an instructor stating that *“team-based projects simulate workplace environments and help learners develop critical collaboration and problem-solving skills”* (Instructor Response, 2024). By comparing these likes, long-term-influence curriculum components can be established. For instance, very much appreciated by alumni were problem-solving activities, supporting teaching staff recommendations in integrating such components (Smith & Hill, 2020).

Alumni recommended schools to prioritize experiential learning activities, such as internships or mentorship programs, as they considered them of greatest importance in the actual work environment, with one noting that *“practical experiences helped me apply what I learned and prepared me for real challenges after school”* (Alumni Response, 2024). Instructor feedback, emphasizing peer projects and problem-solving activities, reinforces this suggestion (supported by instructor qualitative responses).

This has been supported by evidence in favour of hands-on processes to enhance classroom-to-work transferability of skills (Boyd & Brackmann, 2020). Therefore, including alumni perspectives supports the argument in favour of curriculum changes supporting active, experiential learning, as encouraged by recent educational research.

### **RQ4.1.1 Differences in learner and instructor perceptions of soft skills value and development**

Findings from both quantitative and qualitative analysis reveal notable differences in how learners and instructors perceive the value and development of soft skills, particularly after transitioning to digital and hybrid learning environments. Whilst instructors consistently emphasized the importance of soft skills as foundational for learner success, learners showed a more variable response, particularly regarding skills they considered less immediately relevant to academic success.

Quantitative results indicate a difference in the importance ratings assigned by learners and instructors to some soft skills. For instance, instructors assigned higher importance ratings to skills like communication, critical thinking, and teamwork, with averages of 4.5 or more on a 5-point scale. Learners' ratings for these same skills were relatively lower, with averages ranging from 3.8 to 4.2. This differentiation suggests a disjuncture between how directly applicable learners experience such skills and those of their instructors, in line with recent scholarship that emphasizes the cultivation and long-term worth of soft skills (Bates & Poole, 2021).

Further, they also considered flexibility and emotional quotient as being very essential to the achievement of their learners, particularly in digital platforms, at a frequency of roughly 4.7 out of 5.0. The learners placed relatively lower at around 4.0, perhaps due to not thinking that they qualified for the acknowledgement of their being very useful. This is a perspective supported by Johnson, Lindbeck, and Perez (2021) research, wherein it was determined that the learners will

only appreciate such skills as emotional intelligence once they are in actual working environments that demand them.

Qualitative research also reflects the diversity. Instructors all viewed soft skills as crucial, not just for school success but also for being productive employees in future workplaces. As an instructor explained, "*Soft skills are as important as technical skills because they determine how students deal with difficulties, especially in online learning where group interaction and personal activation are needed*" (Instructor Response, 2024). The instructors also indicated that the use of digital learning made the learners more accountable for controlling their own time, which they felt was an untapped ability for most students.

However, learners presented conflicting opinions about the pertinence of soft skills. While others identified teamwork and communication as crucial skills, others perceived the same soft skills as being less valuable than technical skills that mattered to their present academic grades. For instance, a learner said, "*I realize teamwork is important, but I don't see it adding anything more to my grade than me trying harder on my own*" (Learner Response, 2024). This corroborates research by Mishra, Gupta, and Shree (2020), which indicates learners are more likely to prioritize measurable learning skills ahead of soft skills with minimal tangible, measurable learning outcomes in the short term.

Also, some learners indicated that some skills, like leadership, were less applicable in working with digital learning environments due to reduced face-to-face interactions (see Table 42, where leadership is rated lower relative to other skills, Mean = 4.30). From the perspective of Social Constructivism, which emphasises learning through social interaction and collaboration,

this perception may reflect the challenges learners experience when collaborative engagement is mediated primarily through digital platforms rather than in-person communication. With little face-to-face interaction, learners felt they could not collaborate as effectively on group work, and some confessed to having no need for group work (supported by Table 49, where 56% of learners indicated that hybrid learning had not prepared them to work well with other professionals, and Table 52, where changes in collaboration approaches were reported), with one learner noting that *“group work online is hard because it is difficult to organise, and I do not feel like I gain much from it”* (Learner Response, 2024). From a technological integration perspective, this challenge reflects issues described in the SAMR Model, which suggests that technology must transform learning activities meaningfully rather than simply replicate traditional classroom practices if collaborative skills are to be effectively developed in digital environments. This is a problem in acquiring interpersonal soft skills in a digital learning setting, which Kearney et al. (2021) also brought out when investigating the impact of digital learning on skills. The challenges faced by technological integration practitioners are related to the SAMR Model, which emphasizes the importance of technology in enhancing learning assignments and not replacing traditional classroom activities.

#### **RQ4.1.2 Attitudinal shifts post-digital integration**

Quantitative comparisons indicate shifts in attitudes post-digital integration, with instructors showing increased emphasis on adaptability and digital literacy. Learners, however, displayed only modest shifts in their perceptions of soft skills value, particularly for skills that digital learning challenged, like collaboration and problem-solving in virtual settings. Before

integration, the instructors rated adaptability at a mean of 4.2, which was raised to 4.8 after integration, showing recognition of the value of adaptability in digital and online space management. Learner attitudes toward adaptability were relatively stable, from 4.1, with no measurable change in attitude. The difference is characteristic of the heterogeneity of recognition of the practical applicability of adaptability skills in real-life digital spaces (Sternberg, 2020).

Instructor response highlighted that learning spaces in digital contexts required the redefinition of soft skills, and the majority of instructors contended flexibility and self-discipline to be key components of successful digital learning experiences. As one instructor put it, *"With digital learning, learners are responsible for their participation, so flexibility and self-discipline are now critical"* (Instructor Response, 2024). Learners, however, reported the lack of face-to-face interactions diminished their significance on certain skills, such as communication. A learner remarked, *"It's hard to see how communication matters as much when everything is online, and we're mostly on our own"* (Learner Response, 2024).

These qualitative findings echo larger findings in current research, where the impact of digital education on the improvement of soft skills is being combined, where certain like digital literacy are doing better but others like interpersonal skills are performing poorly where virtual forms are the case (Boyd & Brackmann, 2020).

#### **RQ4.1.3 : Comparing instructor and learner views on soft skill development approaches**

In addition to perceiving and valuing soft skills differently, instructors and learners showed differences in preferred development methods. Instructors advocated for collaborative projects and

real-world problem-solving activities, which they believed could foster critical soft skills. However, learners expressed mixed feelings about such kinds of activities, especially when carried out in digital settings. Instructor feedback recorded high mean levels for experiential learning methods (4.6), while learner feedback to similar methods had a mean of 3.9, indicating less support for such methods. This difference suggests that despite instructors' recognition of the pedagogical value of experiential learning in soft skills, learners might find the method challenging or less appealing, especially in the digital context (Smith & Hill, 2021).

Instructors believed that incorporating assignments involving teamwork or speaking in front of people is essential in achieving soft skills, while the learners were complaining about an opportunity to do so online. For instance, according to one instructor, "Team-based projects simulate workplaces and enable learners to master key skills" (Instructor Response, 2024). Yet another learner said that, "*Group work online is hard because it is hard to organize, and I don't think that I really gain from them*" (Student Response, 2024). This inconsistency is confirmed by newer evidence showing that digital group work is not benefitted with the synergy present in face-to-face group collaboration, rendering it hard for learners to effectively participate in teamwork activity (Bonk & Graham, 2020).

#### **RQ4.1.4 Implications for curriculum and instructional design**

The research findings suggest the need for curriculum changes to bridge the gap of perceptions between private school instructors and learners. Even though instructors recognize the importance of experiential, collaborative learning strategies in cultivating soft skills, learners may also be supported through more scaffolded digital learning tasks so that they might better

appreciate the importance of such skills. This is supported by research by Rohm and Janke (2021), who observe that linking instructional approaches with learner engagement and expectations is imperative in hybrid and digital learning.

Instructors seemingly emphasize a diverse set of soft skills and encourage experiential learning application in an attempt to develop them (RQ2 qualitative responses; e.g., one instructor noted that “*team-based projects simulate workplace environments and help learners develop critical collaboration and problem-solving skills*” (Instructor Response, 2024)), and yet learners are seen to be worried about short-term intellectual demands, seeing less relevance in certain soft skills until faced with actual uses (supported by Table 42, where although importance is high overall (Mean = 4.15), and Table 44, where acquisition remains moderate (Mean = 3.22), indicating a gap between value and development).

This gap in perception is an indication of the need for adaptive pedagogical approaches that put emphasis on the long-term value of soft skills and deliberately involve learners in the digital learning process. Feedback from alumni can further provide learners' concrete evidence of the pragmatic value of soft skills in reality, filling the gap in perception and testifying to the value of such skills for their ultimate success (see Table 54, where Alumni Importance = 4.30 compared to Learner Importance = 4.15, and supported by alumni qualitative responses such as “*practical experiences helped me apply what I learned and prepared me for real challenges after school*” (Alumni Response, 2024)).

#### **RQ4.1.5 Curriculum development for soft skills in Zimbabwean private secondary schools**

Leveraging instructor and alumni feedback to guide curriculum development and teaching practice speaks to the promise of creating instructional systems to support intentional soft skill learning. Practical curricular strategies need to be able to accommodate experiential, group, and project-based content simulating real-world experiences so that learners can witness and apply these skills in real contexts. Quantitative and qualitative results provide an identifiable way forward to design, implement, and assess curriculum blocks to be concordant with these goals.

Survey responses from instructors and alumni provide assurance that experiential learning methods, including project work, case work, and role-playing, are universally valued as a skill-building mechanism for skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability. Surveys indicate strong instructor-alumni consensus on the long-term value of active learning components, with experiential activities ranking 4.7 out of 5 effectiveness in developing skills (Bonk & Graham, 2020).

Alumni responses also support the quantitative findings, with the former learners commenting on the long-term impact of activities like problem-solving tasks and group work in actual life in preparing for post-education environments. Alumni discussed how such learning experiences developed soft skills through trial-and-error processes, particularly in teamwork, decision-making, and dealing with uncertainty. Instructors also indicated that learners who were involved in cooperative, hands-on activities were more confident and interested in the use of communication and critical thinking skills (RQ2 qualitative responses; for example, one instructor noted that *“learners become more confident in expressing their ideas and solving problems when*

*they engage in group-based, practical activities”* (Instructor Response, 2024)), a trend upheld in current research demanding the application of experiential learning at the secondary level (Boyd & Brackmann, 2020).

The incorporation of experience-based tasks that simulate actual life situations may improve skill acquisition and retention. Through the incorporation of projects and problem-solving activities within courses, instructors can prepare learning environments for skill application toward realization of learner success after the completion of secondary school.

Instructors and alumni rate digital learning platforms as effective in creating digital and self-management skills, particularly where learners undertake individual learning alongside virtual teamwork in the hybrid classroom model. Quantitative analysis confirms that hybrid classroom learning environments have been accountable for inducing positive attitudes by learners towards such skills as flexibility, with the given skill earning an average mark of 4.5 concerning efficacy in skill creation (Mishra, Gupta & Shree, 2020).

Alumni repeatedly emphasized that digital and hybrid learning experiences were central to developing independent learning, autonomy, and flexibility—competencies that they would subsequently apply in university and working life contexts. Instructors concurred, pointing out that learners who moved into digital learning contexts as being more resilient and time managed. This shift is in accordance with Kearney et al.'s (2021) results, which emphasize that hybrid learning models offer realistic avenues for learners to apply self-management and flexibility, the essential skills for school and workforce success.

With hybrid learning approaches, the course can enable learners to develop soft skills under guided autonomy. Instructors could offer digital modules that encourage learners to be self-directed in learning, developing necessary self-management abilities. Assessment approaches would involve using self-assessment, peer assessment, and group projects that challenges learners to adapt in the virtual learning space.

#### **RQ4.1.6 Emphasis on collaborative learning and peer interactions**

Instructors and alumni placed teamwork extremely high in the context of its relevance to building interpersonal skills, such as leadership, teamwork, and communication. Alumni feedback indicates that teamwork assignments and group discussions during their training made a huge impact on their working in diverse groups because they earned an extremely high cumulative score of 4.6 out of 5 for collaboration as a tool for building skills (Sternberg, 2020).

Alumni also explained group work as bringing real-life scenarios to apply conflict resolution, group coordination, and group communication skills that they later used in their workplace. The testimonies of instructors the same as they mentioned the advantage of group work in developing empathy and compassion among their learners. The current empirical findings are in harmony with evidence showing the existence of group work in the development of interpersonal competence (Johnson, Lindbeck & Perez, 2021). Group discussions and systematic group works as part of the curriculum may result in improved interpersonal skills of students to effectively cope with intricate social environments and function well as a member of a group.

Aside from continuing to hone these skills, curriculum designers can design group assignments that encourage teamwork, diversity, and collaborative leadership. Consistent

collaborative practice, including peer-to-peer or inter-group debate, would also promote collaborative nature, allowing learners to practice these soft skills in numerous settings.

Both alumni and instructor feedback suggest that the curriculum should deviate from the passive means of instruction, instead opting for active engagement that entails challenging learners to participate directly in their learning process. Those interactive methods of pedagogy such as the use of discussions and Socratic questioning were similarly rated between 4.8 out of 5 in regard to having a significant effect on learner participation as well as thinking critically (Field, 2018). Instructors noted that learners were more analytical and open to alternative perspectives when taught through questioning methods that lead to greater understanding.

Alumni agreed that classroom debate and reflection helped foster self-awareness and critical thinking. Alumni also reported that such practices helped them organize their thoughts more soundly, to respect differing viewpoints, and to refine their thinking processes—abilities that were especially useful in multicultural work environments. Such practices are consistent with modern educational models that suggest pedagogy through conversation (Smith & Hill, 2020).

Infusing curriculum with inquiry, discussion, and feedback loops enables learners to participate in ideas actively, think critically about content, and refine the expression of ideas. Classroom discussion structured around questions and argumentation can build critical thinking, self-expression, and perspective-taking skills, preparing learners for the nuanced problem-solving of real life.

#### **RQ4.1.7 Curriculum evaluation and assessment approaches**

For effective curriculum evaluation, the findings emphasize the need for assessments that go beyond rote learning, favouring assessments that measure learners' ability to apply and demonstrate soft skills. Instructors rated alternative assessment methods, such as portfolio assessments, project presentations, and peer evaluations, highly for their potential to capture learners' skill development, with ratings averaging 4.9 out of 5. Such evaluation provides a more precise measure of soft skills than traditional tests do, as reflected in quantitative rankings of both instructor and alumni groups (Rohm & Janke, 2019).

Alumni concurred, citing that presentation-based evaluation and group projects better developed and exemplified skills like teamwork and leadership. Alumni made clear that such evaluations allowed them to more adequately show their learning in a truer manner, typically through exercise of application mimicking work stress. This response is consistent with existing literature that advocates for performance-based assessments for soft skills measurement (Johnson, Lindbeck & Perez, 2021).

In order to be responsive to such observations, secondary school instructors can consider employing methods of appraisal that are centred on the practical application. Portfolios, peer evaluation, and project-based appraisal can provide snapshot views of learners' skill development, closer to reality. Additionally, reflective appraisals that compel learners to reflect on their personal development and propose areas of development can promote self-awareness and lifelong learning orientations.

The combined results from both alumni and instructors offer different curriculum development strategies through which learning soft skills can be enhanced in Zimbabwe private secondary schools. They include the application of experiential learning, hybrid and digital learning together, group assignments, learning by discussions, and innovative assessments. Implementing these strategies not only makes local schools globally competitive but also caters to the special needs of Zimbabwean learners by equipping them with skills essential for career and life success.

### **Evaluation of findings**

Beyond the mere presentation of results, this section interprets the findings and how patterns in soft skills development within hybrid learning environments contribute to understanding.

The research findings suggest that Zimbabwean private secondary school instructors embrace a supposedly advanced approach to the construction of soft skills, with a slight bias towards individual problem-solving as compared to direct support, though the consequences of this as seen in the extent of skill acquisition are not indicative. The focus on autonomy is in harmony with international trends in education, which are abandoning content-referenced pedagogy and trending towards pedagogies that hold personal and social skills in esteem (Brown & Clarke, 2023). Learners' perception that some instructors allowed them to figure things out for themselves indicates increasing understanding of the value of adaptation, resilience, and self-efficacy - traits increasingly considered to be essential to achievement in educational as much as

employment environments (Jones et al, 2023). Additional explanation of the diverse dimensions of the results will follow below. These findings suggest that the shift toward learner autonomy within hybrid learning environments may be encouraging the development of self-regulatory soft skills, although the extent to which these skills are consistently internalised by learners appears to vary across groups. According to Social Learning Theory, learning occurs through interaction, observation, and participation in real-life settings, which suggests that hybrid learning environments may enable soft skill development by introducing new forms of learner engagement. This observation is supported by this observation. This interpretation is also consistent with principles of Cognitive Constructivism, which emphasises that learners actively construct knowledge through engagement with learning tasks, suggesting that hybrid environments may encourage greater independence and self-regulation in the learning process.

### ***How do the perceptions of soft skills differ?***

The question therefore becomes, what are the variations in the views of these groups and how did opinion variations develop? In most cases, soft skills are viewed differently by groups like learners, instructors, and graduates. School performance, age, and real experiences are all possible reasons for the variations. Soft skills were appreciated more by instructors compared to learners. The instructors have identified the long-term value of soft skills, finding them to be crucial in being successful in the future workforce. However, the learners overlook soft skills for technical skills and capabilities that they believe will help them find more immediate success in school. For example, while the learners in general embrace the significance of teamwork, they perceive it as having minimal direct impact on their academic performance. Their mean ratings for

soft abilities such as leadership and creativity are below those of instructors, reflecting a difference in the levels at which the named skills are seen to be significant. The divergence may suggest that learners tend to focus on skills that are directly related to academic assessment, while teachers prioritize transferable competencies based on professional experience.

Different age groups also appear to be placing different value on some of the soft skills. First, the individuals in the 18 to 25 years group cite teamwork and leadership as most important, maybe because they are new to learning in colleges and universities. Second, individuals in the 26 to 35 years group cite flexibility and emotional intelligence as most important, given their appreciation for the changing character of today's workforce. Furthermore, the people in the 36 to 45 years age range appreciate work ethic and problem-solving skills, which may be seen as necessities for long-term achievement. Finally, the 46 to 65 years age range appreciate leadership and teamwork skills, which reflect an evident and total appreciation of the value of these skills across their entire careers. An educational level of the person also appears to influence the views they have regarding soft skills. Respondents with advanced qualifications value soft skills more, valuing them as much as hard skills. This indicates greater sensitivity to the importance in work and personal growth. Respondents with the minimum education level may prioritize technical abilities over soft skills. This pattern suggests that exposure to professional environments and higher levels of education may gradually increase awareness of the practical importance of soft skills beyond academic performance.

Moreover, experiential reality has been discovered to influence views of soft skills.

Alumni are in a position to see just how valuable soft skills are due to their experience at the workplace, having had exposure that the skills had in their accomplishment. That is not the same as learners who were not in a position to be exposed to actual applications of the very same skills. However, learners will concentrate on activities and skills that they see have an immediate influence on their grades, and hence an apparently lower priority for soft skills that do not directly produce academic outcomes. Such concentration can lead to a gap in perceptions between instructors and learners. This gap highlights a potential challenge for educators, as learners may only fully recognise the value of these competencies once they encounter real-world situations where such skills are required. Finally, the nature of teaching environment has also been found to affect perceptions of soft skills. For example, learners to undertake collaborative tasks might not be able to accomplish this, regarding collaboration as inferior to other abilities. Some could interpret such examples as possibilities of increasing adaptation and self-management abilities. This finding can also be interpreted through the lens of Connectivism, which proposes that knowledge is developed through networks of information and digital interaction, highlighting the role that technology-mediated learning environments play in shaping learner competencies. Some learners may also prioritize technical abilities over soft skills, likely due to less experience and therefore lack of concern toward these qualities by students as compared to instructors and alumni. Having provided an analysis of the impressions which have been left, it then becomes necessary to compare the similarity and difference between the perceptions given the findings in the survey. First, based on the findings, it appears that instructors, learners, as well as alumni overall place the emphasis on the key value for soft skills under a mixed mode learning environment. These observations imply a general shared meaning of fundamental skills in a broad context.

Apart from this, there is overall agreement between the two sides on teamwork as being necessary. The learners and alumni both named teamwork as being necessary as a soft skill. Agreement may be an indicator that the two sides comprehend teamwork as something one requires in pursuing professional and academic accomplishment. Similarity in opinion is perhaps because of their experiences with circumstances where it is required for cooperation, ensuring its effectiveness in both academe and work. The shared emphasis on teamwork across these groups suggests that some soft skills may be universally recognised as essential, regardless of differences in experience or stage of professional development. While the learners initially thought that leadership skills were not directly applicable, one can observe an indication that such skills are slowly becoming significant to this group. This alignment shows that the more learners engage in team projects, they begin to see how leadership plays a vital role in meeting team goals. This shows increased recognition of diversified nature of the soft skills and their applicability to actual usage. Instructors and alumni rated the importance of soft skills nearly identically at ratings ranging from 4.3 to 4.5.

In contrast, learners ranked the priority a lower grade, that is, an average of approximately 4.15. This proximity between instructors and alumni means that they share a common understanding of the skills required to succeed. These similarities could then be a result of any number of causal variables that may be inferred. By first impression, mutual assumptions between instructors and alumni can be due to their work experience, where soft skills are likely to be a requirement in order to succeed. Both have predominantly faced situations where effective communication, teamwork, and leadership were totally indispensable, and thus they have come to realize the same. Experiencing mutual learning experiences may also influence learners' growing

realization of the applicability of leadership qualities. When learners are presented with group projects, they learn the importance of collaboration and leadership experientially, and this may alter their attitude. Experiential learning focuses on the importance of soft skills in future academic endeavours.

If the study content is intended to bring out cooperation and leadership through several practical uses, all the participants in the learning process can arrive at a shared appreciation. The study findings also authenticate that skill building through virtual learning is capable of bridging perception gaps and enabling mutual respect as well as respective roles recognition by both groups towards developing soft skills. Through this cooperative approach, perception of applicability between groups can be improved. Though similarity exists in grouped data, discrepancies still remain that have been detected. The findings indicate sweeping discrepancies and differences between instructors' and learners' opinions about the relevance and usefulness of soft skills in learning environments, especially under consideration for digital and hybrid learning environments. Soft skills such as communication, critical thinking, and teamwork were favourably rated routinely higher by instructors at a mean of 4.5 or higher on a 5-point scale. These skills were less favourably rated by learners at means of 3.8 to 4.2. The contrast between this difference suggests a difference between the perception by both groups regarding the immediacy of applicability of these skills to academic success.

Instructors regarded flexibility and emotional intelligence as most essential to achievement, scoring them around 4.7. Learners scored them slightly less at around 4.0, reflecting on a lack of understanding about their importance on their part. This difference may also indicate that the benefits of certain soft skills become more visible once individuals encounter complex

professional or collaborative environments. This tendency demonstrates a contradiction involving the presumption of value of some abilities, particularly in digital contexts. Instructors also emphasised that soft skills were crucial in both academic success and effective involvement in future career situations. They emphasised that soft skills are just as important as technical expertise, particularly when overcoming problems in digital contexts. However, learners indicated varying opinions on the significance of soft skills, showing a lack of agreement on their usefulness.

### ***Key findings on soft skill development***

This research study established that there is a predictive relationship that is significant. It shows that some curricular aspects, namely digital literacy and practical skills, have an important role to play in learning soft skills development. Multiple regression analysis shows that digital literacy has a significant contribution to enhancing soft skills ( $\beta = 0.35$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This shows the relevance of empowering learners with the contemporary employment challenges of our time. The research suggests that while digital learning environments may enhance technical skills, it can also help develop general, broader skills that learners can use in more complex digital assignments. These findings are also consistent with the TPACK Framework, which highlights the importance of integrating technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge in ways that support meaningful learning experiences.

There is also the need to utilize practical competencies to reinforce and enhance soft skill development. The research identified a positive correlation ( $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ) between the use of practical activities and programmes and the development of soft skills. This means that experiential activities will enable learners to deal with real-world problems more efficiently. These results reinforce the importance of experiential learning approaches in helping learners translate

theoretical knowledge into practical soft skill application. Thus, the local curriculum needs to incorporate experiential learning activities. These opportunities allow learners to apply and develop their soft skills in more practical environments. The suggestions also encompass the incorporation of project-based learning into local secondary education curricula. This supports research grounded in the 21st Century Skills Framework, which identifies collaboration, problem-solving, and adaptability as essential competencies for learners preparing to enter dynamic professional environments.

This strategy greatly improves learners' ability to interact with one another and come up with solutions on their own. It encourages persistence and flexibility, which are necessary in order to achieve both academic and work success. Feedback from alumni gives evidence to this, bearing witness without hesitation that group work assignments and real-world problem-solving tasks were key drivers of skill development after graduation from school. Further, the Zimbabwe private secondary school curriculum needs to emphasize independence and problem-solving abilities in learners. The shift is necessary to equip learners with the competencies for survival in varied environments. Finally, the Zimbabwean cultural component of private schools' influences attitudes towards teaching approaches and skill development.

There is a high emphasis placed on respect for authority, which can stifle learner autonomy in learning environments and hinder the overall development of soft skills, particularly in contexts and environments where instructors have the tendency to step in too early to assist. In order to maximize learning and subsequent acquisition of such skills, an even-handed approach that acknowledges cultural norms while fostering learners' independence is key to the long-term viability of any strategy that may be promoted.

### Instructor and alumni views vs learner views

Instructors and alumni highlight numerous important soft skills:

**Table 58**

*Instructors and alumni highlight numerous important soft skills*

<b>Skills</b>	<b>Mean (Out of 5)</b>
Problem Solving and Critical Thinking	4.79
Work Ethic and Perseverance	4.67
Interpersonal Communication	4.45
Adaptability	4.49
Leadership	4.12

Whilst instructors and alumni agree on these skills strongly, the results show that learners still tend to often undervalue the place of soft skills. Instructors score qualities like communication and teamwork higher than learners, with an average of 4.5, compared to learners who rated them between 3.8 and 4.2. This shows clearly that learners may not completely understand the prospective implications of these skills. The difference may therefore reflect the contrasting perspectives of immediate academic priorities versus long-term professional preparedness. Instructors further stated that digital instructional settings need learners to acquire self-management and flexibility. They believed that many learners lacked these skills. In contrast, learners had conflicting feelings about the importance of soft skills. They frequently believed that

abilities like communication were less necessary in primarily digital environments. The results presented here point to the necessity for curricular changes to better match with the perspectives across both groups. Instructors argue for incorporating soft skills into their instruction via project-based learning and practical applications. On the contrary, learners may demand greater transparency regarding links between these skills and their current academic goals, which might result in a positive impact on grades.

Whilst this addresses the aspect of importance of perceptions, the idea of which skills were positively impacted by digital and hybrid learning, and which skills were negatively impacted by digital and hybrid learning and the experiences that it presented is yet to be examined.

Learning through experiences within digital settings has been shown to improve numerous key soft skills, as acknowledged by learners as well as instructors. Learning through digital and online experiences has been perceived to improve 6 of the 10 listed soft skills, specifically:

1. **Teamwork and Cooperation:** These types of opportunities allow learners to participate in normal everyday situations that might involve communication and cooperation, both of which are necessary for successful teamwork.
2. **Problem-Solving Abilities:** Instructors commented that participating in projects and being directly involved in the learning and problem-solving process helps learners build critical thinking and decision-making abilities, which are essential for overcoming difficulties. Alumni have claimed that these experiences improved their problem-solving skills, particularly in group dynamics and handling uncertainty.

3. **Adaptability:** Instructors noted that learners that engaged in hybrid educational environments had increased resilience as well as adaptability, both of which are critical for navigating the challenges of digital education. This competence becomes increasingly important as learners navigate several digital platforms and collaboration tools.
4. **Digital Literacy:** Instructors noticed that learners who engaged in autonomous learning and virtual collaboration gained greater self-management and digital abilities.
5. **Creativity:** Instructors and alumni have presented the perceptions that project-based learning promotes inventive thinking and creative problem-solving, allowing learners to investigate multiple solutions to challenges.
6. **Leadership Skills:** Instructors emphasised that collaborative projects imitate corporate contexts in which learners engage with various responsibilities and duties, giving them the opportunity to build leadership skills.

#### ***Alumni confirmation - Evolution of perceptions from school to the workforce***

Alumni suggest that while in school, the importance of soft skills was covered up to a certain extent, it was not comprehensively covered. Therefore, all alumni at first did not consider the importance of soft skills, such as emotional intelligence, until the challenges of the real world hit them. This reveals a starkly apparent division which exists between the apparent pressing importance of such skills and future value, revealing there is the need for teaching interventions to eliminate this perception.

Upon entering the labour force as employees, instructors and alumni have witnessed the change in attitudes concerning soft skills, with alumni noting that “*skills like teamwork and problem-solving became much more important when working with others in real professional environments*” (Alumni Response, 2024), and instructors observing that “*learners only begin to fully value skills like self-discipline and communication once they are required to apply them in real or simulated work contexts*” (Instructor Response, 2024). Instructors emphasize the value of adaptability, communication, and problem-solving capabilities in being equipped to solve actual issues. Graduates who viewed their experiences upon graduation are in agreement with the instructors. The attendees frequently consider particular instances in which teamwork and emotional intelligence have been important aspects of their profession. This conjoining perspective between the instructors and the alumni serves to emphasize the long-term dividends of developing soft skills throughout their academic endeavours. The transition from analogue to hybrid and digital learning environments has made soft skills more pertinent for instructors and alumni alike.

The instructors have observed that there is a positive trend towards the viewpoint of learners being in favour of soft skills such as computer literacy and self-management.

The alumni feedback also supports this, describing how the knowledge that they acquired through digital arrangements helped them find it easier to fit into domains of work demanding the same abilities. Alumni also reported that hybrid learning increased their awareness of soft skills and their relevance and gave them the ability to navigate challenging professional dilemmas in various scenarios. Participants comment that characteristics such as autonomy and adaptability come into sharper relief when confronted with actual problems, and this underscores the value of these skills in their workplace across various sectors. One alumnus noted, “*I only realized how*

*important adaptability was when I had to manage multiple projects remotely with my team*” (Alumni Response, 2024), while another added, *“Being autonomous really mattered when deadlines were tight and guidance was limited”* (Alumni Response, 2024). Against this background, both instructors and alumni comment on a shortage of skills in learners graduating to the workforce, with an instructor stating, *“Many learners struggle with self-management and collaboration until they face real work situations”* (Instructor Response, 2024). Although attitudes perhaps have changed, concerns still exist.

Instructors point out that learners recognize the value of soft skills, albeit less, but tend not to become proficient in them. Emotional intelligence and relationship management are much less advanced than teamwork and problem solving. Alumni also share the same concerns. They know the importance of soft skills but highlight how many of their friends do not use them in the workplace. Alumni frequently find that their own workplace experiences validate the use of soft skills they learned during secondary and tertiary education. They have also consistently offered examples of the ways in which these skills were downright crucial in addressing job issues, again validating the proposed curriculum's emphasis on the cultivation of these skills. Alumni have claimed that the soft skills they acquired throughout their studies, namely teamwork and emotional intelligence, are invaluable in the workplace.

These skills have helped them communicate effectively and handle issues in various work environments in various fields, reflecting the importance that instructors have placed on these skills. Additionally, they agree with instructors that school-taught soft skills stick, especially in grass-root levels of education. Graduates have continuously maintained that flexibility and persistence have been the crucial factors to solving problems outside of secondary school. They

highlighted the significance of soft skills along with issues and loopholes within their learning experience. They would frequently experience that leadership and creative skills were not entirely established yet, and therefore it was challenging to utilize them, even when they understood that they were required. However, the transition to digital and hybrid learning has influenced alumni attitudes towards soft skills. The majority of people perceive these modes as helpful to develop self-management and digital competence. However, concerns regarding the development of interpersonal skills in virtual environments exist.

There are mixed views about the potential of hybrid learning in the cultivation of soft skills. While some view virtual environments as capable of cultivating development, others think that the lack of face-to-face interaction dilutes core communication abilities. This highlights the necessity for schools to realign courses. This is about adding more experiential, hands-on independent learning in order to get learners more prepared for digital work environment demands and fill the skill gap between school learning and workplace requirements. These gaps can be seen clearly through alumni experience in areas such as leadership; emotional intelligence; teamwork, particularly in virtual settings; problem solving, especially under stress; and the ability to adapt to change. There are several who have illustrated that although leadership is a sector emphasized in their research, they did not know how to implement leadership in the workplace setting. One alumnus respondent articulated: *"I understood leadership in theory, but when tasked with leading a project, I found I lacked real-world experience in team motivation and decision-making under stress."* This illustrates a gap between knowledge and practice. Alumni have also noted that their secondary school education fell short in equipping them with the emotional intelligence required in their profession. Another alumnus respondent added, "I learnt about emotional intelligence, but

I struggled to apply it in real-life scenarios, such as managing conflicts or grasping team dynamics." As remote work grows in popularity, alumni are finding it difficult to apply their team working skills from the classroom to the virtual office. One alumnus described, *"Group projects in school were manageable, but working with a remote team was a different difficulty. I felt unprepared for the communication tools and strategies required to collaborate effectively online."* They also discovered that their school lessons did not accurately mimic the pressure of real deadlines and expectations. One ex-pupil stated: *"In school, we tackled problems in a controlled setting, but at work, stakes are higher, and I need to think quickly without the same support."*

Now, in rapidly changing career environments, flexibility is the only path to success. Alumni claim their secondary schooling equipped them insufficiently for that. One former student explained, *"I was taught about adaptability, but when unexpected changes occurred at work, I found it difficult to adjust quickly. I wish I had gotten more instruction on how to pivot and embrace change."*

Alumni view their field experience as being applicable to the planning of courses that help future learners gain soft skills. Their comments are significant in emphasizing some key contributions.

Firstly, their work experiences have brought into focus the significance of communication, teamwork, and problem-solving as key soft skills. They frequently provide real-life examples of how these skills were required in their working environments, showing the relevance of education systems emphasizing such competences in their curricula.

This convergence of alumni experience and curriculum design underscores the need to integrate soft skills into school systems. In addition, alumni gave valuable feedback on the most effective ways learning approaches enhance their soft skills. Alumni support experiential learning approaches such as project work and case studies, which were effective in building skills that are applicable in real life. Such feedback indicates incorporating similar experiential approaches into a curriculum to offer more learner engagement and recall of skills.

They still emphasize teamwork and collaborative work throughout their years at school. They call on the curriculum to avail more ways of group work and peer collaboration since such activities not only transfer soft skills to learners but also equip them for the collaborative labour that characterizes modern businesses. This proposition is consistent with the instructors' assumptions about bringing collaborative aspects to the curriculum.

Alumni also emphasize that school education needs to be connected to real-world applications. They propose that curricula must incorporate internships, mentoring, and industry associations to offer learners direct experience in defining soft skills. The industry alliances can help make learners understand the significance of soft skills in their professional lives and encourage them to develop these skills.

Additionally, alumni commented on the variations of skills they perceived among themselves and their peers throughout their studies. They advocate for certain programme modifications that put more emphasis on skills like emotional intelligence, flexibility, and leadership, skills they feel are essential to surviving in the workplace. Closing these gaps allows

schools to better prepare learners with the solutions they will be presented with in their respective fields of professional interest.

Finally, alumni appreciate the highest value of self-directed learning and computer literacy, especially in hybrid modes of learning. They think that curriculum should allow for individuality and ability to self-manage, both of which are essential to be able to navigate academic and professional environments. Emphasis on self-direction might allow future learners to take charge of their own skill acquisition.

### ***Curriculum and pedagogical aspects of soft skill development***

A majority of instructors (89%) continue to believe that there is a disconnect between how instructors and learners perceive their roles in the educational process, indicating the need for learners to be educated about their role in modern education in terms of peer learning, learning how to learn through the use of cognitive constructivism, and using instructors solely as facilitators of knowledge development rather than the sole responsible constructors.

Prior to digital and hybrid learning, 100% of surveyed instructors claimed that they would support changes to the curriculum and assessment techniques, albeit the degree of support was not specified. In this study, however, the instructors reported a "Very Supportive" rating of 4.27 (SD=0.86) out of 5, suggesting that they would be prepared to introduce and carry out new areas of the curriculum with the goal of improving learners' soft skills. This would imply a need for instructor education to provide them with the necessary skills and knowledge, especially given their mean perceived knowledge of 2.59 out of 5 regarding soft skills. The degree of willingness to go through training and education is similar to that seen in 2020 before digital and hybrid

learning, with 81% versus 87%. Even though the figures are similar, given the information outlined thus far, it is considered to be important to investigate the reasons for the 6% decline.

Prior to digital and hybrid learning, Zimbabwean private secondary school instructors employed a wide range of pedagogical approaches in the classroom, including discussion (27%), demonstration (25%), problem-solving (22%), lecture (10%), and other (16%). Following digital and hybrid learning, the same approaches are still utilised, but at varying frequencies: discussion (38%), demonstration (26%), problem-solving (25%), lecture (4%), and other (7%). While there is a shift away from lecture-based approaches and towards discussion, 61% of instructors have claimed that they have not changed their pedagogical techniques as a result of digital and hybrid education. The 39% who modified the methods can be observed in the shift of the percentages above. However, while there is a favourable movement towards established techniques for implementing soft skills in learners, this is not always reflected in learner acquisition of soft skills with an average perceived acquisition level of 2.88 prior to digital and hybrid learning and an average perceived acquisition level of 2.81 post-digital and hybrid learning, only a SD of 0.04, indicating an insignificant change.

The additional significant distinction between pre- and post-digital and hybrid learning is the instructor's assessment of the value and necessity to work with companies and the corporate world in order to further enhance learners' soft skills. The view used to be that it would be very helpful (88%), and while the present findings still demonstrate a degree of relevance, there has been a considerable reduction in perception (74%). This could represent a topic of interest for future research concerning what caused the reduction, given that teaching industry-relevant skills is one of an educational institutions' key priorities.

After reviewing the findings, it is important to address the skills that have emerged as a priority for consideration. To adequately bridge the perceived gap between learners and their instructors about the relevance of soft skills, instructional materials should prioritise the following key competencies:

1. **Communication skills:** Effective communication is critical for academic performance and future job relationships. Instructors rated communication skills highly (mean score of 4.5), whereas learners evaluated them lower (about 3.8). Emphasising communication through presentations, group discussions, and written projects can assist learners understand its importance and application in real-world situations.
2. **Teamwork and Collaboration:** Teamwork is essential for success in both academic and professional environments. Instructors and alumni frequently emphasise its relevance, with high appraisals for collaborative abilities. Implementing collaborative projects and cooperative tasks into the academic programme may offer learners hands-on experiences that highlight the importance of cooperation, therefore favourably shifting their attitudes.
3. **Problem-solving and Critical Thinking:** Instructors rated problem-solving and critical thinking as essential abilities, with mean values of 4.60 and 4.70, respectively. These abilities should be prioritised through project-based learning and practical case studies, which allow learners to engage in complicated problem-solving activities that mirror professional issues. This technique can increase learners' enthusiasm for these abilities by demonstrating their immediate relevance.

4. **Adaptability and Flexibility:** Adaptability is becoming more crucial in today's rapidly evolving workforce, particularly in digital and hybrid environments. Instructors evaluated adaptability highly (about 4.7), whereas learners rated it lower (around 4.0). The school curriculum should contain tasks which encourage learners to adjust to new situations, such as simulations or role-playing exercises, in order to assist them to comprehend the importance of this skill.
5. **Emotional intelligence:** Emotional intelligence, which includes self-awareness, empathy, and abilities to communicate, is essential for successful cooperation and leadership. Instructors emphasised its relevance, but learners frequently underestimate it. Incorporating emotional intelligence education into reflective practices, peer feedback, and group dynamics can assist learners grasp its use in academic and professional settings.
6. **Digital Literacy:** Digital literacy is crucial for success in today's digital learning contexts. Instructors reported an increasing demand for digital skills following the introduction of hybrid education. The academic programmes should prioritise digital literacy training, particularly the proper utilisation of collaborative tools and platforms, in order to prepare learners for the needs of today's workplace.
7. **Creativity:** Instructors evaluated creativity highly (mean score: 4.23), whereas learners rated it substantially lower (3.65). Fostering innovative thought via brainstorming sessions, design challenges, and innovation projects may help learners understand the importance of creativity in problem resolution and adaptation.

While independence is encouraged, 41% of the respondents believe that over-reliance on instructor involvement in conventional classroom settings may prevent full cultivation of essential soft skills. Based on current research, excessive instructor involvement may limit the capacity of learners to engage in experiential learning, where they encounter and resolve problems on their own (Davies, 2023). With independence being encouraged, 41% of the population believe that reliance on instructor engagement in conventional class environments can prevent full development of essential soft skills. Based on available research, high levels of instructor engagement may limit learners' capacity to engage in experiential learning, where they solve and overcome problems on their own (Davies, 2023). Besides that, learners who have been used to having things interpreted to them promptly will also struggle with resilience and adaptability when faced with new challenges because they are habituated to asking for directions (Larsen & Clark, 2023).

This study offers one of the areas of improvement of pedagogical practice in Zimbabwean private schools because striking a balance between autonomy and proper guidance is still key for optimal soft skill development (Rahman & Evans, 2023). Where too early intervention takes place by instructors, learners will not be appropriately internalizing the sense of perseverance and creative problem-solving, both of which are necessary to both academic and personal growth. To counteract this disparity, staff development can be begun to teach instructors how to foster independence while providing structured support wherever feasible.

### ***Cultural and Contextual Factors in Soft Skill Development***

It is important to consider the cultural environment in which these Zimbabwean private schools exist, as cultural values tend to shape educational attitudes and practices regarding skill development (Nyoni & Moyo, 2023). The majority of African education systems continue to place a strong value on authority, which could influence the amount of autonomy granted in the classroom. According to Dube et al. (2023), in Zimbabwean schools, instructors tend to be the focal point of information, with little space for learner independence. This cultural orientation may be the reason why a fairly high proportion of learners feel that instructors are more likely to "offer help first." This suggests that cultural expectations surrounding authority and instruction may influence how autonomy and independence are experienced within the learning environment.

However, with growing integration of African education systems with global standards, there is growing need for shifting towards learner-centred teaching approaches that place emphasis on critical thinking and autonomous learning (Chikandiwa & Madzivanzira, 2023). These approaches recognize that the soft skills are essential in empowering learners to succeed in a globalized world. A balanced approach, one that balances traditional deference and modern teaching practice, might better be able to connect Zimbabwe's teaching practice to the changing expectations of the foreign and domestic communities.

### ***Addressing Gaps in Teacher Training and Support***

The results considered a possible gap in the readiness of the instructors to facilitate effective soft skill acquisition, since the majority of the learners continue to prefer direct interaction. This suggests specialized training programmes for educators in soft skills delivery

(Cheng, 2023). This interpretation is consistent with the TPACK Framework, which highlights the need for educators to effectively integrate technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge in order to design learning experiences that support both cognitive and interpersonal skill development. This interpretation is consistent with the TPACK Framework, which emphasises that effective technology-enhanced teaching requires the integration of pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and technological competence to support meaningful learner engagement. Strengthening instructor training in this area may therefore play an important role in bridging the gap between instructional intentions and actual learner skill acquisition. Schools can provide an environment in which learners learn to become independent problem solvers and not over-depend on the support of their instructors if they provide the relevant instructors with strategies that encourage independence while providing support guidelines, such as the scaffolded approach identified in the above section.

Soft skill instructor training is ever more recognized as necessary, and the literature indicates that teacher training facilitates the effective application of such skills in the daily operation of the classroom (Ali et al, 2023). Training is also capable of avoiding typical obstacles to the use of autonomy-based learning, such as lack of experience with various methods of instruction (Rahman & Evans, 2023). Confident instructors, with a sense of whether they can or cannot walk the balance beam of structure and flexibility in the classroom, can teach soft skills to prepare learners for the demands of contemporary academic and work settings.

## Summary

Given the importance of developing soft skills for learners to succeed in the C21st, this research study's specific objectives are separated into two areas.

The initial objective is to determine how the introduction of digital and hybrid education during and after the coronavirus pandemic affected groups of learners and instructors in Zimbabwean private secondary schools' perceptions of the importance of soft skills, as well as the extent and balance of their soft skill acquisition.

The second step, by comparing these points of view, it is intended to show the opportunity for all shared fundamental conclusions that could potentially be used to lay the groundwork for both pedagogical and assessment methods that may not only contribute to developing soft skills but also serve to increase synchronisation and streamlining by bringing learners and instructors together in a common understanding of their responsibilities while actively working on them.

The research project's aims were as follows:

1. To assess learners' and instructors' perceptions of soft skills before implementing digital and hybrid classroom possibilities in Zimbabwean private secondary schools.
2. Determine the impact of digital and hybrid learning on learners' views of the importance of soft skills and skill gaps.
3. Determine the impact of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities on instructors' assessments of soft skill development and perceived skill gaps.
4. Determine if learners and instructors have a clear awareness of their roles for curriculum development.

Chapter 4 has therefore provided knowledge of the participants' experiences and viewpoints, laying the groundwork for the discussion of the implications and recommendations presented in the next chapter. The findings highlight the complicated dynamics of soft skill development in traditional Zimbabwean private secondary school settings. While autonomy is recognised as important for promoting resilience and critical thinking, there is still a need to provide instructors with the skills necessary to balance intervention with freedom. Enhancing instructor education, changing curriculum material to include real-world problem-solving activities, and encouraging a culturally responsive approach to independence might all help to promote soft skill development in this environment. This will equip learners not just for academic achievement, but also for the problems and expectations of a fast-changing global community (Brown & Clarke, 2023).

The research's aims have been considered as distinctive and meaningful in light of the relevant review of the literature and an absence of data-driven studies on digital and hybrid learning effects on secondary school learners within the region.

The research presented here explores how secondary schools might design educational programmes in order to take advantage of hybrid learning's advantages, and it recommends using a combination of methods to investigate the impact of these factors on the growth of soft skills in these and similar institutions. It is critical that digital learning is firmly connected with in-person instruction. When correctly matched, hybrid learning may be highly effective. Without a doubt, instructors encounter several obstacles when incorporating digital educational resources. The debates over what and when to teach learners something may not always be clear. The instructor's experience is vital in this case.

One of the research's main accomplishments is its real-world strategy, which has the potential to propose an instructional framework that, once implemented, has the prospect to significantly enhance our existing system of education. Such a programme could take advantage of the affordable nature of digital learning, as well as the various forms of engagement and participation that it provides, and seeks to improve practical involvement, social and emotional learning, and other soft skills in order to prepare learners for achievement when approaching employment opportunities and challenges. This instructional initiative strives to provide complete educational growth that extends beyond learners who receive high grades at the conclusion of an academic year. The modification of current administrative guidelines at the national level will not constitute a disadvantage in terms of how they are implemented. Another especially noteworthy addition is about scalability in the sense that, while the hybrid learning framework is used, conjunctural activities by individual learners or instructors can provide educational relevance. Small modifications may make a difference, and the design that is to be recommended corresponds to each individual's capacity to constructively adapt.

In conclusion, learners do not have the soft skills that corporations are looking for. Technology has transformed the global work landscape. It has altered not only how we work, but what we do at work. The information economy has produced new employment opportunities. The route to job success, however, no longer leads directly from school to employment. Instead, new generations are increasingly seeking an integrated style of education and employment. Individuals are expected to be lifelong learners. These are prevalent in soft skills-rich workplaces. Private secondary schools are particularly important for teaching adolescents soft skills. Educational policy change is critical for the development of these skills.

The findings of this research highlight the importance of using accessible and adaptable methods of instruction in situations where soft skills components must be created. The findings further suggest that educational opportunities may be broadened in order to assist learners develop soft skills that are critical to their future chances in a time of artificial intelligence and automated machinery.

While this research paper contributes to the growing body of research arguing that hybrid learning integration is an opportunity for producing essential soft and interpersonal abilities, it also implies a critical analysis and an overhaul in how we structure educational services in Africa and globally. Without question, one of the most important ways to achieve this is by means of the education system—a place where every learner can acquire secure knowledge, set learning objectives, and strive for diligent achievement while discovering what it means to be a completely realised individual. This framework will be discussed in detail in the following chapter, along with further implications of the research results and the recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

While organisations appreciate their workforce's technical abilities, there is an ever-increasing demand for globally aware, creative, entrepreneurial, and digitally literate individuals who are capable of managing their capabilities and steer organisational strategy via softer transferable operational skills. Hybrid learning has the ability to significantly improve the methods of instruction for developing these soft skills. This is due to the fact that hybrid learning is, by definition, a learner-centred framework that emphasises active and involved learning.

Hybrid learning is a combination of conventional in-person classes and distance/digital learning, often known as hybrid learning. In Zimbabwe, hybrid learning is still in its infancy; only a few leading schools have invested in establishing hybrid educational environments at the secondary level, and this was carried out exclusively throughout the lockdown phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it has since gradually died out, leaving only face-to-face instruction, or only being relevant in certain circumstances, for example, for additional lessons for examination classes during the duration of the school holidays. The research recognises the importance of hybrid learning in the era of global technology advancements, as well as how soft skills may be developed through hybrid learning. As a result, this research project concentrates on how private secondary schools implemented hybrid learning and primarily the subsequent development of soft skills among their learners. It investigates what soft skills were taught through hybrid learning and how successful this method has been.

Universities and business sectors are usually eager for a direct transition from school to university and onto the labour market. Yet, they are said to be not prepared sufficiently to provide their graduates according to their requirements. Earlier studies have identified an insufficiency of soft skills among graduates currently. As a result, there have been demands for the modification of courses in universities toward the development of soft skills suitable for C21st employment. But it is probable that the gap begins even sooner at university. It is essential that learners are provided with the required lifetime flexible skills to allow them to respond and adapt in a changing environment at an early point. Secondary school is where these skills are best acquired, especially by those who might not necessarily wish to attend university and might either enter the workforce immediately or might instead attend college in order to gain skills in a trade instead. To bridge this gap, secondary school education must be accorded the highest priority if university graduates are to perform at the level needed by industry and relevant to the local and global economies. Unfortunately, most learners graduate from secondary school without the skills needed to make them employable and successful in life. Such adolescents are thought to be intellectually gifted but not practically and socially adept. The education system in Zimbabwe aims at producing skills that are pertinent for university admissions, rather than skills that are sensitive to real events. Furthermore, the curriculum is always congested and has always prioritized technical study and skills over the acquisition of soft skills. Therefore, secondary education has been designed with the aim of assisting the academic subject matter taught and information imparted beneficial for the cause of national development. There is also much less or no assistance for skill development for less academically inclined students which proves to be a huge disadvantage for them. Bridging educational disparities is difficult, and some disparities are more noticeable than others. The present research investigates the possibilities of expanding education in secondary schools to

bridge the gap between classroom learning and the soft skills necessary in the workforce for recent school graduates. Hybrid learning is used as an active approach that proposes, if in minor ways, that schools might discover innovative ways to incorporate industrial challenges into education, guaranteeing that learners are more sensitive to the workplace and employable. Enabling the educational environment to closely align with formal learning in a professional intelligence-led approach makes school graduates more appealing to industry and provides a new avenue for supporting the national goal of maximum and appropriate internship placements for polytechnic and university learners upon graduation.

The objective of this chapter is to discuss the findings of the study, give recommendations for utilisation in Zimbabwean private secondary schools, and suggest areas for further research. This chapter also aims to give a brief summary of the overall results of the study with particular emphasis on how hybrid classroom spaces affect learner and instructor perceptions of soft skills development. The research study has been aimed to explore the perceptions of Zimbabwean private secondary school instructors and learners on the value of the soft skills both before and after incorporating digital and hybrid classroom learning modalities. The research findings provided valuable information on changing attitudes and levels of skills concerning soft skills, perception differences between learners and instructors, and the verification was found in the perceptions of recent school leavers who had completed the hybrid learning stages of Zimbabwean schooling.

This chapter will address the practical consequences of these results, give specific recommendations for educators, administrators, and legislators, and identify areas where additional investigation would be beneficial.

## Implications

The findings of this research have several profound implications for policymakers, school leaders, and instructors in Zimbabwean private secondary schools, particularly in soft skill development and in the use of digital and hybrid learning spaces. These implications are significant in light of shifting education contexts, wherein digital resources continue to play more central roles in defining pedagogy and learning cultures. Below, the main implications are elaborated in more detail, organized by research question.

### Research Question 1

*What were Zimbabwean private secondary school learners' and instructors' impressions of soft skills prior to the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities?*

*RQ1 H0:* Learners and instructors are likely to have equal impressions of soft skills prior to the use of digital mixed classroom opportunities.

*RQ1 H1:* Learners find soft skills acquisition to be irrelevant and unimportant compared to the importance that instructors place on the skills.

**Expected findings RQ1:** It is expected that whilst instructors find the acquisition of soft skills valuable, learner impressions will be that of personal characteristics that cannot be taught or improved and therefore of less importance within the scope of their educational journey than rote memorisation and recall.

### ***RQ1 Research findings and implications***

The research study has unveiled a gradual shift in the attitudes of both learners and instructors towards understanding the importance and use of soft skills in Zimbabwean private secondary schools, particularly in digital and hybrid classroom settings. While both groups had a limited perception of the usability and variety of soft skills to start with, this has also been significantly altered since the onset of digital and hybrid classroom settings. Both instructors and learners seem to have begun to understand the significance of communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and time management skills in traversing digital learning spaces and for their future development and workplace successes, either locally or internationally.

The growing recognition of soft skills as a passport to academic achievement and ultimate employability is in consonance with a global tendency to integrate C21st skills into the educational systems. For Zimbabwe, such a finding substantiates the advocacy for education reform that emphasizes soft skills alongside traditional academic subjects. The private schools in the region need to adopt soft skills as integral of the holistic development of Zimbabwean learners, and curricula must encompass these skills in a systematic and methodical manner.

Moreover, increasing recognition of the worth of soft skills by both learners and instructors signifies an educational paradigm shift. As technology evolves, learners not only must be found to have technical knowledge but also must be capable of navigating complex interpersonal and professional environments. This makes a compelling case for the education system to embrace the incorporation of soft skills as core competencies, embedded in every subject and activity.

Upon learning with the advent of hybrid learning techniques and platforms, students indicate that they experienced a shift in collaborative mindsets. The transition to hybrid learning environments has underscored the significance of such soft skills as teamwork and collaboration essential to the acquisition of skills like collaboration. These experiences offered during the pandemic and continued digital and hybrid learning have enabled students to have a means to participate in real-world scenarios that involve communication and collaboration, improving their collaboration and other soft skills. Alumni have often named the importance of soft skills such as cooperation and emotional intelligence, which have facilitated their professional advancement. They have also stated that their education, particularly in environments of hybrid learning, has made them proficient enough to handle difficult working environments. Alumni have claimed that skills like these helped them solve working issues and aided their professional development. Both alumni and learners' experiences put into perspective the significance of integrating soft skills into the learning programmes. The move to hybrid learning has assisted learners to appreciate the skills to some degree, which resonates with alumni suggestions of the long-term benefit of soft skills, such as teamwork and collaboration, in the workplace. This observation aligns with principles within the 21st Century Skills Framework, which identifies communication, collaboration, and adaptability as core competencies required for success in contemporary professional environments. This reinforcement highlights the need for soft skill enhancement in the curriculum of education, making sure that students are adequately equipped to meet the demands of contemporary workplaces.

The research study also uncovered vast gaps in the development of soft skills among learners as well as instructors, particularly during the shift to digital learning environments.

Previously inexperienced learners with digital and hybrid learning environments found it challenging to self-regulate, learn digital literacy, and engage positively in virtual classrooms. Instructors, however, were challenged throughout the pandemic to make use of digital technologies exceedingly well in facilitating their instruction and measuring their learners' development of soft skills. These kinds of skill gaps point to a greater global issue of the “digital divide”, as well as the need for instructors to go through continuous professional development in order to be able to keep up with the advances in technology (Selwyn, 2022).

Ultimately, soft skills are perceived differently by learners, instructors, and alumni depending on factors like age, educational background, working experience, academic focus, learning settings, and course arrangements. Instructors emphasize further the importance of soft skills, while learners underutilize them due to their short-term concerns over marks and cut-offs. To resolve such discrepancies through focused pedagogy can help raise the learning of core soft skills in all categories.

The research on this subject sought to explore the differences between the perceptions of soft skills by learners and instructors prior to the utilization of digital and hybrid classroom potentials. The findings are consistent with the research question, indicating a notable difference in how learners and instructors view soft skills. These skills were rated more consistently higher by instructors than by learners, indicating that learners have little to no knowledge and appreciation of the long-term advantages of soft skills. This disparity highlights the necessity for education programmes aimed at soft skills alongside traditional academic success. Universities also have to address the concerns of less supportive individuals toward hybrid learning, and render techniques accessible, interesting and worthwhile to all learners.

## Research Question 2

*How have the differences in **instructor** perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap transformed as a result of the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities?*

*H0:* Instructors perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap have not altered.

*H1:* Instructors perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap has shifted in balance in levels of acquisition of various soft skills but still indicates a larger skills gap.

**Expected findings RQ2:** It is expected that instructors feel that very few learners actively took part in their learning journey through digital and hybrid learning opportunities to fully make use of skills opportunities available in soft skill acquisition and that whilst the balance of acquisition is likely to have changed with some soft skills - soft skills such as adaptability and organisational skills, may have improved whilst others, such as emotional intelligence and interpersonal communication, would have regressed - there will still be a noticeable gap between levels of importance versus acquisition. The impressions of the given soft skills importance between learner and instructor impressions post-pandemic may be more similar and with less deviance that prior to the pandemic and the use of digital and hybrid learning.

### ***RQ2 Research findings and implications***

56% of instructors agree that digital and hybrid learning may strengthen a variety of soft skills; yet just 28% believe that hybrid learning should be maintained in education. One may consider if this could indicate a resistance to change, an anxiety concerning technology, or a need for training to boost confidence, knowledge, and competence, or potentially all three.

65% of instructors acknowledge that there is more emphasis on soft skills on a global scale following digital and hybrid learning; however, only 39% indicate to have evolved their methods of instruction and classroom focus in order to meet this increased emphasis, even though there has been no significant increase in acquisition nearly five years later. It is hardly surprising then, that just 23% of instructors believe that educational institutions place a conscious priority on their development. If the significance is acknowledged, who then, if not instructors, should be in charge of their development?

In light of this, it should be observed that the mean acquisition level of soft skills slightly decreased from 2.88 to 2.81 post-hybrid learning, indicating a relatively insignificant change and suggesting that hybrid learning might not be perceived as being as beneficial in developing these skills within the confines of traditional methods. Nonetheless, instructors have noted difficulties engaging with their learners in collaborative tasks within digital setups, which are important in order to build teamwork and communication skills. A lack of engagement might be a reason why hybrid learning is not as effective in building key interpersonal skills. Zimbabwean learners have also been seen to underestimate soft skills, instead favouring technical skills which they believe deliver the academic results they desire. This inconsistency can perhaps be behind the private schools' instructors' reservations to adopt the prowess of hybrid learning in emphasizing soft skills.

The research study emphasizes the potential of hybrid learning in refining the skill of digital literacy as well as self-management skills. It does, however, emphasize the need for a balanced method that integrates both digital and classroom learning to effectively cultivate a wider variety of soft skills, as well as the need for specialized training for educators that are involved in facilitating soft skill acquisition. This could involve preparing the local instructors with ways of balancing both autonomy and supervision in the secondary school classroom.

By implementing these strategies, instructors can effectively balance guidance and learner autonomy in collaborative projects, enhancing the development of essential soft skills. Establishing clear expectations, fostering a supportive environment, making use of scaffolding techniques, encouraging self-reflection, assigning more structured roles, integrating problem-based learning, and providing timely interventions are all critical components of this approach. These methods not only take steps in empowering learners to take ownership of their learning but also to prepare them for the collaborative demands of the modern C21st workforce.

Alumni workplace experiences have emphasized the importance of soft skills such as adaptability, communication, and problem-solving. Despite that, there are still barriers to learning and implementing these skills in the classroom setting. Alumni have a significant role to play in recommendations for learning soft skills in digital learning environments. Not only do they validate the applicability of these skills, but they provide commentary on effective learning approaches, identify skill gaps, provide real-life applications, and provide curriculum design suggestions in the Zimbabwean context. Alumni believe that their real-world experience can be leveraged to guide curriculum design to improve soft skills acquisition for secondary school

students. Alumni recommend that schools map soft skills development to meet workforce demands. They recommend:

- Incorporating experiential learning.
- Emphasizing collaborative projects.
- Focusing on real-world problem-solving.
- Integrating digital literacy.
- Providing continuous assessment.
- Redesigning curricula to prioritize soft skills.

This method will better prepare the learners to tackle work issues in a variety of environments. Closing these gaps can also increase the relevance and effectiveness of learning soft skills at school. Zimbabwean secondary private schools must subsequently further increase their emphasis on experiential learning and tailor curricula to prepare their learners for evolving labour needs.

There is also the need for continuous learning for Zimbabwean secondary school instructors. According to McKinsey & Company (2022), instructors should have and be able to use digital classroom competencies if they are going to successfully teach their learners through a hybrid classroom. It is about more than just possessing technical knowledge to use digital tools; one must also be aware of how to teach soft skills in a way that captures learners. An increasing number of research works suggest that professional development in the area of how to use digital platforms can be used to make instructors more effective (VanderArk, 2023). Therefore, schools need to provide their instructors with regular, dedicated training sessions that allow them to develop their digital pedagogy skills and implement soft skills training in their classroom practice successfully.

The research question included examining how the subjective assessment of the value and development of soft skills, and the perceived skills gap, differed with the utilization of digital and hybrid classroom options by Zimbabwean secondary school instructors. The findings suggest that, whilst instructors' perceptions recognize the growing significance of flexibility and digital literacies, there remains a skills gap. This is consistent with the research's hypothesis (RQ2 H1) that instructors' perceptions have altered slightly, but overall, still show a wider skills disparity that balances out to a similar gap as shown in research prior to digital and hybrid learning. The findings show that there should be a sustained emphasis on soft skills in the curriculum in order to effectively bridge this gap.

### Research Question 3

*To what extent have the differences in **learner** perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap transformed as a result of the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities?*

*H0:* Learner perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap have not altered.

*H1:* Learners perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap have shifted in the direction of a narrowing gap.

**Expected findings RQ3:** It is expected that learners have a slightly better idea of the importance of soft skills and their place in their future success. It is also expected, however, that learners have

an inflated perception of their levels of acquisition of these skills and a belief that the skills gap has, as a result, become relatively insignificant at this point in time and that they have no more to learn on these skills.

### ***RQ3 Research findings and implications***

The research reveals views of soft skill regression during digital and hybrid learning, leading one to wonder why learners as well as instructors report such a significant regression of soft skills. Interestingly, learners continue to feel that hybrid learning should remain a part of local secondary school curricula. One may question why, given the regression that they claim occurred (82% of learners), and the mixed outcomes for soft skill improvement. Several variables may contribute to the apparent decline in soft skills during hybrid learning.

Hybrid learning spaces also tend not to facilitate learners in their engagement in collaborative and interactive activity, leading to a perception that such abilities are not being properly developed, adding to the perception of regression as a whole. Moreover, the sudden shift to digital and hybrid learning has made it increasingly difficult to develop interpersonal skills like emotional intelligence and relationship management. The lack of communication in direct face-to-face contexts might slow the development of these skills, leading to a perceived devaluation. Second, the curricula might not necessarily embrace the introduction of soft skills into hybrid educational frameworks either. Learners indicated interest in gaining more experiential, simulation-based learning activity centred on applicable practice to real-world processes, which do not tend to occur in typical hybrid learning formats. Finally, instructors must be specially trained in order to be able to provide sufficient support for soft skill learning in hybrid learning

environments. Without sufficient support, instructors might find it difficult to reconcile autonomy and direction, which are both critical in skill building.

However, learners (56%) think that digital and hybrid learning have not adequately prepared them for collaboration with others, while 76% report that they cooperate differently with people after hybrid learning. Furthermore, many claim that digital and hybrid learning has deteriorated their soft skills. Alumni, who have already gained experience in the workforce and higher education, report that digital and hybrid learning helped them develop soft skills that led to their success outside of school (86%). One could question whether this indicates a lack of awareness about real-world experiences and views amongst learners.

The reason for any of these inequalities is bound to vary, for instance, lack of direct relation, unfamiliarity with real-life scenarios, volatility in learning activities, and breakdown of communication between instructors and learners. The shift towards hybrid learning has brought about change in pedagogy, for example, more emphasis on interactions and problem solving. Despite all of this change, acquisition of soft skills such as teamwork has not increased noticeably, as shown by the relatively small increase in average levels of acquisition. This may mean that, while learners may be working in new ways together, they may not necessarily feel more able to do so. Secondly, learners may perceive soft skills as less directly related to their academic success than their technical skills. This impression might be a result of an obsession with grades and examinations which focuses more on academic content rather than skills acquisition, hence neglecting to appreciate the long-term applicability of soft skills. The majority of the learners may also underestimate the importance of soft skills such as emotional intelligence and flexibility until confronted with actual life problems that demand these qualities. A lack of real-world exposure

might result in a mismatch between perceived relevance of soft skills to classroom contexts and their usefulness within the work environment. Further, the transition to digital and hybrid learning spaces might have provided learners with a variety of experiences that influenced their understandings of soft skills. Discipline and time management could also be more difficult for some learners in such environments, leading to lower evaluation of skills that they may find difficult to develop. There may also be a lack of communication between instructors and learners regarding the importance of soft skills. Instructors may fail to explain the importance of these skills in relation to academic and professional success in both the Zimbabwean and international contexts, and hence the learners derogate their importance. As a result, learners might not realize the true value of teamwork unless they are exposed to real-life settings demanding such competencies. While individuals describe collaboration differently post-COVID, this does not necessarily translate to confidence, given that they may lack the experience to execute these skills proficiently in varying settings.

The research also created the fact that when alumni and instructors enter the work environment, their perception of soft skills is radically different. They both perceive these characteristics as critical to workplace success. These attitudes are largely influenced by hybrid learning environments. The persistent skills shortage in the work environment only demands the need for education systems for learning and application of soft skills. Using this approach guarantees students are well equipped for employment challenges.

Closing gaps among learners will take more than a basic digital literacy course. It is crucial to give learners the practice opportunity for time management and self-regulation, both of which are determinants of successful digital and hybrid learning environments (Zimmerman, 2020).

Furthermore, instructional approaches must address developing collaboration skills and communication techniques by which learners are able to efficiently work in virtual teams, and this is the increasingly networked and digital society (Chai et al, 2021).

The research question was on examining how learners' perceptions of the value and acquisition of soft skills, and the perceived skills gap, had changed as a result of digital and hybrid classroom options. The evidence supports the research hypothesis (RQ3 H1) that learners' perceptions have changed toward a narrowing gap but not completely closed off. Learners are already beginning to see the value in some soft skills, but the gap between perceived usefulness and actual possession remains wide. This means that there should be the continued emphasis on incorporating soft skills in the curriculum in order to improve the way learners learn and make use of such skills in both professional and academic environments.

#### Research Question 4

*What underlying ideas may be effectively used in the curriculum development, its presentation, and evaluation that can support the acquisition of soft skills in Zimbabwe's private secondary schools?*

*H0:* There are no shared ideas between learners and instructors to be used to streamline and emphasise respective roles in the learning process.

*H1*: There are several new and shared ideas between learners and instructors in regard to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that can be used to streamline and emphasise respective roles in the learning process.

**Expected Findings RQ4**: It is the general feeling that there may be some new fundamental shared ideals that could be utilized to further streamline educational processes with both learners and instructors both backing newly realised roles in the educational journey with an emphasis on soft skills, particularly for the less academically gifted learners.

#### ***RQ4 Research findings and implications***

The shift to digital and hybrid learning environments demands a top-to-bottom reimagining of the way soft skills are taught and assessed in Zimbabwean secondary schools. As information technologies increasingly become a mainstay of the education sector worldwide, schools must adapt by retooling their traditional pedagogical models in a way that opens the instruction of soft skills to digital landscapes. The importance of digital literacy, not only the ability to use digital tools but also to communicate and collaborate in online spaces, cannot be overstated (Voogt and Roblin, 2020), particularly for Zimbabwean learners who typically leave the country to attend university and the workforce in other countries where there tends to be higher rates of digital literacy.

The research study finds that instructors, learners, and alumni share common knowledge of the value of soft skills to a certain extent. The findings can be attributed to experience in life, evolving learner views, structure of courses, and mutual appreciation of work during learning.

Where there is commonality in attitudes, the chance is high that pedagogical and course modification can be introduced and supported. The differences in the perceptions of soft skills between the learners and the instructors point towards the need for much greater communication and pedagogical methods addressing the long-term benefits of soft skills. Addressing the causes for these differences can help fill the gap and create greater awareness of the importance of soft skills in learning and workplace settings. Based on the preliminary findings, certain areas can be suggested as potential areas for instructional designers to address gaps in developing applied skills and improving soft skills learning in Zimbabwean private secondary schools.

On the one hand, instructors claim that 55% of learners seek assistance as soon as they encounter a problem, but learners estimate that only 8% of learners seek assistance early into the learning process without actively taking the time to problem-solve themselves. On the other hand, instructors admit that, in their opinion, 27% of them provide assistance early in the learning process, while the remaining 73% give learners adequate time to address problems. In contrast, 42% of learners believe that instructors rush in too early to provide assistance before they have had opportunity to problem-solve. The question therefore becomes, where does this gap in views originate from? There could potentially be various causes for these differences.

There is a cultural focus on authority in private schools in Zimbabwe, and this could affect how learners view and respond to instructors. This cultural background could make learners believe that instructors are more likely to assist earlier, whereas instructors could view themselves as encouraging independence. Soft skills like problem-solving and critical thinking are also more highly valued by instructors than by learners. This values mismatch and conviction in skills and abilities can result in an imbalance in expectations, with instructors believing that they are

promoting independence while learners might feel that they have not been given adequate space to resolve challenges on their own. In addition, Zimbabwean secondary school learners might not be fully aware of the transition to more problem-solving and discussion-based pedagogies. Although instructors perceive that they are encouraging problem-solving skills, learners might still gravitate towards the idea of direct instruction because of long-standing deeply embedded learning behaviours as a lasting effect of a combination of cultural elements of respect and listening to elders as well as the strictly used behaviouristic teaching and learning frameworks. Finally, instructors and alumni who have more exposure to the real world understand the value of problem-solving and soft skills. Learners, however, might not yet realize the long-term benefit of these skills and will therefore feel that immediate assistance is preferable.

There may be implications as a result of these discrepancies. For instance, if learners believe they are not provided with sufficient opportunity to address problems on their own, this may impede the development of essential soft skills such as resilience and flexibility. This may result in a skills gap when they enter the workforce, where these skills are considered even more essential. The gap in views may provide difficulties in reaching educational goals that need teamwork and problem solving. If learners do not understand the value in these skills, they may be less motivated to participate in activities that build them, affecting their entire learning experience.

Instructors agree there is a skills gap, although the perception appears to have decreased considerably from 96% to 89%, as has the total perceived significance from 4.52 to 4.43. If educational approaches have become more aligned with what is necessary to instil soft skills, such as a greater emphasis on discussion and problem solving, one may wonder why overall levels of

soft skill acquisition have stayed relatively consistent, only partially shifting from 2.88 to 2.81. It could ultimately boil down to one of two options, if not both. One might question whether instructors are adequately prepared and using these strategies effectively to obtain the desired effects, or if they overestimate their ability to use these approaches as in learners' tendencies to overestimate their knowledge and development of soft skills. Alternately, one may query if the acquisition levels were reliably and completely analysed on a broad scale. Irrespective of how one could interpret it, both of these concerns highlight the need for instructors to be educated and trained in the development of soft skills, processes for current pedagogical approaches, and how to recognise skill growth.

One further possibility is the question whether this possibility of "overvaluing" instructional capabilities could be linked to instructor self-perceived levels of skill acquisition for themselves, where over half of the surveyed instructors (53%) believe that they have adequate soft skills, while learners (who have a history of overvaluing skills and abilities) are less convinced of this, with less than half (41%) of learners believing that their instructors are adequately equipped with soft skills. There might, however, be alternate perspectives on these experiences.

Instructors rate higher on soft skills than learners do, seeing them as critical to long-term success. This is reflected through their higher self-rating of themselves in their ability to execute these tasks. Learners, by contrast, tend to be more interested in technical skills that give immediate academic dividends, resulting in lower valuing of soft skills and a sense that instructors are less expert in them. In addition to this, instructors who have more hands-on experience appreciate how significant soft skills are to the workplace. This experience builds up their confidence when dealing with soft skills. The learners may not have had proper exposure to real-world application of such

skills and, consequently, end up believing that their instructors are less prepared than them. Finally, the learning environment in Zimbabwean private schools emphasizes respect for authority, which may impact learners' views of their instructors' competences. This cultural factor may lead learners to under-value their instructors' soft skills since they may not see them being applied in ways that meet their needs.

This might have a wide-ranging impact. The gap in views might impede the development of soft skills among learners. If the learners do not see the significance of these skills in their instructors, they may be less likely to acquire them themselves, perhaps leading to a skills gap when they join the workforce. Perception differences may also provide obstacles in reaching educational results that involve teamwork and communication. If learners do not regard their instructors as role models for these qualities, they may be less motivated to participate in activities that build them, affecting their entire learning experience.

In order to better align learners' views of the value of soft skills with those of alumni and instructors, some curricular changes could be implemented. These should serve to increase the visibility, relevance, and use of soft skills in learning settings.

Soft skills must be integrated into existing disciplines or offered as separate courses. Integration of this nature should be aimed at the development and assessment of skills like communication, teamwork, and problem solving, which instructors and alumni consider necessary to succeed in the future. Incorporating these skills into the curriculum will make learners more aware of how they can be applied in academic and working environments.

Practical experience and project-based learning can also make soft skills more interesting for learners. Alumni and instructors have identified the usefulness of real-world applications, such

as case studies and group projects, in developing key competencies. These approaches allow learners to transfer soft skills to real-world situations, illustrating their relevance and utility.

Given the issues that learners experience within digital environments, it is necessary to design scaffolded digital learning activities that support collaboration and communication. Instructors must structure group work opportunities and peer interaction while guiding learners through virtual collaboration challenges. This can be a way of closing the perceived gap through the modelling of soft skills use within digital environments.

Having regular evaluations focused on soft skills can help the learners identify improvements and areas requiring attention. Instructor feedback on such skills as flexibility, problem solving, and interpersonal communications should be delivered with a highlight of how significant they are within the academic world as well as in the work environment. A feedback loop can make the learners better aware of the utility of these skills.

Involving alumni in curriculum design can provide valuable feedback on practical application of soft skills. Alumni are able to voice their views and the impact of soft skills on their careers, and help present learners appreciate long-term value of such skills. These kinds of connection may encourage learners emphasize soft skills throughout their study periods.

Offering professional development to Zimbabwean instructors can teach them about the skills and approaches they need to teach and assess soft skills properly. In dealing with emerging educational needs, training needs to focus on prevailing pedagogy enabling collaborative work, flexibility, and knowledge literacy.

Finally, engaging parents and other stakeholders in discussions about the significance of soft skills can guarantee a positive learning environment. Meetings and workshops can assist in synchronizing home-school initiatives, demonstrating the value of soft skills in different situations.

The most self-evident action to take for instructional designers would be to prioritize experiential learning practices. These include project assignments, research projects, and role-plays. These strategies suit the building of key soft skills like teamwork, problem-solving, and flexibility perfectly. Interactive projects have received positive feedback from both instructors and alumni, with a mean score of 4.7 out of 5 for the value they bring in skills development.

Group work within learning contexts is also vital in enhancing interpersonal skills like leadership and communication. Alumni feedback from Zimbabwe shows that group work within learner groups was helpful in preparing them with the development of numerous soft skills, which they afterwards utilized within their working lives across various regions. In consideration of this, Instructional designers should include group work that is designed to promote cooperation and shared leadership. It helps learners to manage complex social interactions and in working in groups.

Also, as technology is being more incorporated into schools, instructional designers ought to be aiming to implement digital and hybrid learning environments to promote soft skills. These settings can assist learners in enhancing their self-management and digital literacy. More freedom and flexibility in digital settings have been outlined by both instructors and alumni. Instructors can assist learners in acquiring useful self-management skills through the use of digital and online courses that promote autonomy.

Instructional designers should additionally seek alternate evaluation techniques to accurately evaluate soft skill development. In terms of skill evaluation, 68% of instructors report that soft skill assessment occurs through external assessments, but at an efficiency level of 2.78 out of 5 (SD=0.4), which is similar to the perception of learners (2.72, SD=0.45), showing that significant improvements are required. It can also demonstrate that assumptions about soft skills are finally being brought into line. Improvement recommendations may include portfolio evaluations, project presentations, and peer reviews. Instructors scored these approaches highly, with a mean rating of 4.9 out of 5. Such tests provide a better assessment of soft skills compared to standard tests. They allow learners to demonstrate their ability through experiential tests that simulate job demands.

In addition to applying direct assessment tools, there also needs to be a norm established that fosters regular feedback and reflection since this has the capability to significantly improve learners' awareness of the development of soft skills. Self-assessment must be integrated by instructional designers that challenge learners to assess their development and how they should improve. This method not only enhances self-consciousness but also instils an attitude of lifelong learning, something that is crucial in addressing the challenges of the future. To do all this, collaboration with businesses and organizations on the ground would give quality input on the most required skills among the existing workforces. The instructors suggest collaboration with businesses in a bid to incorporate practical skill training through mentorship and internships. This method bridges the gap between learning and employment.

While most of the above is widely accepted, it is also necessary to understand learners' cultural backgrounds in order to design effective courses. The emphasis on deference to authority

in Zimbabwean private schools can influence learners' autonomy in what and how they learn. Instructional designers must use an integrated approach. Such an approach must be in line with cultural norms when developing learner autonomy, hence designing an environment that supports the development of soft skills.

While instructional designers may craft such programmes, instructors must use and track their application. Their work involves more than dispensing knowledge, having an impact on the social skills, teamwork, and learning engagement of the learners. Instructors also play an important part in teaching social skills such as communication, patience, and respect. Learners look up to their instructors and will certainly take note of and imitate what they do in these sessions, showing how applicable these skills are to teamwork. A learner commented: "If my teacher is patient and respectful, it makes me want to be the same way to others, even in group work." This modelling supports implicit learning since it allows learners to learn through observation. Scaffolding is provided effectively by good instructors to assist learners in engaging in group projects. This involves guiding learners through procedures, feedback provision, and supporting learners with challenges. Learners suggested a desire for greater supported guidance in group work, particularly in digital and online contexts where group work is problematic. Instructors can optimize learning through the establishment of clear goals, the provision of resources, and the promotion of effective collaboration.

Further to this, the instructors can support learners to obtain soft skills using reflection and feedback. By allowing learners to think about how they have worked together with others and the skills utilized, instructors support them to appreciate the contribution of soft skills towards their learning. Regular feedback concerning group working and personal input may help learners build

interpersonal skills as well as teamworking. Instructors get to fill the impression gap between themselves and learners concerning the value of soft skills. Whereas instructors always point to long-term gains for skills such as adaptation and interaction, the learners usually underrate the skills initially before getting to witness actual applications. By incorporating alumni comments and real-world examples into talks, instructors may help learners to further understand the importance of skills.

However, in a situation where learners and instructors are accustomed to an instructor-centred approach, one needs to consider how instructors could be made to implement strategies to ensure a more balanced approach and promote learner autonomy and individuality. Instructors may start by establishing clear requirements and goals for collaborative assignments. Learners can better comprehend the frameworks wherein they will operate by establishing the objectives, roles, and expected outcomes. This clarity allows learners to be in charge of their coursework while being sure that they are on a well-defined path. One instructor said, "When learners know what is expected of them, they feel more empowered to take initiative."

Moreover, the development of a conducive learning environment plays a crucial role in fostering learner autonomy. Educators can establish a trustworthy environment where learners feel comfortable taking risks and making things work on their own. This can be done by the display of positive interpersonal qualities such as patience and respect, which learners tend to imitate. This kind of open communication culture of collaboration can be used to boost the self-confidence of learners. This can be done by having instructors employ scaffolding techniques in an attempt to support learners at the same time as promoting learner autonomy. This involves providing the necessary help at appropriate points during projects and then removing support progressively as

learners begin to develop expertise. For instance, instructors can present problem-solving tools or guidelines initially, then encourage learners to seek their own solutions as time progresses. This approach encourages analytical thinking and perseverance. While encouraging more independence, instructors also need to be prepared to provide immediate help when learners are faced with larger issues. This can be in the form of check-ins or counselling that gently guide students through the issues without taking control of the process of problem-solving. The instructors can use guided questions to guide learners to consider what they have to do next in a critical manner while granting autonomy and yet providing the required help. Including reflective reflection and peer feedback within group work can strengthen the learners' perception of their attainment of soft skills.

Instructors can ask students to evaluate their own contribution and the dynamic of their group communication. Through this reflective process, students can identify areas for improvement and see the value of their soft skills in realizing project objectives. Regular feedback sessions can offer a platform for constructive discussion regarding the communication and collaboration among secondary school instructors and learners. This can even be done through assigning formal group roles that permit a balance between independence and direction. By assigning each member of the group a specific role, instructors are able to ensure that the learners work together with one another, regardless of learning ability, while giving them autonomy to finish their own tasks creatively. The system encourages accountability and enables learners to gain teamwork and leadership skills, as well as bringing in vital peer interactions which are an important aspect of social connectivism.

While all of the methods discussed in this section emphasize teamwork and experience learning in an effort to develop soft skills, there is also evidence that hybrid learning must be sustained. Virtual learning platforms, particularly those utilized within hybrid environments, have been shown to be beneficial in developing self-management and digital literacy. Instructors observed that learners who acclimated to these surroundings demonstrated greater resilience and time management, both of which are critical soft skills in today's fast-paced, technology-driven industries. The capacity to manage time and adapt to new technologies and platforms is becoming increasingly vital in academic and professional settings. Practical experience is essential in cultivating learners' soft skills in e-learning settings. They facilitate skill acquisition, make skills more practically relevant, boost confidence, and improve adaptation and self-management. Experience-based learning can prepare learners for effective future academic and working performance because it can close perceptual gaps and improve autonomy, particularly in hybrid learning settings.

The significance of this study is that Zimbabwean private secondary schools must accelerate the implementation of digital learning platforms that enable the acquisition of soft skills. Such group collaboration systems as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Classroom, and any other suitable digital learning platforms can be used to enable real-time group communication and collaboration. Schools will be able to mimic actual professional environments that require these soft skills.

The pandemic has also underscored the central role that digital technologies must play in education, and never more so than now has it been necessary for schools to rethink their teaching models. The COVID-19 pandemic brought digital technologies more quickly to all parts of the

globe, but it also illuminated stark inequalities in terms of access to technology and digital assets (OECD, 2020). This is particularly relevant in the Zimbabwean context, where the digital divide remains a harsh reality. In trying to make these learning tools available to everyone, schools must be able to provide equal access to technology and provide additional support to learners who may be technologically disadvantaged.

The implications of the research substantiate the growing prominence of soft skills in education, particularly in digital and hybrid learning environments. Soft skills are categorically crucial to students' academic success and preparation for professional life, and students as well as teachers have to be diligent to master them in addition to academic abilities. The study has highlighted the need for transformation of the integration of soft skills into curricula, the need for professionalization of teachers, and the need to be gender-sensitive and culturally responsive in the provision of soft skills training.

Moving forward, schools must continue closing gaps in digital literacy, increasing gender parity, and including soft skills increasingly in the curriculum. Instructors, policymakers, and stakeholders must realize that the soft skills are not inferior to technical skills but are integral towards helping students fit into current workplaces where technical expertise is not the only means of being successful. By taking these implications into account, Zimbabwean private secondary schools can equip their learners more effectively to succeed in the C21st. This will produce more balanced, adaptive, and robust individuals poised to meet the challenges of the future job market.

Another significant implication that emerged from this study is the effect of gender and school culture on gendered perceptions and soft skills acquisition. The research found that there were varying attitudes among learners in all-girls schools, all-boys schools, and co-educational schools concerning the significance and relevance of specific soft skills. This is confirmed by findings in the research study that indicates gender and the learning environment can influence if and how learners perceive soft skills as valuable (Parker et al, 2021). For instance, the study confirmed that female learners value communication and team-working skills more than male learners, for example, due to different socialization patterns in single-sex and co-educational schools (Dweck, 2016). Similarly, school culture determines the manner in which learners engage with soft skills. For schools that are co-educational, there may be more freedom of inter-gender interactions that could lead to divergent communication skills, while single-gender schools may pose a different scenario. This calls for a tailor-made soft skills training that considers these differences in gender as well as in school culture.

To fill such gaps, schools may adopt gender-sensitive and culturally responsive approaches to cultivating soft skills. Tailoring soft skills training to meet the diverse needs of learners in different school settings and gender groups will empower all Zimbabwean secondary school learners with the skills necessary to thrive both in academic and work settings. Furthermore, gender-sensitive spaces designed to encourage frank conversation and a culture of mutual understanding among different gender learners may enrich learning and improve the promotion of communication skills.

The research question aimed at identifying underlying concepts that may be employed in curriculum creation to promote soft skill acquisition in Zimbabwean private secondary schools.

The results confirm the hypothesis (RQ4 H1) that learners and instructors have various new and common concepts about curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. These principles have the potential to simplify and highlight some of the obligations in learning, especially for learners who are not so academically inclined. Incorporating these fundamental principles into the curriculum has the ability to close the skills gap and prepare learners for professional and personal success in a globalised world.

### **Theoretical and Stakeholder Implications**

The present research makes a contribution in this regard by presenting some empirical evidence of how learners in hybrid learning environments of Zimbabwean private secondary schools view the development and importance of soft skills. This research adds on the existing theory, like Connectivism, Social Constructivism and Cognitive Constructivism, to show how the hybrid learning environment can affect soft skills development and significance, for example, adaptability, communication and problem solving among learners. The study also provides insights into these views from different perspectives of instructors, learners and alumni.

This research adds to knowledge of the development of soft skills in hybrid learning environments. It has provided evidence that has supported and built upon some of the ideas held in theories of Connectivism, Social Constructivism and Cognitive Constructivism. These findings indicate that hybrid learning environments can aid learners in the development of certain soft skills such as adaptability, communication and self-management by means of having learners interact with digital learning networks, participate in collaborative learning with others and increase their skills with independent problem solving.

Within a connectivist view the findings illustrate how digital environments provide opportunities for learners to gain access to knowledge networks further afield than that of the classroom, and how the collaborative nature of hybrid learning reflected the interaction and shared problem-solving essential to social constructivist theory, and the aspect of learner interdependency which encourages the development of social skills. Aspects of independent work needed to effectively complete tasks within hybrid learning also support the cognitive constructivist notions of learner activity.

The study also complements other related theoretical concepts. For example, Social Learning Theory shows how learning through observation, modelling and social interaction is important. The study shows that learners obtain some of their skills through collaboration with their classmates and educators in blended/face-to-face and online learning environments. In addition, the role of technology in the learning process follows the same logic in the TPACK Framework and the SAMR Model. Both point to the importance of integrating technology to enhance learning. The focus on skills like collaboration, communication and adaptability relates to the skills focus of the 21st Century Skills Framework.

In addition, this study provides insight for the existing debates on theory in technology enhanced learning as it demonstrates how hybrid learning environments are situated in the models of Social Learning Theory, TPACK and the 21st Century Skills Framework. The findings suggest the importance of pedagogical planning and implementation to ensure digital learning environments support the outcomes of student learning as well as the development of generic skills needed in the modern classroom and beyond.

The findings from this research project will be of interest to educational practitioners who are involved in the delivery, development and management of hybrid learning environments. The

results indicate to school principals and school leaders that they need to support the strategic integration of technology into teaching and learning and advocate the implementation of learner-centred pedagogies that develop collaboration, communication and critical problem solving. School leaders may have to facilitate these learning environments by providing suitable digital hardware and software, up-to-date policies and professional development activities.

However, for instructors, the findings suggest the explicit design of learning activities that afford opportunities for interaction, collaboration and independent problem solving in both digital and face-to-face learning environments to not only support the development of soft skills but also improve the academic learning. Meanwhile, for policymakers and other educational stakeholders, the study demonstrates the importance of policy and curriculum framework that acknowledge the role of hybrid and technology enhanced learning environments as means not only for enhancing subject knowledge, but also for the development of other soft skills that are essential for learners to succeed in the modern environment.

In sum, these points suggest that digital and hybrid learning environments can be used to build soft skills when learning activities are designed around collaboration and the practical application of skills. The research study contributes to the expanding research into the effect of digital and hybrid learning environments on both academic performance as well as the acquisition of soft skills that learners will require to be successful in today's educational and workplace environments.

## **Recommendations for application**

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made for the application of soft skills development in Zimbabwe's private secondary schools.

### ***Incorporation of soft skills into the curriculum***

For policymakers, curriculum designers and school leaders, schools should make soft skills part of the formal school curriculum. The education system in Zimbabwe has, by and large, focused on academic skills, but now soft skills are recognized as important for both personal and professional success. There should be defined modules on communication, teamwork, critical thinking, problem-solving, and time management, which could be taught using face-to-face learning as well as digital learning environments. These skills should be assessed alongside traditional academic outcomes, ensuring that learners understand their importance and have opportunities to develop and demonstrate them.

### ***Professional development for instructors***

For school leaders, teacher training institutions and education policymakers, instructors must be offered ongoing professional development in order to prepare them to teach content knowledge and soft skills more effectively. Training must be offered on teaching subject-specific content incorporating soft skills and how best to use digital platforms to teach these skills. Furthermore, instructors must be trained to design a compelling and collaborative virtual classroom through which these abilities can be nurtured, such as using collaborative tools like Google Docs or virtual breakout rooms for group projects and work.

Even more importantly, instructors should be trained in how to use pedagogical methodologies such as discussion and problem solving effectively and successfully in order to see an increase in soft skill development without requiring further curriculum changes, particularly given that these changes are not controlled internally or locally.

### ***Promoting digital literacy***

For school leaders, teachers and educational institutions, since the transition to digital learning has been rapid, it is essential that learners as well as instructors have the digital literacy necessary to excel in this kind of environment. Schools must provide instruction on digital tools and platforms, and how they can be used as part of soft skills training should be emphasized. Not only will this enable learners to become valuable contributors to digital learning environments, but it will also leave instructors more competent and confident in instructing in digital and hybrid environments.

### ***Gender-sensitive approaches***

For school leaders, teachers and educational policymakers, educational institutions should consider the gender dynamics in their approach to soft skills development. The study revealed differences in how male and female learners perceive and value soft skills. Tailoring soft skills training to be more gender-sensitive could help to ensure that all learners, regardless of gender, feel equally empowered to develop these skills. This could involve offering different types of extracurricular activities or leadership opportunities that encourage the development of

communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills among both male and female learners. This could give rise to an area which requires additional investigation in order to be fully understood.

### **Comprehensive recommendations related to the theoretical framework**

As life becomes increasingly competitive and busy, individuals must acquire different skills in order to prosper professionally and personally. This applies most specifically to young adults who are about to become independent and are getting entangled in societal complexity. Keeping this in mind, schools must recognize the significance of initiating skill courses for 17- and 18-year-olds. The following subsection advises the introduction of semi-self-paced digital skills classes for 17- and 18-year-olds, supported with weekly peer group facilitation meetings, forming a hybrid model of skills acquisition. The literature has shown that hybrid learning is not only effective in developing skills but also in achieving learning outcomes as well as in facilitating larger class sizes. Other Zimbabwean private high school courses should therefore incorporate hybrid learning within the regular instruction to help learners gain soft skills. This can be crafted to encompass more group work and a combination of digital learning and one-on-one feedback in person-to-person sessions. Relevant written materials, stipulated in the weekly agendas, need to have defined objectives and pre-class preparations. Learners should be given specific assignments, limitations on time, and deadlines. The allocation of skills and duties among group members should be done in such a way that the instructor needs to support or guide only moderately. Instructional materials should also include information and resources that go beyond what the instructor can give in an educational setting.

To give a comprehensive learning experience, the courses will incorporate concepts from social constructivism, cognitive constructivism, and connectivism. To begin with, it may be necessary to re-examine the concepts of social constructivism, cognitive constructivism, and connectivism, which were discussed in Chapter 2.

Social constructivism is a learning theory that emphasizes the role of social interaction in knowledge construction. The theory holds that learning occurs through interactions among people as they share experiences and build new meanings together. By incorporating social constructivism, learners will be taught how to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, and maintain relationships with other people. These are worthwhile skills which will benefit them throughout their business and personal careers. Social constructivism emphasizes social interaction as an integral part of learning. Through the inclusion of peer group facilitating meetings, learners are able to discuss and debate with each other, allowing them to build knowledge collectively. Such a collaborative methodology encourages critical thinking and problem-solving, essential in the C21st.

Cognitive constructivism, however, deals with the mental processes used by individuals to interpret and build knowledge. It emphasizes the need for personal experience, reflection, and critical thinking during learning. Cognitive constructivism will therefore enable learners to gain critical thinking and problem-solving skills. As learners learn at their own pace and reflect on their experience and ideas, they will have a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. This will not only help students in their academic studies, but also in making significant life decisions. Cognitive constructivism involves active learner construction of knowledge by experience. Self-paced modules allow learners to study at their own time, as per their own learning

needs and learning style. The customized approach ensures each learner's needs are addressed, resulting in enhanced knowledge and retention of the learned.

Finally, connectivism is a theory of learning which recognizes the role of technology and networks in learning. It highlights the importance of collaborating and working with others and acquiring and imparting knowledge via technology. Finally, connectivism recognizes the role of technology and networks in current life. The introduction of this concept in skills training will equip 17 and 18-year-olds with the digital literacy skills they need to excel in the digital era. They will be empowered on how to utilize technology to obtain and exchange information and work remotely. These are vital skills in today's fast-evolving world where technology controls every aspect of our lives. Connectivism emphasizes the use of networks and the ability of technology to acquire knowledge. With the blending of internet sources and technologies, learners are given access to a complex pool of knowledge and opinions, broadening their global consciousness. The use of digital media promotes increased collaboration and communication among learners, making them more apt for the globalized working world.

To supplement the self-paced nature of the skills courses, weekly peer group facilitating sessions are expected to be held to foster collaborative learning and peer engagement. These gatherings will allow learners to engage in conversations, exchange thoughts, and give feedback to their peers. These sessions, which incorporate ideas of social constructivism, cognitive constructivism, and connectivism, will encourage learners to construct knowledge collaboratively, question current viewpoints, and use social networks for learning and growth.

Incorporating these three theories into skills courses for 17- and 18-year-olds can significantly improve their development and growth. These adolescents are at a critical point in their life, changing from being dependent on their family to being self-sufficient individuals. As a

result, it is critical to provide them with the abilities they will need to effectively navigate this change.

Incorporating soft skills into all regular educational programs is undoubtedly possible via the appropriate application of contemporary methods of instruction, which, as previously indicated, would necessitate professional development for instructors. However, while a shift in assessment techniques would be beneficial to promote growth, Zimbabwe's usage of externally regulated curriculum and evaluation makes this task challenging and, hence, nearly impossible as the primary means of assessment. Until these approaches become more achievable and widely accepted, it may be more feasible to explore the possibility of including an additional skills development subject into the curriculum to allow learners to gain the essential soft skills.

In light of the foregoing, the literature, and the findings of the research study, the researcher has communicated with several upskilling-oriented establishments in various regions and has since collaborated with one in particular - Skillogy PERFORM™, based in the United Kingdom - on the adaptation of career upskilling courses to suit learners in Zimbabwean private secondary schools and possibly beyond.

The concept involves the adaptation and use of the Skillogy PERFORM™ SELF course in order to create a comprehensive and detailed review and development of a range of soft skills. Each course entails training and tutorials in specific development areas, each beginning with a baseline test which consists of an online quiz. Thereafter, the course is run through as a semi-self-paced course where learners are set completion deadlines and objectives and are required to complete bite-sized activities based on personal experiences and perceptions to ensure utilisation, deployment and therefore development of the specified skills. Weekly peer group discussions and facilitated guidance sessions would be recommended to allow for learner autonomy whilst , to a

smaller extent, guiding learners and also ensure they remain on track to meet their deadlines and maintain, not only to ensure that they are adjusting sufficiently to a more learner-centred learning style, but also to keep a constant emphasis on why the courses are so important. Integrating reflective thinking and feedback from peers into group assignments can raise the learners' understanding of their development of soft skills. In the previous section, it was also noted that the emphasis on respecting authority in Zimbabwean private schools may have an influence on learners' independence in what they study and that instructional designers must use an integrated approach. This strategy must conform to cultural norms while developing learner autonomy, so creating an environment that encourages the development of soft skills. This suggested use of weekly peer group sessions is aimed at accomplishing just that. The learners are otherwise left to work in a semi-self-paced environment, allowing them to work at their convenience, suiting all schedules and all levels of academic capabilities. The courses are completed upon viewing and completion of the in-course activities and another online quiz as a final assessment of the development of the skill. Each course would be fully certified. Ensuring that the courses are not only assessed but also certified should reinforce to learners and their guardians that these courses are of vital importance and deserve the attention that technical skill subjects traditionally get.

The courses would be run through term one and two out of three of the school year to still allow learners to maintain their focus on their external assessments in term three of both the lower and upper 6<sup>th</sup> forms. It is hoped that this would also allow for further parental buy-in to the concept at hand.

The course's basic outline is proposed as follows:

<b>Course Name</b>	<b>Development Area</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>	<b>School Year and Term</b>	<b>Number of Tutorials</b>
Wellness and Advancement	Life Development	8 Weeks	Lower 6 <sup>th</sup> form, term 1	10
Personal Communication	Behaviour Development	3 weeks	Lower 6 <sup>th</sup> form, term 1	8
Personal Contribution	Behaviour Development	3 weeks	Lower 6 <sup>th</sup> form, term 2	10
Time Management	Productivity Development	3 weeks	Lower 6 <sup>th</sup> form, term 2	8
Personal Organisation	Productivity Development	2 weeks	Lower 6 <sup>th</sup> form, term 2	6
Emotional Intelligence	Behaviour Development	3 weeks	Upper 6 <sup>th</sup> form, term 1	6
Priority Management	Productivity Development	2 weeks	Upper 6 <sup>th</sup> form, term 1	6
Stress Management	Life Development	3 weeks	Upper 6 <sup>th</sup> form, term 1	7
Thinking Abilities	Productivity Development	5 weeks	Upper 6 <sup>th</sup> form, term 2	8
Work Personality	Behaviour Development	5 weeks	Upper 6 <sup>th</sup> form, term 2	8

Ultimately, it is believed that this theory provides a holistic learning strategy that is consistent with the ideas of social constructivism, cognitive constructivism, and connectivism and support the findings of the research study. These educational opportunities seek to support the development of important skills required for academic achievement and future ambitions by offering autonomy, as well as an experiential and collaborative learning environment for 17- and 18-year-olds. It is advised that these courses be implemented to provide learners with skills that will help them grow personally, academically, and professionally in an ever-changing global world. The adaptations to make this framework suitable for Zimbabwean private secondary schools has been recommended to the relevant individuals at Skillogy PERFORM™, been accepted and a course proposal is ready to be made to the Association of Trust Schools - the governing body of private primary and secondary schools in Zimbabwe. There is also a possibility of tailoring a package for learners to continue with their skills development programmes post-secondary school, using the SELF programme as the basis for their further development and training. It is believed that this will not only make learners of all academic levels employable, but also capable of greater achievement in either further education, the workforce, or both.

## Conclusion

To penetrate the intricacies of a changing workforce and education system, soft skills have never been more important. The shift from a manufacturing to a service economy has redefined the skill sets needed for work and long-term success, with people skills, critical thinking, teamwork, and the ability to adapt among others being key. The COVID-19 pandemic has hastened this trend, exposing serious deficits in recent graduates' soft skills and pushing towards a reevaluation of learning methods. The findings of this study seek to fill this gap between Zimbabwean instructors and learners and supported by alumni by presenting evidence on perceptions of soft skills and their role in the C21st job market. By considering both instructor and learner perspectives, one can create more integrated and responsive education programmes focused on the development of core soft skills. Educational institutions must prepare themselves to suit the requirements of a knowledge-based economy in the future. Redesigning the requirements is the need of the time, and it needs concerted efforts.

The last few years have witnessed growing attention towards investigating the possibilities of hybrid learning, combining face-to-face and digital training, to amplify educational achievement and performance. This study further gauged the contribution of hybrid learning to developing soft skills for Zimbabwean private secondary school learners, yielding useful information on the interface between pedagogy and education practice and skill development.

According to this, the aim of this existing study was to fill the knowledge gap by examining the significance of hybrid learning towards developing soft skills in Zimbabwean private secondary schools. Data for the study were collected using the mixed-methods approach.

Quantitative data was gathered using Likert 5-point style ranking questions as well as closed-ended questions in surveys distributed online to learners, instructors, and alumni for completion, while qualitative data was gained using open-ended questions in the surveys among those same groups. The learner population comprised of current secondary school learners aged 18 (over-age lower sixth form learners and normal age upper sixth form learners) and 19 (over-age upper sixth form learners). Instructors were represented by current secondary school instructors from Zimbabwean private secondary schools who taught online throughout the epidemic and had experience with hybrid learning in the final phases of lockdowns before full face-to-face instruction resumed. Alumni were learners who attended Zimbabwean private high schools online during the digital and hybrid stages of their high school years.

Having reached the conclusion of the investigation into the transformational impact of hybrid and digital learning on private secondary schools in Zimbabwe's development of soft skills, one cannot help but consider the sobering implications of the evidence that was compiled. The pandemic has served as a catalyst of change, with both instructors and learners compelled to acclimatize to more independent and technology-driven learning. This shift is centred not just on the significance of soft skills in facilitating academic excellence and professional preparedness, but also on the significance of collaboration among learners, educators, and learning institutions. To this end, the research answered four research questions with the following findings and implications:

**Research Question 1:** *What were Zimbabwean private secondary school learners' and instructors' impressions of soft skills prior to the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities?*

**RQ1 H0:** Learners and instructors are likely to have equal impressions of soft skills prior to the use of digital mixed classroom opportunities.

**RQ1 H1:** Learners find soft skills acquisition to be irrelevant and unimportant compared to the importance that instructors place on the skills.

*Expected findings RQ1:* It is expected that whilst instructors find the acquisition of soft skills valuable, learner impressions will be that of less importance within the scope of their educational journey than rote memorisation and recall.

### ***Findings***

**Learners' Impressions:** Prior to the introduction of digital and hybrid classroom options, learners in Zimbabwean private secondary schools saw soft skills as less important than memorisation and recall. They considered soft skills as personal traits which could not be taught or developed substantially while at school. This perception was mirrored in the study's anticipated results, which had anticipated that learners would perceive learning soft skills as irrelevant and unimportant in relation to how vital the instructors believed these skills were.

**Instructors' Impressions:** On the other hand, instructors were stressing the cultivation of soft skills. Instructors believed that communication, teamwork, flexibility, and emotional intelligence were the cornerstones for long-term success. Instructors placed a high emphasis on the importance of work ethic, perseverance, problem-solving, and critical thinking and had strong convictions concerning their ability to contribute to the learners' growth.

**Relation to Research Question:** The research question was focused on finding differences between instructors and learners in perceiving soft skills prior to digital and hybrid classroom

courses. The findings confirm the study hypothesis (RQ1 H1) as they indicate that there is a significant difference in learners' and instructors' perception of soft skills. These skills were rated higher by instructors than by learners, indicating a lack of awareness and appreciation in learners of the long-term value of soft skills. This gap highlights the necessity for educational initiatives focusing on soft skills alongside traditional academic success.

**Research Question 2:** *How have the differences in **instructor** perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap transformed as a result of the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities?*

**RQ2 H0:** Instructors perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap have not altered.

**RQ2 H1:** Instructors perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap have shifted in balance in levels of acquisition of various soft skills but still indicates a larger skills gap.

**Expected findings RQ2:** It is expected that instructors feel that very few learners actively took part in their learning journey through digital and hybrid learning opportunities to fully make use of skills opportunities available in soft skill acquisition and that whilst the balance of acquisition is likely to have changed with some soft skills - soft skills such as adaptability and organisational skills, may have improved whilst others, such as emotional intelligence and interpersonal communication, would have regressed - there will still be a noticeable gap between levels of importance versus acquisition. The impressions of the given soft skills importance

between learner and instructor impressions post-pandemic may be more similar and with less deviance than prior to the pandemic and the use of digital and hybrid learning.

### *Findings*

**Instructor Perceptions Before and After Digital Integration:** Zimbabwean private secondary school instructors first emphasized soft skills, in that, they regarded them as being very important in helping learners succeed in the long run. Soft skills such as communication, critical thinking, and teamwork were given top priority by the instructors with scores of 4.5 and above on the scale of 5. The introduction of digital and hybrid classrooms, however, saw the instructors observe changes in the extent of soft skill development. They discovered flexibility and organizational capability to expand, but emotional intelligence and communication skills lagged in virtual settings. Despite these advances, instructors reported a large skills gap. They believed that there were not many learners who participated actively in their learning experiences through digital and hybrid learning opportunities to fully avail themselves of the skill acquisition possibilities on offer. This perception is in agreement with the anticipated outcomes, which are that, although the equilibrium of acquisition has shifted, there is a significant gap between the significance accorded to soft skills and their acquisition.

**Relation to the Research Question:** The research question was to investigate how the perceptions of the value and development of soft skills, and the perceived skills gap, among instructors were altered using digital and hybrid classroom alternatives. The results show that, while the perceptions of the instructors have shifted to recognize the growing need for flexibility

and digital literacy, the skills gap remains. This aligns with the study hypothesis (RQ2 H1) that instructors' perceptions have evolved but still reflect a wider skills gap. The findings suggest that there must remain emphasis on soft skills in the curriculum to productively bridge this gap. Alumni feedback validated the notion that experiential learning is necessary to determine the lasting advantage of soft skills.

**Research Question 3:** *What are the learner perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and the perceived skills gap as a result of the use of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities?*

**RQ3 H0:** Learner perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap have not altered.

**RQ3 H1:** Learners perceptions about the value and development of soft skills and perceived skills gap have shifted in the direction of a narrowing gap.

**Expected findings RQ3:** It is expected that learners have little comprehensive knowledge of the importance of soft skills and their place in their future success. It is also expected, however, that learners have an inflated perception of their levels of acquisition if these skills.

### ***Findings***

**Perceptions of Soft Skills Value and Development:** Private secondary school learners in Zimbabwe have redefined their vision with regard to the significance and transformation of soft skills due to the exploitation of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities. Learners in the initial

stages did not have profound understanding of how vital soft skills are in order to succeed in the future. However, the transition to digital and hybrid learning environments has led to a moderate change in their perceptions, specifically of skills such as flexibility and self-discipline, which are paramount in digital settings. Despite some encouraging advances, learners continue to overestimate their attainment in soft skills. Learners tend to prioritize technical skills over soft skills, which are seen as less directly transferable to academic success. This view suggests a persistent skills shortfall, as learners may lack appreciation for the long-term benefits of these soft skills like communication and teamwork unless they are offered real-life simulations.

**Relation to the Research Question:** The research question has been focused on determining how learners' perceptions of the value and acquisition of soft skills and perceived gap in skills changed as a result of digital and hybrid classroom configurations. The findings affirm the study hypothesis (RQ3 H1) that learners' perceptions had changed towards a narrowing gap, though the gap does still exist. Learners have begun to recognize the significance of some of the soft skills, but perceived relevance and actual learning still trail behind. This means that there must be continuous emphasis on incorporating soft skills into the curriculum to improve how learners understand and utilize these skills both in academic and work settings.

**Research Question 4:** *What underlying ideas may be effectively used in the curriculum development, its presentation, and evaluation that can support the acquisition of soft skills in Zimbabwe's private secondary schools?*

**RQ4 H0:** There are no shared ideas between learners and instructors to be used to streamline and emphasise respective roles in the learning process.

**RQ4 H1:** There are several shared ideas between learners and instructors in regard to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that can be used to streamline and emphasise respective roles in the learning process.

***Expected Findings RQ4:*** It is the general feeling that there may be some new fundamental shared ideals that could be utilized to further streamline educational processes with both learners and instructors both backing newly realised roles in the educational journey with an emphasis on soft skills, particularly for the less academically gifted learners.

### ***Findings***

**1. Integration of Project-Based Learning:** Project-based learning is also emphasized as a viable approach to curriculum design. It invites students to engage in complex tasks that involve collaboration, discussion, and problem-solving on their own, which build resilience and adaptability. The method meets the requirement for experiential learning, which is at the centre of developing soft skills like leadership and teamwork.

**2. Cultural and Contextual Considerations:** The Zimbabwean private school cultural environment has an important influence on the perceptions of skill development. Demonstrating respect for authority but encouraging student autonomy can help integrate traditional values with emerging needs in education. This approach promotes the transition towards learner-centred models that emphasize critical thinking and self-directed learning.

**3. Experiential and Collaborative Learning:** Experiential learning strategies, such as group work and discussion teaching, are more appropriate for instructing students soft skills. These approaches offer real-world, actionable steps that help students identify and apply skills in relevant contexts.

**4. Performance-Based Assessments:** Drawing upon performance-based assessment, such as portfolios and peer review, can offer a holistic insight into how effectively learners are developing their skills. These types of assessment are designed to mirror expectations in the real world as well as foster self-awareness and a spirit of continuous learning.

**Relation to the Research Question:** The research question was interested in the identification of underlying ideas to be used in curriculum development to improve the learning of soft skills in private secondary schools in Zimbabwe. The outcomes confirm the hypothesis (RQ4 H1) that instructors and learners have various new and common ideas about curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. These ideas can facilitate and emphasize some responsibilities easier during the learning process, especially to less academically gifted learners. The incorporation of such fundamental principles within the curriculum could help fill the skills gap and prepare learners for professional and personal achievement in the globalised environment.

Besides, the research study highlights principal weaknesses in the training of instructors and the facilitation of soft skills. The research indicates that the majority of the instructors lack proper training to transfer these skills efficiently due to inadequate training programmes and resources. Bridging these gaps is essential to improve the quality of soft skills training. Subsequent efforts should be focused on establishing overall professional development plans for instructors that provide them with the strategies and tools required to facilitate soft skill acquisition within their classrooms.

In addition to this, culture and context considerations, such as gender, continue to be at the centre of learning soft skills in Zimbabwean private secondary schools and influence the manner in which learners interact with these skills. Culturally responsive and context-sensitive education programmes are advocated by the study, taking into account the heterogeneity of the experiences and backgrounds of learners while developing the curriculum. Furthermore, it stresses the importance of mainstreaming soft skills development into current curriculum through application of educational reforms, closing gaps in educator training and availability of resources that continue to diminish effective teaching practices. This underscores the necessity of preparing education programmes that respond to learners' varied backgrounds and experiences.

In addition, the pedagogy and assessment critical curriculum outcomes reveal how pedagogic disciplines such as digital literacy and practice skills are essential in facilitating the teaching of soft skills. The following are proposed solutions towards ensuring the maximization of the teaching of soft skills education in learning environments:

Experiential learning processes must be adopted more fully and efficiently into educational environments. Of the most essential elements of this adoption is the implementation of learner-centred learning procedures with active involvement and personal engagement in the process of learning. This method encourages learners to take personal responsibility and accountability for themselves and their learning, which generates more internalization of knowledge and skills. Experiential learning in virtual contexts has all combined to increase teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, digital literacies, creativity, and leadership potential. All these innovations have demonstrated the significance of active learning methods in creating a foundation for future educational and professional success. Integrate these elements to facilitate a more knowledge-rich learning experience that not only enhances memory recall but also prepares learners with an ability

to solve problems in actual situations. Experiential learning with sensitivity to culture facilitates the acquisition of skills in critical thinking, collaboration, and flexibility.

To bridge gaps in practical skill application, curriculum designers should:

- Prioritise project-based learning.
- Encourage collaboration in initiatives.
- Improve digital literacy.
- Conduct alternative evaluations.
- Align with real-world circumstances.

In these kinds of cases, educators bear a huge responsibility in fostering the soft skill development through cooperative activities and assessments. Through role-modelling effective interpersonal skill, setting up significant cooperative experience, facilitation, employing alternative assessment, encouraging reflection, and closing perceptual gaps, instructors can increase learners' development of soft skills significantly. On the whole, this methodology not only makes learners ready for academic success, but it also makes them ready to gain the skills they must attain in order to find success in this day's workplace.

Against the backdrop of these findings to the research questions, this research adds to the current pool of knowledge in three aspects. First, it has presented empirical findings on whether hybrid learning bridges the soft skills gap in Zimbabwean private secondary schools. Through conducting comprehensive research, the study verifies the facilitative role of hybrid learning in the acquisition of necessary soft skills. It highlights that schools must restructure their curricula in such a manner that they include intensive training in soft skills that covers the changing demands of the job market. According to the findings, a highly technical curriculum can end up not equipping learners for work in later life, when soft skills are more needed. Therefore, education

reforms ought to be directed towards incorporating soft skills into current curricula so that learning individuals get a balanced education that includes technical education and people skills.

Additionally, the research identified the most critical factors supporting or obstructing the application of hybrid learning in these institutions. Understanding these factors will help policymakers and educators avoid probable challenges and derive the highest benefits from hybrid learning. Understanding will aid in decision-making and resource allocation when applying and adopting hybrid learning methodologies.

Finally, the study establishes a model of integrating hybrid learning into the curriculum for the acquisition of soft skills. The model provides an educators' and policymakers' guidebook to develop actionable hybrid learning plans for Zimbabwe's private secondary schools. Institutions can provide an organized process of acquiring soft skills through hybrid learning by using the model.

The research result has extensive practical applications to educators, policymakers, and researchers. Educators can use the hybrid learning process as a means of facilitating learners in gaining their soft skills. Educators can create an interesting and vivid learning environment to facilitate acquiring of corresponding soft skills by incorporating online and offline training sessions.

Apart from these, the research findings have fundamental implications for Zimbabwean education. In the wake of greater demand for knowledgeable labour, narrowing the employment qualification and academic achievement gap is crucial. Closing the skills gap is attainable through hybrid learning through the development of learners with the required soft skills to compete in the labour market. Thus, the policy and practice implications of this study are relevant to inform education programme design policy and practice to equip learners for the labour market.

Policymakers can integrate hybrid learning into education policy and frameworks. The confirmation of the effectiveness of the approach allows authorities to provide an environment conducive to the implementation and adoption of hybrid learning in Zimbabwean private secondary schools. This can lead to overall educational quality and the development of well-rounded graduates with valuable soft skills.

Researchers might expand on this study to look at the function of hybrid learning in improving soft skills in various settings. This study's findings provide a framework for future research, allowing for a more comprehensive knowledge of the possibilities of hybrid learning in various educational settings and cultural contexts.

### **Limitations**

The findings of the research must be considered in light of its limitations. Online surveys are traditionally considered to contribute to lower response rates, which might be caused by a range of circumstances, including:

- Participants struggled to complete the online questionnaire outside of school hours due to a lack of reliable internet connectivity and electricity.
- Because certain learners, and particularly their instructors, have expertise in the educational components required for assessments - knowledge and understanding; analysis; evaluation; and application - opinions may be considered guesswork by some and simply not completed by individuals who are afraid of the unknown.

- Surveys with limited time frames are difficult because individuals who suffer from actual or perceived time constraints are less likely to respond to surveys because they may feel overwhelmed, especially at the time the research was conducted, as it was in preparation for external examinations, so answering questionnaires was likely to be the least of the concerns for both learners and instructors.

In addition to these potential constraints to restricted responses, surveys sometimes restrict participants to certain response categories, limiting the range of responses. In contrast to a discussion, in which participants can ask clarifying questions, participants are often limited to the wording in the questionnaire itself for advice on how to complete the forms and where to place their comments.

The primary limitations could be addressed in future studies by using a combination of quantitative and more in-depth qualitative data-gathering approaches to ensure comparable outcomes as well as higher response rates and a broader range of more in-depth answers from participants.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This research examined current academic concerns, methodologies, and activities aimed at bridging existing research gaps in the development of soft skills in Zimbabwe's private secondary schools. Several of the recommendations given in this research may be of interest, particularly those linked to new opportunities that may be pursued in future research. The need for individuals with a set of soft skills and the aptitude to use and communicate with technology efficiently is

growing daily; therefore, more in-depth research is warranted in the field of soft skills development.

### ***1. Role of Hybrid Learning***

#### **Longitudinal Studies on Soft Skills Development**

More research can be conducted on how digital and hybrid learning environments influence the long-term development of soft skills. Longitudinal studies would be suitable in this instance, as it would track the same instructors and learners for an extended period of time. This would enable researchers to observe how their attitude changes and their skills develop as they continuously use digital platforms and hybrid learning types, particularly if the Skillogy PERFORM courses proposal is approved and put into practice. Observing the changes will reflect the effect of extended use of different instruction types on soft skills like teamwork, communication, and problem-solving. An understanding of such relationships can assist instructors and policymakers in changing programmes to strengthen the acquisition of skills in different modes of learning. It will also determine the essential changes in terms of teaching strategies and support infrastructure to make digital and hybrid mode learning strategies more effective.

#### **Impact of Technology on Instructor Development**

This research focused mainly on the perception of various learning styles and technologies by instructors and learners, with the support of alumni perception. Additional research must be done to analyse other factors. Among the most crucial factors is the individual impact of

technology and digital tools on the professional growth of instructors. Studying this influence can provide insight into how such resources have impacted instructors' teaching style in relation to teaching learners soft skills. Understanding this relationship could assist in identifying effective ways to promote digital literacy. It may also indicate opportunities where teaching efficiency may be improved. Future research on the influence of technology on teaching can result in a more informed teaching process so that teaching and learning are effectively supported in the age of technology. Such a better understanding can result in creating individualized instruction programmes for instructors that are customized to available technologies.

## ***2. Curriculum and Pedagogy***

### **Educational Reforms**

The research highlights the critical need to alter the schools' curriculum according to the shifting labour market requirements. As labour market demands transform and become multifaceted in nature, there is a need for soft skills training to become part of the academic curriculum in and of itself. Soft skills such as communication, cooperation, and problem-solving skill are more and more crucial for learners' survival in the years to come. The current curriculum tends to incorporate technical details, with no scope for imparting these life-changing interpersonal abilities.

Such a setting has enormous challenges for secondary level instructors. The majority of the instructors are bound by inadequate methodologies and inadequate infrastructures within which they can acquire and transfer soft skills. They are without the capability or infrastructures for the

effective transfer of soft skills. Such limitations may restrict the potential of instructors to equip learners with balanced learning suitable for the prevailing workplace reality. Recognizing these challenges allows schools to move towards more balanced methods. This involves planning professional development for instructors. These programmes would provide instructors with the tools by which they can provide basic soft skills alongside conventional subjects. These additions would prepare learners better with experience on the intricacies of the job market, including both technical knowledge as well as interpersonal skills needed in varied professional settings.

### **Perceptions of Soft Skills**

Instructors and learners both realize the importance of soft skills in learning and life. Soft skills are a collection of social skills and personal qualities that allow effective interaction and communication with individuals. While both groups appreciate them, they may create different definitions, perceptions, and priorities. For instance, instructors emphasize hard skills such as cooperation, problem-solving, and flexibility in class. They realize that they are essential for scholarship and employment. On the contrary, learners may prioritize other things based on the experience at the moment, e.g., cooperation in teamwork within group projects or communication within presentation.

Alumni opinions change when they move from school to the labour market. When individuals become a part of the labour market, their perception concerning soft skills changes as well. Individuals realize the importance of such skills when they move ahead in their career and make professional contacts. The transformation reflects the changing value of soft skills in the eyes of organizational requirements and individual experience.

### **Gaps in Instructor Training**

There are broad gaps in the training and assistance that instructors are provided with when it comes to creating soft skills in learners. The gaps are a result of varied reasons that include the lack of proper resources and inadequate training programmes. Instructors are sometimes unprepared to deal with the complexity that is generated in instructing soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. This lack of preparedness may result in variability in instruction and variability in their success in conveying soft skills training.

It is necessary to fill these gaps in order to improve teaching and learning of soft skills. Improved education opportunities can provide instructors with additional strategies and content to teach these skills to their learners. Further, continued support for instructors, such as seminars and mentoring, can allow them to integrate the learning of soft skills into their curriculum more effectively. Prioritizing the training and assistance of instructors in this context will result in a more harmonious and effective approach to teaching soft skills. Finally, ingraining these characteristics will allow learners to better address professional and personal matters in the future.

### ***3. Cultural and Contextual Factors***

#### **Cultural and Contextual Influences on Soft Skills**

The cultural background of Zimbabwe's private schools' influences attitudes towards skill development and methods of instruction. These educational systems place a high value on respect for authority. This cultural norm determines to what extent learners are allowed to be independent

in school. Therefore, the learning space usually emphasizes conformity and compliance more than independent learning and critical thinking.

This cultural dynamic may also affect how learners perceive their instructors. Most learners may see their instructors as being all-knowing with all answers. The presupposition that instructors are the most immediate source of knowledge may prevent the manner in which learners' approach and take charge of acquiring knowledge for themselves. This perception limits opportunities for co-acquiring and contact with others, both of which are important in acquiring valuable skills in the learning process today. In summary, the cultural context of Zimbabwean private schools impacts both skill development strategies and instructor-learner and learner-instructor interactions. Submission to authority emphasizes may limit the independent thinking of learners, and this will touch every aspect of their learning. As a result, learners are likely to lose opportunities to widen their skills and knowledge through participation and inquiry.

### **Gender-Based Perceptions**

These results confirm previous research that has established gender and school type to impact the manner in which learners order these skills, with female learners tending to rate communication and cooperation skills higher than male learners. Moreover, institutional culture is a major factor influencing the manner in which learners relate to soft skills. Co-educational schools enable learners to relate to each other in more varied ways, enhancing their communication skills, while single-sex schools offer a unique environment.

#### ***4. Geographic and Community Influences***

##### **Broader Geographic Scope**

The research focused on a number of private secondary schools in Zimbabwe. The research within this study aimed to measure attainment of soft skills in this given learning environment. However, untainted potential continues to exist whereby research can explore further beyond immediate boundaries. Future research offers room for researchers to develop a richer picture of how different school cultures influence training in soft skills by sampling a wider range of alternative schools, both public and private.

Additionally, studies conducted in schools within urban and rural environments may be useful to the research. Urban and rural environments present different challenges and opportunities that can have a dramatic effect on academic achievement. Additional research could identify what similarities and patterns exist between these highly disparate environments and could assist in creating more successful approaches in teaching soft skills.

##### **Role of Parents and Communities in Soft Skills Development**

Additional studies may explore how parents, guardians, and communities affect the learning of soft skills in children. Some examples of soft skills that are increasingly important in learning and working environments include communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. These are the skills that tend to make one able to deal well with other people and adjust to changing situations. Understanding how parents and guardians affect the learning of their children may offer insight into how they approach cultivating these important skills. Parents who model good

communication and collaboration, for instance, may assist in developing those traits in their children. Furthermore, education through civic involvement, such as neighbourhood groups and mentorship programmes, may play an important role in building a learner's soft skills. Communities offer other paths for socialization and skill development that may not be accessible within formal education environments. Researchers can learn how to improve soft skill development by studying these outside influences. Educators and administrators can use this information to help plan supportive environments that go beyond formal education. Looking at the influences of parents and communities will assist in creating an overall plan for preparing learners for successful lives.

## ***5. Policy, Global, and Workforce Considerations***

### **Global Discussions**

The study has huge impact to global discourses in the value of soft skills within the modern workplace. The soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving are important in achieving success in any work environment. The study shows the importance of the skills as they mould the learners in gaining the abilities that will be needed in the world of work upon their graduation. More employers are seeking people with good interpersonal skills; hence, academic institutions must conform to this demand. By highlighting the shift in learning processes, the research promotes a balanced approach to learning that incorporates both academic and people skills. Such shifts will be able to equip learners to handle the challenges of the modern workplace, which in turn will contribute to a highly skilled and flexible workforce.

### **Explore the Role of Educational Attainment in Soft Skill Development**

The self-perceived correlation of higher education levels with higher sensitivity towards soft skills brings into focus the need for research on how education influences the general skills. More exploration of this correlation involves additional longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of soft skills over time and by educational level. Researchers can provide useful insight into how college experiences influence the evolution of these skills by tracking learners from grade school through college.

### **Lessons to be drawn**

The shift from traditional to hybrid learning has highlighted the critical need for a comprehensive approach to soft skills development in Zimbabwe's private secondary schools. Key findings from this research include:

**1. Recognition of Soft Skills:** Learners and instructors both need to recognize the value of soft skills since they determine success in the classroom and at the workplace. Soft skills have to be a part of school studies so that soft skills don't take the second seat behind technical skills.

**2. Curriculum Reform:** Curriculum needs to be designed to promote experiential learning through working on projects and team work on assignments based on actual scenarios. These will instil critical thinking, flexibility, and communication competencies so precious in today's workplace.

**3. Instructor Professional Development:** Instructors must continue to be trained to ensure that they are adequately equipped with the tools and methods needed to be capable of teaching and

assessing soft skills correctly. This includes acquiring skills on how to achieve the optimal balance between guidance and autonomy in learning.

**4. Collaboration with Stakeholders:** Schools, companies, and society need to work together in offering the learners a chance to apply and demonstrate their soft skills through actual experiences. Partnerships can increase the relevance of packages of learning and enable learners to prepare for employment.

**5. Cultural Sensitivity:** Cultural context knowledge is important to set soft skills training in a way that is responsive to the varied learner requirements. This is done by establishing an environment for inclusivity, retaining cultural practices while encouraging independence and cooperation.

Finally, as models of learning evolve, Zimbabwean private secondary schools must embrace an integrated model of learning—one that is predicated on academic achievement but also cultivates the soft skills to enable learners to thrive in a world that is rapidly altering, interdependent. By doing so, institutions will be able to prepare the future generation of leaders, innovators, and problem solvers, who will be poised to solve problems ahead.

This study has therefore shed light on changing attitudes towards learners' and teachers' soft skills development in Zimbabwean private secondary schools, particularly in the era of digital and hybrid classroom opportunities. The findings provide notable skill deficits, particularly digital literacy and soft skills, together with the need for specific professional development among educators as well as learners. Hybrid learning is also simple to transition to and reach, a appealing choice for those learners who could be hindered from accessing mainstream classroom instruction.

Integration of the soft skills into school curricula and continuous instructor training in content along with digital literacy is required for further enhancement of these skills in Zimbabwean children. The research also indicates that a more gender-sensitive and school culture-sensitive intervention would be required to prepare all children to be successful in the digital era.

Later studies should investigate longitudinal studies to learn the long-term effects of hybrid learning on learning soft skills and work outcomes. Furthermore, studies on the effectiveness of certain methods formulated for training soft skills under hybrid learning would be helpful. Subsequent studies must investigate the impact of gender and socioeconomic factors on learners' experience and perception regarding soft skills. Through closer examination of such influences, researchers can expand the body of knowledge regarding soft skills learning in varying types of schools, eventually more effectively preparing learners for the demands of the modern workplace.

Not only does this study validate the worth of hybrid learning in an effort to complement Zimbabwean learners' soft skills but also invokes cooperation to change study processes to prepare graduates with what they require to meet prevailing profession demands. By filling gaps in instructor training and rationalizing curricula to cope with the multi-dimensional reality of soft skills, schools can function as change agents for the making of effective, flexible, and well-rounded human beings who are capable of responding to the demands of the modern world.

Finally, the study highlights the relevance of hybrid learning in nurturing Zimbabwean private secondary schools' soft skills. The study contributes to the knowledge pool since it presents empirical facts, the specification of key determinants, and an integrative model. The study is also pragmatically valuable to policymakers, researchers, and educators. Embracing hybrid learning has the potential to create a more integrated and effective learning approach, eventually equipping learners to excel in an ever-evolving global world. The findings of this research have implications

beyond Zimbabwean education, adding to global debate about the appropriateness of soft skills in the C21st labour market. Workers are increasingly valuing interpersonal skills; therefore, schools worldwide are required to adapt to adequately prepare their learners for a successful life.

This research not only reflects the current state of education in Zimbabwe, but it also forces researchers to confront a critical challenge: whether we as a community will capitalise on the momentum generated by hybrid learning to address the widening soft skills gap, or will it be allowed to dissipate, ultimately disadvantaging future generations in an ever-changing job market.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: UREC Application Package

#### Provisional Approval



UREC Decision, Version 2.0

#### **Unicaf University Research Ethics Committee Decision**

**Student's Name:** Chantel Tara Duckworth

**Student's ID #:** R1804D4997647

**Supervisor's Name:** Dr Rachel Monde Kabeta

**Program of Study:** UU-EDUD-900-1-ZM

**Offer ID /Group ID:** O59850G62896

**Dissertation Stage:** DS1

**Research Project Title:**

**EXAMINING THE SHIFT IN THE BALANCE OF SOFT SKILLS ACQUISITION WITH THE INCREASE IN ONLINE AND BLENDED LEARNING: THE PERCEPTION OF ZIMBABWEAN SECONDARY SCHOOL INSTRUCTORS AND LEARNERS**

**Comments:** No comments.

**Decision\*:** A. Provisionally approved without revision or comments

**Date:** 16 May 2023

\*Provisional approval provided at the Dissertation Stage 1, whereas the final approval is provided at the Dissertation stage 3. The student is allowed to proceed to data collection following the final approval.

## Final Approval



RDC Decision, Version 1.0

Unicaf University Research Degree Committee Decision	
<b>Student Name</b>	Chantel Tara Duckworth
<b>Student's ID #</b>	R1804D4997647
<b>Supervisor's Name</b>	Dr Rachel Monde Kabeta
<b>Program of Study</b>	EdD
<b>Offer ID / Group ID</b>	O72481G75511
<b>Dissertation stage:</b>	DS3
<b>Research Project Title</b>	HYBRID LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AND THE SOFT SKILLS GAP: INSTRUCTOR AND LEARNER PERSPECTIVES IN ZIMBABWEAN PRIVATE SECONDARY SCHOOLS
<b>School of Doctoral Studies Comments:</b>	
<b>Research Title :</b>	no comments.
<b>Problem Statement / Conceptual Framework:</b>	no comments.
<b>Innovation / Significance / Contribution:</b>	no comments.
<b>Research Objectives / Questions / Hypothesis:</b>	no comments.
<b>Methodology:</b>	no comments.
<b>Research Tools / Material and Instruments:</b>	no comments.
<b>Ethical Concerns:</b>	
<b>RDC Decision*:</b>	A. Proceed to the next stage
<b>Date:</b>	June 19, 2024

## Informed Consent Form Template



UU\_IC - Version 3.0



### Informed Consent Form Part 1: Briefing of Participants

**Student's Name:** Chantel Address

**Student's E-mail Address:** duckworthchantel@gmail.com

**Student ID #:** R1804D4997647

**Supervisor's Name:** Dr Rachel Monde Kabeta

**Supervisor's Email Address:** r.kabeta@faculty.unicaf.org

**University Campus/Program:** Unicaf University in Zambia: EdD Doctorate of Education



**Research Project Title:**

HYBRID LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AND THE SOFT SKILLS GAP: INSTRUCTOR AND LEARNER PERSPECTIVES IN ZIMBABWEAN PRIVATE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

**Provide a short description of the research project. To be precise, explain:**

**(1) what the main aim of the research project is**

The primary aim of this study is understanding the potential change in soft skills levels, as well as instructor and learner perceptions in order to identify effective ways to transmit their relevance and establish steps with relevant stakeholders in assuming duties in relevant changes in pedagogy in order to close the skills gap.

**(2) what the participant will need to do during the data collection**

Participants will be required to complete a questionnaire comprising of one section of closed-ended ranking questions, and one section of open-ended questions.

**(3) where the data collection will take place**

The data collection process will take place online through a web-based survey provider.

**(4) the duration of participant's involvement in the data collection**

The questionnaire should about 20 minutes to complete.

**(5) whether the participant will be paid**

Participants will not be paid for their participation.

The above named student is committed to ensuring participant's voluntarily participation in the research project and guaranteeing there are no potential risks and/or harms to the participants.

Participants have the right to withdraw at any stage (prior or post the completion) of the research without any consequences and without providing any explanation. In these cases, data collected will be deleted.

All data and information collected will be coded (kept anonymous) and will not be accessible to anyone outside this research. Data described and included in any dissemination activities will only refer to coded and nonidentifiable information ensuring beyond the bounds of possibility participant identification.

If you have any issues or concerns about the study, please contact:

Dr Rachel Monde Kabeta

r.kabeta@faculty.unicaf.org

I, , ensure that all information stated above

is true and that all conditions have been met.

Date:

**Informed Consent Form**  
**Part 2: Certificate of Informed Consent**

**This section is mandatory and should be signed by the participant**

**Student's Name:** Chantel Address

**Student's E-mail Address:** duckworthchantel@gmail.com

**Student ID #:** R1804D4997647

**Supervisor's Name:** Dr Rachel Monde Kabeta

**Supervisor's Email Address:** r.kabeta@faculty.unicaf.org

**University Campus/Program:** Unicaf University in Zambia: EdD Doctorate of Education ▼

**Research Project Title:**

HYBRID LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AND THE SOFT SKILLS GAP: INSTRUCTOR AND LEARNER PERSPECTIVES IN ZIMBABWEAN PRIVATE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

I have read the foregoing information about this study, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss about it. I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions and I have received enough information about this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time without giving a reason for withdrawing and without any negative consequences. I consent to the use of multimedia (e.g., audio recordings, video recordings) for the purposes of my participation in this study. I understand that my data will remain anonymous and confidential, unless stated otherwise. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Participant's Print name:

Participant's Signature:

Date:

**If the Participant is illiterate:**

I have witnessed the accurate reading of the consent form to the potential participant, and the individual has had an opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the aforementioned individual has given consent freely.

Witness's Print name:

Witness's Signature:

Date:

## Gatekeeper Letter Template



UU\_GL - Version 3.0

### Gatekeeper Letter Part 1: Approval Request

**Institution/Organization:** St Patricks Christian Brothers College

**Address:** Corner Old Esigodini Rd, Chelmsford Rd

**Date:**09-Apr-2024

**Subject:**Request for research permission

Dear Christian Brothers College,

My name is Chantel Duckworth, a doctoral student at Unicaf University in Zambia.

In the context of my studies, I am conducting research on HYBRID LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AND THE SOFT SKILLS GAP: INSTRUCTOR AND LEARNER PERSPECTIVES IN ZIMBABWEAN PRIVATE SECONDARY SCHOOLS. This topic is relevant and important as the study will portray useful and productive input for additional courses of action and measures to be implemented by school stakeholders regarding the closing of the soft skills gap faced throughout the world. If instructional designers and education institutions can help both learners and themselves obtain sufficient pertinent awareness of C21st skills, they could indeed cooperate in an effort to map out and conceptualize applicable educational procedures and regulations in order to effectively merge soft skills into routine pedagogical practices in an era where learners might have recently come to a place of comprehension in light of recent life events, and share in several underlying beliefs of learning and their roles in it - something that is unfamiliar to the educational sector, particularly within the region. .

The study will apply a quantitative methodology, and data collection will be conducted with the use of online surveys to investigate the potential shift in perception of soft skill acquisition and usefulness in both learner and instructor groups.

Subject to approval by Unicaf Research Ethics Committee (UREC), this study will require from participants to engage in answering questionnaires via an online survey platform, that is, Responster. The time frame for which data will be collected will run from 7 May 2024 (the start of the school term) through to 27 May 2024. The survey will take roughly 20 minutes to complete. Please note that participants have the right to withdraw from the research at any time.

As such, I am writing to inquire whether you would be willing to permit staff lists, alumni lists and upper 6th student lists in order to recruit participants for this research, by or before 29 April 2024 for the selection of participants.

## Gatekeeper Letter Part 1: Approval Request

To this end, I would be grateful if you would grant your approval for conducting this research. I wish to assure you that all data and personal information will be processed according to the code of Ethics of Unicaf University, which ensures the anonymity and confidentiality of participants. During the entire research process, no personal information of participants will be revealed, thus maintaining scientific confidentiality and anonymity.

I wish to clarify that the organization's participation will be voluntary. For any further clarifications, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you in advance for your time and for your consideration of this project.

Yours Sincerely,

**Student's Name:**Chantel Duckworth

**Student's E-mail:** duckworthchantel@gmail.com

**Student's Address and Telephone:**28 Burns Drive, Malindela, Bulawayo; +2632572548

**Supervisor's Name:** Dr Rachel Monde Kabeta

**Supervisor's E-mail:** r.kabeta@faculty.unicaf.org

**University Campus/Program:** Unicaf University in Zambia: EdD Doctorate of Education 

**Research Project Title:** HYBRID LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AND THE SOFT SKILLS GAP:  
INSTRUCTOR AND LEARNER PERSPECTIVES IN ZIMBABWEAN PRIVATE  
SECONDARY SCHOOLS

**Gatekeeper Letter  
Part 2: Approval**

**This section is mandatory and should to be signed by the Gatekeeper**

**Student's Name:** Chantel Duckworth

**Student's E-mail:** duckworthchantel@gmail.com

**Student's Address and Telephone:** 28 Burns Drive, Malindela, Bulawayo; +2632572548

**Supervisor's Name:** Dr Rachel Monde Kabeta

**Supervisor's E-mail:** r.kabeta@faculty.unicaf.org

**University Campus/Program:** Unicaf University in Zambia: EdD Doctorate of Education

**Research Project Title:** HYBRID LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AND THE SOFT SKILLS GAP:  
INSTRUCTOR AND LEARNER PERSPECTIVES IN ZIMBABWEAN PRIVATE  
SECONDARY SCHOOLS

I have read the foregoing information about this study, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss about it. I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions and I have received enough information about this study. I consent to the provision of access as per the letter above for the period from  to

**Gatekeeper's Name:**

**Gatekeeper's Position:**

**Gatekeeper's Signature:**

**Date:**

**Gatekeeper Letter  
Part 2: Approval**

**This section is mandatory and should to be signed by the Gatekeeper**

**Student's Name:** Chantel Duckworth

**Student's E-mail:** duckworthchantel@gmail.com

**Student's Address and Telephone:** 28 Burns Drive, Malindela, Bulawayo; +2632572548

**Supervisor's Name:** Dr Rachel Monde Kabeta

**Supervisor's E-mail:** r.kabeta@faculty.unicaf.org

**University Campus/Program:** Unicaf University in Zambia: EdD Doctorate of Education

**Research Project Title:** HYBRID LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AND THE SOFT SKILLS GAP:  
INSTRUCTOR AND LEARNER PERSPECTIVES IN ZIMBABWEAN PRIVATE  
SECONDARY SCHOOLS

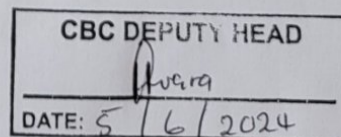
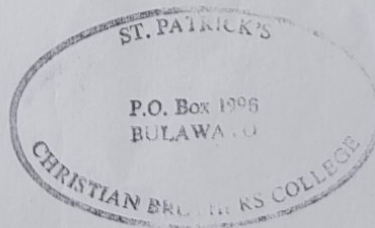
I have read the foregoing information about this study, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss about it. I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions and I have received enough information about this study. I consent to the provision of access as per the letter above for the period from  to

**Gatekeeper's Name:** CHIWARA HAZVINEI

**Gatekeeper's Position:** DEPUTY HEAD

**Gatekeeper's Signature:** *Chiwara*

**Date:** 5/6/2024



### Gatekeeper Letter Part 2: Approval

**This section is mandatory and should to be signed by the Gatekeeper**

**Student's Name:** Chantel Duckworth

**Student's E-mail:** duckworthchantel@gmail.com

**Student's Address and Telephone:** 28 Burns Drive, Malindela, Bulawayo; +2632572548

**Supervisor's Name:** Dr Rachel Monde Kabeta

**Supervisor's E-mail:** r.kabeta@faculty.unicaf.org

**University Campus/Program:** Unicaf University in Zambia: EdD Doctorate of Education ▼

**Research Project Title:** HYBRID LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AND THE SOFT SKILLS GAP:  
INSTRUCTOR AND LEARNER PERSPECTIVES IN ZIMBABWEAN PRIVATE  
SECONDARY SCHOOLS

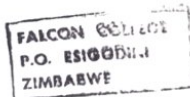
I have read the foregoing information about this study, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss about it. I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions and I have received enough information about this study. I consent to the provision of access as per the letter above for the period from 5/6/24 to 30/6/24


**Gatekeeper's Name:** PIERRE HEYMANS

**Gatekeeper's Position:** ACADEMIC DIRECTOR

**Gatekeeper's Signature:** 

**Date:** 5/6/24



  
2/4/25

**Gatekeeper Letter  
Part 2: Approval**

**This section is mandatory and should to be signed by the Gatekeeper**

**Student's Name:** Chantel Duckworth

**Student's E-mail:** duckworthchantel@gmail.com

**Student's Address and Telephone:** 28 Burns Drive, Malindela, Bulawayo; +2632572548

**Supervisor's Name:** Dr Rachel Monde Kabeta

**Supervisor's E-mail:** r.kabeta@faculty.unicaf.org

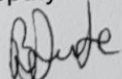
**University Campus/Program:** Unicaf University in Zambia: EdD Doctorate of Education

**Research Project Title:** HYBRID LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AND THE SOFT SKILLS GAP:  
INSTRUCTOR AND LEARNER PERSPECTIVES IN ZIMBABWEAN PRIVATE  
SECONDARY SCHOOLS

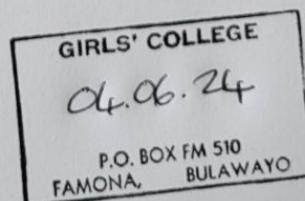
I have read the foregoing information about this study, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss about it. I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions and I have received enough information about this study. I consent to the provision of access as per the letter above for the period from  to

**Gatekeeper's Name:** Betty Dube

**Gatekeeper's Position:** Deputy-head academics

**Gatekeeper's Signature:** 

**Date:** 04.06.24



## **Appendix B: Research Tools**

### **Instructor Questionnaire Foundation – questions per online questionnaire page numbers**

1. Welcome to my "TEACHER" survey!
2. Background 1 of 2
3. Background 2 of 2
4. Informed Consent
5. Age
6. Gender
7. School
8. Level of education
9. Area of focus:
10. What is your current level of knowledge on soft skills?
11. In your opinion, how important are the following soft skills in affecting employability and success in the modern workforce?
12. Teamwork and cooperation
13. Leadership
14. Problem solving and critical thinking
15. Work ethic and perseverance
16. Organisational skills
17. Creativity
18. Interpersonal communication
19. Emotional intelligence
20. Relationship management

21. Adaptability
22. Do you agree with the notion that current students are leaving high school well equipped with any of the following skills?
23. Teamwork and cooperation
24. Leadership
25. Problem solving and critical thinking
26. Work ethic and perseverance
27. Organisational skills
28. Creativity
29. Interpersonal communication
30. Emotional intelligence
31. Relationship management
32. Adaptability
33. Do you feel that there are any aspects or processes within online or blended learning that helped to develop soft skills in students?
34. Which soft skills do you feel were positively affected by online and blended learning?
35. Are there any other soft skills that you feel were positively influenced that you would like to mention?:
36. Do you feel that there are any aspects or processes within online or blended learning that played a part in degrading or deteriorating the soft skills of students?
37. Which soft skills do you feel were negatively affected by online and blended learning?
38. Are there any other soft skills that you feel were negatively influenced that you would like to mention?:
39. Based on your experience, to what extent do you believe that any of these soft skills are currently measured in internal and external examinations?
40. Teamwork and cooperation

41. Leadership
42. Problem solving and critical thinking
43. Work ethic and perseverance
44. Organisational skills
45. Creativity
46. Interpersonal communication
47. Emotional intelligence
48. Relationship management
49. Adaptability
50. How supportive would you be as a teacher if there were curriculum and/or subject changes made in order to increase the introduction of these skills at high school level?
51. How supportive do you think students would be if there were curriculum and/or subject changes made in order to increase the introduction of these skills at high school level?
52. How supportive do you think parents would be if there were curriculum and/or subject changes made in order to increase the introduction of these skills at high school level?
53. Do you specifically try to impart any of the following particular soft skills in your teachings?
54. Teamwork and cooperation
55. Leadership
56. Problem solving and critical thinking
57. Work ethic and perseverance
58. Organisational skills
59. Creativity
60. Interpersonal communication
61. Emotional intelligence
62. Relationship management

63. Adaptability

64. How do you feel about the assessment of soft skills in high school?

65. How do you think the assessment of soft skills should be improved to better reflect the importance in personal and professional development?:

66. What recommendations would you make to students regarding their soft skills to better prepare themselves for the future?:

67. What advice would you give to other educators looking to enhance their students' soft skills?:

68. Do you feel that blended learning should have a continued place in the schooling system?

69. Do you think that soft skills are skills that either a person does or does not have, or do you think that they can be taught and learned?

70. Do you feel that soft skills should be incorporated by the teacher's own willingness, by the student's own willingness, through syllabus content, at home, or all four?

71. In the case of soft skills being developed through schooling activities, do you feel that soft skills should be developed in existing classes, or should a special co-curricular course be developed and implemented, or both?

72. Do you feel that hard skills or soft skills are more important for getting and maintaining a good, paid job?

73. Do you feel that the responsibility to develop and instill soft skills lies with students, teachers or parents?

74. Do you feel that soft skills are important in high school or should their development only be focused on in university or employment training?

75. Please list any other skills that you feel are essential to success in modern employment.:

76. Do you feel that there is a skills gap in Zimbabwe?

77. Do you think that students and teachers have historically had differences in views regarding their roles in the teaching and learning process?

78. Do you think that, following the online and blended learning experience, these teacher-centric vs learner-centric views are still separate from each other or do you think that students and teacher views are beginning to align regarding their roles?

79. What was your goal during the period of blended and online learning?
80. Have you noticed a shift or any changes in the emphasis on soft skills following online and blended learning?
81. What is your usual style of instruction?
82. In what ways do you incorporate the teaching of soft skills in your classroom?:
83. Did your in-class style of teaching change after the online and blended learning period?
84. What strategies have you found effective for assessing soft skills either online or in person? :
85. What challenges have you found in developing soft skills in students?:
86. What challenges have you found in assessing soft skills in students?:
87. Do you think that soft skills are adequately emphasized and valued in the educational system?
  
88. Do you think that soft skills should be assessed?
89. How do you think soft skills should be assessed?:
90. In your perception, when your students encounter a problem, do they ask for help or first try to solve the problem on their own?
91. In your perception, if you see a student struggling, do you offer help or do you let them first try to solve the problem on their own?
92. Have you received any training or support to enhance your ability to nurture students' soft skills during online and blended learning?
93. Have you received any training or support to enhance your ability to nurture students' soft skills after online and blended learning came to a close?
94. Do you think that teacher training would be required in order for teachers to be fully capable to successfully instill these soft skills through the use of current curriculum?
95. Would you be willing to undergo training to become more capable to instill soft skills in students?
96. If it were up to you, what changes, if any, would you want to make to the present curriculum and/or choice of subjects available in your school?:

97. Are there any other structures or processes in the teaching and learning process that you feel needs to be changed?

98. Do you feel that collaborations with businesses are necessary to assist with imparting these skills in students, either in the form of internships or mentorships?

99. How do you think educators can collaborate with parents, guardians and other stakeholders to ensure that students are developing essential soft skills in both online and in-person learning environments?:

100. What questions do you have about soft skills that you would like addressed?:

101. Do you feel that you as a teacher are equipped with sufficient soft skills?

102. You can't see it, but I'm doing my happy dance right now. It's good. Very good. Like, a million dollars good. And it's all because of your help. Many thanks to you for completing my survey.

### **Alumni Questionnaire Foundation – questions per online questionnaire page numbers**

1. Welcome to my "ALUMNI" survey!

2. Background 1 of 2

3. Background 2 of 2

4. Informed Consent

5. Age

6. Gender

7. School

8. Level of education

9. What best describes your current activities?

10. Area of focus:

11. What is your current level of knowledge on soft skills?

12. In your opinion, how important are the following soft skills in affecting employability and success in the modern workforce?

13. Teamwork and cooperation

14. Leadership

15. Problem solving and critical thinking

16. Work ethic and perseverance

17. Organisational skills

18. Creativity

19. Interpersonal communication

20. Emotional intelligence

21. Relationship management

22. Adaptability

23. How well equipped do you feel you were with the following skills on your completion of high school?

24. Teamwork and cooperation

25. Leadership

26. Problem solving and critical thinking

27. Work ethic and perseverance

28. Organisational skills

29. Creativity

30. Interpersonal communication

31. Emotional intelligence

32. Relationship management

33. Adaptability

34. Do you feel that there are any aspects or processes within online or blended learning that helped you to develop your soft skills?
35. Which soft skills do you feel were positively affected by online and blended learning?
36. Are there any other soft skills that you feel were positively influenced that you would like to mention?:
37. Do you feel that there are any aspects or processes within online or blended learning that played a part in degrading or deteriorating your soft skills?
38. Which soft skills do you feel were negatively affected by online and blended learning?
39. Are there any other soft skills that you feel were negatively influenced that you would like to mention?:
40. Based on your experience, to what extent do you believe that any of these soft skills are currently measured in internal and external examinations?
41. Teamwork and cooperation
42. Leadership
43. Problem solving and critical thinking
44. Work ethic and perseverance
45. Organisational skills
46. Creativity
47. Interpersonal communication
48. Emotional intelligence
49. Relationship management
50. Adaptability
51. How supportive would you be as alumni if there were curriculum and/or subject changes made in order to increase the introduction of these skills at high school level?
52. How supportive do you think teachers would be if there were curriculum and/or subject changes made in order to increase the introduction of these skills at high school level?

53. How supportive do you think parents would be if there were curriculum and/or subject changes made in order to increase the introduction of these skills at high school level?
54. Whilst in high school, did you regularly participate in or receive awards for sport, music or art?
55. Do you feel that soft skills have contributed to your academic and/or employment achievements and success following high school?
56. In what ways have you noticed the importance of soft skills evolving as you transitioned from high school to your current activity?:
57. What role has university/work experience played in enhancing your soft skills?:
58. In what ways did your university/work experience influence your perception of the value of soft skills in relation to your career prospects?:
59. Have you observed any differences in the emphasis on any of the following soft skills in your university/workplace compared to your high school experience?
60. Teamwork and cooperation
61. Leadership
62. Problem solving and critical thinking
63. Work ethic and perseverance
64. Organisational skills
65. Creativity
66. Interpersonal communication
67. Emotional intelligence
68. Relationship management
69. Adaptability
70. How do you continue to enhance your soft skills in an academic or professional environment?:
71. Do you think that online and blended learning has been helpful or a hindrance in preparing you for life outside of high school?

72. As far as you are aware, have you received any training or support to enhance your ability to nurture your soft skills in high school, university or work?
73. What challenges have you faced in developing your skills?:
74. How do you feel about the assessment of soft skills in high school?
75. With your post-high school experiences in mind, do you feel that soft skills were given enough emphasis in the assessment process in comparison to academic achievements and standardized tests?
76. How do you think the assessment of soft skills should be improved to better reflect the importance in personal and professional development?:
77. Have you encountered any alternative approaches to assessing soft skills in your university/workplace that you have found valuable or effective that you could list below?:
78. What recommendations would you make to educators on how to improve the development and assessment methods of soft skills to better prepare students for the real world?:
79. What advice would you give to current high school students to improve their soft skills in preparation for the future?:
80. Do you feel that blended learning should have a continued place in the schooling system?
81. Do you think that soft skills are skills that either a person does or does not have, or do you think that they can be taught and learned?
82. Do you feel that soft skills should be incorporated by the teacher's own willingness, by the student's own willingness, through syllabus content, at home, or all four?
83. In the case of soft skills being developed through schooling activities, do you feel that soft skills should be developed in existing classes, or should a special co-curricular course be developed and implemented, or both?
84. Do you feel that hard skills or soft skills are more important for getting and maintaining a good, paid job?
85. Do you feel that the responsibility to develop and instill soft skills lies with students, teachers or parents?
86. Do you feel that soft skills are important in high school or should their development only be focused on in university or employment training?

87. Please list any other skills that you feel are essential to success in modern employment.:

88. Do you feel that there is a skills gap in Zimbabwe?

89. Do you feel that you are now suitably equipped with soft skills?

90. You can't see it, but I'm doing my happy dance right now. It's good. Very good. Like, a million dollars good. And it's all because of your help. Many thanks to you for completing my survey.

### **Learner Questionnaire Foundation – questions per online questionnaire page numbers**

1. Welcome to my "STUDENT" survey!

2. Background 1 of 2

3. Background 2 of 2

4. Informed Consent

5. Age

6. Gender

7. School

8. Level of education

9. Area of focus:

10. What is your current level of knowledge on soft skills?

11. In your opinion, how important are the following soft skills in affecting employability and success in the modern workforce?

12. Teamwork and cooperation

13. Leadership

14. Problem solving and critical thinking

15. Work ethic and perseverance

16. Organisational skills

17. Creativity
18. Interpersonal communication
19. Emotional intelligence
20. Relationship management
21. Adaptability
22. How well equipped do you feel you currently are with the following skills?
23. Teamwork and cooperation
24. Leadership
25. Problem solving and critical thinking
26. Work ethic and perseverance
27. Organisational skills
28. Creativity
29. Interpersonal communication
30. Emotional intelligence
31. Relationship management
32. Adaptability
33. Do you feel that there are any aspects or processes within online or blended learning that helped you to develop your soft skills?
34. Which soft skills do you feel were positively affected by online and blended learning?
35. Are there any other soft skills that you feel were positively influenced that you would like to mention?:
36. Do you feel that there are any aspects or processes within online or blended learning that played a part in degrading or deteriorating your soft skills?
37. Which soft skills do you feel were negatively affected by online and blended learning?
38. Are there any other soft skills that you feel were negatively influenced that you would like to mention?:

39. Based on your experience, to what extent do you believe that any of these soft skills are currently measured in internal and external examinations?

40. Teamwork and cooperation

41. Leadership

42. Problem solving and critical thinking

43. Work ethic and perseverance

44. Organisational skills

45. Creativity

46. Interpersonal communication

47. Emotional intelligence

48. Relationship management

49. Adaptability

50. How supportive would you be as a student if there were curriculum and/or subject changes made in order to increase the introduction of these skills at high school level?

51. How supportive do you think teachers would be if there were curriculum and/or subject changes made in order to increase the introduction of these skills at high school level?

52. How supportive do you think parents would be if there were curriculum and/or subject changes made in order to increase the introduction of these skills at high school level?

53. Whilst in high school, did you regularly participate in or receive awards for sport, music or art?

54. Adaptability

55. Do you think that online and blended learning has been helpful or a hindrance in preparing you for life outside of high school?

56. As far as you are aware, have you received any training or support to enhance your ability to nurture your soft skills during or following online and blended learning?

57. What challenges have you faced in developing your skills?:

58. How do you feel about the assessment of soft skills in high school?

59. Do you feel that soft skills are given enough emphasis in the assessment process in comparison to academic achievements and standardized tests?
60. How do you think the assessment of soft skills should be improved to better reflect the importance in personal and professional development?:
61. Do you feel that blended learning should have a continued place in the schooling system?
62. Do you think that soft skills are skills that either a person does or does not have, or do you think that they can be taught and learned?
63. Do you feel that soft skills should be incorporated by the teacher's own willingness, by the student's own willingness, through syllabus content, at home, or all four?
64. In the case of soft skills being developed through schooling activities, do you feel that soft skills should be developed in existing classes, or should a special co-curricular course be developed and implemented, or both?
65. Do you feel that hard skills or soft skills are more important for getting and maintaining a good, paid job?
66. Do you feel that the responsibility to develop and instill soft skills lies with students, teachers or parents?
67. Do you feel that soft skills are important in high school or should their development only be focused on in university or employment training?
68. Please list any other skills that you feel are essential to success in modern employment.:
69. Do you feel that there is a skills gap in Zimbabwe?
70. What questions do you have about soft skills that you would like addressed?:
71. Do you feel that online and blended learning has prepared you better for working effectively with other professionals?
72. In your perception, when you encounter a problem in class, do you ask for help first, or first try to solve the problem on your own?
73. In your perception, if a teacher sees you struggling and not asking for assistance or guidance, do they allow you time to find a solution on your own, or do they offer help?
74. Did you notice any changes in the emphasis on developing soft skills during online and blended learning?

75. Have you noticed any changes in the emphasis on developing soft skills after online learning, during regular in-person teaching?
76. Do you feel that teachers have provided you opportunities to enhance your soft skills DURING online learning?
77. Do you feel that teachers have provided you opportunities to enhance your soft skills AFTER online learning?
78. Do you feel that the value of soft skills has increased following the pandemic?
79. Have you noticed any difference in how you collaborate with others in an online or blended learning environment compared to a traditional classroom setting?
80. Do you feel that your teachers are adequately equipped with soft skills?
81. What are your career aspirations?:
82. You can't see it, but I'm doing my happy dance right now. It's good. Very good. Like, a million dollars good. And it's all because of your help. Many thanks to you for completing my survey.