



Role of Soft Skills in Enhancing Graduate Employability: A Systematic Review from Developing Economies

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Abstract

Graduate employability has become a major challenge for universities, employers, and policymakers in developing economies due to rapidly changing workplace needs. In this regard, a persistent mismatch between competencies of university graduates and expectations of employers can be clearly observed over the years. This systematic review attempts to synthesize empirical evidence on the role of soft skills in enhancing graduate employability in developing economies. Following the PRISMA 2020 framework, this systematic review analyzed 22 peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2025 through the multistage screening process. This review identifies communication, collaboration, teamwork, critical thinking, complex problem-solving, adaptability, leadership, emotional intelligence, professionalism and life-long learning as the soft skills usually associated with graduate employability. The reviewed studies consistently value these transferable soft skills alongside or often above disciplinary expertise. Despite this fact, universities continue to face challenges in embedding soft skills effectively in their theory-oriented curricula due to which university graduates get limited workplace readiness. Furthermore, evidence from the reviewed studies indicates that experiential learning, work-integrated learning, learner-centered pedagogies, industry-academia collaboration, authentic assessment and curriculum redesign substantively enhance graduate employability. By synthesizing evidences from the Global South, this review identifies the thematic patterns and research gaps. On the basis of this evidence-based recommendations are provided to the universities, employers and policy makers regarding the better alignment of graduate competencies with evolving workplace demands.

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Introduction

Employability of graduates has become one of the crucial indicators of quality higher education in the twenty first century. It is taken as a prime accountability of modern day higher education institutions (HEIs) that they include the employability skills in their graduate courses along with the core disciplinary content (Gurung, et al., 2023). Traditionally, universities were evaluated based on their ability to generate new knowledge and produce graduates with in-depth and specialized disciplinary knowledge. However, the current educational paradigm has changed considerably. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly expected to nurture graduates able to successfully transit to the workplace, adapt to the rapidly changing requirements of the workplace and sustain lifelong careers in knowledge-based economies (Nusrat & Sultana, 2018; Trilling & Fadel, 2009; UNESCO, 2012).

Rapid technological advancement, globalization, digitalization, automation and the emergence of Industry 4.0 have fundamentally transformed the workplace requirements at the macro-level (Ivaldi et al., 2021). Due to such paradigm shifts, employers increasingly value human capabilities equipped with technical expertise and transferable competencies (Beardmore, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2020). Furthermore, today's workforce and workplaces highly demand competencies such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, emotional intelligence, leadership, and lifelong learning (Friedman & Kass-Shraibman, 2017; Mahasneh, 2016; Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Despite the global expansion and massification of higher education, most of the employers continue to report their difficulties in recruiting graduates with workplace-ready competencies (Segneda et al., 2025; Verma et al., 2018). Such co-existence of increasing graduate numbers and persistent workplace skills shortage has raised concerns about the higher education outcomes and job market expectations (Andrews & Higson, 2008). This mismatch between university graduates and industry expectations has prompted policy-makers, employers, and universities to redefine a "qualified candidate" and the competencies that a university graduate should possess (Schulz, 2008; van Rooijen, 2011).

In this sense, workplace readiness has shifted from academic qualification or genre specific knowledge to a more holistic, multi-dimensional construct (Zare & Parvin, 2023). Therefore, graduate employability is now generally understood as a multidimensional construct including disciplinary knowledge, professional competence, personal attributes, interpersonal capabilities, cognitive flexibility and a commitment to lifelong learning (Qizi, 2025; Verma et al., 2018). Within this expanded employability paradigm, soft skills have arguably emerged as the most influential determinants of graduate success, workplace effectiveness and career longevity (Klaus, 2010; Succi & Wieandt, 2019; Wats & Wats, 2009).

Although the terminology varies across academic disciplines and geographical contexts-often used interchangeably as generic skills, transferable skills, core competencies, or graduate attributes, soft skills generally refer to a constellation of interpersonal, behavioural, cognitive and professional competencies that facilitate effective performance in diverse occupational settings (Cinque, 2016; Havar-Simonovich,

2012; Vivekanandan & Pierre-Louis, 2020). Commonly identified soft skills include, but are not limited to, oral and written communication, teamwork and collaboration, critical thinking, complex problem-solving, leadership, emotional intelligence, adaptability, ethical judgment, self-management, and psychological resilience (Mahasneh, 2016; Paneru, 2023; Schulz, 2008).

Hard skills are typically more job-specific, easier to measure, and more readily replaced by technology that can automate repetitive tasks. As Artificial intelligence and automation increasingly replace routine technical tasks, employers warmly regard soft skills as indispensable for teamwork, innovation, managing uncertainty, cultural diversity, workplace harmony and organizational adaptability (Beardmore, 2019; Friedman & Kass-Shraibman, 2017; Hendarman, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2020). Furthermore, soft skills are more broadly applicable across jobs and industries. The value of uniquely human skills has surged in the age of Industry 4.0 and the burgeoning digital economy. Employers increasingly see soft skills not as supplementary “nice-to-have” qualities (James & James, 2004), but as essential, non-negotiable competencies that allow graduates to work in multidisciplinary teams and contexts.

In developing countries like Nepal, employability challenges severely affect economic development and social integrity. The rapid expansion of higher education opportunities produces a higher number of graduates every year than the employment opportunities available in the country. On the other hand, the fixity of higher education courses and the dynamic nature of the job market have created a profound gap between the competencies required for employment and those that graduates actually possess (Zare & Parvin, 2023). This systemic rigidity is further observed significantly in forms of pedagogical and infrastructural deficits in the national education system. For example, a severe digital divide and lack of ICT preparedness among educators deny students the ability to acquire critical 21st century digital and technological skills needed for the modern workplace questioning their readiness to adopt in digitizing workplace (Bohara, 2025). Furthermore, foundational skill deficits such as inadequate language proficiency attributed to socio-economic barriers and lack of academic support in rural areas severely limit students’ global communication capabilities (Paneru & Bohara, 2025). Therefore, despite a significant rise in educational achievements and enrollment, these compounding systemic and foundational deficits ensure graduate unemployment persists.

Employers frequently complain that university graduates lack essential workplace competencies such as communication, collaboration, teamwork, leadership, adaptability, problem-solving, critical and creative thinking despite possession of adequate theoretical knowledge (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Gautam, 2016; Sharma, 2010). This indicates rethinking on curriculum reform, improved teaching practices, enhanced assessment approaches, and stronger university-industry collaboration (van Rooieen, 2011; UNESCO, 2012).

This mismatch between educational outcomes and job market requirements has, in some developing economies, led to a paradoxical reliance on expatriate labour for mid-level managerial and specialized service jobs, further marginalizing local graduates. This systemic disconnect has generated the “graduate employability skills gap,” and has

prompted governments, education policymakers and HEIs to urgently review curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, assessment methods, and the level of university–industry collaboration.

Although research on graduate employability and soft skills has expanded considerably over the past decade, the existing literature remains scattered across disciplines, geographical contexts, and conceptual perspectives. Individual studies vary wildly in their operational definitions of soft skills, employability, and graduate attributes (Cinque, 2016; Havar-Simonovich, 2012; Villiers, 2020). Furthermore, empirical studies are often limited to certain competencies, vocational professions, or country contexts, and hence the generalizability of the findings is limited. Therefore, there is a clear gap in integrated and comparative evidence on the collective role of different clusters of soft skills in graduate employability, particularly in the context of developing economies with unique socio-economic and institutional constraints (Bronson, 2007; Claxton et al., 2016; Knight & Page, 2007; Marle et al., 2022).

Some studies have covered graduate employability or employability skills in general; however, very few have synthesized empirical evidence on the role of soft skills in enhancing graduate employability in higher education in developing economies, while explicitly controlling for non-STEM disciplines. Most existing reviews tend to combine studies conducted in very different educational contexts (developed and developing countries) or combine technical and non-technical competencies, without critical consideration of the distinct standalone role of transferable soft skills. Furthermore, the post-pandemic transformation of workplaces with hybrid work arrangements, digital collaboration, and increasing organizational uncertainty has changed employers' expectations of graduates, highlighting the necessity of an updated synthesis of the available empirical evidence (Shah et al., 2025; World Economic Forum, 2020).

In this context, the present study provides a systematic literature review (SLR) to organize empirical work on the soft skills-graduate employability relationship in higher education. Following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), the review assembles evidence from 22 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025. The review aims to specifically (1) identify the soft skills most frequently associated with graduate employability in non-STEM disciplines; (2) synthesize empirical evidence on the contribution of soft skills to workplace readiness and career success; (3) explore reported similarities and differences between employer expectations and graduates' self-perceptions of soft skills; and (4) synthesize evidence on the role of higher education institutions in facilitating employability-oriented competencies through curricular, pedagogical and institutional initiatives.

This systematic review makes three major contributions to the field. First, it offers a thorough, up-to-date synthesis of empirical evidence on the relationship between soft skills and graduate employability in developing economies such as Nepal. Second, it synthesizes findings across various educational and national contexts to identify common patterns, contextual differences and ongoing research gaps regarding the role of soft skills in improving graduate employability and responding to rapidly changing labour-market demands. Third, it provides practical, evidence-based recommendations for higher

education institutions, employers and policymakers to improve graduate employability through curriculum innovation, soft skills integration, experiential learning, lifelong learning and stronger university–industry partnerships.

Methodology

This study is a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). An SLR is a study which provides a highly structured, transparent, and reproducible process for synthesizing existing research, minimizing selection and researcher bias while enhancing the reliability of the findings (Page et al., 2021). In this study, insights are drawn from 22 systematically searched and selected articles from different databases.

The Systematic Literature Reviews are methodologically more rigorous since they adopt predefined and transparent protocols for literature identification, screening, eligibility assessment, data extraction, and evidence synthesis, thereby minimizing selection bias and reducing the risk of selective reporting. Due to their methodological rigor, use of standardized and publicly documented review procedures, this research design enhances the consistency, transparency and reproducibility of the review process, resulting in more reliable and valid evidence synthesis.

SLR research design was chosen basically for three reasons: first, the mismatch between education and employability is a major issue widely discussed in higher education literature which should be consolidated. The second reason is to discover the common patterns through the integrative synthesis of literature and the third reason is to higher education reform in Nepal demands evidence-based guidelines derived from global practices rather than a single issue. Thus, internationally recognized systematic review based on the PRISMA model would be an appropriate research design for this study.

The review was structured to address the key research questions: How do soft skills affect graduate employability in developing economies, and which specific soft skills are consistently associated with positive employability outcomes and employer satisfaction? To find the answer to this question comprehensively, the review collected empirical evidence from peer-reviewed journal articles published over a decade, from 2015 to 2025.

Search Strategy

We conducted a systematic literature search using the bibliographic retrieval platform Publish or Perish (PoP), accessing multiple databases. The PoP was selected because it enables automated and simultaneous retrieval of scholarly publications from several academic databases and search engines, which substantially increases search coverage, removes manual extraction errors, and avoids dependence on a single, potentially biased indexing source (Jacsó, 2009).

We systematically retrieved bibliographic records from four major academic databases: Scopus, Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, and Crossref. Using multiple databases is a well-established best practice in SLR methodology (Bramer et al., 2017) as it significantly reduces publication bias, and increases the statistical likelihood of identifying relevant, quality empirical studies that may not be found using a single database. The search strategy was developed using combinations of keywords and controlled vocabulary related to the three core conceptual pillars of this review: soft skills, graduate employability and higher education contexts.

Table 1.
Search Strategy

Search String	Purpose
"soft skill" AND "employability"	Identify studies examining relationships between soft skills and employability
"graduate employability" AND "soft skill"	Retrieve studies specifically focusing on graduate employability
"employability skill" AND "higher education"	Identify higher education studies investigating employability competencies
"graduate attribute" AND "employability"	Capture studies using alternative terminology
"transferable skill" AND "graduate"	Retrieve studies employing synonymous concepts

Search time parameters were strictly limited to publications in the English language published between 2015 and 2025. This decade (2015-2025) was intentionally chosen to capture the most recent evidence on graduate employability and soft skills. This period witnesses major shifts in the job market driven by digital transformation, Industry 4.0, technologies, workplace dynamics, and the post-pandemic global economy.

Eligibility Criteria

To ensure methodological consistency, thematic coherence, procedural transparency and a high-quality evidence base, specific predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria were established before the screening.

Table 2.
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference papers, books, book chapters, dissertations, editorials, and reports
Published between 2015 and 2025	Studies published before 2015
Written in English	Non-English publications
Empirical studies	Opinion papers and conceptual articles
Focus on graduate employability or employability skills	Studies examining general workforce skills unrelated to graduates
Focus on soft skills within higher education	Studies focusing exclusively on technical or discipline-specific skills
Conducted within higher education contexts	Studies involving secondary education or vocational training only
Studies from non-STEM streams	Studies from STEM streams
Full-text available	Abstract-only available

This included fields such as business, management, education, social sciences, accounting, tourism, hospitality, and the humanities. Studies conducted exclusively within engineering, medicine, nursing, information technology, and other highly technical disciplines were explicitly excluded. This decision was made because employability requirements and the weighting of soft skills versus hard skills in STEM and medical fields are often overwhelmingly dominated by profession-specific, highly regulated technical competencies and clinical accreditations, which would confound the analysis of transferable soft skills in generalist or business-oriented contexts.

Study Selection Process

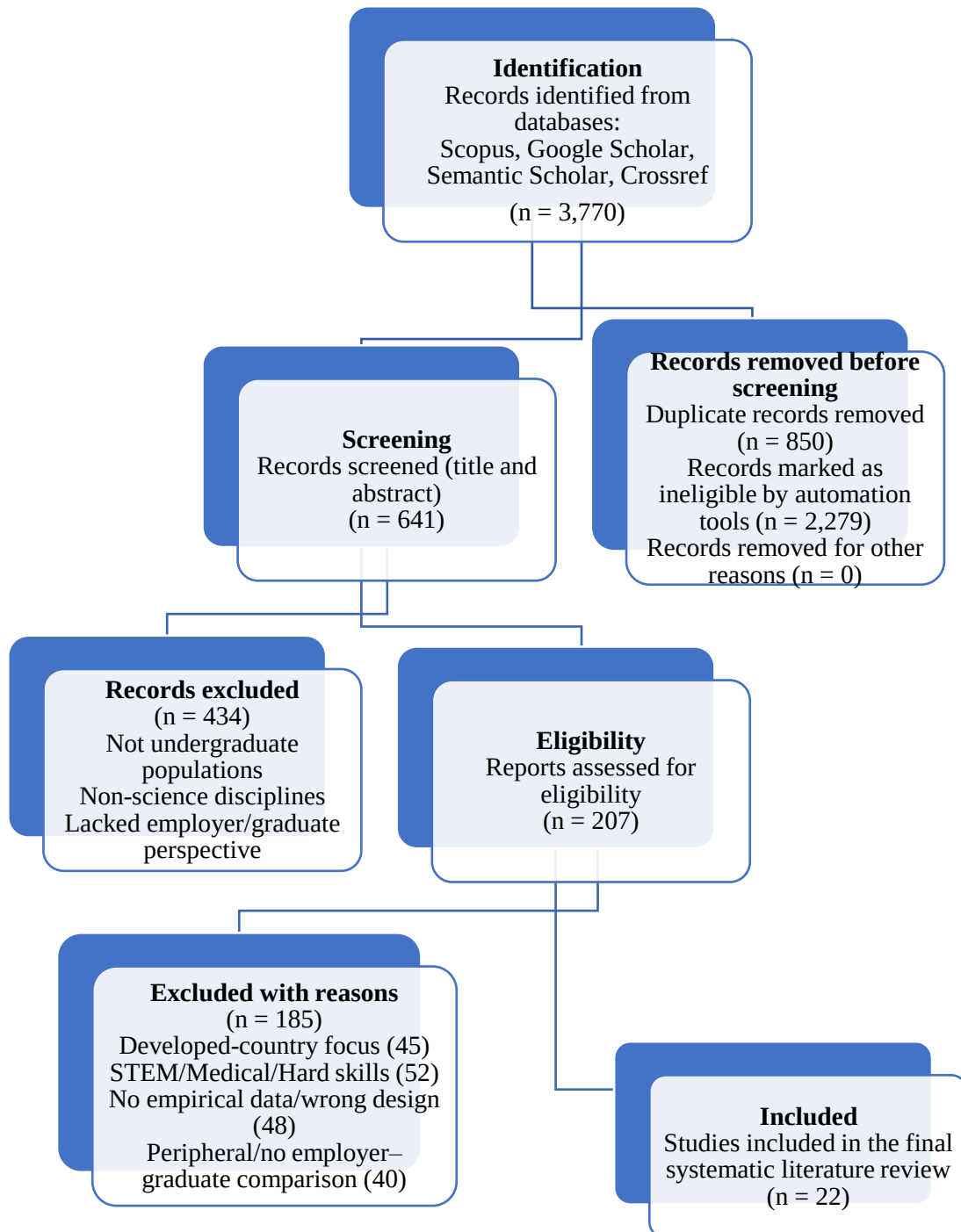


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

The study selection process followed the four sequential, rigorous stages recommended by the PRISMA 2020 framework: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA flow chart below shows how 3,770 studies identified at the first stage reduced to the final number of 22 included in the study.

Quality Assessment

To ensure and enhance the methodological and epistemological credibility and reliability of the review, all 22 studies included in this review were critically evaluated before extraction. The quality assessment was evaluated in terms of several methodological factors such as the clarity and specificity of the research objectives, appropriateness and methodological rigour of the research design, adequacy and justification of the sampling strategy, transparency of data collection procedures, rigour of data analysis methods, validity and reliability of the reported findings and relevance of each study to the review objectives. Rather than assigning arbitrary subjective numerical quality scores, the assessment focused on methodological transparency, theoretical grounding and empirical evidence to contribute to the meaningful thematic synthesis. All these 22 included studies met the predetermined quality criteria and were retained for the final in-depth thematic analysis.

Data Extraction

To ensure and enhance absolute consistency and accuracy throughout the review process, a data extraction form was developed. The detailed information was systematically extracted from each of the 22 included studies.

Table 3.

Data Extraction Variables

Variable	Description
Author(s)	First author and publication year
Country	Geographical context
Journal	Publication source
Research objective	Aim of the study
Methodology	Qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods
Sample	Participant characteristics and sample size
Soft skills examined	Competencies investigated
Employability dimensions	Work readiness, employment outcomes, employer expectations, skills gap
Key findings	Principal empirical findings
Limitations	Authors' reported limitations

The standardized data extraction process employed rigorous and consistent cross-study comparisons across the included studies throughout the review. It also ensured that

extracted findings from these diverse studies could be synthesized thematically and systematically rather than summarized in a descriptive narrative.

The extracted data were analyzed using thematic synthesis, a sophisticated qualitative method especially suited to synthesize findings from heterogeneous qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method research. Thematic synthesis allows identification of recurrent conceptual themes, underlying processes and complex relationships and is well suited to the methodological and contextual diversity of the included studies. The synthesis was conducted in three iterative stages of deep analysis. First, all included studies were read and re-read several times to ensure a deep understanding of the individual study's aims, methods and findings. Second, relevant findings regarding soft skills, employer expectations and graduate employability were coded systematically using both deductive (predefined) and inductive (data-driven) coding frameworks. Finally, conceptually similar codes were grouped, refined, and elevated into broader analytical themes representing shared patterns across the entire evidence base.

Results and Discussion

Following the rigorous PRISMA screening process, a summary of 22 studies published between 2015 and 2025 is included in this systematic review. The studies were conducted across 10 developing countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, India, South Africa, Nigeria, Tanzania, Malaysia, Namibia, Indonesia, and Botswana and represent diverse disciplinary contexts such as higher education, business, accounting, vocational education, tourism and hospitality, English language education, management, and graduate employment. This systematic review includes a broad range of research designs such as quantitative surveys, qualitative studies, mixed methods research, ethnographic investigations, activity-based interventions, systematic and narrative literature reviews and conceptual analysis.

The thematic analysis of the studies included in the review consistently demonstrates three core themes that define the landscape of soft skills and graduate employability in these contexts: (1) The Hierarchy of Core Soft Skills Demanded by Employers (2) The Persistent Employer-Graduate Skills Gap; and (3) Pedagogical Interventions and Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) as a mechanism integrating soft, technical and digital competencies to bridge the divide and meet the demands of the contemporary workforce. The following table briefly presents the systematic review of 22 included studies.

Table 4.

Details of Included Studies

Author(s) & Year	Country	Discipline	Study Design	Key Findings
Setyaningrum et al. (2015)	Indonesia	Accounting	Quantitative (survey)	Graduates lack orientation/adaptation skills; internship and student-centered learning recommended.

Gautam (2016)	Nepal	Management / Urban Youth	Ethnographic research	Youth lack soft skills practice; theoretical knowledge is insufficient for the job market.
Batra (2016)	India (Context: Thailand)	Tourism / Hospitality	Conceptual / Analytical	Need to align curriculum with industry; develop managerial and soft skills.
Akinrinmade & Ayeni (2017)	Nigeria	Higher Education	Descriptive survey (ex-post facto)	Extracurricular activities improve employability skills to a moderate extent.
Pheko (2017)	Botswana	Higher Education	Quantitative (survey)	Students undervalue communication despite employer demand; need for a development framework.
Tahir et al. (2018)	Malaysia	Higher Education	Quantitative (survey & interviews)	Employers rate graduate competencies (leadership, critical thinking) lower than graduates themselves.
Shivoro et al. (2018)	Namibia	Higher Education (Management Sciences)	Quantitative (survey)	Mismatch in stakeholder perceptions; curriculum doesn't sufficiently develop attributes.
Nusrat & Sultana (2019)	Bangladesh	Business	Two-phased study (survey & job ad analysis)	Soft skills highly desired; significant gap between curriculum and industry expectations.
Abd Majid et al. (2020)	Malaysia	Higher Education	Quantitative (survey)	Location, endurance force, time management, and activities predict employability.
Khan et al. (2021)	India	English Language / General	Activity-based study	GIE and soft skills training significantly improve speech intelligibility and employability.

Mgaiwa (2021)	Tanzania	Higher Education	Narrative literature review	University-industry partnerships, curriculum review, and QA systems are critical.
Shahriar et al. (2021)	Bangladesh	Higher Education / Economy	Qualitative / Exploratory (interviews, secondary data)	COVID-19 intensified unemployment; urgent need for up-skilling and soft skills.
Schultz (2022)	South Africa	General / Low-income workers	Qualitative constructivist (email interviews)	Behavioral and psychosocial skills (including forgiveness) improve employability.
Sotshangane & Obioha (2022)	South Africa	Graduate Employment	Quantitative (survey)	Employers expect strong interpersonal competencies; least expect quantitative/leadership from entry-level.
Abdullah et al. (2023)	Malaysia	Accounting	Conceptual / Review	Industry 4.0 requires integrated technical, soft, and digital skills.
Gurung et al. (2023)	Nepal	Business	Qualitative (semi-structured interviews)	Graduates view employability as positional competition; lack of practical skills noted.
Islam et al. (2023)	Bangladesh	English	Mixed methods (survey, interviews, FGDs)	Awareness exceeds practice; large class sizes hinder practice; self-directed learning helps.
Dutta (2024)	India	Vocational Education	Descriptive & analytical (secondary data)	Gap between vocational training and industry needs; lack of hands-on and soft skills.
Nie & Mastor (2024)	Malaysia	Accounting	Systematic literature review	Integrated technical, soft, digital, and strategic skills needed; expectation-performance gap exists.

Razalli et al. (2024)	Malaysia	Education & Social Science	Quantitative (survey)	Soft skills and academic performance positively affect perceived employability.
Hossain & Arefin (2025)	Bangladesh	General / Multiple sectors	Quantitative (survey)	Curricula and practical training positively impact employability; expatriate preference negatively impacts it.
Mishra & Devi (2025)	India	Service- based business	Quantitative (survey)	Gap between desired and current soft/technical skills in service organizations.

The Hierarchy of Core Soft Skills Demanded by Employers

The reviewed literature from the included studies consistently identifies a cluster of soft skills that employers from developing economies often place on par with or above technical expertise. Communication skills have emerged as a universally demanded attribute (Nusrat & Sultana, 2019; Pheko, 2017; Tahir et al., 2018; Razalli et al., 2024). Nusrat and Sultana (2019) analysed nearly 4,000 job advertisements and found that communication skills (both verbal and written) were explicitly required in 51.08% of entry-level business roles in Bangladesh. Similarly, Khan et al. (2021) highlighted proficiency in General Indian English and speech intelligibility as significant filters for recruitment in multinational companies. Although most employers consistently prioritise communication skills, many students underestimate its importance, which reveals a mismatch between graduates' perceptions and labour market expectations (Pheko, 2017).

Beyond communication skills, interpersonal skills and teamwork skills are consistently highlighted across the 22 reviewed studies. In this regard, Nusrat and Sultana (2019) stated that 44.34% of employers prefer candidates with strong interpersonal skills and team spirit. Likewise, Sotshangane and Obioha (2022) found that employers in South Africa expect graduates with well-developed interpersonal competencies and collaborative abilities. In the same way, Shivor et al. (2018) identified a mismatch between employers' expectations and university graduates' attributes regarding teamwork and interpersonal competence. Furthermore, Razalli et al. (2024) demonstrated that soft skills significantly and positively influence graduates' perceived employability, and these skills should be incorporated into university education.

The reviewed evidence further suggests that the advent of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) has significantly increased employer demand for adaptability/flexibility, collaboration, critical thinking, problem-solving, conflict resolution and life-long learning (Abdullah et al., 2023; Nie & Mastor, 2024). In the same way, Abdullah et al. (2023) emphasized that Industry 4.0 requires a balanced integration of technical and interpersonal competencies. As routine technical tasks become automated, employers in tourism and

hospitality fields require graduates who can synthesize knowledge, solve complex problems, and adapt to dynamic customer-oriented environments (Batra, 2016). Likewise, Nie and Mastor (2024) argued that graduates must possess an integrated combination of technical, digital, strategic, and soft skills to meet evolving workplace expectations. Most of the employers also value graduates who demonstrate a proactive attitude, resilience, effective time management, and the ability to perform under pressure (Abd Majid et al., 2020; Nusrat & Sultana, 2019). Moreover, evidence from Nepal and developing countries suggests that graduates continue to face employability challenges because higher education remains overly theoretical and provides insufficient opportunities to develop soft skills required by the employers (Gautam, 2016; Gurung et al., 2023; Hossain & Arefin, 2025).

The Persistent Employer-Graduate Skills Gap

The reviewed literature consistently reveals a significant and systemic disconnect between the competencies possessed by graduates and the evolving requirements of the job market (Dutta, 2024; Gurung et al., 2023; Hossain & Arefin, 2025; Nusrat & Sultana, 2019). This employability gap is largely attributed to traditional theory-driven curricula, teacher-centric pedagogical approaches, inadequate practical training, and limited opportunities for students to enhance workplace-relevant soft skills (Dutta, 2024; Gautam, 2016; Mgaiwa, 2021). Thus, a recurring finding from the selected studies can be observed as the disparity between graduate self-perceptions and employer expectations. In this regard, Gautam (2016) explicitly illustrated that students had robust theoretical knowledge but lacked sufficient opportunities to practice these competencies in authentic workplace settings. Due to such disconnects and mismatches between graduates' expertise and employers' expectations, many graduates expect to obtain higher/middle-level managerial positions immediately after graduation but struggle to secure even entry-level roles. Even though they get such positions, they fail to function effectively within professional organizations and increasingly globalized work environments due to the graduates' knowledge-based qualifications and employers' expected skills in graduates (Gurung et al., 2023).

In the same way, Nusrat and Sultana (2019) identified significant gaps between recruiters and academics regarding the importance of graduate competencies. Academics highly stressed content-focused presentation skills, critical thinking, and creativity, whereas employers preferred real-life work ethics, responsibility and the ability to work under pressure. In this sense, academics' knowledge-focused approach usually contradicts the employers' functional-mode skills for workplace results. Questioning the "overconfidence" among the university graduates, Tahir et al. (2018) reported that employers consistently rated the graduates' competencies such as leadership, communication and critical thinking lower than the graduates rated themselves. In the same line, a mismatch can be vividly observed between employers' expectations and graduates' attributes/competencies awarded by the university (Mishra & Devi, 2025; Shivor et al., 2018).

A majority of the reviewed literature agrees that curriculum-industry misalignment remains a persistent structural challenge. Even the vocational education systems

emphasize theoretical knowledge rather than providing sufficient hands-on experience and soft skills development (Dutta, 2024). Hossain and Arefin (2025) argued that practical training and curriculum relevance significantly enhance graduate employability, whereas weak academia-industry linkages confine employment opportunities. In this way, these findings suggest that graduates from developing economies frequently enter the job market without the balanced combination of technical expertise, practical experience, and transferable soft skills required by employers (Abdullah et al., 2023; Mgaiwa, 2021; Nie & Mastor, 2024).

Pedagogical Interventions and Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)

In the review, the findings consistently highlighted the need for pedagogical interventions and work-integrated learning (WIL). Literature indicates that continuous curriculum review, experiential learning, and increased academia-industry collaboration are critical strategies for bridging the gap between graduates' competencies and employers' expectations (Batra, 2016; Dutta, 2024; Hossain & Arefin, 2025; Mgaiwa, 2021). Reviewed studies consistently revealed that traditional lecture-based approaches are insufficient for developing employability-related soft skills, and that universities should adopt more practice-oriented and learner-centred pedagogies. Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), internships, and industry-based learning are highlighted as the most effective strategies for fostering soft skills in authentic workplace settings. In this regard, Batra (2016) stated that the multidisciplinary nature of the tourism and hospitality industry requires graduates who can integrate theoretical knowledge with practical workplace experience. This study indicates mandatory internships and industry-based learning opportunities to enable students to translate their classroom learning into workplace settings, develop their professional behaviours, and strengthen managerial and interpersonal competencies. Likewise, Setyaningrum et al. (2015) found that internships and learner-centered pedagogies significantly enhance graduates' orientation and adaptation competencies. For this, Mgaiwa (2021) stressed university-industry partnerships, curriculum revision, and quality assurance systems for enhancing graduate employability. In this vein, Hossain and Arefin (2025) described that practical training and industry-relevant curricula positively impact graduates' employability in workplace settings.

Beyond the formal university curricula, the review of selected studies shows that complementary skills such as soft skills positively influence in enhancing employability skills. Schultz (2022) highlighted that besides the formal educational programmes, behavioural skills (i.e. communication skills, time management), psychosocial competencies (i.e. self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, resilience, and forgiveness) mainly enhance the graduates' work readiness and self-confidence. The findings of these reviews suggest that these attributes are not fixed and acquired through formal lessons, but they can be systematically and strategically developed through well-designed experiential learning. Akinrinmade and Ayeni (2017) further argued that participation in extracurricular activities better enhances employability. Regarding cultivating soft skills in the graduates, embedding soft skills in the curricula (i.e. content, pedagogies and assessments) is better strategy rather than treating this as a standalone component (as a

separate subject). Khan et al. (2021) showed that integrating activity-based soft skills training with English language teaching significantly enhanced the learners' speech intelligibility, confidence, body language and overall employability. Likewise, Islam et al. (2023) reported graduates' theoretical knowledge on soft skills but a lack of practical competencies. Furthermore, Dutta (2024) stated that vocational education needs much emphasis on experiential learning and hands-on training to enhance graduates' both technical expertise as well as transferable soft skills expected by employers. In this way, the findings of the reviewed studies collectively indicate that employability can be enhanced through soft-skills-integrated curricula, experiential pedagogies, workplace exposure, and continuous collaboration between the academia-industry.

Implications of the Study

This systematic review synthesized the findings from 22 studies published between 2015 and 2025 to examine the role of soft skills in graduate employability. The findings of these studies consistently show that employability is not possible only by academic qualifications or technical expertise. Therefore, employers increasingly value transferable soft skills such as communication, collaboration, teamwork, critical thinking, adaptability, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving as essential competencies for workplace performance and success. However, the review of the studies also reveals a persistent mismatch between university outcomes and employers' expectations. Such mismatches indicate the need for curriculum reform, stronger university–industry collaboration, and a focus on experiential learning. In this sense, these findings have important theoretical, practical, and policy implications.

The findings of the studies are in line with the Human Capital Theory which states that investment in education improves the productivity and economic worth of individuals (Awu et al., 2025). The reviewed studies explicitly acknowledge that technical knowledge could be an important element of graduate competence, but not enough by itself to secure employment. Indeed, the graduates with disciplinary expertise plus non-technical skills such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving skills are preferred in the job market (Nusrat & Sultana, 2019; Nie & Mastor, 2024; Razalli et al., 2024). These findings suggest that, within context of developing economies and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), human capital should be viewed as an integrated model of technical, digital, and transferable competencies rather than as academic knowledge alone.

The evidence from the studies and workplace indicates that employers are looking for observable behavioural competencies than on academic credentials alone. In this context, communication ability, collaboration, teamwork, emotional intelligence, leadership potential, critical thinking, problem-solving skills and adaptability are the major determinants of workplace readiness that employers usually assess during recruitment and internship experiences (Tahir et al., 2018; Sotshangane & Obioha, 2022; Razalli et al., 2024). The mismatch between graduate self-perceptions and employer evaluations reported in the reviewed studies further suggests that academic qualifications alone are becoming less reliable signals of employability, particularly when graduates have limited opportunities to demonstrate practical competencies (Gautam, 2016; Tahir et al., 2018).

Furthermore, findings of the reviewed studies support the concept of contemporary employability perspectives that conceptualizes employability as a multidimensional concept shaped by individual competencies, educational experiences, institutional practices and employers' expectations as well as conditions (Ahmed & Tessma, 2020). Within this understanding, reviewed studies consistently show that graduates' employability depends not only on individual competencies but also on curriculum relevance, university-industry partnerships, experiential learning opportunities, and broader economic context (Gurung et al., 2023; Hossain & Arefin, 2025; Mgaiwa, 2021).

This systematic review offers several practical and policy implications for university education, employers, and policymakers seeking to improve graduate employability in developing economies. For higher education institutions, the evidence from the reviewed studies indicates that soft skills should be embedded in university curricula (i.e., content, pedagogies and assessments) for employability skills. The traditional lecture-based teaching method is not sufficient for enhancing workplace competencies. Thus, universities should adopt learner-centered pedagogies that integrate soft skills (Khan et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2023). They should emphasize experiential learning through internships, work-integrated learning (WIL), project-based learning, simulations, and community engagement activities that help the student apply their theoretical knowledge in authentic professional contexts (Batra, 2016; Mgaiwa, 2021; Setyaningrum et al., 2015). In addition, soft skills along with technical knowledge should be properly assessed to ensure the graduates' competencies demanded by employers. In addition, systematic assessment of soft skills should complement traditional evaluation methods to ensure that graduates develop competencies demanded by employers.

Thus, universities should produce and prepare adaptable, resilient and digitally competent graduates to navigate rapidly changing workplace conditions associated with technological transformation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Abdullah et al., 2023; Nie & Mastor, 2024). In this context, governments should also encourage university–industry collaboration through funding mechanisms, innovation partnerships, internship support programmes, and graduate employability initiatives. Such coordinated efforts and initiatives help reduce graduate unemployment and enhance workforce competitiveness in developing economies like Nepal.

Conclusion

This systematic review synthesized the results of 22 studies conducted in developing economies to examine the relationship between soft skills and graduate employability. The review shows that graduate employability is greatly influenced not only by academic qualifications or technical skills but also by transferable soft skills such as communication, collaboration, teamwork, critical thinking, adaptability, problem-solving, leadership, and emotional intelligence. These competencies are in line with rapid technological advancement, globalization, and the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

A key finding of the review of the included studies is the mismatch between university graduates' competencies and employer expectations. In the reviewed studies, employers are consistently looking for practical workplace competencies, whereas many

university graduates usually possess mainly theoretical knowledge. This academia–industry mismatch causes graduate unemployment, underemployment, and skills shortages in many developing economies.

The review also observes that employability of graduates requires a combined effort by HEIs, employers and policymakers. There is a need for universities to embed soft skills in the curriculum through student-centred pedagogies, experiential learning, Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) and academia-industry collaboration to ensure relevance of the curriculum, while employers are expected to participate in the curriculum design and workplace learning. Similarly, the government should promote policies that encourage university–industry collaboration and competency-based education. Such collaborative and collective initiatives are essential for fostering graduates with adaptable, resilient, and equipped to respond to evolving workplace demands.

However, despite providing a comprehensive synthesis of the findings from the selected studies, this review has several limitations. First, the review included only 22 peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2015 and 2025. In this sense, this review excluded relevant studies published in other languages, conference proceedings, dissertations, policy reports, and other forms of grey literature. Second, the review focused exclusively on developing economies; which might not be directly generalizable to developed countries. Third, the methodological diversity of the selected studies included only quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, conceptual, and review studies.

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The author(s) declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this article.

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Data Availability Statement

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Data Sharing Statement

No additional data are available related to this study.

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