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**Lund University Master of Science in  
International Development and Management  
May, 2024**

**Soft Skills and Youth Employability in Azerbaijan:  
The Role of Formal and Non-Formal Education.**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the development and integration of soft skills into the formal and non-formal education systems of Azerbaijan, as well as evaluating their influence on the employability of young individuals. Through qualitative interviews and secondary data analysis, the study finds that while formal education in Azerbaijan mainly focuses on imparting academic skills, non-formal education provides a more dynamic environment for the development of soft skills. The research findings highlight a discrepancy between the skills taught in educational institutions and those demanded by employers in Baku. This emphasises the importance of implementing reforms that comprehensively integrate soft skills into the educational system. This study provides valuable insights for the improvement of youth employability and the alignment of educational outcomes with labour market demands in Azerbaijan.

**Key words:** formal and non-formal education, youth employability, soft skills, hard skills, employers, youth, Azerbaijan, Baku.

**Word count:** 14762

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Swedish Government for granting me the Swedish Institute for Global Professionals scholarship for my master's studies. The financial support was crucial in making my educational journey possible.

I am grateful to my supervisor, Prince Young Aboagye, for his invaluable feedback and guidance during the thesis writing process. I am thankful to all the LUMID professors and programme coordinators for expanding my perspectives and enhancing my understanding of development management through thorough academic exploration.

I am grateful to Lund University for greatly enhancing my academic knowledge and playing an instrumental part in my personal and professional growth. Over the past two years, I encountered challenges that have not only assessed my resilience but also equipped me to navigate the complexities of the development sector confidently and competently.

In the culmination of this academic endeavour, I extend my profound gratitude to the participants of the interviews and survey for generously sharing their insights, experiences, and expertise.

## **List of Abbreviations**

Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy (ADA)

Azerbaijan State Economic University (UNEC)

The Bachelor of Arts (BA)

Baku State University (BSU)

Career Experience, Degree, Generic skills and Emotional intelligence (CareerEDGE)

Employability Development Profile (EDP)

General Basic Education (GBE)

General Secondary Education (GSE)

Gross domestic product (GDP)

Higher Education Institution (HEI)

Human Capital Theory (HCT)

Human Resources (HR)

The Master of Art (MA)

National Assembly of Youth Organizations of the Republic of Azerbaijan (NAYORA)

Non-Formal Education (NFE)

Nongovernmental organization (NGO)

Personal Development Planning (PDP)

Personal Development Planning (PDP)

State Employment Agency (SEA)

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The International Labour Organisation (ILO)

Vocational Education and Training (VET)

Work- Integrated Learning (WIL)

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)

World Economic Forum (WEF)

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## **1. Introduction**

The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2020) emphasises a comprehensive strategy, advocating for education systems closely aligned with current labour market demands, particularly focusing on digital skills. Employers are urged to invest in education, while individuals are encouraged to pursue continuous learning through formal, non-formal, and informal channels (Ibid). In Azerbaijan tackling the urgent issue of youth unemployment requires a collaborative effort from all parties involved: stakeholders, universities, the government, businesses, and workers as pointed out by Ismayilov (2020). Education, as emphasised in Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) is vital for providing people the necessary skills and knowledge for employment. When it comes to dealing with youth unemployment in Azerbaijan, understanding the difference between hard skills and soft skills becomes crucial. Hard skills, as defined by Smith (2010), encompass technical expertise derived from theoretical knowledge and applied in practical contexts. Conversely, academics Pandey & Pandey (2015) define soft skills as interpersonal relationships and emotional intelligence that solve organisational problems and boost productivity. Robles (2012) for instance, highlights essential soft skills such as teamwork, flexibility, positive attitude, and social skills, emphasising their relevance across various organisational settings. Given their critical role in employability and organisational success, there is an imperative to integrate soft skills training into educational programs (Ibid.).

Moreover, forecasts by Deloitte (2017) project a growing demand for soft skills, estimating that by 2030, the majority of jobs will require a high level of soft skills, and possibly overcome the primary position technical skills have thus far (Varis, Majaniemi, and Wilderom, 2018). In addition, there are reported discrepancies between the skill sets of employees and employer expectations, as investigated by Mourshed, Patel, and Suder (2012) in their report focusing on soft skills among young Europeans. Such a gap underscores the need for enhanced collaboration between educational institutions and employers to bridge the divide between education and employment, as a disparity between the demand for and the availability of soft skills among young people keeps on growing (Tulgan, 2015). Therefore, in an attempt to address the issue of youth unemployment in Azerbaijan, aligning educational programs with the evolving needs of the labour market, including both hard and soft skill development, becomes imperative.

This has inspired this study intending to investigate how soft skills are developed and incorporated within formal and non-formal education in Azerbaijan and their impact on youth employability.

### **1.1 Aim and Research Questions**

The primary objective of this study is to investigate how soft skills are acquired through formal and non-formal education among the youth in Baku, Azerbaijan, and to assess their contribution to employability. Similarly, the study will explore how young people relate the contribution of soft skills to employability. This shapes the research question and sub-question as:

- How are soft skills developed and integrated within formal and non-formal education in Azerbaijan, and what impact do they have on youth employability?
- Which soft skills are perceived by Azerbaijani youth and employers as most crucial in the current labour market?

The necessity of prioritising the employability of people in Azerbaijan arises from the mismatch between what educational institutions produce and what the job market requires. Deputy Minister of Education Idris Isayev has emphasised this disparity warning that it poses a risk to the country's future. The lack of skills, particularly soft skills among graduates is often linked to shortcomings in the Azerbaijani education system, which struggles to adequately equip students for employment (Valiyev, 2020). This issue is further highlighted by concerning data showing that the official unemployment rate for individuals aged 15-24 stood at 13.6% in 2023 (World Bank, 2023). These statistics underscore the pressing need to explore strategies and their impact on enhancing employability.

### **1.2 Problem Statement**

The importance of this study is supported by a review of literature, which shows a significant shortage of research on the connection between enhancing soft skills and job prospects in Azerbaijan. While the significance of skills for employment is widely recognized there is an absence of specific studies, in this local context. The existing studies, such as those by Amirova & Valiyev (2021) and Elman & Akbulaev (2022), discuss the broader implications of these skills but do not address the unique challenges faced by Azerbaijan's transitioning education system and its impact on the job market. Furthermore, post-communist countries like Azerbaijan, face the challenge of deciding whether to completely imitate existing models or combine their distinct traditions with worldwide trends, particularly in lifestyle preferences



shaped by historical heritage and globalisation (Saxanli, 2018). Such a choice has a substantial impact on society's comprehension of the significance of interpersonal skills and that is why it has been a point of departure for this study which seeks to examine the actualities in the capital of Azerbaijan.

In addition, this study aims to contribute to the field of sustainable development by investigating how soft skills impact youth employability in the context of Development Goals (SDGs) particularly focusing on SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). The emphasis, on closing the skills gap and improving youth employability aligns with objectives such as poverty reduction, economic empowerment and social inclusion outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015). This study aims to bridge this knowledge gap by providing empirical insights into the integration of soft skills into Azerbaijan's educational frameworks and evaluating their influence on the employability of Azerbaijani youth. Given the rapid evolution of labour market demands, this investigation is particularly timely. By concentrating on Azerbaijan, which exhibits specific socio-economic traits and educational dynamics, this research offers valuable contributions to the broader discourse on employability and soft skill skills development, addressing significant and impactful research.

## **2. Contextual Background**

### **2.1 Introduction to Azerbaijan**

Azerbaijan, a pivotal nation straddling Eastern Europe and Western Asia, boasts significant geographic diversity, which is a critical factor in its complex socio-economic landscape. Its economy, heavily reliant on the oil and gas sectors, has been pivotal in shaping its post-Soviet economic development. With a diverse population of approximately 10 million, Azerbaijan's demographic dynamics play a crucial role in its labour market and educational systems. (Azerbaijan Tourism Board, 2021). As per the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan enacted on 5 May 2007, individuals between the ages of 14 and 29 are considered youth, highlighting the demographic focus of youth policy (Republic of Azerbaijan, 2007, No. 331-IIIQD, Article 1.0.2).

### **2.2 Economic Overview**

Azerbaijan's economy is primarily driven by its abundant oil and natural gas reserves, making the energy sector the fundamental pillar of its economic framework. Nevertheless, the dependence on this industry has posed difficulties, such as susceptibility to fluctuations in global oil prices, which directly affect the economic stability of the country (World Bank, 2022). The employment prospects for young people are significantly impacted by these economic dynamics, highlighting the urgent necessity for economic diversification. The government has implemented various economic reforms to diminish reliance on oil and promote sectors such as tourism, agriculture, and information technology, which are becoming progressively important for generating employment opportunities for young people (Ibid). However, in 2020, a significant portion of Azerbaijan's workforce was concentrated in the agriculture and informal sectors. Specifically, more than 35 percent of all labour resources in Azerbaijan were engaged in agriculture, even though this sector contributes only a small fraction to the country's GDP. Moreover, the majority of these workers are unregistered and do not contribute to income tax. As a consequence, these individuals will not qualify for additional pension benefits and will only receive the standard pension amount. This could potentially lead to a rise in the proportion of individuals residing in or near poverty. Valiyev (2020)

### **2.3 Challenges in Youth Employability**

Azerbaijan's labour market is characterised by high rates of youth unemployment and underemployment, especially among university graduates. The official unemployment rate among young people (ages 15-24) was reported at 13.6% in 2023, which is significantly higher than the adult rate (World Bank, 2023). The majority of individuals who have completed higher education lack the necessary skills to enhance their competitiveness (Rutkowski, 2015). According to the findings of the 2013 STEP Employer Skill Survey conducted in Azerbaijan, there was a significant shortage of skills, particularly in the areas of technical, cognitive, and socio-behavioural skills. Employers also had high expectations of their employees (Ibid.). A major obstacle to increasing youth employment rates is the discrepancy between the education or training provided and the requirements of the job market (Valiyev, 2020).

### **2.4 Formal Education System in Azerbaijan**

Azerbaijan requires its citizens to attend school from Grade 1 to Grade 9. Primary education (four years; ages 6–10), General Basic Education (GBE) (9th grade) (five years; ages 10–15), and general secondary education culminating in GSE (11th grade) (two years; ages 15–16/17) comprise the school system. Conversely, a vocational education and training (VET) system is

also in operation. Primary vocation education, also known as initial professional education, is conducted at technical professional schools. It is available as either a one-year programme following the GSE, which grants eligibility for tertiary education, or as a one to the two-year programme following the BSE, which does not grant access to tertiary education. Operating at colleges and professional lyceums, specialised vocation education (secondary professional education) is available in two-to-three-year programmes that concurrently offer the GSE (granting access to tertiary education) or as one-, two-, or three-year programmes following the GSE (Rashidova et. al, 2019).

In Azerbaijan, in addition to obtaining a GSE, one of the prerequisites for tertiary education is the successful completion of the National Admission Test. The university education system in Azerbaijan has been structured according to the Bologna process since 2005. This entails the awarding of three-cycle degrees: Bachelor (BA), Master (MA), and Doctoral. Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, is home to the greatest number of universities, consisting of 25 state universities and 9 private universities that all offer three-cycle degrees (Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2024).

## **2.5 Non-Formal Education System in Azerbaijan**

By offering flexible, scalable, and context-specific educational opportunities, NFE plays a pivotal role in developing the practical and soft skills essential for today's workforce (Smith, 2020). In Azerbaijan non formal education is deeply integrated in efforts on youth development, overseen by two bodies: the Ministry of Youth and Sport and the Youth Foundation. These organisations hold roles in supervising a network of 35 youth centres and 44 youth career development hubs dispersed throughout the country. Supported by government funding, these facilities are open to all Azerbaijani people serving as centres for programs that enhance skills and create an atmosphere for personal and career advancement. More significantly, youth centres support youth-led projects that enable individuals or groups to launch activities that align with youth development principles, all free of charge. Additionally, the Youth Foundation goes a step further by offering grants to both individuals and youth organisations highlighting the Azerbaijani government's dedication to supporting and empowering its youth through initiatives (The Ministry of Youth and Sports of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2024).

Key Stakeholders in non-formal education government agencies:

- Ministry of Youth and Sport: This body coordinates various youth-focused non-formal education and sports programs across the country, aiming to enhance the employability and active citizenship of young Azerbaijanis (Ministry of Youth and Sport of Azerbaijan, n.d.).
- The Youth Foundation is a critical entity under the auspices of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, dedicated to fostering the development of young people through financial support and organisational activities. (Youth Foundation of the Republic of Azerbaijan, n.d.)
- The Central Career Branch under the SEA focuses on career guidance and vocational training to bridge the gap between education and labour market needs (State Employment Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2023).

#### Local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs):

- NAYORA (National Assembly of Youth Organizations of the Republic of Azerbaijan): Acts as an umbrella organisation for 154 youth NGOs, facilitating non-formal learning opportunities that enhance leadership and civic engagement (NAYORA, n.d.).
- Youth Career and Development Centers: These centres are pivotal in providing on-ground training and workshops focusing on both career development and personal growth (Youth Career and Development Centers, n.d.).

Understanding this contextual framework sets the stage for this study, which aims to investigate the impact of formal and non-formal education on the development of soft skills and subsequent employability among Azerbaijani youth. The insights gained from this analysis are essential for designing targeted interventions that could significantly improve the career prospects of young Azerbaijanis.

### **3. Literature Review**

The literature review starts with definitions and examines the growing importance of soft skills for employability. Moreover, it presents soft skills from the perspective of employability, formal and non-formal education perspectives as well as insights from employers and youth.

### **3. Definitions**

#### **3.1.1 Employment**

Employment, as per the definition provided by Mankiw and Taylor (2014), refers to the contractual agreement between employers and employees. In this arrangement, individuals provide their skills, time, and efforts to an organisation or enterprise in exchange for monetary compensation. As per the findings of economists Kalleberg and Vallas (2017), employment extends beyond the conventional notion of engaging in a job. It emphasises the changing characteristics of work arrangements and the impact of precarious employment on individuals and society.

#### **3.1.2 Employability**

Hillage and Pollard's (1998) definition broadens the scope of employability, encompassing the ability to secure initial employment, maintain it, transition between roles, seek new employment, and ideally, find work that is both suitable and fulfilling. Brewer (2013) further expands on this notion, emphasising the multifaceted nature of youth employability, which involves not only obtaining the first job but also networking, navigating through a career, and remaining employable throughout life. Employability encompasses an individual's capacity to secure and maintain substantial employment. The term refers to a broad set of abilities, knowledge, and personal attributes that improve one's competitiveness in the job market (Hillage & Pollard, 1998, Romgens et al., 2019).

#### **3.1.3 Soft skills**

Soft skill is a term used to describe intangible, non-technical abilities. Soft skills are provided as a means to enhance employability due to their ability to improve technical, career, and academic skills. According to academics Pandey & Pandey (2015), soft skills refer to the fundamental elements of interpersonal relationships and emotional intelligence that are essential for resolving organisational problems and enhancing individual productivity. Furthermore, soft skills are considered to be the outcome of various psychological constructs in humans, including traits, attitudes, behaviours, non-cognitive intelligence, and meta-competencies, all converging together (Potgieter, 2012).

#### **3.1.4. Hard Skills**

According to Doyle (2020), hard skills refer to the specialised knowledge and abilities that are necessary for specific occupations. These skills can encompass language proficiency, academic qualifications, certifications, and technical expertise in a particular domain. Within the realm of employability, job descriptions frequently include hard skills, which are essential for candidates to possess in order to meet the technical requirements of a position.

#### **3.1.5 Formal Education**

Formal education refers to a well-organised educational system that encompasses primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions. It is distinguished by a standardised curriculum, qualified teachers, and specific learning goals that result in recognized qualifications (Tight, 2012). The purpose of this system is to convey fundamental knowledge and skills to students in a structured and methodical way. It primarily emphasises the development of cognitive and technical abilities, such as literacy, numeracy, and subject-specific knowledge (Schulz, 2008).

#### **3.1.6 Non-formal education**

Non-formal education, in contrast, pertains to educational endeavours that take place beyond the confines of the formal curriculum, providing greater adaptability, variety, and frequently community-oriented learning prospects (Eshach, 2007). These can encompass workshops, online courses, community service, and other educational opportunities that may not result in official certification but are highly beneficial for personal and professional growth. Lifelong learning and personal development are significantly influenced by it, as it offers individuals the chance to gain new skills and knowledge in a flexible and less rigid environment (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974; UNESCO, 2012).

### **3.2 The Rising Importance of Soft Skills**

The phenomenon of globalisation has exerted a profound influence on the nature of work and employment, resulting in notable transformations within the labour market (Kayode, 2012). This evolution is marked by an increasing demand for knowledge-based work, requiring a workforce that is not only skilled in technical skills but also flexible and possesses a wide range of soft skills (Pink, 2006). As a result of this alteration, employers are currently assigning greater significance to soft skills, encompassing communication, interpersonal abilities, teamwork, and proficiency in foreign languages. The acquisition of these skills enables

enhanced interaction, collaboration, and management, which are of utmost importance in a job market characterised by globalisation (Omar, et al., 2012). These changes in the job market require educational systems and training programmes that can effectively equip individuals for the ever-changing requirements of the global job market. This emphasises the importance of developing policies and curricula in this area (Bridgstock, 2009). However, this study aims to focus on youth employability's connection to soft skills.

### **3.3 Soft skills and employability**

The section explores the distinction and significance of soft skills alongside hard skills, emphasising their crucial role in employability. It highlights employer preferences for soft skills and youth perspectives on their development, aiming to illuminate the essential contribution of these skills to professional success and educational alignment with job market demands.

The relationship between soft skills and employability is influenced by today's interconnected industries because graduates must not only possess job skills but also embrace lifelong learning to adapt to changing market demands continuously (Butum & Nicolescu 2019). As work continues to evolve career uncertainties become more prevalent requiring individuals to take a role in navigating their career paths (Clements & Kamau 2018). The ability to adapt to changing job roles and transition between different positions within organisations has become essential (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). In today's job market, obtaining a job requires more than just good grades. Practical skills and personal qualities gained through hands-on learning are extremely important (Ornellas, 2018; Reddy, 2019). Employers give priority to candidates who possess soft skills due to their positive impact on job performance and their broader contributions to the workforce, community, and economy (Reddy, 2019; Rohanai et al., 2020; Cimatti 2016).

As the workplace evolves from a manual to a technologically advanced setting, the importance of soft skills such as leadership, communication, and networking grows significantly for employability, particularly in a competitive job market (Habiyaremye et al., 2022). Moreover, Watts and Watts found that hard skills account for only 15% of an individual's success, while soft skills contribute to 85% of their success (Watts and Watts, 2008). Other research indicates that 75% of sustained career achievement is attributed to interpersonal skills, with technical

expertise accounting for the remaining 25% (Klaus, 2010). Furthermore, the study conducted by Nusrat, M., & Sultana, N. (2019) analysed that soft skills were crucial for the sustainable employment of business graduates in Bangladesh. They found that skills such as teamwork, leadership, and interpersonal skills are significantly associated with improved employment prospects (Ibid). Employers prioritise soft skills as the most important factor for entry-level success on the job, as they seek mature and socially well-adjusted employees.

According to Cleary, Flynn, and Thomasson (2006), Soft skills are employability skills that are transferable in many jobs. Whereas other authors highlight that Employability skills constitute a combination of hard and soft skills. The lack of proficiency in soft skills, specifically in problem-solving, communication, and the application of knowledge, among university students, along with insufficient English language abilities, is a matter of concern for employers in Malaysia. They attribute this gap to deficiencies in higher education (Azmi, Hashim & Yosuff, 2018; Hurrell, 2016). Acquiring soft skills is crucial for students in order to secure employment. When hiring new employees, employers typically prioritise specific soft skills such as creativity, leadership, critical thinking, communication, time management, teamwork, and problem-solving (Patacsil & Tablatin, 2017). Consequently, Cimatti (2016) emphasises the importance of teaching soft skills all the way from primary school and even before that within the family. The significance of these soft skills lies in recognizing them as crucial components of employability skills. Familiarize oneself with the definition of each skill will facilitate the learning process, as emphasised by numerous scholars, as depicted in the Figure 1.

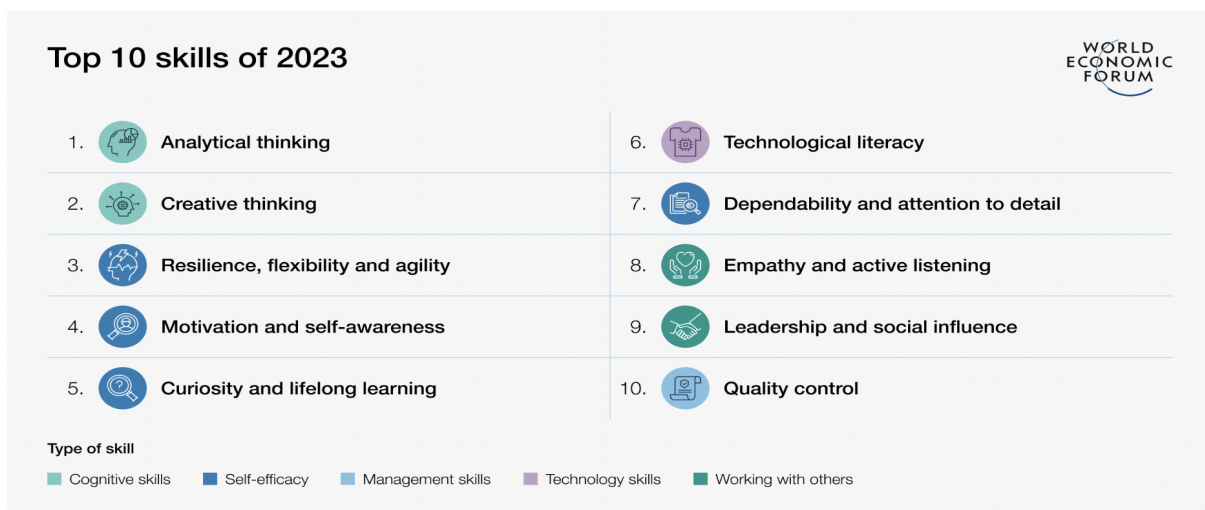
Skills	Definition
Communication skills/ foreign language	Understanding and performing in a language different from the mother tongue. It is the skill that helps transmit information and common understanding from one person to another. Good communication skill requires knowledge and understanding of social and cultural factors in a situation.
Problem-solving	Engaging in the action or thoughts necessary to find a solution to a difficult or complex question or situation and resolve conceptual problems.
Leadership	The ability to motivate and positively influence others to achieve goals. It is a behaviour, role relationship, influence, and interaction pattern. Graduates should develop and lead individual or team activities, addressing challenging situations.



Skills	Definition
Critical Thinking	Gathering, analysing, and articulating information from different sources for solving problems and making decisions.
Creativity	Thinking outside the box in order to bring new ideas to solve problems.
Decision Making	Thinking of several choices, relevant information, and predicting the consequences.
Teamwork	Involves a set of interdependent activities performed by individuals who collaborate toward a common goal.
Time Management	The process of planning and exercising conscious control of the time spent on specific activities to work smarter rather than harder.

**Table 1:** Definition of the skills. Source: Asefer and Abidin (2021)/Amirrudin & Salleh (2016)/ Ornellas et al. (2019)

Additionally, the importance of soft skills is underscored in the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Future of Jobs report. The WEF periodically identifies critical soft skills every two years. Listed below are the top 10 soft skills deemed most essential for the year 2023, according to the latest publication. However, this study focuses on the skills highlighted by Asefer and Abidin (2021) as the top 10 soft skills of 2023 (Di Battista et al., 2023) are ahead of the realities of Azerbaijan, as it is still in the process of developing a stronger labour force (Amirova and Valiyev, 2021).



**Table 2:** Top 10 skills of 2023 by WEF. Source: (Di Battista et al., 2023).

### 3.4 Soft skills in formal and non-formal education

This paragraph explores the relationship between soft skills and both formal and non-formal education, examining global trends in integrating these crucial competencies. It addresses challenges and issues faced in embedding soft skills into educational systems.

Formal and non-formal education systems have distinct but complementary functions in cultivating a comprehensive skill set. Formal education establishes the essential skills and knowledge as a foundation, while non-formal education offers practical experiences that facilitate the application of these skills in real-world circumstances (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004). Non-formal education is highly effective in improving soft skills, such as leadership, teamwork, communication, and intercultural competencies. These skills are increasingly acknowledged as crucial for achieving success in the global job market (Laal, 2011). Research indicates that non-formal education is more effective in meeting the needs of students, as it allows them to gain a deeper understanding of both them and the world. Non-formal education typically prioritises the student, offering a flexible and adaptable approach that responds to the specific needs and interests of individuals. It is also responsive to the evolving requirements of both individuals and societies (Todaro, 1995).

Formal and non-formal education includes these characteristics:

<b>Formal education</b>	<b>Non-formal education</b>
Learning is structured (e.g., linear objectives)	Learning may be structured
Learning is promoted through direct teaching behaviours	Learning is promoted through indirect teaching behaviours
Learning is intended (by educator and learner)	Learning is intended by the learner
Learning is recognised by the learner and educator	Learning is recognized by the learner
Motivation for learning may be extrinsic to the learner	
Learning takes place in educational institutions	Learning can take place in educational institutions
Learning has a mandated dimension	Learning has voluntary dimensions
Learning may be recognized or measured through qualifications	

<b>Formal education</b>	<b>Non-formal education</b>
Learning may be primarily focused on propositional knowledge	Learning may focus on both propositional and procedural knowledge
Learning tends to have a cognitive emphasis	Learning involves cognitive emotional social-behavioural and elements
The curriculum is written down	The curriculum may be written down
The learning process is ‘top-down’ focusing on developing specific knowledge and skills	The learning process is bottom-up focusing on the learner and their needs
Learning follows a formal curriculum	Learning may complement the formal curriculum

**Table 3:** Formal and non-formal education includes these characteristics. Source: Johnson, M. and Majewska, D., 2022. Formal, non-formal, and informal learning: What are they, and how can we research them? *Journal of Education, Society & Multiculturalism*, 1(2).

The interaction between soft skills and both formal and non-formal education is crucial in determining individuals' preparedness for the labour market. Formal education has historically focused on teaching technical knowledge and academic skills. However, it has been criticised for not sufficiently addressing the soft skills that are now highly valued in the contemporary workplace, such as interpersonal communication, critical thinking, and adaptability (Jackson, 2016). Helyer, (2011) focused on aligning higher education with the workplace in the UK and demonstrated that integrating soft skills into curricula enhances employability. The study showed that graduates with strong soft skills were more employable and performed better in their roles (Ibid.) Despite widespread initiatives to provide soft skills in higher education, there are still gaps between the performance of graduates in the workplace and the expectations of employers (Helyer, 2011). For example, the study of Jackson, and Chapman, (2012) research on non-technical skill gaps in Australian business graduates, highlighted significant gaps in skills like problem-solving and communication, which are highly valued by employers. This has informed the methodological approach (seen in Chapter 5) especially in interviewee sampling, attempting to highlight the importance of integrating soft skills in business education to enhance employability.

Furthermore, Yasunaga (2014) emphasises that formal education frequently overlooks critical soft skills, resulting in a gap in graduate competencies. Traditional curricula fail to include essential skills such as creativity, adaptability, teamwork, and the ability to thrive under pressure. Furthermore, effective communication, attention to detail, technological proficiency, time management, foreign language proficiency, responsibility, and decision-making are emphasised as essential skills for success in the modern workforce (Ibid). Bridgstock (2009) supports this perspective, asserting that fostering employability skills in academia serves not only to improve students' employment opportunities but also to equip them as agile learners and contributors in a complex, globalised society. Hence, educators increasingly agree that integrating employability skills into academic curricula is crucial for aligning educational outcomes with the intricate demands of the 21st-century workforce (Yorke, 2006). Recognizing this deficiency, there is a growing agreement on the necessity to incorporate soft skills more efficiently into formal educational programs, thus aligning educational outcomes more closely with the diverse requirements of modern employment sectors (Clarke, 2018).

Non-formal education serves as a valuable addition to the current educational system by providing flexible and practical opportunities for learners to enhance and polish their crucial soft skills through hands-on experiences. Non-formal education encompasses activities and programs that offer learners the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge and develop soft skills through practical engagement in real-world contexts (Jones, 2017). The combination of formal and non-formal educational experiences is essential for developing a comprehensive range of skills, connecting the theoretical knowledge gained through formal education with the practical, hands-on experiences offered by non-formal learning environments (Smith & Patton, 2016). The interdependence between these two educational fields highlights the significance of a comprehensive educational approach that not only provides knowledge but also fosters the essential soft skills required to navigate the intricacies of the international job market.

### **3.5 Employer Insights on Soft Skills**

In the contemporary job market, employers highly value graduates who not only meet academic requirements but also demonstrate a high level of proficiency, particularly in soft skills. This increasing emphasis requires a more profound comprehension of the soft skills that employers consider crucial, underscoring the importance for higher education institutions to align their curriculum with employer requirements (Asefer and Abidin, 2021). However, other authors

highlight that soft skills are more challenging to assess than hard skills, employers often prioritise candidates who possess a balance of both, recognizing the impact of soft skills on fostering a positive work environment and effective interpersonal interactions (Abujbara & Worley, 2018). Moreover, Kaur et al. (2008) noted that employers in higher positions, as a result of their extensive industry experience, have higher expectations regarding the skills that job candidates should have. Murugan and Sujatha (2020) state that employers highly appreciate a wide range of skills in prospective employees, such as foundational skills, effective communication, technological competence, and proficiencies in stress management, language, conflict resolution, and empathy. Consequently, the repercussions of employing individuals who lack essential skills can have a significant impact, resulting in decreased morale, commitment, and productivity, as well as increased turnover, recruitment expenses, and workplace incidents (Johri, 2005).

Furthermore, a 2017 report commissioned by the American Chamber of Commerce in Azerbaijan and endorsed by the Ministry of Education, underscores notable gaps in the preparedness of graduates. The recruitment survey, encompassing companies primarily in the banking and oil and gas sectors, which are Azerbaijan's most advanced industries, unveiled that approximately 70% of employers encounter difficulties in locating graduates possessing appropriate skills. More precisely, deficiencies were observed in non-technical aptitudes such as communication (58%), teamwork (42%), and presentation skills. The report highlights a prevailing viewpoint that students who lack these skills are prone to falling behind their peers in the highly competitive job market. Additionally, it identified difficulties that higher education institutions (HEIs) face in promoting the significance of soft skills among students. The mismatch between education and employability continues to be a significant obstacle for countries such as Azerbaijan (Amirova and Valiyev, 2021).

### **3.6 Youth Insights on Soft Skills**

In this shifting landscape, the perspectives of young individuals on soft skills have become increasingly vital. The younger generation today exhibits a deep understanding of the complex concept of employability. They recognize that true employability goes beyond academic achievements and includes a wide range of soft skills, such as effective communication, collaborative teamwork, proficient problem-solving, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances (Jackson, 2016). This broadened perspective is in line with the changing

priorities of the worldwide job market, which places importance not only on technical proficiency but also on the capacity to thrive in collaborative and dynamic environments (Clarke, 2018).

Graduates, especially, are realising that simply having a degree may not be enough in the highly competitive job market. They recognize the utmost significance of soft skills, acknowledging that these abilities are crucial for navigating the intricacies of modern employment environments (Tomlinson, 2008). Moreover, a survey conducted by a youth agency in Azerbaijan showed that 60% of 8,921 surveyed youths work in areas that are not relevant to their university degree and mainly lack soft skills (NAYORA, 2018). The common understanding among young people emphasises the need for an educational method that not only conveys academic knowledge but also actively cultivates the soft skills needed for success in today's constantly evolving workforce.

### **3.7 Insights from the Literature Review**

The literature review emphasises the growing importance of soft skills in the global labour market, emphasising the need for educational reforms that incorporate these skills into both formal and non-formal education to improve employability (Kayode, 2012; Pink, 2006). While employers value a combination of technical and soft skills, such as teamwork and adaptability, formal education systems frequently fall short of providing these necessary competencies (Yasunaga, 2014). This disparity between educational outputs and labour market demands necessitates a re-evaluation of curricula to better prepare students for modern employment challenges (Bridgstock, 2009; Clarke, 2018). According to the evidence from Malaysia, the agreement among employers and youth on the critical role of soft skills emphasises the importance of aligning education with the nuanced needs of today's job market (Tomlinson, 2008). This review advocates for a comprehensive educational approach that emphasises both technical knowledge and soft skills, ensuring that graduates are prepared for the complexities of a globalised workforce.

In the context of Azerbaijan, studies by Amirova and Valiyev (2021) and Elman and Akbulaev (2022) raise similar concerns, pointing to a significant misalignment between educational competencies and those required by the job market, with a particular emphasis on a lack of requisite soft skills as a barrier to employment. These findings highlight the broader issue that

the challenge of unemployment in Azerbaijan goes beyond a lack of job opportunities, pointing to a mismatch between received higher education and current labour market demands (Ibid.). Given the scarcity of research on the relationship between soft skills, employability, and the role of formal/non-formal education in the Azerbaijani context, this thesis seeks to fill that gap by providing valuable insights.

## **4. Theoretical Grounding and Key Concepts**

### **4.1 Human Capital Theory**

Following the literature review, this chapter aims to introduce theoretical perspectives on the Human Capital Theory (HCT) in conjunction with the EDGE model seen in the previous chapter. After a critical theoretical discussion on the use of HCT in empirical studies focusing on education and soft versus hard skills, this study adopts a more critical approach that tries to refrain from a market-driven neoliberal approach. Even if addressing soft skills in their opposition to hard skills can be methodologically justified, this study utilises HCT in understanding their interconnection within the overall education of young people and their challenges towards employability.

HCT, initially articulated by Becker (1962) and then Rosen (1976), revolves around two perspectives: Rational choices and General skills, with emphasis on education as the foremost facilitator of the global economy and economic participation (Bridgstock 2009). Companies and recruiters now view qualified graduates as factors of success and production because human capital reflects the labour quality skills and knowledge. (Mgaiwa, 2021)

Literature reveals a theoretical argument of employability and soft skills concerning HCT and human capability or development theory (Jonck 2014; Bridgstock 2009) with Jonck (2014) arguing that educational success is the dominant rule in measuring human capital quality. More studies indicate that while analysing students' employability from employers' perspectives, the skills and capabilities of graduates are analysed with a human capital approach (Ibid).

Although HCT portrays key impactful employability factors, the literature identifies key limitations, such as failing to highlight those skills that students must acquire in higher education (Suleman 2021). To overcome that, a significant number of studies have focused on employability skills highlighting the individual's soft and hard skills, job-oriented attributes, time, behavioural and technical aspects to help the employability process (Andrews and Higson 2008; Branine 2008; Clarke (2018). But there are other reasons to invest in education such as

the need to foster civic literacy aiming to stabilise the political system, the desire to support social mobility, the project of building a nation-state, and the social necessity of caring for children and youth (Kuzminov, et al. 2019). In Howard's (2018), opinion, "the unfortunate use of the term human capital is characteristic of a depersonalised, dehumanised concern, as people are "means to an identifiable end"." However, addressing soft skills, particularly within education, brings forth another layer that has been severely affected by education for economic growth (Tholen 2015). Many countries have fallen victim to the "middle-income trap", in which the growth of the education system does not result in the expected growth of productivity (Kuzminov, et al., 2019).

Thus, on the one hand, soft skills frame a productivity-driven education, which is captured by a vocabulary typical of the business world: goals, objectives, competence, efficiency, educational services, customers, etc. On the other hand, the intrinsic connection between soft skills and a humanistic approach aim to develop an independent person as a bearer of cultural, national, and social knowledge and skills; Soft skills imply the development of a person's creative potential, self-dependence, and autonomy, and at the same time, they are focused on meeting the needs of a globalised knowledge economy (Howard, 2018; Hilt, et al., 2019). In a way, a student has an opportunity to develop critical thinking, but within certain limitations – the limitations that pose a challenge to the political and economic status quo. Thus, being aware of the particular socio-political context, in this case of Azerbaijan, provides a critical lens to the analysis of employability and soft skills, while exploring the nuanced relationship of formal, non-formal education, the "growth" mindset that underlies HCT.

#### **4.2 CareerEDGE model of employability**

The CareerEDGE model, developed by Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007), is widely recognised as a practical and comprehensive framework for assessing graduate employability (Jollands, 2015; Small, Shacklock, & Marchant, 2018; Smith, et al., 2014; Dacre-Pool and Sewell, 2007). It has been applied extensively in the field of career management education and research. Conversely, Wait and Govender (2017) contended that the Career EDGE model's data collection was deficient in both depth and richness. It was contended to be an imprecise and superficial examination of employability.

In this model, employability is defined as "Having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful" (Dacre-Pool and Sewell, 2007; p. 280). It is a



complete model of employability, including students' Career development learning, Experience, Degree, Generic skills, and Emotional intelligence (CareerEDGE). A multi-tiered approach to improved self-perceived employability, which has been associated with enduring career contentment, is proposed by this sustainable employability model (Dacre-Pool and Qualter, 2013). Following this, the CareerEDGE Employability Development Profile (EDP) was independently verified by Dace-Pool et al. (2014) as a measurement tool and a developmental instrument for students, as well as to design, implement, and assess employability interventions.

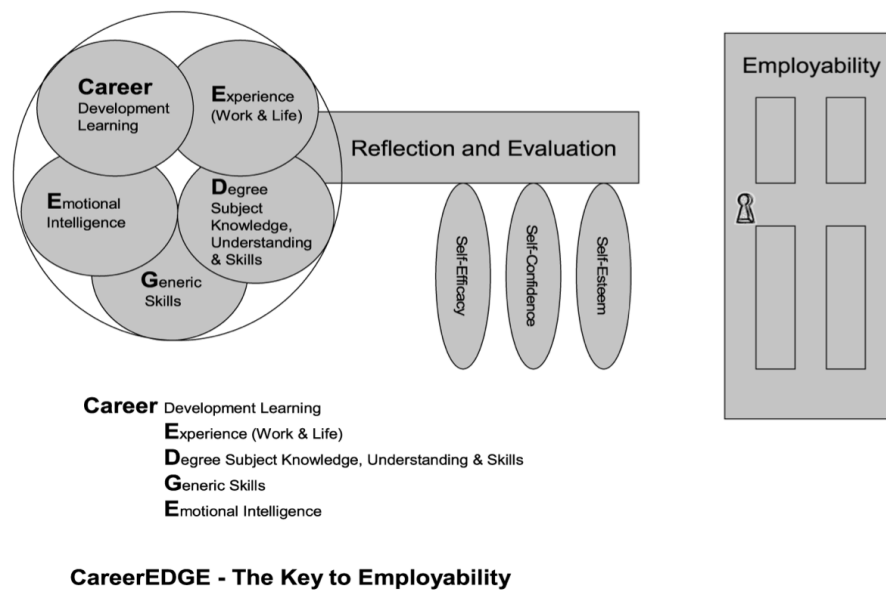
Thus, the CareerEDGE model explains crucial components that need to be taken into account when describing employability. The interrelationships between the essential components of employability are illustrated in Figure 4 by Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007). Career (learning and development), Experience (work and life), Degree (knowledge, understanding, and skills), Generic Skills, and Emotional Intelligence (EQ) are the five essential components. Employability results from the development of the higher-order categories of self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-esteem via evaluation and reflection on these components.



**Figure 1:** Essential components of employability. Source: Dacre-Pool and Sewell, 2007

According to Figure 1, Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007) symbolically established the key to access employability. The metaphorical model of employability, consisting of the elements

depicted above, is explicitly specified in Figure 5:



**Figure 2:** A symbolic model of CareerEDGE- The key to employability. Source: Dacre-Pool and Sewell, 2007

The literature has extensively discussed the terminology used to describe generic skills, which can also be referred to as "core skills", "key skills", or "transferable skills". The term "generic skills" has been employed in this model and is utilised.

*[...] to represent the skills which can support study in any discipline, and which can potentially be transferred to a range of contexts, in higher education or the workplace (Bennett et al., 1999, p. 76).*

Employers seek graduates who possess subject-specific skills, knowledge, and understanding. However, they also value well-developed generic skills in various domains (Harvey et al., 1997). Numerous publications have documented a substantial body of work that outlines the various generic or transferable skills that employers seek. According to the Pedagogy for Employability Group (2004, p 5), extensive research conducted over the past 25 years has resulted in a list of generic skills that employers anticipate finding in graduates:

- imagination/creativity;
- adaptability/flexibility;
- independent working/autonomy;
- working in a team;
- ability to manage others;
- ability to work under pressure;
- good oral communication;
- communication in writing for varied purposes/audiences;
- numeracy;
- attention to detail;
- time management;

- assumption of responsibility and for making decisions;
- planning, coordinating, and organising ability; and
- ability to use new technologies (not included in the list above but mentioned in many others and an important element). (Ibid)

Degree Subject Knowledge, Understanding, and Skills must be a fundamental concept in the model. The primary incentive for pursuing higher education is commonly understood to be the opportunity to delve deeply into a specific field of study, obtain a degree, acquire advanced qualifications, and consequently secure a good or improved job. It continues to hold true that individuals with higher qualifications enjoy significantly more employment prospects (Johnes, 2006).

According to Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007), in order for a graduate to fully realise their employability potential, they must possess highly developed emotional intelligence competencies, just like all the other components in the model. Emotional intelligence, as defined by Salovey, DiPaolo and Mayer (1990) refers to the ability of individuals to effectively utilise their emotions and feelings as a source of motivation to direct their thoughts and behaviours. According to Coetzee and Beukes (2010), emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in employability. Graduates who possess emotional intelligence are more likely to cultivate self-empowering career attitudes, skills, and behaviours. According to Coetzee and Beukes (2010), it is advisable to include emotional intelligence as a fundamental component in career support programmes.

Career development learning is an additional component within the CareerEDGE model. According to Watts (2009), career development is an essential element that should be incorporated into all higher education programmes. These programmes will help graduates acquire employability skills and guide them towards suitable career paths. According to Osibanjo, Oyewunmi, and Ojo (2014), career development helps graduates create individual career maps that showcase their values, skills, and other abilities. These maps serve as a guide for graduates and employees to make informed decisions about their career paths and contribute to the success of their organisations. Ultimately, career development enhances employability and makes individuals valuable assets to their employers.

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) relies heavily on life and work experience as crucial components for enhancing graduates' employability. Life and work experience are essential components of the CareerEDGE model. They are commonly employed in higher education institutions to enhance employability. It is essential to offer graduates opportunities to acquire

skills and experience in order to enhance their employability. However, acquiring skills alone does not guarantee employability (Dacre-Pool and Sewell, 2007)

Reflection and evaluation are crucial for ensuring employability. According to Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007), the absence of opportunities for reflection and evaluation makes it unlikely for a student to fully consider their progress in developing their employability and the necessary steps to further enhance it. Personal development planning (PDP) is essential for evaluating and reflecting on one's progress. According to Ward (2006), the connection between Personal Development Planning (PDP) and Employability is crucial for learners to recognise, express, and demonstrate their learning and overall growth. This connection is essential for successful advancement in education and career throughout one's life. (Ibid)

In regard to Self-efficacy, Self-confidence, and Self-esteem, Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007) explain the three closely-linked “Ss” to “provide a crucial link between knowledge, understanding, skills experience and personal attributes and employability” (p. 285).

Bandura (1995) defines perceived self-efficacy as the belief in one's ability to effectively plan and carry out the necessary actions to handle future situations. Efficacy beliefs have a significant impact on individuals' cognitive processes, emotional states, self-motivation, and behaviours. Self-confidence is evident in a person's attitude and behaviour. Goleman (1998) states that individuals who possess self-confidence are capable of projecting themselves with self-assurance and exude a sense of "presence." Furthermore, it is proposed that enhanced self-esteem plays a crucial role in fostering employability. Having a strong belief in one's ability to succeed and being able to demonstrate this belief to others is crucial. However, it is equally important for a graduate to possess a high level of self-esteem, which includes being realistic about their accomplishments and being dedicated to continuous learning throughout their life. (Steinem,1992, p. 26)

The “Ss” therefore perfectly fit in the CareerEDGE Model as self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-esteem are important qualities employers value in a prospective employee. (Dacre-Pool and Sewell, 2007)

## **5. Methodology**

This chapter describes the methodology used to investigate the relationship between soft skills development and youth employability in Azerbaijan, emphasising the rationale for site selection, research design, data collection methods, sampling strategy, and data analysis techniques. It also discusses ethical concerns, strategies for mitigating bias caused by positionality, and the study's limitations.

## 5.1 Positionality

Before moving on to introducing my methodological approach, I will begin by positioning myself as a researcher within this research project to highlight the importance of subjectivity based on situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988). This notion of specific knowledge tied to a particular situation signifies the interconnectedness of the ontology, epistemology, and ethics of the researcher with their research. Nevertheless, this constitutes a critical realist approach rather than the relativism of “everything is subjective” (Ibid). Therefore, in need of recognizing the risk of innate biases and layers of subjective practices, I will place myself within this study. For the last 14 years, my journey as a youth worker and soft skills development trainer has deeply immersed me in the context of non-formal education in Azerbaijan. Through the ability to actively participate in local non-governmental organisations and social activism, I have developed soft skills in communication, problem-solving, and adaptability, which greatly enabled the prospect of my professional career. Such privilege has informed my methodological approach by conducting a qualitative online survey, in an attempt to grasp how soft skills are perceived and developed by the students themselves.

I have spent the last ten years promoting the critical importance of soft skills among Azerbaijani youth, employing non-formal education techniques in training sessions while also utilising my outreach in a personal social media blog that engages over 100,000 young followers with content on soft skills enhancement, social activism, and educational opportunities abroad. My initiatives have motivated over 2,000 young individuals to participate in international projects and directly mentored more than 500 Azerbaijani youths in soft skills enhancement for global engagement. Such access to a wider audience,

Keeping my subjective perspective in mind, I am situating myself as an insider, due to my extensive background in soft skills development within the Azerbaijani context, able to identify systemic flaws and opportunities. As an insider, I position myself, as always transparent, reflexive, and aware of the knowledge I am producing, in the hope that this research serves not only to contribute to the academic discourse on non-formal education in Azerbaijan but also to offer practical insights for key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Youth and Sport, Youth Centers, NGOs, and the SEA, but ultimately to enhance the employability and social participation of Azerbaijani youth.

## **5.2 The case of Azerbaijan: Site selection**

The research focuses on the development of soft skills among Azerbaijani youth, focusing on the challenges they face in finding jobs post-graduation due to a lack of skills and work experience. The study aims to provide insights into the essential soft skills considered crucial by Azerbaijani youth and employers for success in the current labour market. The research is centred on Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, which serves as the primary educational and employment centre, hosting most universities and offering numerous job opportunities for recent graduates. This strategic focus enhances the importance and thoroughness of the research, allowing for an in-depth investigation of the relationship between formal and non-formal education, soft skills enhancement, and job prospects in Azerbaijan's changing labour market.

## **5.3 Research Design**

The qualitative research design of this thesis is based on the methodologies outlined in Alan Bryman's "Social Research Methods." Bryman's influential publication from 2016 is a fundamental resource that thoroughly examines qualitative research methods and emphasises their ability to investigate complex social phenomena and the detailed experiences of individuals. This method enables comprehensive data collection by engaging in direct interactions (Creswell, 2017). The study will offer an understanding of the personal experiences and interpretations that individuals attribute to their educational and professional paths. More specifically, it includes interviews with eight key informants from three critical sectors: two from non-formal education, one from human resources professionals from private and public employment sectors, and 4 academic staff members. This triangulation of perspectives seeks to enhance the research results by providing varied insights into the landscape of soft skills development in Azerbaijan (Creswell, 2017).

As Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006, p.70) propose, —the goal is to look at a process or the meanings individuals attribute to their given social situation, not necessarily to make generalisations. Aside from the targeted interviews, the research will also include a qualitative survey with the primary target group, the youth. Qualitative surveys offer one thing that is unique within qualitative data collection methods – a ‘wide-angle lens’ on the topic of interest (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004) that provides the potential to capture a diversity of perspectives, experiences, or sense-making (Braun et al., 2017b). This diversity is about hearing a range of

voices and sense-making, something especially useful when researching an un- or under-explored area, such as the soft skill's connection to youth employability in Azerbaijan.

Additionally, online qualitative surveys tackle the risk of treating a participant as a “spokesperson” within their demographic, due to their particular social position, bypassing the diversity of voices among the participants. This diversity of voices matters: it matters for quality and validity of knowledge; it matters for what knowledge might inform practice – as ‘the pond you fish in determines the fish you catch’ (Suzuki et al., 2007, p. 295) – and it matters from a social justice and inclusion point of view. Online qualitative surveys offer an accessible method to research beyond the ‘usual suspects’ (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Terry & Braun, 2017). This method provides an additional layer on the reality of soft skill learning in Azerbaijan, directly from the demographic targeted by the Azerbaijani government's efforts to increase youth employability.

Besides interviews and online surveys, the study will examine the official research document “Labour Market Bulletin 2024” published by the State Employment Agency as highlighted by Scott (2014) the value of official documents in social research, specifically their role as primary sources, offer systematic and authoritative data. The “Labour Market Bulletin 2024” provides information regarding the extensive study on the assessment of the competencies required by employers in the Azerbaijani labour market. The research includes data from 136 companies, with 67.1% from the private sector and 31.9% from the government sector. Consequently, the "Labour Market Bulletin 2024" will enable the study to incorporate a robust perspective from employers on the significance of soft skills, enhancing the depth and relevance of the findings. The research design is based on the selection of a case study methodology, providing a structured framework to examine the phenomenon of soft skills development in Azerbaijan's educational and employment settings. Flyvbjerg (2011) argues that case studies, despite being perceived as lacking generalizability, can make a substantial impact on social science research by offering in-depth analysis of a specific context that can lead to valuable insights and serve as a foundation for wider theoretical and empirical investigations.

This comprehensive qualitative method, which integrates interviews, surveys, and the bulletin in a case study structure, aims to reveal the complexities of soft skills enhancement and its crucial impact on enhancing youth employability in Azerbaijan. It will address the main research inquiries from various perspectives.

## **5.4 Data collection**

This thesis utilises qualitative research methods by accumulating data from various sources to thoroughly investigate complex phenomena. Interviews play a crucial role in this research as they can gather in-depth and subtle insights, making them a fundamental aspect of qualitative inquiry (Bryman, 2016). The interview guide's semi-structured format aims to encourage open dialogue, enabling detailed and contextual responses while offering the flexibility to explore important themes highlighted by participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Furthermore, this study applies a qualitative survey in addition to interviews to broaden its scope to a wider demographic of Azerbaijani youth. Utilising an online qualitative survey, following Braun et al. (2021), provides a flexible method for collecting data from many participants.

The data collection phase, including interviews and a qualitative survey, was carefully carried out over 30 days. The timeframe was carefully planned to allow for in-depth interaction with participants and to enable a thorough collection of data, establishing a strong basis for the following analysis.

### **5.4.1 Sampling**

The sampling strategy was meticulously developed through a comprehensive mapping of non-formal and formal education entities in Azerbaijan as well as employers, ensuring the inclusion of all key informants essential to the research. The interviewees were selected to provide a comprehensive perspective. Moreover, by conducting a qualitative survey, we aimed to incorporate the perspectives of young individuals regarding soft skills development, enhancing the comprehensiveness and representativeness of our research. The sampling of the survey was randomly distributed through the Instagram profiles of six notable youth workers in Azerbaijan, to encompass a wide range of viewpoints from the youth population. The deliberate choice to administer the survey in Azerbaijani was made to collect data from individuals with diverse educational backgrounds and abilities, to prevent the limitation of responses to only highly skilled English-speaking participants. There are various strategies to purposively sample: convenient (eligibility criteria are posted and the first volunteers who meet it comprise the sample),

Moreover, the data has been gathered from fourth-year undergraduate and second-year master's students nearing completion of studies and getting ready for employment as well as from recent graduates. In the realm of qualitative research, the selection of participants is not left to chance but is a deliberate process aimed at engaging individuals who possess deep insights into the



research questions at hand (Creswell, 2009). This purposeful sampling method is pivotal in social research, ensuring that the chosen participants can provide rich, detailed, and relevant data that significantly contribute to the understanding of the study's focal issues (Bryman, 2016).

This study strategically selected interviewees whose roles and experiences could illuminate the relationship between soft skills development and youth employability in Azerbaijan. A detailed mapping of formal and non-formal education entities and my professional network in Azerbaijan helped me identify and contact key informants for 8 Google Meet interviews. Each was briefed on my thesis objectives and invited to a 60-minute discussion, with all eager to contribute meaningful insights to this soft skills and employability exploration. Bryman (2016) recommended a semi-structured interview format for qualitative research because it ensured consistency and allowed for in-depth exploration of emerging topics. Two interviews were in English, but the other six were in Azerbaijani and translated and transcribed into English for comprehensive analysis.

### **Key Interviewers:**

1. **Director of the Central Career Branch in Baku:** leads a SEA-affiliated youth career guidance and soft skills enhancement institution in Azerbaijan. The director is a key informant because the branch helps universities create career centres and integrate career and soft skills courses into academic curricula.
2. **Director of the Youth Career and Development Centers:** The director's work covers Azerbaijan's youth development beyond the capital. Their involvement in non-formal education initiatives shapes how such education affects soft skills development nationwide.
3. **Directors of Career Centers at Baku State University and Azerbaijan State University of Economics:** These two major Azerbaijani universities emphasise career and soft skills development with active career centres and large student bodies. Directors' interviews reveal academic perspectives on youth development and formal education-career readiness relationships.
4. **A youth worker from a government agency in Baku, Azerbaijan:** The youth worker has over 10 years of experience improving youth soft and hard skills through projects and programs.

5. **University Teachers:** These representatives are associated with career centres that are more in name than practice. University educators in Baku offer valuable perspectives on system challenges. Their roles contrast theoretical career advancement with career centre implementation.
6. **A human resource professional with experience in both private and public sectors:** The HR is deeply involved in youth skill development projects, offering valuable insights into Azerbaijan's labour market soft skills needs. Her understanding enriches this research on youth employability by highlighting employer preferences.

### 5.5 Data Analysis

The data analysis for this thesis was carefully carried out to guarantee a detailed comprehension of the intricate relationship between soft skills development and youth employability in Azerbaijan. All interviews were conducted in Azerbaijani, the national language, in order to preserve important insights. The sessions were recorded after obtaining consent to prevent any loss of valuable information (Creswell, 2017). The recorded data were promptly translated and transcribed to facilitate analysis, following Silverman's (2013) recommendations. Data analysis proceeds by (a) preparing the data for analysis, (b) conducting content analysis, and (c) if desired and the sample size is adequate, transforming the textual data into numerical data. (McIntosh & Morse, 2015)

The analysis utilised NVivo, an advanced software for qualitative data analysis, to effectively manage and organise a large amount of collected data. This tool facilitated the methodical coding and categorization of data, following Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) focus on organising qualitative data to identify significant patterns and themes. Bryman (2016) emphasises the importance of using software to improve the thoroughness and complexity of qualitative analysis by enabling researchers to effectively identify and investigate recurring themes and patterns within the data set. While coding the interviews and the online survey, the method was dynamic, with a focus on constant movement between the theory and the empirical data (Wodak, 2011:8)

The transcribed interviews were carefully analysed, emphasising important statements and insights from participants that were relevant to the study's research questions. The process entailed a meticulous coding procedure to identify and categorise recurring words, phrases, and expressions from interviews into thematic groups (Gibbs, 2007).

The qualitative surveys were analysed using Braun et al.'s (2021) methodology to interpret the nuanced perspectives gathered. To code the transcripts Nvivo 12 software was used, developing a code system where initially codes stemmed from the questions of the online survey and were, after the second wave of coding, merged into broader categories. The survey responses were examined to identify main themes and insights, enhancing the interview data and offering a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Utilising both interviews and qualitative surveys with the assistance of NVivo 12 allowed for a thorough and detailed examination of the topic.

## **5.6 Considerations**

Having discussed the assumptions, data collection methods and analysis framework, I will now elaborate on the ethical considerations and limitations of the methodological approach used in this study, as well as any limitations and reliability.

### **5.6.1 Ethical considerations**

All the empirical data used in this thesis has been obtained with the informed consent of the interviewees and online survey respondents. Throughout the course of this study, I strived to maintain transparency and comprehensively document each step of the research process. This includes detailed documentation of methodological decisions such as sampling and analytical approach, data collection procedures, and analytical techniques through memos, annotations, interpretive coding in Nvivo. By prioritising transparency, I aim to enhance the trustworthiness and replicability of my research findings, thereby contributing to future research.

Situations of confidentiality breach may easily occur in studies conducted remotely by digital means in which the researcher has no control over who may enter the study setting and also via social media due to the difficulty to separate public and private (Taquette, 2022) A strategy used to counter this issue is to include within the online qualitative survey questions on the respondents information that is relevant to the study: in which university are they enrolled or have been enrolled, as well as graduation year and name of the study program. Of course, this study is limited to the transparency of the respondents (Connors et al., 2019).

Additionally, researchers' biases and preconceptions may influence the design, interpretation, and reporting of online qualitative research, potentially affecting the validity and reliability of the findings (Galdas, 2017).

Throughout the research process, I tried to be reflective of my own assumptions, values, and biases. By acknowledging and actively mitigating the influence of my subjectivities, I aimed to minimise researcher bias in data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

### **5.6.2 Limitations**

Individuals with limited access to technology or low digital literacy may be underrepresented in a sample that has been accessed online (Herzing and Blom, 2019) That being said, since the focus of this study is exploring soft skills and youth employability, the sampling techniques were focusing on individuals between the ages of 18-29. Interviews are in Azerbaijani and translated by me in English (Temple & Young, 2004).

The results of the analysis cannot be generalised to a larger sample or population, as the analysis purpose was to perform an in-depth analysis of the data collected through six interviews with 8 field experts and 67 survey participants. According to the State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, since the number of graduates in the country is 233.159, approximately 11% of the total number of students, the sample of this study is not representative.

Another limitation acknowledged in this section is the participation of the respondents: The literature review has revealed the distinction between active and passive youth, with the latter not interested in soft skills development. This has been recorded over the first wave of coding, where many young respondents of the online survey were aware of the importance of soft skills while experts were highlighting the difficulty, they face in youth engagement with career centres. This indicates that there are youth that could not be involved in this study.

Lastly, de Leeuw argues that many people may “lurk” or not give the questionnaire adequate time, and for that Internet questionnaires must be short, with less than 10 to 15 minutes to complete (de Leeuw, 2008). Reflecting on this, I ensured that the online survey questionnaire does not exceed 10 minutes to complete, while also not compromising the quality of the open-ended questions asked.

## **6. Results**

This study delves into the growth of soft skills. The main goal of this research is to assess the effectiveness of developing soft skills through both formal education and non-formal learning in enhancing employability among young people in Azerbaijan. Furthermore, the study intends to identify the soft skills that are perceived by Azerbaijani youth and employers as most essential in the current labour market.

For this study, data was collected through 8 interviews with stakeholders such as HR managers, educators, and youth workers. In addition, secondary sources such as literature and the Labour Market Bulletin 2024 document were examined. In addition, an online qualitative survey was conducted to incorporate the viewpoints of young individuals. A total of 67 individuals responded to a set of 17 open-ended questions that required detailed answers. The age range of the survey participants is between 18 and 32 years old, with 83.6% being female and 16.4% being male. Furthermore, 46.3% of the students are in their final year of their bachelor's degree, 10.4% are in their final year of their master's degree, and 43.3% have already graduated. In addition, among the 67 survey participants, 53.7% are currently employed and 46.3% are unemployed.

### **6.1 Soft Skills and Employability**

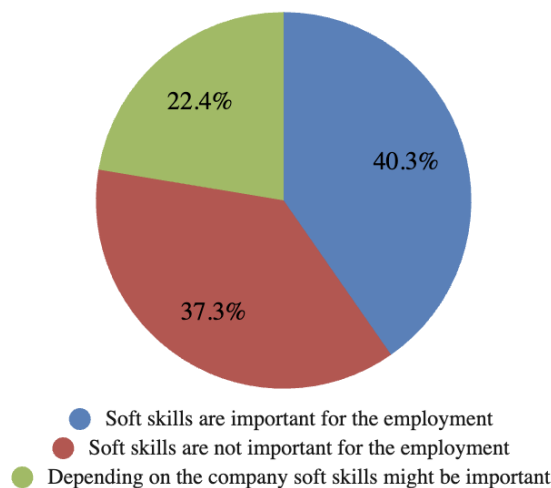
The interviewees, including the head of the central career branch, youth workers, and career centre representatives from academia, emphasised the crucial role of soft skills in the employment and employability of youth in the labour market of Azerbaijan. The HR emphasised that in the past, individuals could be hired primarily based on their hard skills. However, in the current Azerbaijani labour market, soft skills have become significantly more important in the selection process. The primary factor is that hard skills can be readily taught and acquired, whereas soft skills are more challenging to enhance. Furthermore, during the hiring process, HR professionals typically prioritise specific soft skills of candidates that align with the company's values. The HR also stated that soft skills have a positive impact on employees' career advancement.

Due to the difficulty in finding employees with exceptional soft skills, the company highly values their presence and wishes to retain them. The head of the central career branch emphasised that young individuals who possess robust soft skills, such as teamwork,

communication, presentation, and critical thinking, can advance in their careers within the organisation they are employed. In addition, both the head of the youth career development centre and the youth worker emphasised that possessing strong soft skills allows young people to attain success in a highly competitive labour market. Further, most of the participants of the survey also raised the importance of soft skills and one of the students distributed such a detailed response:

*“Soft skills (or lack of them) can have a huge impact on our career development. Skills such as effective communication, leadership, and collaboration made me more successful in the workplace and helped me advance to higher positions. Empathy and adaptability skills help me better connect with my clients and organise my work effectively. Also, creativity helped me to introduce new ideas. However, a lack of soft skills can cause problems in the workplace and cause you to experience difficulties.”*

Soft Skills in Azerbaijani Labour Market.



**Figure 3:** The chart indicating the soft skill importance coding references among survey participants.

The online survey summary reveals that 40.3% of participants emphasised the significance of soft skills, while 22.4% acknowledged that the importance of soft skills may vary depending on the company. Nevertheless, 37.3% of participants indicated that soft skills hold no significance. Therefore, it is evident that many of the respondents recognise the importance of soft skills for employment in Azerbaijan. HR further emphasised that the significance of soft skills will continue to increase. According to the head of the career centre at BSU, the advancement of soft skills is expected to be the most significant requirement over the next 50

years. Moreover, the head of the central career branch emphasised the significance of both paid and unpaid internships, as they provide young individuals with the opportunity to fully engage in work-integrated learning. The career centre representatives from universities also emphasised the significance of internship programmes, as these experiences encourage students to participate in internships and work-integrated learning experiences not only enrich their soft skills but also enhance their human capital by bridging the gap between academic learning and real-world applications. Moreover, these experiences provide young individuals the opportunity to gain first-hand exposure to the professional work environment. Internships allow them to identify their strengths and weaknesses, explore their field of interest, improve their soft skills, and most importantly, apply their theoretical knowledge in practical settings. However, it was only mentioned by one career centre representative that Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC) maintained a list of private sector partners, which is updated annually by the career centre employees. The UNEC guides students regarding internship opportunities available through their partner companies in the private sector. Despite the recognition of its significance by three other universities, no steps have been taken to establish a partnership with the private sector, as it is currently not a top priority for the career centres. Furthermore, HR emphasised that there is a lack of collaboration between the private sector and formal education due to a mutual lack of awareness regarding its substantial benefits for both parties.

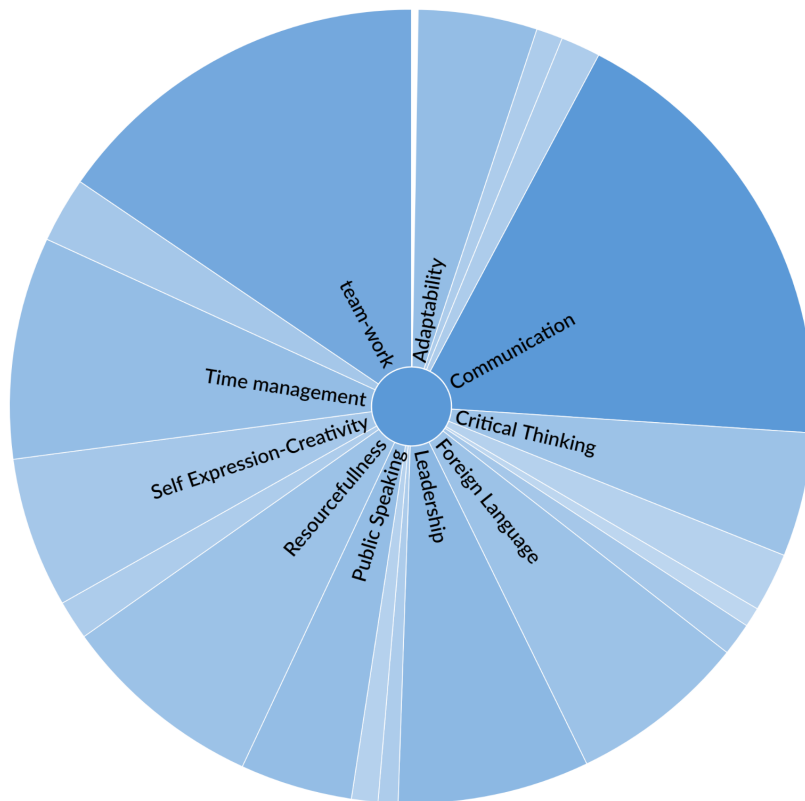
The second aim of the study is to identify the comprehensive list of soft skills that are most in demand for achieving successful employability. Based on the data from interviewees, the HR emphasised that the job market in Azerbaijan has diverse demands, with each company having its own specific set of soft skills required based on the company's values and the position's requirements. Furthermore, the “Labour Market Bulletin 2024”, identified 10 soft skills that employers require for expert and administrative positions.

<b>For Expert Position</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>For Administrative position</b>	<b>%</b>
Learning oriented	90.3	Teamwork	62.6
Operativeness	87.4	Operativeness	60.7
Teamwork	85.9	Stress Management	58.7

Details oriented	84.5	Details oriented	57.8
Adaptability	84.0	Learning oriented	56.8
Effective Communication	84.0	Adaptability	55.8
Result Oriented	83.5	Active listening	50.0
Active listening	80.1	Multitasking	47.1
Initiatives	76.7	Result Oriented	44.7
Technological skills	76.7	Effective Communication	44.7

**Table 4:** 10 soft skills required by employers in Azerbaijan. Source: State Employment Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2024. *Labour Market Bulletin 2024*.

Additionally, participants of the online survey conducted for the study also identified communication, teamwork, and adaptability as the most important soft skills for employability in Azerbaijan. The following chart showcases the soft skills that survey participants have identified as the most important in connection to employability:



**Figure 4:** Hierarchy chart indicating the soft skill coding references among survey participants. Source: NVivo



More specifically, the top 10 soft skills, according to the online survey participants of this study are:

	All Participants
Communication	29,19%
Adaptability	12,05%
Teamwork	10,55%
Resourcefulness	8,53%
Foreign Language	7,63%
Self Expression/Creativity	6,66%
Time management	6,51%
Critical Thinking	5,61%
Stress management	4,72%
Leadership	4,19%
Public Speaking	2,62%
Decisiveness	1,72%

Comparing the list of 10 skills distributed by employers and youth, the one skill that is recognised by both in the first 3 is teamwork. Furthermore, communication and adaptability are also overlapping with the list published by the SEA. An interesting insight is that the analysis found examples of skills

**Table 5:** Top 10 soft skills mentioned by survey participants.

Source: NVivo

indicated by the survey participants, such as foreign language, critical thinking, public speaking, leadership, time management, and resourcefulness, do not overlap with the top 10 soft skills by the SEA. This disparity may partially arise from the different interpretations and definitions of these skills by each group involved in the surveys. Subsequently, there is a mismatch between employers' skills demand for recruitment and youth skills expectations for employment. On the other hand, interviewers emphasised the importance of presentation skills, communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking as essential soft skills for employability. Nevertheless, the director of the career centre at Baku State University (BSU) included research skills, whereas the HR department emphasised the importance of the initiative.

Moreover, in the “Labour Market Bulletin 2024” the employers highlighted the percentages of the young jobseekers experiencing challenges in the recruitment processes due to the low level of presentation skills (58.7%), communication skills (49.5%), lack of knowledge about the vacancy and company (45.1%), a non-serious approach to recruitment (37.9%), unprofessional behaviour (35.9%), dissemination of incorrect information (25.2%), tardiness to interviews (18%), incorrect contact details (7.8%), and other issues (6.3%) related with candidates.

Nevertheless, many students from the online survey highlighted that some state enterprises do not value the soft skills of their employees, focusing solely on previous work experience or

work deliverables. One of the students added, “There is still not much soft skills-oriented work process in state enterprises in Azerbaijan, but soft skills are already becoming a trend in private workplaces.”

## 6.2 Soft Skills Development in Formal Education

The HR and career centre representatives emphasised that universities primarily prioritise academic knowledge over the development of soft skills. This academic rigour-centric approach limits students' preparedness for the labour market, as highlighted by the head of the central career branch, who also noted the absence of dedicated soft skills development curricula within many universities in Baku. Most of the responses from the online survey were similar to the cited one and proved the lack of soft skills integration at university education:

*“As many young people experience in Azerbaijan, my university education did not play a significant role in my soft skills development, as the education system is focused only on the distribution of academic knowledge, subsequently I acquired these skills more on my account and desire via social activism.”*

Based on the summary of the responses 40% of respondents mentioned the absence of soft skills integration into university curricula and 11% complained about a traditional approach that was quite superficially addressing soft skills development. Career planning classes were mentioned by 3% of the participants, specifically by those attending UNEC, the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy (ADA), and Khazar University.

Formal education and Soft skills	
I improved my soft skills due to the student organisation within the university	14.99%
I did not improve my soft skills as I did not join any activity within the university	19.40%
Universities did not integrate soft skills teaching into curricula	40.29%
I improved soft skills due to a career planning course at the university	2.98%
I improved my soft skills a bit due to a few trainings at university	11.90%

Universities have a very traditional approach with lack of soft skills integration	10.44%
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**Table 6:** The table indicates the responses to the question “How formal education affected the soft skills development of the survey participants”.

Furthermore, the HR department highlighted the importance of youth counselling due to the abundance of information and opportunities that might lead them to confusion adding that the presence of career centres at universities is necessary. The head of the central career branch, with support from HR, also emphasised the necessity of compulsory career planning courses for youth. This seems to agree with the majority of the survey respondents as many of them still value the legitimacy of formal education and thus the integration of soft skill development within that.

The head of the central career branch mentioned that 10 universities in Azerbaijan have established career centres, and with the support of the SEA, the central career branch is providing capacity development training for the career centre representatives of these 10 universities. However, the two career centre representatives added more details: some career centres are established formally, but due to financial issues, they do not have dedicated staff, or any initiatives extended within the collaborating universities.

Nevertheless, the other two universities, such as BSU and the UNEC, have actively functioning career centres since 2022 and 2018, respectively. The career centre within UNEC is the only one in Azerbaijan that has a career planning department focusing on developing academic teaching materials and has published a manual book for career planning subjects. The career centre director at UNEC responded that UNEC has been teaching career planning subjects to all students at the universities for two semesters starting from the first grade starting from 2022. However, based on previous experience, the career centre employees found that it had a low effect on students as it was too early for them, and they did not understand its importance. Subsequently, the career centre reconstructed the curriculum so that the career planning subject would be taught in the second half of the second year of the bachelor’s degree. Moreover, for other students who do not have this subject, the career centre organises training, and workshops, and offers consultancy services on how to prepare a CV and how to respond to interview questions.

The UNEC career centre director revealed results from an experiment assessing the impact of career planning courses on students. The study compared groups with and without this subject in their syllabus over two semesters, finding significant skill improvements in presentation, communication, teamwork, and research among students who took the course. These students also showed a more proactive approach to job searching and higher interest in volunteering, internships, and social projects compared to their peers without such courses.

BSU mandates career planning subjects in only three programs. The career centre is tasked with syllabus introduction, teacher development, and organising extracurricular seminars, workshops, and job fairs focused on soft skills and networking. The career centre head at BSU reported that many students are indifferent to soft skills, noting that in a typical group of 35, only 7 recognize their importance and engage in activities like projects and volunteering. Conversely, at UNEC, only 20-30% of students demonstrate disinterest in soft skills. Despite this, 73% of survey respondents expressed interest in participating in voluntary soft skills development activities. An interesting insight that came through the data analysis of the online survey was that quite often students would mention that career centres have adopted a superficial approach towards soft skills, with the educator's approach and capacity building being one of the most coded nodes within this section.

HR and career centre leaders stressed the importance of collaboration between career centres, the private sector, and government agencies to improve youth soft skills for the job market. They highlighted the slow adaptation of universities to employment market realities, especially in Azerbaijan where changes are hindered by bureaucratic and regulatory constraints. For instance, academic syllabuses can only be updated every five years, often resulting in outdated courses. Additionally, conservative management in academia further delays necessary updates, making it challenging for institutions to keep pace with global changes.

Furthermore, both youth workers and academia representatives emphasised that soft skills should be taught at universities. They noted that soft skills are better improved through non-formal educational activities such as volunteering, internships, social projects, etc. Moreover, all interviewees except also mentioned that a high amount of youth lack interest in social activism, especially volunteering, as it is mostly unpaid, and they do not see the real learning benefits beyond payment. However, all interviewees highlighted that soft skills can be improved through non-formal education, and youth must participate in volunteering activities and social projects within youth NGOs, youth houses, and international organisations. Furthermore, a few quotes from the survey participants prove the proposed idea:

*“After volunteering experience, I can clearly express my thoughts, and manage stress, and I can understand why the HRs in the interview processes are asking that specific questions. Thanks to that experience and gained skills I have been successful in all the interviews I have attended.”*

*“I developed my empathy and cooperation skills by strengthening my relationships with people through volunteering activities. These non-formal education programs have helped me a lot both in the business world and in my personal life.”*

Youth workers mentioned that 30% of youth who join youth organisations lack interest in soft skills development initiatives, while the remaining 70% are interested, although interest may also depend on the topic and format of the activity. The interviewers also noted the lack of emotional intelligence, adaptation, presentation, problem-solving, research, critical thinking skills, time management, and teamwork among Azerbaijani youth. In response to that, the survey responses confirm that many respondents prioritise generic skills over emotional intelligence.

	Bachelor´s Students	Master´s Students	Graduates
Generic Skills	80,32%	75,44%	77,13%
Emotional Intelligence	19,68%	24,56%	22,87%

**Table 7:** Matrix highlights the perceived importance of “Generic Skills” and “Emotional Intelligence” for employability within each respondent category.

The summary of the survey responses also highlights that 38% of survey participants significantly and 22% partially improved their soft skills due to non-formal education initiatives, however, 30% of youth did not want to join any.

<b>Soft Skills in Non-Formal Education in Baku</b>	
I significantly improved my soft skills due to non-formal education initiatives	37.3%
I did not join any non-formal education initiatives	29.85%
Non-formal education initiatives partially affected my soft skills	22.38%
I did not join constantly any non-formal education initiative due to family constraints	10.47%

**Table 8:** The table indicates the responses to the question “How non-formal education affected the soft skills development of the survey participants”.

Interviewers found that Azerbaijani youth struggle with low self-confidence, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. The head of the central career branch noted that 70% of career counselling cases involve this issue. Many young volunteers do not apply for projects due to feeling inferior. This lack of confidence also affects university students who are too shy to participate in class. The root cause, according to experts, is a lack of knowledge and skills, hindering reflection and evaluation. This absence of reflection and evaluation prevents the formation of confidence and self-esteem even among socially active youth.

Data from the survey shows that 44% of socially active youth saw a notable improvement in their soft skills, with 27% experiencing some improvement. However, 30% couldn't answer due to limited experience.

<b>Soft Skills and Self-Confidence</b>	
My self-confidence has changed significantly after social activities	43.28%
I did not join any social activities	29.85%
My self-confidence increased after social activities, however, I need to improve	26,87%

**Table 9:** The table indicates the responses to the question “How non-formal education initiatives affected the self-confidence of the survey participants”.

Youth workers have emphasised the need for collaboration between formal and non-formal education to boost awareness of soft skills at university, thus enhancing student engagement with non-formal educational opportunities. The Azerbaijani government, recognizing this challenge, established the central career branch through the SEA. This branch focuses on promoting the importance of soft skills for employment and developing policies, strategies, and training programs. It also offers both online and offline career guidance, organises social projects, events, and exhibitions on employability, and provides capacity-building for employees of youth organisations and houses.

## 6.4 Societal Norms and Soft Skills Development

The data from interviews, Labour Market Bulletin 2024, and an online qualitative survey clearly reflect significant societal norms hindering soft skills development. Interviewees highlighted the societal importance placed on having a diploma.

1. The head of the career development centre mentioned that possessing a diploma is necessary for a successful future career, even if one works in a field different from the diploma mentioned. This social norm is evident in the Labour Market Bulletin 2024 data, showing that 92.71% of employers require a bachelor's degree for expert positions, while 42.26% would consider a person with a relevant professional certification and 37.37% require a master's degree. Moreover, for administrative assistant positions, 53.39% of employers require a bachelor's degree, 44.17% would accept VET education, and only 36.89% mentioned school education as sufficient. The societal pressure for obtaining a diploma also comes from families, as most parents believe their child must have at least a bachelor's diploma to attain the status of "a person with higher education," which is highly valued in Azerbaijani society, according to HR.

2. The concept of the status "a person with higher education" shows the high value placed on academic education by the older generation in Azerbaijani society, potentially leading to a lack of understanding regarding the importance of soft skills. This contrasts with the non-formal education approach, which some parents view as unserious and a waste of time. 7 students out of 67 reported parental opposition to their involvement in social projects and volunteering activities, and of the students highlighted this issue with the quote below:

*"I have attended many trainings and seminars, and I am currently a volunteer. Social activism had a great influence on my soft skills development. However, some families are very dissatisfied that their child is involved in such activities. They try to dissuade young people from this path as they do not consider non-formal education as serious."*

HR suggested integrating soft skills into secondary and high school programs, while HR mentioned that these topics might be too advanced for school children.

## 6.3 Soft Skills Development in Non-Formal Education

All interviewees emphasised the lack of understanding of the benefits and concept of non-formal education among many representatives of Azerbaijani society. Non-formal education,

which is based on games, team-building activities, and presentations, often appears more as entertainment than an educational process to older generations and some young people. HR

## **7. Discussion**

The study on soft skills development, in educational environments in Azerbaijan has offered valuable insights into youth employability. Analysing the data shows that while formal education helps youth acquire technical skills, informal education is crucial for nurturing soft skills, which are now seen as vital, for employability (Smith, 2020; Jones, 2017). This discovery aligns with human capital theory in that education improves productivity and job prospects by providing youth with necessary skills (Becker, 1964). Moreover, Brewer (2013) highlights that youth employability goes beyond securing the first job; it involves navigating through a career and remaining employable throughout life.

The correlation between real world observations and the CareerEDGE framework also provide an insight into employability within the Azerbaijani context. According to the model, employability is improved by incorporating career development learning, practical experience, academic qualifications, transferable skills, and emotional intelligence (Dacre- Pool and Sewell 2007). The research data from this study highlights the role of education in nurturing these aspects, especially generic skills and emotional intelligence which are less emphasised in formal educational environments. For example, as indicated by the data analysis, youth centres and informal educational initiatives in Azerbaijan play a role in cultivating skills like teamwork, communication abilities and adaptability. These programs not only complement formal education but also align well with the CareerEDGE components, suggesting a holistic approach to employability that integrates both formal and non-formal education (Smith, 2020).

When looking at how soft skills are taught in Azerbaijan's educational institutions, similarities can be made with differences seen in Bangladesh, Australia, and the UK, which were talked about in the literature review. Notably, the focus on soft skills in these different settings shows that people around the world are becoming more aware of the importance of these skills for employability. For example, Nusrat M. and Sultana N.'s (2019) study showed that business graduates in Bangladesh who were good at teamwork, leadership and interpersonal skills were more likely to secure employment. This is similar to what was found in Azerbaijan, where soft



skills were seen as essential for improving job prospects. Similarly, the integration of soft skills into curricula in the UK, (Helyer R. 2011) and the fact that Australian business graduates lack certain non-technical skills (Jackson D. & Chapman E., 2012) are similar to the challenges and opportunities that have been found in Azerbaijan's educational institutions. These similarities not only reinforce the findings from Azerbaijan, but they also show how crucial soft skills are in all kinds of educational and job settings. This indicates that education reforms are needed all over the world to more effectively incorporate these skills.

Employers' expectations in Azerbaijan reflect a significant demand for soft skills, which aligns with the findings of this study that soft skills are critical for employability (Murugan and Sujatha, 2020). The mismatch between the skills provided by the education system and the needs of the labour market (Elman and Akbulaev, 2022), particularly in terms of soft skills, underlines the necessity for educational reforms that integrates these skills into the curriculum (Amirova and Valiyev, 2021; Asefer and Abidin, 2021). This aligns with SDG 4, which advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). By enhancing the teaching of skills Azerbaijan can take steps towards fulfilling SDG 8s objectives of fostering sustainable economic growth, providing meaningful employment opportunities and promoting decent work, for all (United Nations, 2015).

In practical terms, the findings from the research suggests that it is important for policies to focus on enhancing skills in education. Proposals for policies include incorporating soft skills development into the official curriculum and expanding non-formal learning opportunities to foster these skills effectively (Smith, 2020; Jones, 2017). Moreover, the analysed data highlighted the necessity of teaching soft skills in secondary and high school programs while Cimatti (2016) suggests that soft skills must be taught all the way from primary school and even before that within the family. In addition, employers also need to recognize and actively support the development of soft skills in the workplace, which could involve collaborations with educational institutions to ensure that the skills of graduates meet the current market demands (Murugan and Sujatha, 2020).

Diving deeper into the CareerEDGE model the data analysis strongly emphasises the significance of 'Experience', as an element. By participating in non-formal education activities or internships young individuals gain hands-on work and life experiences that connect theoretical knowledge with real world practice. These experiences play a role in shaping the

'Degree' aspect, which encompasses not only academic credentials but also the practical application of acquired knowledge (Dacre-Pool and Sewell 2007). The integration of 'Generic Skills' such as teamwork and communication, which are developed through interactive activities in non-formal settings, further highlights the tangible benefits of the CareerEDGE model based on the data analysis.

Emotional intelligence, another component of the CareerEDGE model (Dacre-Pool and Sewell, 2007), has been highlighted in the analysis as a “blind spot” for the online survey participants. This reflects the broader contextual background of Azerbaijan and specifically the noted emphasis on formal education and the development of generic skills, to increase employability. The development of self-awareness, empathy, and interpersonal skills within these contexts highlights the comprehensive nature of the learning processes that contribute to employability (Coetzee and Beukes, 2010). However, in an educational system which has been characterised by 84% of the survey respondents as having a “superficial approach” to soft skills development, a discussion about self-awareness and empathy, unfortunately falls short. In addition, issues such as educator’s capacity building or the lack of implementation of soft skills within the general curriculum has been underscored significantly by survey respondents and that, within the EDGE model fits possibly in the category of “degree subject and knowledge”.

These findings agree with findings of the 2023 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung report where it has been underlined that “Young people in focus group discussions were critical of the country’s education system. Respondents noted that schools offer outdated curricula, instructors are not on top of the modern approaches to education and the quality of education itself fails to respond to the demands of the labour market” (Shubladze et al., 2023). Thus, even if a young person has the reflexivity and emotional intelligence to understand that, and even try to better their skills and circumstances, it does not encompass the lack of support that they are facing which ultimately affects their employability.

Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of re-examining and extending Human Capital Theory to encompass the significance of soft skills, as integral parts of human capital that enhance economic growth and personal efficiency. Scholars such as Becker (1964) and Jonck (2014) have emphasised this aspect. Moreover, there is potential to enrich the CareerEDGE model by integrating soft skills into its structure underscoring the necessity for educational institutions to incorporate these skills systematically into their curricula as

proposed by Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007).

In conclusion, while Azerbaijan has made significant progress in education and youth employment, the integration of soft skills into educational frameworks remains crucial, as the education system struggles to adequately prepare students for the workforce (Valiyev, 2020). Aligning these educational outcomes with the labour market needs, especially through the enhancement of non-formal education, could substantially improve youth employability, contributing towards the achievement of SDGs 4 and 8. Research and policy efforts should prioritise these alignments to ensure that educational outputs meet the changing demands of both local labour markets (Amirova and Valiyev 2021; United Nations, 2015). This holistic approach highlights the connection between non formal education as outlined in the CareerEDGE model. It promotes an employability profile that includes academic, practical and emotional aspects.

## **8. Conclusion**

This thesis has explored the development and integration of soft skills through formal and non-formal education in Azerbaijan, emphasising their influence on youth employability. The research indicates that while formal education contributes to technical skills it is non-formal education that truly enhances soft skills development. Programs and initiatives outside the formal curriculum, such as workshops, social projects, volunteering, and leadership training, are necessary in equipping young individuals with the essential skills needed in today's diverse working environment.

The impact of soft skills on youth employability in Azerbaijan is significant. The study's findings demonstrate that non-formal education significantly contributes to the enhancement of soft skills, thereby having a positive impact on employability. These skills enhance employment opportunities by matching the abilities of young people with the requirements of the current job market, making it easier for them to move from education to work. Furthermore, the abilities that are considered essential by both Azerbaijani young people and employers in today's job market are effective communication, teamwork, and adaptability skills. Employers in various fields consistently highly value these skills and consider them essential for succeeding in one's career and being effective in the workplace.

In summary this thesis highlights the importance of improving educational policies in order to incorporate soft skills development in both formal and non-formal education systems, in Azerbaijan. Such integration will not only align educational outcomes with labour market requirements but also contribute to the overarching goals of sustainable development, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Therefore, stakeholders including educational institutions, policymakers, and industry leaders must collaborate to reform and enhance the curricula to include focused soft skills training that prepares Azerbaijani youth for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st-century labour market.

The limitations of this study, specifically its narrow scope in the specific context of Baku, in Azerbaijan as well as its reliance on qualitative data, indicate that future research should investigate the quantitative effects of enhancing soft skills on employability in diverse cultural and economic settings. Additionally, methodologies such as online qualitative surveys, in conjunction with in-depth interviews provide a rounded approach when exploring the influence of soft skills on youth employability. Therefore, future studies could either build upon the current mapping of soft skills and career centres in Azerbaijan, but also transfer such research design to a different context. These studies could offer a more thorough comprehension of how educational interventions can be enhanced to meet the varied requirements of global labour markets.

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## **10. Annexes**

### **10.1 Annex 1: Interview Guides**

#### **10.1.1 Interview questions to the director of the Central Career Branch and Youth Career and Development centres in Azerbaijan**

##### **Introduction:**

Start by explaining the study's purpose and obtaining written consent for the use of shared information.

##### **Organisational Overview:**

1. Could you provide an overview of your organisation/centre, including its mission and primary objectives? How long have you been associated with this organisation, and what has been your role in its development?

##### **Relation to Soft Skills Development:**

2. In what ways does your organisation contribute to the development of soft skills among youth? Can you share examples of specific programs or initiatives?

##### **Government and Educational Collaboration:**

3. How does the Government of Azerbaijan support the development of youth soft skills, and what role does your organisation play in these efforts?
4. What is your perspective about the 2015-2025 Development Strategy of Azerbaijani youth?
5. Can you describe the collaboration between formal education institutions and non-formal education programs in enhancing soft skills? What challenges do these partnerships typically face?

##### **Impact of Education on Employability:**

6. How effectively does formal education in Azerbaijan develop the professional competencies required in the current labour market? Are there any gaps you've observed?

7. Regarding non-formal education (NFE) programs, how do they complement the formal education system in developing professional competencies? What success stories can you share?

**Goals and Reach of Soft Skills Initiatives:**

8. What are the primary objectives of soft skills development initiatives within your organisation, and how do they align with national youth development goals?
9. To what extent do these initiatives reach and impact Azerbaijani youth? Are there mechanisms in place to measure their effectiveness?

**Challenges and Gaps:**

10. In your experience, are recent graduates adequately prepared in terms of soft skills for the challenges of the workplace?
11. What are the most common soft skills gaps you observe particularly in recent graduates?

**Program Specifics and Youth Engagement:**

12. Does your organisation offer specialised programs focused on soft skills development? How are these programs designed to meet the needs of today's youth?
13. Could you discuss any challenges your organisation faces in implementing soft skills development programs? How do participants typically respond to these initiatives?

**Labour Market Requirements:**

14. From your perspective, what are the critical soft skills demanded by today's labour market, and how is your organisation addressing these needs?
15. Are these key soft skills typically acquired through formal education, non-formal programs, or a combination of both?

**Tracking and Evaluation:**

16. How does your organisation track the long-term employment outcomes of program participants? Are there any metrics or success stories you can share?

17. In terms of reforms, what improvements do you believe are necessary to enhance the soft skills of Azerbaijani youth more effectively? Would these reforms focus more on formal education, non-formal programs, or a holistic approach involving both?

### **10.1.2 Interview questions for the University Career Center Director**

#### **Introduction:**

Begin by outlining the study's objectives and secure written consent for the utilisation of the information provided.

#### **Career Center Overview:**

1. Could you describe the mission and primary functions of the Career Center at the university?
2. How long have you been leading the Career Center, and what have been some key initiatives during your tenure?

#### **Relation to Soft Skills Development:**

3. In what ways does your organisation contribute to the development of soft skills among youth? Can you share examples of specific programs or initiatives?

#### **Government and Educational Collaboration:**

4. How does the Government of Azerbaijan support the development of youth soft skills, and what role does your organisation play in these efforts?
5. Can you describe the collaboration between formal education institutions and non-formal education programs in enhancing soft skills? What challenges do these partnerships typically face?

#### **Integration of Soft Skills in Academia:**

6. How is the Career Center involved in integrating soft skills development into the university curriculum?

7. Are there specific courses or modules dedicated to enhancing students' soft skills?  
Could you provide some examples?

**Faculty Engagement:**

8. In what ways does the Career Center collaborate with faculty to embed soft skills training within academic programs?
9. How do you ensure that faculty members are equipped to teach and evaluate soft skills effectively?

**Alignment with Labor Market Needs:**

10. How does the Career Center stay informed about the current labor market's soft skills demands, and how is this information reflected in your programs?
11. Could you share examples of how the university's soft skills training aligns with the specific needs of employers?

**Programs and Initiatives:**

12. What specialised programs or initiatives does the Career Center offer to specifically address soft skills development?
13. How do you measure the impact and effectiveness of these soft skills development programs on students' employability?

**Challenges and Student Engagement:**

14. What challenges does the Career Center face in implementing effective soft skills training programs?
15. How do students typically respond to soft skills development initiatives? Are there any feedback mechanisms in place to gauge student satisfaction and learning outcomes?
16. In your experience, are recent graduates adequately prepared in terms of soft skills for the challenges of the workplace?
17. What are the most common soft skills gaps you observe in new hires, particularly recent graduates?

### **Employment Outcomes:**

18. Does the Career Center track the employment outcomes of graduates? If so, how do you link these outcomes to the soft skills training provided?
19. Are there any success stories or case studies that highlight the impact of the Career Center's soft skills training on graduates' career success?

### **Future Directions and Reforms:**

20. Looking ahead, what improvements or innovations are being considered to enhance soft skills training at the university?
21. In your opinion, what role should the university play in bridging the soft skills gap in collaboration with other stakeholders, such as employers and government agencies?

### **10.1.3 Interview questions for the HR**

#### **Introduction:**

Start by explaining the purpose of your study and obtaining written consent to use the information shared during the interview.

#### **Company and HR Overview:**

1. Could you briefly introduce your company and describe the role of the Human Resources department within it?
2. How long have you been in your current role as a Human Resources Manager, and what are some key initiatives you've implemented in the area of employee development?

#### **Relation to Soft Skills Development**

3. In what ways does your organisation contribute to the development of soft skills among youth? Can you share examples of specific programs or initiatives?

#### **Government and Educational Collaboration:**

4. How does the Government of Azerbaijan support the development of youth soft skills,



and what role does your organisation play in these efforts?

5. Can you describe the collaboration between formal education institutions, non-formal education programs and the private sector in enhancing soft skills? What challenges do these partnerships typically face?

### **Relevance of Soft Skills:**

6. From your perspective, how critical are soft skills in the current job market, especially for new entrants?
7. Can you identify the top soft skills your company values in its employees and how these have evolved in recent years?

### **Assessment and Development:**

8. Does your organisation develop the soft skills of employees after hiring? If yes what programs or initiatives does your company have in place to develop or enhance employees' soft skills post-hire?

### **University Collaboration and Expectations:**

9. How does your company collaborate with universities or educational institutions to ensure graduates meet your soft skills expectations?
10. In your experience, are recent graduates adequately prepared in terms of soft skills for the challenges of the workplace?

### **Challenges and Gaps:**

11. What are the most common soft skills gaps you observe in new hires, particularly recent graduates?

### **Feedback and Continuous Learning:**

12. How does your company provide feedback to employees about their soft skills development, and how is this integrated into their career progression?
13. Are there opportunities for continuous learning and development of soft skills within your organisation? How are these opportunities communicated to employees?

### **Impact of Soft Skills on Career Success:**

14. Can you share any success stories or examples where an employee's soft skills significantly contributed to their career advancement within your company?
15. How do you see the role of soft skills evolving in the future within your industry?

### **Suggestions for Improvement:**

16. Based on your experience, what suggestions would you have for educational institutions regarding the development of soft skills in their curricula?
17. What improvements or changes would you like to see in how soft skills are developed and assessed in potential hires?

## **10.2 Annex 2: Online Survey Structure**

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking part in this survey, a key element of my thesis on "Bridging the Soft Skills Gap: Youth Employment Realities in Azerbaijan and the Role of Education." This research aims to understand the role of formal and nonformal education in developing soft skills and how these skills impact employability among Azerbaijani youth.

Your insights will contribute significantly to this study. Please rest assured that all responses will be kept confidential and used solely for academic purposes.

### ***Please get acquainted with these notes:***

***Soft skills are*** Communication skills, Foreign language, Problem-solving, Leadership, Critical Thinking, Creativity, Decision Making, Teamwork, and Time Management

***Non-formal education*** refers to organized learning activities that take place outside of the traditional schooling system. It's often structured and intentional but doesn't necessarily follow a standardized curriculum or lead to formal qualifications. Non-formal education can include programs such as workshops, projects, trainings, community classes, etc.

### **Survey questions**

1. Age: [Open-ended]

2. Gender: [Male, Female, Prefer not to say, Other]
3. Degree Obtained: [Graduate, 4th grade Bachelor, 2nd grade Master]
4. Current Employment Status: [Employed, Seeking employment, Student, unemployed  
Unsure]
5. How do you view the importance of soft skills for success in today's world? Please explain your perspective. [Open-ended]
6. How do you perceive the importance of soft skills for employment in Azerbaijan, and could you share your reasoning? [Open-ended]
7. Have you been involved in activities aimed at developing soft skills? Please provide examples. [Open-ended]
8. Does/Did university education contribute to developing your soft skills? Please justify your answer. [Open-ended]
9. Reflecting on your formal education, which soft skills do you feel were most emphasized, and how were they integrated into your learning experiences? [Open-ended]
10. Have you participated in any non-formal education programs aimed at soft skills development, such as training, workshops, or volunteering? If so, please describe the types of activities and their impact. [Open-ended]
11. How important has non-formal education been in improving your soft skills for different types of jobs? Can you share any specific experiences that shaped your opinion? [Open-ended]
12. How have non-formal education initiatives affected your self-confidence? [Open-ended]
13. From what you've seen or experienced, which soft skills do employers in Azerbaijan value the most? [Open-ended]
14. Have you demonstrated or applied soft skills in job interviews?  
Please specify any advantages or challenges encountered. [Open-ended]
15. What do you think about combining non-formal programs for soft skill learning with formal education? Do you believe it enhances your chances of being employed and if so why? [Open-ended]
16. What do you consider to be the main gaps or shortcomings in the development of soft skills within formal education systems? [Open-ended]
17. Have you encountered any obstacles in accessing opportunities for soft skills development? [Open-ended]

18. How have soft skills (or the lack of them ) influenced your employment opportunities? [Open-ended]

19. By completing and submitting this survey, I consent to my responses being used for research purposes, with all data kept confidential and anonymous.

Yes

No