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CRITICALITY OF INTEGRATING SOFT SKILLS IN THE NAMIBIAN EDUCATION CURRICULUM

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Abstract: Soft skills or people skills are complementary to hard skills in the 21st century to account for competent graduates needed in today's industry. This article uses existing literature to synthesize different views on integrating soft skills in education; a directive for all educators in basic education, tertiary or higher education in Namibia including Technical Vocational education. While training, teaching and developing soft skills is a continuous process from elementary to tertiary, there is a consensus in literature that tertiary institutions should not only train on cognitive and technical skills of different specializations but equally important they use humanistic approaches, technology and experiential techniques to enhance multiple soft skills for a well-rounded human capital. It is expected that all teachers and professors are well-rounded in terms of soft skills to impart these same soft skills into the students. This paper re-emphasizes the obligation of both elementary and institutions of higher learning to ensure the inclusion of holistic soft skills in their teaching and training is given top priority for their graduates to be successful in their careers. Education should not only serve to teach for securing employment but more so for the capacity to innovate, solve problems, apply emotional intelligence, project management and self-management. It is therefore a call for all education and training providers to ensure social skills, personal-related skills and cognitive and entrepreneurial skills among others are part of their curriculum. This article adds to the relevance and importance of soft skills needed in the 21st century for the knowledge-based economy and industry relevant training across all training institutions.

Key words: Soft Skills, People Skills, Social Skills, Personal-related skills, and Cognitive and entrepreneurial skills.

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PUBLIC INTEREST

The relevance of education is under scrutiny from the public eye and other stakeholders with an interest on the impactful contributions from graduates to propel and accelerate the development of knowledge-based economy. It is of particular importance that education adds value to transform and capacitate graduates not only with hard skills but in this case with needed soft skills. This article aims to add weight and call for the inclusion of soft skills in the curriculum for a well-rounded human capital.

I.   Introduction

Technical skills without a strong element of soft skills are no longer a sole requisite to competently perform in the changing global work environment of the 21st century (Dean & East, 2019). The promotion of new knowledge or strategic inventions based on existing literature can be a foundation of new objectives for various dynamics in all disciplines. In this context, this article promotes the integration of soft skills in the teaching at both basic and tertiary

levels. Education ushers people into different cylinders of needed human capital who ought to be flexible, well-rounded, innovative and adaptive to the changing dynamics of emerging global challenges and technologies. It is imperative that the education system in the country both at basic and tertiary level aims to transform graduates into functional industry role players as opposed to producing graduates with only book knowledge and paper literacy. Tertiary graduates make up 20% of the total employed population in Namibia, it is expected that highly educated individuals should competently meet the demands of the knowledge-based economy (National Planning Commission of Namibia (NPC), 2025). The question one should ask is whether Namibia's education system is really producing graduates with concrete soft skills? For too long, educated people have become expert followers of emerging global practices without innovation or setting trends for others to follow and in the process reducing the public view and confidence in the education system. The general public expects education to transform learners and students into solution seekers, problem-solving actors, management players and innovative thinkers. Graduates at both the basic education level and tertiary institutions including vocational education should be enriched with both hard skills and soft skills to be compatible with the changing market demands.

COVID-19 pandemic changed the world view on how education responds to the global industry needs which prompts one to question the relevance and applicability of the book knowledge towards the industry realities. The COVID-19 experience scared to death many health professionals who ought to be ready for such situations. The possession of soft skills especially the communication skills, problem-solving, critical thinking and emotional intelligence are some of the important sought after skills in the industry (Diokno and Peprah, 2021). Training and teaching these skills is becoming interesting at both basic and tertiary level with many proposals available on literature. Romanenko, Solodovnikova and Maksimenko (2023) submit that the development and teaching of soft skills can be done independently using different formats such as micro-learning. This according to them requires the interaction between lecturers/teachers and leaners by using mobile phones for social media and other platforms.

In response to the question of whose responsibility it is to instill soft skills into the students, Karras (2022) concludes that both tertiary institutions and basic education have an obligation and a role to ensure that their graduates acquire holistic soft skills for them to competently perform in their various careers. Soft skills are nowadays referred to as 21st century skills while some scholars refer to it as social-emotional skills. It is expected for graduates and professionals to transform through upskilling, reskilling and unlearning to learn and understand things in the current contexts. This reference amplifies the significance of soft skills which makes it imperative for training institutions to include these skills in their teaching and training.

Namibia just like many other African countries is promoting vocational training as a way of reducing youth unemployment through the construction industry, manufacturing and fabrication, and infrastructural development among many other aspects. It is imperative that artisans and technicians are equipped with communication, observation, marketing research, critical thinking and problem-solving skills to adequately meet the demands of the economy. While the hard skills are highly prioritized on technical vocation education training (TVET), Shahbazi and Ahmady (2022) pointed out the negligence of soft skills which hinders the graduates' ability to innovate and solve problems effectively. It is factual that climate change has changed many environmental factors which if one doesn't research through the locals before implementing a solution to an existing problem, is likely to fail with a good solution. To enhance soft skills on TVET, Kasim, Puad and Abdullah (2024) recommend that training institutions and industry should enter a deeper partnership to equip students with the needed soft skills and be ready for today's evolving demands of the job market. The partnerships between training institutions should not be limited to the industry; it should be extended to the local communities as co-knowledge creators.

Soft skills and relevant competencies have recently become a topic of discussion on training and development of the needed human capital for any industry. This publication aims to promote the inclusion of relevant soft skills into the curriculum of different training institutions across the board but it takes an educator with soft skills to implement the proposal. The question is how can one teach soft skills or gain soft skills for instructional purposes. The following section presents the depth analysis and discussions of soft skills.

II.   A review of Related Literature

Soft skills blended with hard skills are increasingly becoming a pre-requisite for employability and quick changing and dynamic work industry in the 21st industry. This is part of skills development that training institution should include in their course outline implementations such as problem-solving, communication, coding, critical thinking among others. Karras (2022) highlighted the importance of educators to be comfortable, well familiar with soft skills and competent to include them in their training. Accordingly, teaching has changed in the 21st century whereby educators focus in the high order thinking (HOT) to develop talents in their students. This section presents concepts on three categories of soft skills such as personal related skills; cognitive and entrepreneurial skills, and

social skills as among many important categories of soft skills for the graduates to be compatible with the work industry.

a) Social skills

These are social skills needed by all graduates for interactions such as communication, teamwork, leadership, negotiation, networking, responsibility and conflict-management among others. While social skills should be promoted as early as the elementary level, Tomé-Fernández, Aranda-Vega, and Ortiz-Marcos (2024) reemphasize that social skills should be actively promoted at both elementary and tertiary level to ensure a successful future in the society and more importantly for students to effectively interact and adapt to changing social situations. Additionally, social skills are fundamental to the promotion of effective adaptation to the environment. In a fast changing work industry due to technological advancements and economic downturns, one should be able to adapt to the emerging realities of the industry with the same qualification.

There are many activities that one can use to teach students or make them learn through different activities such as sport, debates, research, conflict-resolution cases etc, but these are not guaranteed to ensure these skills become part of their philosophies in the work place. Students learn differently and take different durations on one activity. Romanenko, Solodovnikova, and Maksimenko, (2023) Propose that these skills are better taught to students in smaller pieces as long as there is consistency throughout their studies. In the same context, their proposal to use micro learning and mobile technologies is more appropriate for the 21st century especially that we live in a global village.

While literature expands on various factors that promote social skills such as religion and advanced technology, Romanenko, Solodovnikova, and Maksimenko, (2023) make reference to the African strong community orientation and youth living in big families as factors in which collaboration, teamwork and communication are positively cultivated leading to strong social skills. If the African cultural settings could potentially translate to a strong identity associated with strong social skills that improves their true identity, the new social skills can innovatively lead to new methods of finding African solutions in the global context. This is a challenge for all educators to think freely and act outside the confinement of artificially established standards with an organic purpose of promoting normalcy and practical common sense which translates to required soft skills.

b) Personal-related skills

These skills include self-esteem, self-management, self-awareness, time-management, positive attitude, ethics, professionalism, lifelong learning among others. Education is life itself and one expects educated students to be richly endowed with these skills. The question is whether our education system addresses these skills quantitatively for graduates to independently and competitively perform in the work industry. One way of teaching soft skills according to Kearney, Bond-Barnard and Chugh (2024) is through a project management course where students use reflective learning methodologies. Accordingly, reflective methodologies are also viewed as beneficial towards helping students retain soft skills acquired through experiential learning activities.

It is critical to understand ones' emotions, honesty, integrity and behavior in relation to others in order to sustain healthy relationships with others while achieving collective goals for any project. London et. al. (2023) expanded on the importance of self-awareness as it generates self-efficacy and self-confidence which mediate between goal-setting, interpersonal relationship development and performance among others. Accordingly, self-awareness can potentially be achieved through mindfulness training, feedback interventions and coaching. Training institutions can play a role by mindfulness interventions which can increase the students' ability to modulate their behavior in relation to others. Pienaar & Nel (2017) interrogated the concept of feedback intervention in terms of reducing one's bling spot and increasing general awareness of one's behaviour in relation to others. Feedback motivates one to be part of the team especially when one understands how their behaviour affects the others.

Self-presentation, self-management, positive attitudes and ethics are evidently missing from a significant number of graduates. In the 21st century where the prospective employers can use social media to evaluate someone's level of awareness, London et. al (2023) highlight the use of social media as a vehicle for personal image branding. Social media can be used to promote personal and professional identities but equally can be misused through ignorance if not used in moderation. Educational interventions in the context of developing self-awareness can include many activities about self-monitoring, self-assessment, self-determination, social identities, and self-regulation in the training programmes.

c) Cognitive and entrepreneurial skills

Education should transform graduates into independent thinkers that can understand new things and apply knowledge into new contexts. Well-rounded graduates with high-order thinking skills should be able to identify problems, find solutions, be creative and innovative, think critically, apply analytical thinking and be fit when it comes to decision-making, risk management, change management and leadership among others. Karras (2022)

emphasized the importance of lecturers knowing their roles on developing problem-solving and critical thinking skills and proposed the usage of cooperative activities that are connected to the students' past experiences. Teaching book knowledge is important but it is meaningless if taught in isolation from local and global realities. Lecturers must encourage conversations around the real world issues while acting as guardian facilitators with a purpose of providing guidance (Karras, 2022). One thing clear is that one can't teach or educate students on soft skills if they have none in them. Teaching soft skills is recent and currently an element appreciated by the work industry however, it remains a puzzle for some lecturers on how best one can evaluate and assess these skills (Romanenko et al. 2023). It is however proposed that institutions of higher learning introduce soft skills courses such as emotional intelligence, leadership and change management among others to their programme offerings.

Literature has strongly recommended the inclusion of soft skills in the curricula at both elementary and tertiary level however, Rogers (2021) there is notable resistance by the traditionalists to have soft skills included in the curricula and still favor the traditional method of teaching even in the 21st century. Furthermore, Rogers (2021) views the embedding of soft skills in the curricula to be particularized to different disciplines and study programmes leading to different careers. She therefore proposes online teaching for some activities for the law qualification to enhance soft skills. Other qualifications such as Technical Vocational Education (TVET), trainees concentrate on technical (hard skills) skills to fabricate and design products for the market however soft skills is needed for innovation and marketing of products. Kasim et. al. (2024) emphasizes the importance to continuously foster critical thinking through real world exposure and classroom-based experiential learning. It is in this context that the National Planning Commission of Namibia (2025) advocates for the inclusion of digital skills, entrepreneurship, and green economy competencies in the vocational programmes. The artisans and youth in particular should work on bankable entrepreneurial ideas for productive business that will make a contribution to both the national economy and their own individual economic status.

Entrepreneurship education fosters an entrepreneurial mindset into all graduates. Caggiano and Costa (2023) conclude that entrepreneurship education capacitate people to manage real-world problems as it focuses on mindset, personal development and alertness to respond to changes in the environment. It should form part of the curriculum. While there are debates that one can learn entrepreneurship through exposure without going through formal education, Caggiano and Costa (2023) emphasized that entrepreneurship education as some call it enterprise education promotes career readiness and the development of much-needed soft skills for the knowledge-based economy. It is however noted that for one to be both competitive and effective in the global economy, education with an element of experiential learning and industry exposure is the best formula.

III.   Discussions and Recommendations

One can only expect the teachers and professors to teach soft skills if they themselves are well rounded when it comes to soft skills. The deficiency of soft skills in many high school leavers and university graduates is a concern for the real world of work and global industry. While many institutions of higher learning have advocated and implemented internship component in their study programmes before exiting the institution, there is a need to strongly get the industry involved in their training programmes from onset.

Romanenko et. al. (2023) advocates for micro learning using mobile phones as one of methods to teach soft skills at the university level. Many universities have embraced the use of technology as a way of teaching many students from different offerings or groups, registering global students and conducting assessments. While technology saves cost, promotes efficiency and flexibility; it can equally be used to teach soft skills such as emotional intelligence, self-management and critical thinking by using various platforms such as telegram social network, learning management system platform (Moodle) among others, as long as the content is taught in a micro-format. The implementation of micro learning format is practical as many students are in possession of mobile phones with access to internet connectivity. While technology promotes flexibility in terms of teaching the masses in one go, there are concerns of misuse of internet which if not managed ethically and efficiently, it will present challenges for the industry with graduates that cannot think due to over reliance on artificial intelligence, ChatGPT. While Wang and Fan (2025) highlights the impact of artificial intelligence (ChatGPT) has on improving learning performance, the academic consensus on its efficacy remains elusive. The author of this article advocates for responsible, ethical and moderate use of artificial intelligence to avoid a possible reduction in memory and brain functions such as critical thinking with a view to use it as a support and not a substitute for human thinking.

Teaching soft skills to students is an expectation but having teachers and lecturers with fully developed soft skills is another concern. Karras (2022) submits a critical analysis that teachers and lecturers require a set of sufficient holistic soft skills to competently respond to the public demands and expectations of the education industry and society. Besides basic education teachers, some universities employ lecturers based on their highest

higher qualifications who surely in most cases were not professionally trained to teach and provide good and effective instructions to students. Unless lecturers are all trained pedagogically, their relevance in terms of imparting and developing soft skills compromises the quality of teaching which should be more than just the conveyance of knowledge from lecturers to students. Teaching should be comprehensive and enriched with soft skills to bring out the best in students. One should understand individual student's learning style and make use of effective and relevant technology for the benefit of the students to handle global problems, challenges and societal transitions. Lecturers are pivotal in the development of soft skills hence, Almeida and Morais (2021) propose that institutions of high learning use soft skills to assess both students and lecturers for future capabilities. In other words, lecturers and students should be evaluated for fitness to teach and exit tertiary education respectively on the aspect of soft skills. The construction of a relevant human capital depends on graduates with a holistic set of soft skills to innovate, solve problems and mitigate challenges.

Soft skills should be taught and developed for the productive citizens in their various groupings such as elementary school going youth, university students and graduates which includes teachers and professors. It is key to note that soft skills bridge the gap between formal schooling and workforce demands. In this context, Basir et. al. (2022) and other proponents of internship programmes, experiential learning programmes and on-job training for graduate interns have highlighted a disconnect between education training and the expected demands of the work industry. The call to ensure that real-work challenges are integrated in the formal training will enhance the soft skills aspect of the learners and students. When the industry realities are included in the curriculum whereby students do experiential learning, take education excursions and do work-integrated learning as part of their formal training; it helps them become well-rounded citizens with great soft skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking and innovative thinking besides hard skills. This is a shared responsibility hence an expectation for tertiary institutions to invite industry experts to teach university students in selected topics.

The importance of soft skills can be fully understood by a generation with strong identity in terms of language, indigenous knowledge, culture and a national agenda.

IV.   Conclusion

The literacy of the 21st century is to learn, unlearn and relearn which include the element of upskilling and reskilling of some professions. Education should be a transforming tool for any society but book knowledge and/or hard skills alone without soft skills has no relevance in the work industry. It takes a soft skilled professional to include soft skills in their teaching and training hence all educators should be evaluated for reskilling and capacity building. All graduates should be assessed for soft skills before they are employed in the industry. Soft skills should be part of the curriculum from elementary to tertiary level for all graduates to have needed soft skills such as problem solving, self-management, leadership, project management skills among others.

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