

Comparative Study of Soft Skills of Students at Public and Private Universities of Islamabad

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Abstract

Soft skills, encompassing behavioural and interpersonal abilities, significantly influence students' interactions and responses in various situations. This study aimed to investigate the levels of soft skills of students at public and private universities of Islamabad, to compare the soft skills among students of public and private universities of Islamabad and to find the difference in soft skills based on demographic factors (Age, Gender and Organization) of students at university level. The study, used a positivist paradigm, employed a descriptive, quantitative and survey-based design targeting BS students from four universities, encompassing both public and private institutions. Specifically, it focused on students from Social Sciences and Management Sciences faculty, with a special emphasis on Psychology and Economics departments. Applying proportionate stratified sampling with a sample size of 169, the study analyzed soft skills levels using descriptive statistics like Mean, Mode and Percentage. Additionally, it compared soft skills between public and private university students through t-Test, while demographic factors were explored using inferential statistics such as t-Test and ANOVA. Results revealed strong soft skills among students, especially in leadership and teamwork, with private university students generally exhibiting higher proficiency levels. Age and gender showed no significant difference, but differences based on the organization were noted. Despite commendable soft skills overall, recommendations included integrating soft skills courses, particularly in universities with moderate proficiency levels and refining skills in universities already excelling. Faculty involvement was considered crucial, alongside curriculum restructuring and faculty development programs, especially for public universities. Organizational support was emphasized for fostering both cognitive and practical soft skills development. Overall, the study highlighted the importance of soft skills in student interactions and suggested proactive measures for enhancing these crucial abilities within the academic setting.

Keywords: Soft Skills, Public University, Private University, Students

Article Details:

Received on 29 Nov, 2025

Accepted on 24 Dec, 2025

Published on 26 Dec 2025

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Introduction

The goal of education is to change students' behaviour in a positive and beneficial way. The main purpose of education is to give students the tools they need to become self-sufficient, to earn a living and to live a meaningful life in a dignified manner. Skill-based education can help our large unemployed labor force and serve as a major contributor to the global skill-based economy while also fostering teamwork, influencing skills and other important life skills. Knowledge and skills must be equally prioritized in our educational system (Tang, 2019).

The skill or ability is one of the most crucial provisions. Skills can be acquired through traditional education, such as attending school and through other means such as reading books, watching TV, reading magazines and other similar activities. Technical skills, also known as hard skills, are skills that workers in specific professions must have in order to perform their jobs (Lamri & Lubart, 2023). According to the profession being pursued, hard skills include the capacity to master science, technology and technical skills because they can actually act in the real world, hard skills can be observed by the human eye. So, it follows that hard skills are the technical aptitudes a person needs to have in order to perform tasks associated with their profession (Vera & Tejada, 2020).

According to Kostikova et al. (2021) a university graduate needs skill in order to find employment and take on the specific responsibilities of society. Other skills, such as technical, interpersonal and perceptive skills must be learned during studies in addition to mental, physical, academic aptitudes and behavioural traits like personality, attitude, motivation and personal values. Soft skills are qualities and aptitudes that promote effectiveness in the workplace in daily life and in education. According to Succi and Wieandt (2019) the majority of soft skills has a human or social component and is connected to human personality, traits, actions and interactions. Personal qualities, social appeal, language proficiency, personal values, optimistic attitudes, awareness and sensitivity are examples of soft skills. According to research, only 15% of success is determined by hard skills; the remaining 85% is determined by soft skills.

The inclusion of soft skills or 21st century skills in education is important. Positive, workplace-ready and desired social behaviours call for these skills. In an era when good grades were the only criterion for success in the workplace, today's competitive environment necessities require not only good grades but also soft skills. It changes the students and prepares them to deal with the situation. It shapes students' attitudes and aids in the presentation of perspectives (Ngo, 2024). Soft skills are becoming increasingly important for students' education and future success. Soft skills are not as visible as academic skills; they add the finishing touch to a student's personality. In both social and professional life, hard and soft skills are equally important (Muammar & Alhamad, 2023). Soft skills are a dynamic blend of intellectual, practical, interpersonal and cognitive/metacognitive abilities. People with soft skills are better able to adjust to changing situations and act in a positive manner, which enables them to navigate both daily and professional obstacles. Soft skills are associated with motivations, goals and personality traits (Succi & Canovi, 2019). One of the most crucial skills sets that can enable someone to succeed in their career and in life in general is soft skills (Feraco et al., 2022).

Through the development of attitudes, traits and the improvement of communication abilities, soft skills help to shape the personality in different ways. Soft skills are also becoming more crucial for students' future employment and higher education. Only intelligent, professional candidates are hired by companies. Furthermore, soft skills enhance a student's personality but are less obvious than hard skills (Ghaith, 2024). The relationship between a

person's soft skills and emotional intelligence, which is made up of personality traits, social graces, communication, language, personal habits, friendliness and optimism. Academic success is thought to be the knowledge or skill acquired in academic subjects, which is typically designated as marks assigned by educators. Soft skill is an intangible skill set that is concerned with how people learn and develop. Education's main goals are academic success and the development of soft skills (Mwita et al., 2023).

Objectives of the Study

The following objectives of the study were to:

1. Investigate the levels of soft skills of students at public and private universities of Islamabad.
2. Compare the soft skills among students of public and private universities of Islamabad.
3. Find the difference in soft skills based on demographic factors (Age, Gender and Organization) of students at university level.

Hypotheses

The null hypotheses of the study were:

H_{O1} : There is no significant difference between soft skills among students of public and private universities of Islamabad.

H_{O2} : There is no significant difference in soft skills based on gender of students at university level.

H_{O3} : There is no significant difference in soft skills based on age of students at university level.

H_{O4} : There is no significant difference in soft skills based on organization of students at university level.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The researcher used Bereday's comparative model (1964) as a theoretical framework, a structured method for analyzing educational systems within their cultural contexts. Data was gathered and organized from public and private universities into tables and graphs. This data was then interpreted by analyzing student responses, followed by a juxtaposition where the data was classified and preliminary comparisons made, establishing criteria for comparability. In the final comparison stage, the data was synthesized to generate action plans. Concurrently, a conceptual framework based on the SPOCC Framework (Social, Personal, Organizational, Cooperative, Creativity skills) from the Soft Skills Framework (2019) was developed. On the basis of the conceptual framework, the researcher created a self-developed questionnaire.

Literature Review

The modern world is evolving quickly and demand is rising across all industries. In order to be competitive, a graduate must not only have solid professional knowledge but also a variety of additional abilities or "soft skills," that will enable students to complete tasks creatively, make their own decisions and collaborate with others to speed up the advancement of science, industry and the economy (Van Wyk & Jacobs, 2019). When it came to professional success in the past, getting an excellent education was the criterion but in today's competitive job market, soft skills are also in demand. It alters the students and gives them the ability to handle the circumstance. It aids in presenting perspectives and helps students develop their attitudes. Education and future success of students now depend on soft skills (Raitskaya et al., 2018).

According to Yilmaz and Urhan (2024) soft skills are the abilities and life skills required to live independently, communally, socially or with the creator. Having soft skills increases the significance of one's contribution to the community. The ability to manage interpersonal relationships, make wise decisions, communicate effectively and leave a positive impression is among the most crucial soft skills for advancing one's career. According to Noah and Aziz



(2020) the first key to a student's career success is the integration of soft skill development into university curricula. Universities call for the necessary pedagogical changes to both the course content and professional practices, in order to give people both the talents and skills they need for both being and doing.

Giving students soft skills is crucial to preparing them for the workforce. Soft skills, such as those related to communication, emotion, language and group dynamics, as well as ethics, morals and manners increase a person's visibility in their community. Understanding the meaning of soft skills is crucial for university students because it makes it clearer why they are beneficial for both academic and professional success (AlHouli & Al-Khayatt, 2020). Soft skills are a blending of personality traits, attitudes, behaviours and practices. They make it possible for a person to move around and handle a variety of situations at work. Soft skills are useful in all occupations, so students can apply them to a wide range of positions (Kumar et al., 2022).

When compared to soft skills, which are a "cluster of personality traits, social graces, personal habits, friendliness and optimism," hard skills are more "along the lines of what might appear on your resume." Although they are not a replacement for technical or hard skills, soft skills serve as a key to unlocking the potential for highly effective performance in people even with strong hard skills (Tusyanah et al., 2023).

Incorporating soft skill development into university curricula is essential for enhancing the employability of recent graduates, as it significantly improves their ability to excel in competitive job markets. Higher education institutions are urged to prioritize the cultivation of these skills, recognizing their impact on personal wellbeing, social adaptation and workplace performance. Universities should offer an education that balances theoretical knowledge with practical skills, fostering creativity, self-improvement, critical thinking and societal commitment (Mahdy & Zaghloul, 2020). It is crucial for educators to integrate soft skills teaching into all courses to prepare work-ready graduates, as employers highly value a diverse set of soft skills. Furthermore, engaging methods such as guest speakers and public speaking workshops have shown positive student responses, suggesting that interactive workshops can effectively enhance soft skills learning (Sa & Serpa, 2022). Additionally, the use of interactive workshops, including guest speakers or public speaking events, effectively supports soft skill development in the classroom (Dean, 2019).

Research Methodology

Research Design/Paradigm

The paradigm of this research was positivism. The research was descriptive. The design of the study was survey and quantitative in nature.

Population and Sample

The study focused 295 BS 6th semester students majoring in Psychology and Economics department at both public and private universities. A sample of 169 students was selected based on Siegle's table (2015), ensuring a 95% confidence interval and a 5% margin of error. The stratified random sampling technique (proportionate stratified sampling) was used in the study.

Instrumentation

Self-developed questionnaire was used for the research. The questionnaire was closed-ended and on five Likert scale, strongly agree = 5, agree = 4, neutral = 3, disagree = 2, strongly disagree = 1. Each skill had 5 statements and the total number of statements in the questionnaire was 40. The level of soft skills of students was measured as low, medium and high. The Soft Skills were taken from SPOCC Framework; Social Skills (Communication Skills),



Personal Skills (Handling Stress and Self-Management), Organisational Skills (Critical Thinking Skills, Time Management and Leadership Skills), Cooperative Skills (Teamwork Management) and Creative Thinking Skills (Analytical Thinking).

Procedure (Validity, Pilot Testing & Reliability)

Validity

The researcher used content validity for the self-developed questionnaire. In content validity, experts validate the questionnaire while observing the language, use of words, grammar and relevancy of the concepts. The validity of the questionnaire checked by three experts of the Faculty of Education and two experts of Sociology Department. They had checked the phrasing, configuration language, grammar and context of the questionnaire and gave some suggestions to improve some statements. After following the suggestions of experts regarding the instrument, the questionnaire was ready to be administered.

Pilot Testing

An Instrument Development Pilot Study was conducted with a sample of 30 students drawn from one public university and one private university. The participants involved in the pilot study were excluded from the final data collection. The purpose of instrument development pilot study is to test and refine the measurement tools (questionnaires, surveys) used in the study. It involves administering the instruments to a small sample to identify and address any issues with clarity, wording and response options.

Reliability

Table 1 : Reliability of Soft Skills

S#	Variable	No of items	Cronbach alpha
	Soft Skills	40	.980
S#	Sub Skills	No of items	Cronbach alpha
1.	Communication Skills	05	.624
2.	Handling Stress	05	.637
3.	Self-Management	05	.835
4.	Critical Thinking	05	.710
5.	Time Management	05	.917
6.	Leadership Skills	05	.850
7.	Teamwork Management	05	.830
8.	Analytical Thinking Skills	05	.831

Table 1 presents that Self-developed questionnaire consisted of 40 items and Cronbach Alpha .980 shows that questionnaire was highly reliable. Although, various sub-skills along with the number of items give an idea of how satisfactory and reliable the items are within each sub-skill.

Data Collection

The researcher used a primary data collection approach to gather data from the selected universities. In this case, the researcher personally visited each university, obtained permission and directly collected data from the students of the respective institutions.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

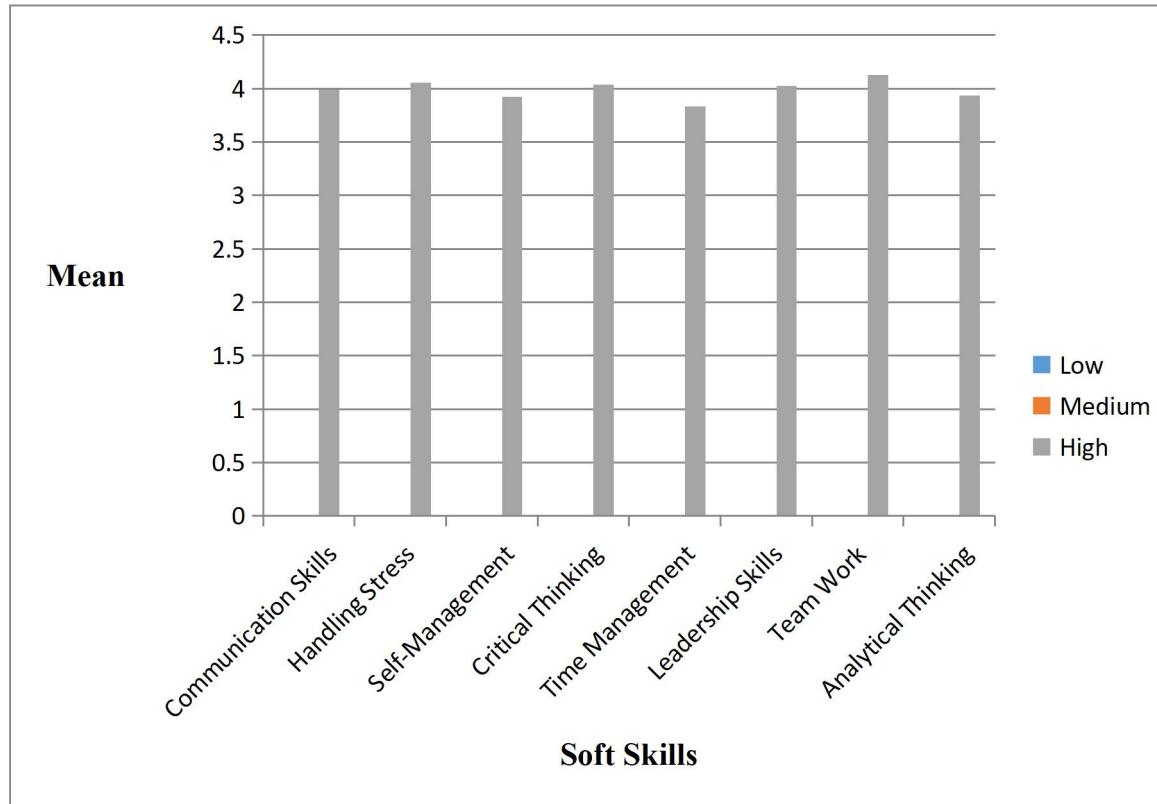
Data were tabulated to analyze first objective through Descriptive Statistics (Mean, Mode and Percentage) while t-Test applied for the second objective to compare the Soft Skills of students among public and private universities. Likewise, Inferential Statistics (t-Test and ANOVA) were used for third objective for demographic factors. The level of soft skills of students was measured as low, medium and high. In the light of Bereday's comparison model, four stages of

this model (Description, Interpretation, Juxtaposition and Comparison) were used and data were analyzed and compared.

Analysis According to First Objective

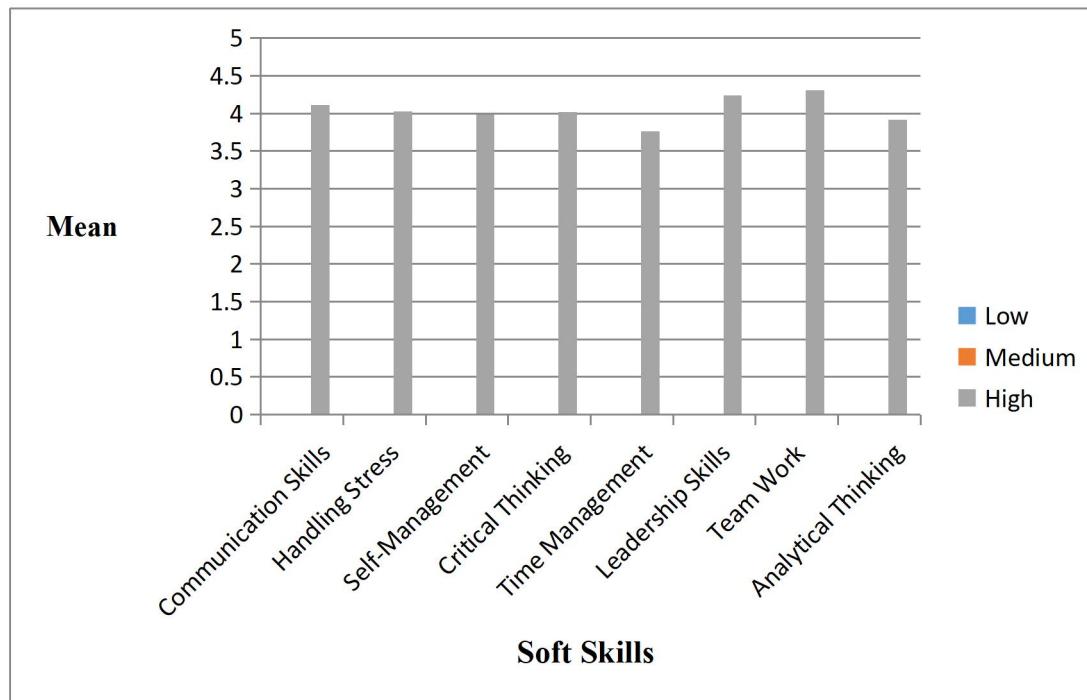
Descriptive Statistics (Levels of Soft Skills)

Graph 1: Representation of Private University A students on the basis of Soft Skills levels



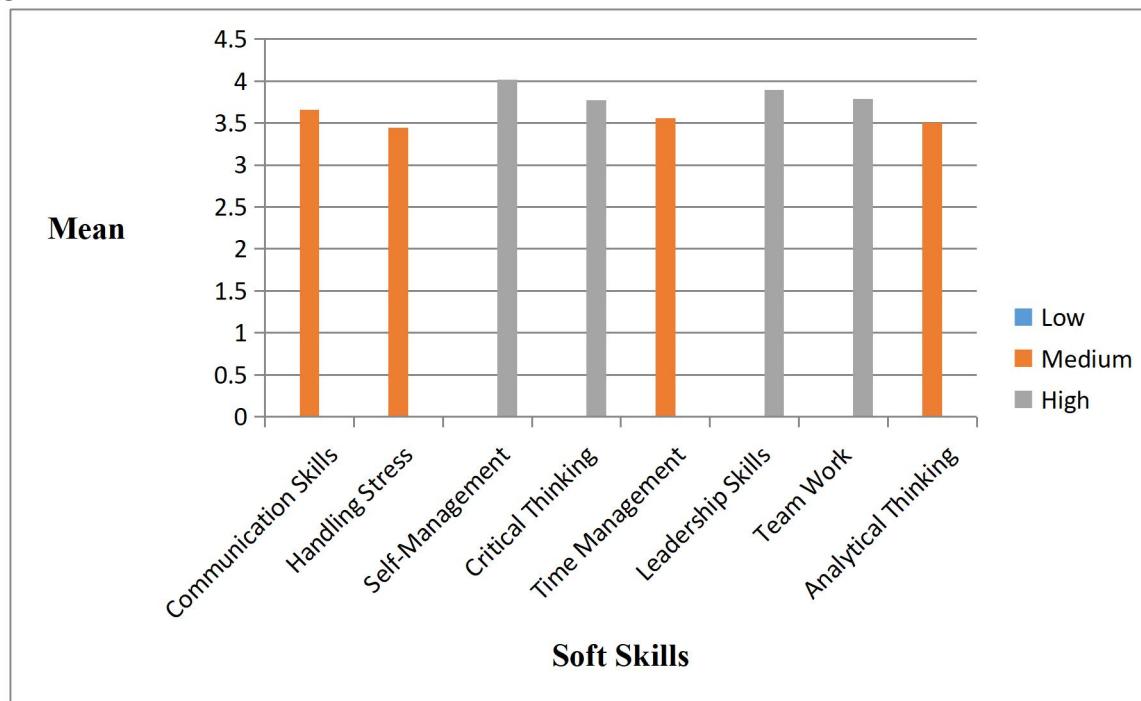
Graph 1 suggests that students have strong soft skills and there are some variations in specific skills based on their mean values. Among these skills, leadership and teamwork stand out as the highest, indicating strong proficiency. On the other hand, self-management, critical thinking, communication, analytical thinking, time management and handling stress skills are also good but show slightly lower mean values compared to leadership and teamwork. Overall, the students exhibit high-level soft skills.

Graph 2: *Representation of Private University B Students on the basis of Soft Skills levels*



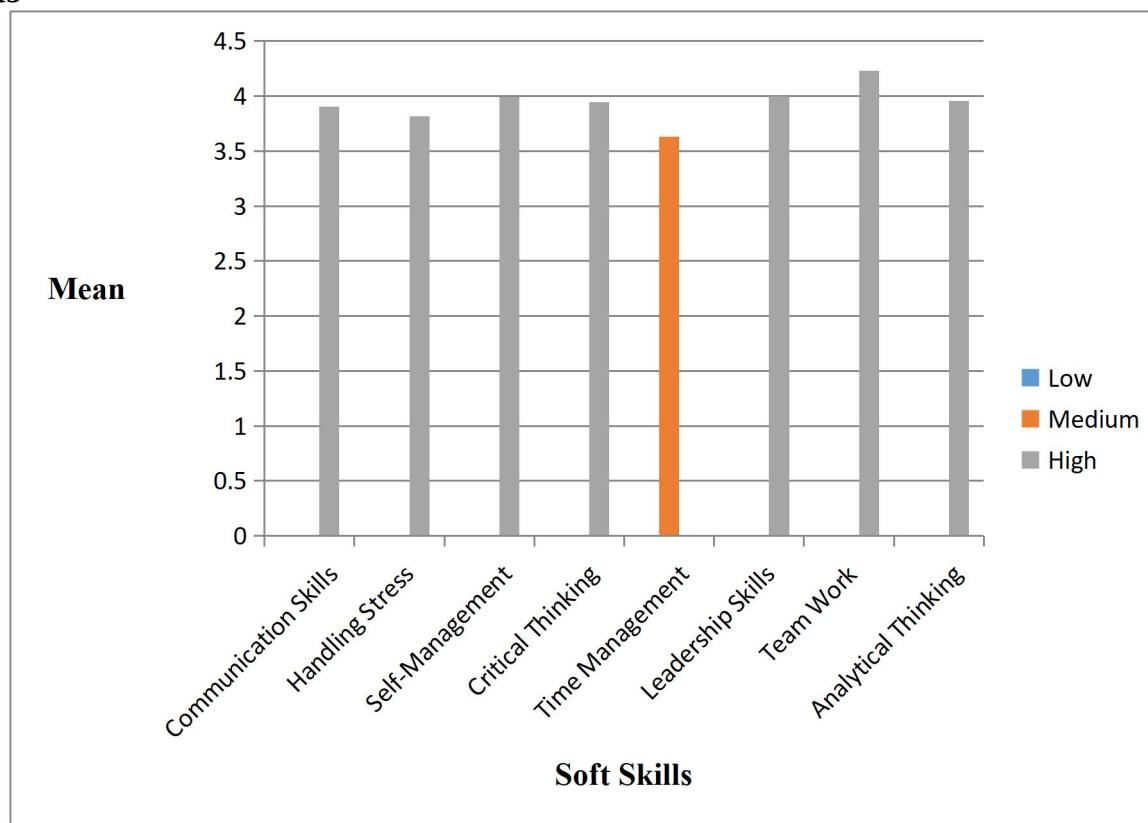
Graph 2 illustrates that students have strong soft skills, with some differences in specific skills based on their mean values. Leadership and teamwork skills are the highest, showcasing exceptional proficiency. However, self-management, critical thinking, communication skills, as well as analytical thinking, time management and handling stress skills, while still good, exhibit slightly lower mean values compared to leadership and teamwork. Overall, the students exhibit high-level soft skills.

Graph 3: *Representation of Public University A Students on the basis of Soft Skills levels*



Graph 3 suggests that students have a mix of medium and high-level soft skills, with some variations in specific skills based on their mean values. Self-management and critical thinking skills stand out as particularly strong, categorized as High. Leadership and teamwork skills are also noteworthy, falling into the High category. On the other hand, communication skills, time management, handling stress and analytical thinking fall into the medium category, indicating good but not exceptionally high proficiency. Students demonstrate a blend of medium and high-level soft skills, with strengths in self-management and critical thinking, as well as notable leadership and teamwork abilities.

Graph 4: Representation of Public University B Students on the basis of Soft Skills levels



Graph 4 suggests that students generally exhibit high-level soft skills, with some variations in specific skills based on their mean values. Leadership and teamwork skills are particularly strong, falling into the High category. Self-management, critical thinking, communication skills and analytical thinking also demonstrate high proficiency, categorized as High. However, time management falls into the medium category, indicating good but not exceptionally high skills. Students demonstrate a predominantly high level of soft skills, with notable strengths in leadership and teamwork, as well as commendable abilities in other areas like self-management and critical thinking.

Analysis According to Second Objective

Inferential Statistics (Hypothesis Testing)

i. t-Test (Sector)

H_{0i} : There is no significant difference between soft skills among students of public and private universities of Islamabad.



Table 2: *Difference on soft skills of public and private universities*

Variable	Sector	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Df	Sign/P
Soft Skills	Private	84	167.3452	16.34308	1.908	167	.410
	Public	85	162.4471	17.02065			

Table 2 presents a comparison of mean scores for soft skills between the private and public sectors. In the private sector (N=84), the mean score is 167.3452 with a standard deviation of 16.34308. In the public sector (N=85), the mean score is 162.4471 with a standard deviation of 17.02065. Although there is difference in mean values of both groups that is in favour of private universities. The mean value of soft skills of students of private universities is greater than public universities. To assess the significance of the difference between these means, a t-test was conducted. The t-value is 1.908, and the degrees of freedom (Df) are 167. The p-value associated with this t-value is .410. The t-test result indicates that there is a slight difference in mean scores between the private and public sectors regarding soft skills. However, the p-value of .410 is greater than the typical significance level of 0.05. Therefore, the difference is not statistically significant. Consequently, the null hypothesis, which posits no significant difference in Soft Skills scores between public and private universities, is accepted based on the non-significant p-value.

Analysis According to Third Objective

ii. t-Test (Gender)

H_{O2} : There is no significant difference in soft skills based on gender of students at university level.

Table 3: *Difference on soft skills of Male and Female Students*

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Df	Sign/P
Soft Skills	Male	67	165.8955	16.95997	.634	167	.678
	Female	102	164.2157	16.77435			

Table 3 presents a comparison of mean scores for soft skills between the male and female groups. In the male group (N=67), the mean Soft Skills score is 165.8955, with a standard deviation of 16.95997. On the other hand, the female group (N=102) has a slightly lower mean score of 164.2157, accompanied by a standard deviation of 16.77435. Although there is a numerical difference in the mean values of both groups favoring males, the magnitude of this difference seems relatively small. To assess the significance of the difference between these gender-based means, a t-test was conducted. The t-value is calculated at .634, with degrees of freedom (Df) set at 167. The associated p-value, denoted as Sign/P, is .678. However, the p-value of .678 is greater than the typical significance level of 0.05. Therefore, the observed difference is not statistically significant. Consequently, the null hypothesis, which posits no significant difference in Soft Skills scores between male and female groups, is accepted based on the non-significant p-value.

iii. ANOVA (Age)

H_{O3} : There is no significant difference in soft skills based on age of students at university level.

Table 4: *One way ANOVA for the comparison of Age*

Age	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig/P
Between Groups	395.521	2	197.761	.697	.500
Within Groups	47122.112	166	283.868		
Total	47517.633	168			

Table 4 shows that P value (.500) shows that this difference between soft skills among age was not significant. It means hypothesis has been accepted. Although there is difference in mean square and sum of squares values of both groups. The within age group is higher than the between groups.

iv. ANOVA (Organization)

H_04 : There is no significant difference in soft skills based on organization of students at university level.

Table 5: One way ANOVA for the comparison of organization

Organization	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig/P
Between Groups	3484.116	3	1161.372	4.362	.006
Within Groups	43930.369	165	266.245		
Total	47414.485	168			

Table 5 indicates that P value (.006) shows that this difference between soft skills among organization was significant. Its means hypothesis has been rejected. Although there is difference in mean square, the between groups are higher than the within groups. Likewise, there is difference in sum of squares, the within groups are higher than the between groups.

Table 6: Post Hoc multiple comparisons on Organizations

(I) Organizations	(J) Organizations	Mean Difference (I-J)	(I- J)	Std. Error	Sig/P
Private University A	Private University B	-3.43789		3.56167	.336
	Public University A	8.16676*		3.56167	.023
	Public University B	-2.10511		3.58231	.558
Private University B	Private University A	3.43789		3.56167	.336
	Public University A	11.60465*		3.51902	.001
	Public University B	1.33278		3.53990	.707
Public University A	Private University A	-8.16676*		3.56167	.023
	Private University B	-11.60465*		3.51902	.001
	Public University B	-10.27187*		3.53990	.004
Public University B	Private University A	2.10511		3.58231	.558
	Private University B	-1.33278		3.53990	.707
	Public University A	10.27187*		3.53990	.004

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 6 shows significant differences between the organizations. Public University A showed a significant difference with Private University A ($p = .023$), Private University B ($p = .001$) and Public University B ($p = .004$). These results indicate that responses vary significantly across

different types of universities, highlighting differences in the studied variables between private and public institutions.

Discussions and Conclusions

The study's first objective investigates soft skills levels across various universities, revealing Private University A and Private University B as having high level soft skills such as communication, stress management, critical thinking, leadership, teamwork and analytical thinking. In contrast, the Public University A showed a mix of proficiency levels, with a focus on communication and stress management falling into the medium category. Public University B displayed high proficiency across multiple dimensions. The second objective compared soft skills between public and private university students, finding a slightly higher mean value for private university students, though the difference was not significant. The third objective explored demographic factors, indicating that age and gender do not significantly influence soft skills, while organizations demonstrated a statistically significant difference. Overall, the study provides valuable insights into the soft skills landscape among university students and the influence of certain demographic factors.

In comparing the findings with existing literature, the study aligns with previous research by Rzempala et al. (2023), Shabbir and Rahat (2021), Ngo (2024), An (2022) and Noah & Aziz (2020). Similarities are observed regarding the importance of soft skills in academic success, the positive impact of soft skills on various life stages and the necessity for prioritizing the development of soft skills in educational institutions. However, the study also reveals that, despite the awareness of the significance of soft skills, Pakistani universities insufficiently prioritize the development of these skills. This echoes the findings of Shabbir and Rahat (2021), emphasizing the need for a more concerted effort to incorporate soft skills into the academic environment.

Contradictory findings emerge when comparing the cooperative attitudes of private and public university students. While private university students demonstrate strong cooperation, public university students exhibit reluctance and fear-based attitudes. This contrast highlights potential differences in the learning environments and the need for tailored strategies to promote engagement with soft skills in different institutional settings. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the practical implications of soft skills, aligning with the perspective of Noah & Aziz (2020). Both studies underscore the importance of addressing the gap between the recognition of soft skills and their effective development, with the ultimate goal of producing well-rounded graduates prepared for the job market.

Recommendations

By keeping in view the findings, researcher makes some recommendations which are discussed below:

1. The research highlights the importance of enhancing soft skills among students at Public University A and Public University B through dedicated non-credit courses. Similarly, despite the already strong soft skills exhibited by students at Private University A and Private University B Universities, integrating soft skills subjects into non-credit courses is advisable to further refine these abilities. Faculty members play a crucial role in emphasizing the practical significance of soft skills through their teaching methodologies and assessments. By creating an environment that fosters effective communication, teamwork, adaptability and leadership, students are better equipped to succeed in various professional environments. Incorporating soft skills into the academic curriculum ensures students are well-prepared for the complexities of the real-world, enhancing their employability and adaptability.

2. Students of private universities had better practical exposure to soft skills as compared to public university students. Based on this finding, it is recommended that public universities may consider restructuring their curricula by introducing dedicated soft skills courses, while parallel providing faculty development programs to equip educators with the necessary skills for teaching and evaluating soft skills. Encouraging experiential learning through internships and cooperative education programs is vital for enhancing practical exposure and strengthening career services departments is crucial to help students translate their soft skills into employable attributes. The implementation of peer mentorship programs, collaborations with industry professionals and the organization of soft skills-based competitions, can further promote skill development. Continual assessment and feedback mechanisms are pivotal to monitor progress and tailor interventions to meet the evolving needs of students.
3. As the result showed that demographic factors (Age and Gender) do not create differences with respect to the soft skills likewise the result of demographic factor (organization) had created certain difference with respect to the soft skills. On the basis of this finding, it is recommended that Universities may develop an organized system of information for the students through which they may have guidance about soft skills with respect to the teaching-learning process and their assessments. Additionally, Curriculum maybe developed under the umbrella of soft skills; leading to the integration of cognitive knowledge and to the practice for developing soft skills in the students.
4. It is strongly recommended that soft skills maybe considered as integral part while developing, restructuring and modifying the curriculum.

Recommendations for Future Researches

1. Similar studies maybe conducted on this core issue in future among the students of universities and colleges as well as the colleges and schools to produce comparable results.
2. In addition, as this research was carried out while using quantitative method, both qualitative and mixed methods maybe used to conduct the research, not just at the university level but also at school and college level.
3. Future researches maybe conducted on soft skills with parallel to hard skills as well.

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