

# Soft Skills Valued by Maldivian College Students as they Prepare for Lifelong Learning, Career Success, and Citizenship

Hidaya Mohamed Zahir<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Soft skills such as adaptability, innovation, creativity, interdisciplinary collaboration, leadership and resilience are transferable skills expected of university graduates, to find sustainable solutions to the challenging and complex problems faced by the society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This necessitates the need to continuously evaluate the effectiveness of programs of study that are not contributing greatly to student's future career success and to the economy in general. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to explore the soft skills Maldivian college students consider important, as they complete higher education and prepare for the 21<sup>st</sup> century world of life, work, and citizenship. A purposive sample of 18 students from three different colleges in Male' was interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. The findings revealed that college graduates valued essential soft skills such as adaptability, communication, collaboration, and problem solving skills, and realised they needed these skills to be competent and successful in the world of work. They also identified weaknesses in college curriculum and pedagogy which hindered them from learning and practicing these skills. Significantly concerning was that these students did not have the opportunities to consider innovation, creativity, and cultural citizenship as important skills they could gain during their tertiary education experience. This indicates that regular revisions to curricular should be made to address and accommodate graduates' deficiencies in soft skills which are transferrable to the workplace. Students also should be given applied projects, case studies, and experiential learning to narrow the soft skills gaps.

**Keywords:** career readiness, higher education, soft skills, 21<sup>st</sup> century education

---

<sup>1</sup> Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Hidaya Mohamed Zahir, Villa College, Male', Maldives. Email: [hidaya.mohamed@villacollege.edu.mv](mailto:hidaya.mohamed@villacollege.edu.mv)

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, the Maldives has seen significant improvements in access to education; however, there is growing concern about whether their graduates are prepared adequately to overcome the socio-economic challenges of a rapidly changing and evolving society. Census data of Maldives reveals that the unemployment rate of individuals within the age range of 15 to 29 has been increasing (National Bureau of Statistics, 2014). Similarly, a study conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities found that one-third of employers felt recent college graduates were not ready for the real world (AAC&U, 2015).

The rapidly evolving and changing world of work in the technological era requires a resilient workforce that can learn and evolve continuously. Dramatic and unpredictable shifts are taking place in manufacturing, trade, service industries and in work organization. Some jobs are disappearing completely. Others will be transformed beyond recognition with radical changes in skill requirements. Future job roles are unknown and unpredictable. For instance, technicians who used to troubleshoot and fix problems in machinery manually now rely on diagnostic machines that identify and adjust faulty settings automatically. Medical X-rays and scans are transmitted to specialists in other nations for evaluation. Investment firms are displacing staff with software to design investment programs and financial portfolios. Complex surgery is done using remotely operated robotics. Knowledgeable workers in retail and wholesale are being rapidly displaced by automation and online markets (Jackson, 2000; Future Jobs, 2018). The way people live and work is shifting rapidly, demanding levels of flexibility and mobility, unseen in previous decades. Climate change and environmental sustainability demand the modern day youth to find urgent solutions required of post-industrial society.

There is a global consensus that the century to which we are currently preparing students is very divergent from what we have known in the past, this recognition, often is globally labelled as 21st-century learning. The global movement's focus is to enable students to navigate learning in an information-rich era with appropriate skills and knowledge to succeed in a rapidly changing global economy (Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017). However, within a local consideration of 21st-century learning, Maldivian cultural systems of moral and ethical practices that guide behaviour, their personal, familial, and communal rights, obligations and responsibilities, cultural praxis of being, within the historical and geopolitical context of the Maldives, has to be acknowledged and woven into any model of tertiary education for the 21st century Maldives.

Higher education not only offers graduates higher earning power, personal development, and a sense of accomplishment but a better chance at a healthier and happier life, with better communication skills, more opportunities to find interesting work, networking, and civic engagement. Higher education also provides the students the opportunity to become aware of and knowledgeable about culture, arts, humanities, ethics, social justice, equity, integrity, and education as search for truth and character building, as they learn to bring about creative transformation to make a difference and to contribute to society gainfully. Diversification of education and assessment beyond repetitive memorization of information to include technical skills for innovative design, implementation and evaluation together with development of personal attributes and social capacities is needed to prepare graduates for life-long learning, career progression and success in life (Docherty-Skippen, & Woodford, 2017; Bissell, 2017).

Employers from different sectors such as education, health, tourism, fishing and agriculture, law enforcement, retail and trade criticize the lack of transferable skills and personal attributes required of new recruits, though the employee may have obtained the graduate degree certificate. Job Maldives (2018), a popular job search engine used by the Maldivian tourism industry, the biggest employer in the Maldives, demonstrated a comprehensive list of soft skills or graduate attributes in the advertisements for jobs. The requirements for job applicants are grouped into domain-specific functional skills and generic or soft skills respectively. Employers also expressed high demand for skills in certain areas especially English Language: communication skills (both written and oral communication for business), and ICT proficiency. They also valued soft skills, such as a good work attitude and a willingness to learn, critical thinking skills, communication skills, and teamwork skills. Personal and social competencies such as empathy, conscientiousness, perseverance and time management were highlighted as essential to be competent in the modern workplace. Interviews with employers as a preliminary part of this research project showed that Maldivian employers look beyond academic qualifications to hire employees. Primarily skills and personal attributes identified as lacking were effective communication, conflict-resolution, teamwork, adaptability, altruism and reciprocity.

### **The evolving nature of higher education in the 21st Century and soft skills**

Higher education leaders are urging us to use this moment in time to rethink higher education transformation, to move beyond thinking of the immediate

issues of raising funds, meeting the needs of a diverse student population, preparing graduates for an ever-changing workforce. Additionally, alternative modes of delivery should be used for transformative education. The purpose is to teach the students using a creative curriculum so that co-curricular spaces can be developed (Maimon, 2020). As such, in addition to technical and professional competencies, preparing students for a given career, colleges and universities worldwide are beginning to consider how to enhance generic graduate attributes in students to prepare them for the evolving world of work and life, through redesigning core curriculum and pedagogy with student participation, and introducing a wider range of multidisciplinary learning, community engagement, and community service, thus ensuring students obtain the knowledge, world awareness, and skills required to prepare for an unknown future (Barnett, 2004). Graduate attributes have been incorporated in curricula and co-curricular spaces, with evolutions in pedagogy towards more participatory and self-regulatory teaching, learning, and assessment (Barrie, 2012). Colleges design authentic assessment activities, aligned with industry practices, standards, and approaches, embedding graduate attributes of employability, in their formal assessments (Hughes & Barrie, 2010).

### **Soft Skills or Graduate Attributes**

Several terms have been used in the higher education literature to describe the generic skills of graduates and these commonly include the following: graduate attributes competencies, qualities, or outcomes; generic attributes; transferable, employability or soft skills; and core capabilities (Barrie, 2012; de la Harpe, Radloff, & Wyber, 2000). For this study, soft skills are viewed as graduate attributes, skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values that are distinguished from the disciplinary expertise associated more traditionally with higher education, but which contribute to the profession. Graduate attributes are broader and more encompassing than employability, helping to develop lifelong learning and career competencies (Spronken-Smith et al., 2015). A competency is more than just knowledge or skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilizing psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context (Rychen & Selgenik, 2003). Soft skills are the personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people. Soft skills also refer to the cluster of personality traits, social graces, and facility with language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that mark people to varying degrees (Collins Dictionary, 2000).

## Graduate attributes in higher education

Graduate attributes have been integrated into quality assurance frameworks worldwide. As such, graduate attributes have been integrated into the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework, embedded in England within individual institutions following the HEFCE skills agenda, and promoted in Europe following the Bologna Process (Barrie, 2012; Hounsell, 2011, Hill, Walkington & France, 2016). Furthermore, graduate attributes are increasingly being used to inform curriculum design and engagement with teaching and learning experiences at universities around the world (Bath, Smith, Stein, & Swann, 2004; Barrie, 2012).

Maldives National Qualifications Framework, which is based on the Scottish model, has graduate attributes incorporated into the framework. Learning outcomes in programs of study are structured by course accreditation requirements of Maldives National Qualifications Framework and quality assurance mechanisms of Maldives Qualifications Authority. Tertiary education providers also endeavour to match their programs of study with industry standards and employer expectations of graduates.

A review of literature on 21st-century education and skills requirements showed a range of intrapersonal and inter-personal competencies expected of young people. Flexibility and adaptability, self-evaluation, initiative and self-direction, leadership and responsibility, ability to network globally and negotiate skilfully across cultures are emerging trends in life skills in the world of work (The Partnership for 21st-century learning, 2019). Intellectual openness, curiosity, creativity and innovation, critical thinking, risk-taking, managing complexity, problem-solving, decision making, work-ethic consciousness, productivity and accountability, metacognition, and learning to learn are inventive ways of thinking valued in the 21st-century workforce (Binkley, et al., 2010). Interactive communication, teaming, collaboration, interpersonal skills, information, media, and ICT literacy are required as effective communication skills (Lemke, 2002). Development of and engagement in personal health and wellbeing, entrepreneurship and financial, economic and business literacy, social and civic responsibility for active personal, local, societal, global, and environmental concern is valued by the young people entering education institutions and the workforce (OECD, 2018).

Graduate attributes currently given high priority in universities all over the world include the following: critical thinking skills, such as intellectual curiosity, analytical reasoning, problem-solving and reflective judgment; effective communication; leadership and teamwork skills; research and inquiry skills;

information literacy; digital literacy; personal attributes such as self-awareness, self-confidence, personal autonomy/self-reliance, flexibility, creativity; and personal values such as ethical, moral, social responsibility, integrity, and cross-cultural awareness. Problem-solving and collaboration skills are developed through group project work and competence in collaborative work is assessed (Muukkonen, et al. 2019). Some of the sub-skills of collaboration targeted include integration of individual and collaborative working, decision-making, communication, conflict resolution, coordination, negotiation, interdisciplinary collaboration, communication, and development through feedback. Research indicates that the graduate attributes most lacking amongst graduates are critical thinking (60%), attention to detail (56%), communication skills (46%), ownership (44%), and leadership (44%) (Payscale, 2016).

A study carried out by the Foundation for Young Australians in 2016, to identify the skills required by today's workforce revealed that, since 2013, the demand for critical thinking has increased by 150%, creativity by 60%, and presentation skills by 25%. A similar American study to investigate attributes of new graduates expected by employers found that employers valued leadership (80%), teamwork (79%), communication (70%), and problem-solving (70%) (NACE, 2016). Lastly, a British survey of human resource directors reported in Gillinson and O'Leary (2006) showed that the most important skills expected of graduates were communication (68%), problem-solving (40%), teamwork (36%) creativity, and innovation (28%). Although the ranking of the skills identified in these 3 studies varies, there is a high similarity between the skills identified as most important; the most commonly cited skills were communication, leadership, teamwork, critical thinking/problem solving, and creativity.

Educators argue that there is nothing new in the proposals for the 21st-century skills movement that was not reiterated by pedagogues in the last century (Sawchuk, 2009). Bernhardt (2015) suggested that what is new is the considerable influence of private industry, including multinational corporations on the educational values, attitudes, knowledge, and competencies emphasized in curriculum frameworks, pedagogy, and evaluation. The fledgling tertiary education sector in the Maldives is no exception to the marketization of education, as it attempts to cater pedagogically and curriculum-wise to these shifting demands, with neoliberal market corporatization driving student expectations and state educational policies. Smith (2018) asserts that tertiary institutions should be vigilant of how they may unwittingly adopt an ideology that conflicts with core societal and educational values. Rushkoff (2019) suggests that ideas are drawn from arts, and humanities should play a critical role in learning, to engage young people to consider ethical and

moral principles to benefit society and to find solutions to emerging socio-economic and environmental issues. Mehta, Creely & Henrikson (2019) suggest that the 21st-century skills movement should not be taken up uncritically but interrogated carefully to align with the deeper Deweyian and Freirean purposes of education, to prepare students for uncertain futures that are socially just and equitable.

## Research Methods

This paper presents an evaluation of soft skills that tertiary educational institutions ought to consider while preparing students for the world of work. A qualitative phenomenological study design was used for this study to explore students' experiences of the phenomena. Data was collected by using a semi-structured interview guide from eighteen academically proficient students, from three different colleges in Male' by using purposive sampling. The interviews were focused on the following key areas namely: perception of graduate attributes about the world of work and future careers, the efficacy of graduate attributes in the world of work, college curriculum, college environment, and pedagogies utilized in the colleges. Besides, field observations were conducted in several workplaces. Twelve participants had previous work experience. Six female participants had worked in the private sector and six male participants were in the government sector. Three participants were in leadership positions and the other three participants had worked in an administrative role. Data were analysed using the thematic latent approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). In the data analysis process, the interview transcripts were read several times to get a full understanding of the participants' thoughts. The data were coded, and themes were identified from recurring perspectives. The phenomenological approach adopted in the study facilitated the use of stories from participants to describe their experiences with soft skills. Additionally, narrative descriptions were used to strengthen the validity and credibility of participants' perceptions.

## Findings and Discussion

### Students' perceptions of soft skills

The data revealed that students recognized that academic qualifications alone will not enable them to secure jobs. Sixteen respondents strongly agreed that acquiring and mastering soft skills was essential to be successful in the world of work. They identified soft skills as the personal traits and the attributes required for communication and teamwork. Most respondents identified soft skills such

as critical thinking, and problem-solving as soft skills, and recognized that adaptability will provide an additional benefit that will lead them to be excellent employees. Unanimously, all the participants agreed that soft skills need to be mastered while they are studying in colleges and universities and that the elements of soft skills should be embedded into their college curriculum. For instance, the students generally felt that participants noted that, for example,

*Soft skills are essential for us especially when dealing with many people, namely parents, and our staff.*

Soft skills help us to understand people to some extent, how to interact and how to react to others such as staff and spouse.

A similar thought process was found in what other students reported.

*Soft skills are very significant when it comes to communicating with clients as well as to maintain relationships and for presentation purposes.*

*I feel that there is still a lot to learn regarding soft skills. I wish I have enhanced all of the soft skills required for the world of work and that it is instilled through my college.*

The participant's responses demonstrated that the students who had previous leadership experiences valued communication and teamwork skills. Communication and teamwork were the two highest-rated soft skills they saw as useful for work.

*Good communicators listen and respond, ensuring that everyone on a team has a solid understanding of work that needs to be completed.*

The students also noted that effective communication skills and teamwork will eventually lead them to success as it will enable them to reach their goals.

*I believe communication helps fill the gap of confusion in an organization which enables things to be done in an orderly way and teamwork will increase productivity.*

*I try to adapt to any challenging environment by trying to be a team player rather than being the person with opposing opinions always. With that in mind, I found quite a success.*

Most of the students were motivated to work in teams and liked to do collaborative work. Also, some students believed that they learn from each other through teamwork which ultimately strengthens their relationship. Most of the participants indicated that they would like to increase their motivation skills to perform better in school and college.

*I am a good communicator, motivated to work with teams. My strengths are working in teams and communications skills.*

*My strengths are generally language skills, speaking fluently as well as being a good listener. I have been credited with being a trustworthy player always. I do feel motivation is at times my weak point.*

The data revealed that although some of the courses in the colleges had exposed the students to a certain extent of soft skills, the respondents believed that there were still a lot more soft skills to learn and acquire to enable them to perform well in their future careers.

A common view amongst interviewees was that they lacked reading fluency and ability to find relevant and accurate information through using effective reading strategies. According to the students, the course materials, or units that are assigned to them to read in can be accompanied by supplementary reading material such as worksheets, quizzes, or tests to let them focus on the reading material. “*I am a poor reader*” or “*my attention deviates while reading*” were mentioned. Reading and writing skills for university study are available online for free which students can take and obtain credits or recognition for completion.

The findings from the study indicated that most of the respondents have acquired soft skills to a certain extent. However, none of them mentioned creativity and innovation or cultural awareness and ethics skills as soft skills they have acquired. Some of the participants expressed that more opportunities should be provided to enhance effective communication, critical thinking, and resilience along with other soft skills such as problem-solving and negotiation skills. They identified character and wellbeing as neglected aspects of tertiary education provision. They also saw that acquiring soft skills is a lifelong learning process. Despite the colleges trying to instil soft skills in graduates, participants believed that provisions are inadequate and need urgent improvement, especially, the curriculum design, teaching, learning and assessment, and the learning environment.

The students also reported that some of the strategies used by students to overcome challenging behaviours of others need improving. For instance, students identified that,

*Learning to say no is still a challenge.*

Another student had overcome challenges to ensure personal safety and safety of others as well as to challenge discriminatory and disrespectful behaviours of others.

*I have improved a lot and can manage the behaviours of the bullies and now I know how to deal with it and tend to face them if they are disrespecting someone else.*

Another student highlighted recognition of importance of identifying personal strengths, and working to improve on weaknesses.

*Different knowledge which I have gained has helped me to overcome the difficulties I face. Also, I find that having more experience and as time passes the individual may be more familiar with their challenges and tend to work on it if they wish to.*

### **Curriculum and co-curricular activities**

The data showed that the college curriculum and co-curricular activities are not aligned to incorporate the necessary soft skills required for the world of work and future careers. One of the respondents highlighted the narrow, content focused nature of college learning provision.

*Colleges make sure that that the number of hours allocated for the modules is taken and assignments are given to students, they are not worried whether we learn any skills or not.*

Several of the respondents asserted that programmes are not evaluated to ensure students gain technical and soft skills.

*Graduate attributes are not instilled in the curriculum nor does the college ensure whether necessary skills are instilled in us.*

These findings match with what the researcher had experienced personally as a student, and as a lecturer in the Maldives, with many colleagues not having the time to explore, learn about and implement soft skills in the courses they teach, nor given any incentives to do so. The findings further support the idea that with strong leadership from senior management and institutional enabling structures, balancing of disciplinary content and generic graduate attributes within programs of study can be achieved (de la Harpe & David, 2012; Spronken-Smith et al., 2015). Implementing graduate attributes systemically across programs and institutions should be given time, for instance, two academic years, to be embedded in course development specifically encouraging reflexive practice (Bath, Smith, Stein, & Swann, 2004). Additionally, the academic staff should take ownership of the implementation of soft skills (Chapple & Tolley, 2000).

Even generic soft such as critical thinking and problem-solving can be contextualized to the discipline (Litchfield, Frawley, & Nettleton, 2010). Embedding soft skills within curricula can be difficult for a novice, however, it greatly depends upon the academic staff positively viewing their role in fostering such skills and delivering learning activities that are effective in the delivery of these attributes, and feeling supported in the process.

### **Broadening opportunities for co-curricular engagement**

The college environment is not perceived by students as actively engaging or supportive. The common perspective of students was that,

*College is full of negative electrons; I am always worried about deadlines and get stressed about thinking of meeting deadlines.*

Some students expressed that,

*We only have to finish the assignment to the given deadlines. There are no planned activities for us to take part and relieve the stress.*

I wish the college lecturers can make it more friendly and easy for us to survive in the college environment.

Graduate attributes of students can be developed and strengthened when it becomes more authentic and relevant to their sense of self (Hill, Walkington & France, 2016). Primarily, when students are given opportunities from colleges

and universities to engage in co-curricular activities within the college, to engage in community volunteering and to participate in learning through work placements, a more student-centred partnership approach can be supported. This student-college-community-work-centred approach requires management strategies to consider how the attainment of graduate attributes could become more reflexive based on self-directed learning that cultivates students' capacity to adapt flexibly to being in the world (Su, 2014).

### **Pedagogies utilized in colleges**

To the interview question regarding whether the pedagogies utilized to teach the students in college enhanced soft skills needed for employment, several students pointed out that the lecturers were not using teaching methods which promoted development of soft skills. Few students felt the course work provided partial opportunities for soft skill development, however, some students believed that there is room for improvement to develop soft skills through experiential and hands-on learning. Two respondents commented that,

*Colleges do not have the time and the basic pedagogies to instil the skills that are essential for us to succeed in the world of work.*

Most of the students stated that the lectures most of the time used the lecture method, which is monotonous for them. Besides, some lecturers directly read out loud from power-point presentation slides, without any additional examples or inputs given by the lecturers or by the students.

One participant stated that,

*(There is) no need to come to class. (The student) can stay at home and by heart (the content). The lecture (PowerPoint presentation) slides will suffice.*

Another participant asserted how demotivating the lecture method of teaching can be when it is chosen frequently,

*I wish the lecturer can understand how tired and bored we are to listen to 3 hours of lectures.*

Another student described strategies to motivate students while describing the level of disengagement she experienced in the class.

*More discussions and case studies should be given. It is boring to listen to lectures all the time. I sleep in my class. I have no energy left as I am a working mother. I sit at the back of the class. I do not participate, and the lecturer doesn't bother me.*

The analysis of the data indicated that students wanted hands-on practical training rather than passive lectures as experiential learning allows them to engage in learning. Besides, it allows them to experiment with trial and error, learning from their mistakes. One student asserted that,

I am a firm believer in practical and interactive training rather than the traditional lecturing and assessing based on written assignments. I sincerely believe skills and knowledge are easier to acquire when practically exercised.

Talking about this issue another student said,

*For me, it has always been seminars and team-building exercises whether at work or not, using critical thinking, finding out where when, and why I have lacked something."*

### **Transforming curriculum, pedagogy and learning environments**

The conventional teacher-centred education view used by lecturers to instil facts, procedural knowledge, and principles which the students were expected to replicate in assessed work may have been sufficient for industrialization of the previous centuries. Students in this study expected a more dynamic learning experience than is currently provided. They wanted more teacher, student and community involvement and engagement in collaborative learning processes. More importantly, lecturers need to move from teacher-centred to student-centred and community-centred teaching (Barrie, 2007, Docherty-Skippen & Woodford, 2017) and from passive to participatory pedagogies both within and beyond the curriculum (Hill, Walkington, & France, 2016). For academic staff to engage proactively with the development of soft skills, it is essential that they view themselves as enabling. Passig (2007) describes this as "the competence to borrow a concept from a field of knowledge supposedly far removed from his or her domain, and adapt it to a pressing challenge in an area of personal knowledge or interest" (p. 1). Barrie (2012) suggests students

should be enabled to apply disciplinary knowledge to unfamiliar contexts and be supported in the creation of new knowledge. In other words, transferability of knowledge and skills is what students need to be engaged in practice.

Bartolome (1994) suggests that politically and socially informed teachers create pedagogical spaces for students to get on with the business of sharing and creating knowledge where they can demonstrate their possession of knowledge and expertise, to move from passive learning to active and critical engagement. Such teachers realize that educational institutions mirror the society's culture, values, and norms and that concerted effort needs to be made to transform the socio-cultural reality of inequality and subordination through reflective and humanizing pedagogy. Education needs to be viewed as a holistic process where learning takes place across different dimensions of human experience including spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental dimensions. "Spirituality, relationships and traditional values are the heart of this education" (Alberta Education, 2005). This type of learning can come from volunteering and community engagement.

Equally, there is a need to consider how graduate attributes are achieved by students on modular courses, such as their embedding in compulsory core units (Bath et al., 2004), or in multi-level courses, using careful curriculum design to differentiate learning and assessment activities (Mager & Spronken-Smith, 2014). To overcome the challenges of embedding graduate attributes and soft skills within disciplinary contexts and assessment strategies, colleges and universities should offer professional development to academic staff, providing them with "opportunities to engage in thoughtful discussion about 21st-century learning... there needs to be clear and honest discussion to ensure goals, objectives and timelines are in alignment" (Bernhardt, 2015, p.15 & 16). Staff need the flexibility to combine both working professionally outside with academic work and more opportunities to collaborate with professional colleagues from the world of work and community organizations to ensure course content is aligned to the needs of the society. They need time to plan, to reflect on practice and modify learning experiences when needed.

How real or virtual space is designed also can influence the dominant teaching practices and learning that happens in it, including creative thinking and innovation. Redesigning learning spaces to take advantage of sound quality, air quality, light, shape, colour, and texture can have a direct impact on collaboration and co-construction of knowledge. Details such as furniture arrangements, materials, and technology made available can have a positive influence on the learning and wellbeing of teachers and students (Kemply &

Berki, 2014).

## Conclusions and recommendations

In this phenomenological qualitative research, project data was collected from 18 experienced Maldivian students studying in 3 different colleges. These students had joined the colleges with previous experience in leadership and administrative posts in public and private sector employment in the Maldives. Interview data showed that their knowledge of soft skills was limited, while they had used the skills they knew about, in their work and family environments. The students were keen to acquire soft skills and considered them relevant for their future careers.

The higher education sector of the Maldives urgently needs to play a proactive role in shaping and delivering 21st-century learning to students, specifically focusing on creativity and innovation, communication, critical thinking, character and wellbeing, and cultural and ethical skills. This paper highlighted some of the necessary changes required to develop 21st-century learning policy and to integrate 21st-century learning in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment as well as to move beyond disciplinary learning, to ensure students have opportunities to acquire discipline-nuanced graduate attributes (Hill, Walkington & France, 2016). As Maimon (2020) described, tertiary education enables students to come out of the cocoon as a butterfly. This requires commitment and willingness to engage with students and the community in a collaborative process of learning and reflection. The higher education sector of the Maldives needs to help tertiary students to enhance their relevant soft skills as employers place significant importance on soft skills. Soft skills training strategies should be tailored to meet the needs of students and employers.

## REFERENCES

- Alberta Education (2005). *Our world, our ways: Teaching First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners*. Edmonton, AB: Government of Alberta. <https://education.alberta.ca/media/3615876/our-words-our-ways.pdf>
- Bath, D., Smith, C., Stein, S. & Swann, R. (2004). Beyond Mapping and Embedding Graduate Attributes: Bringing Together Quality Assurance and Action Learning to Create a Validated and Living Curriculum. *Higher Education Research and Development*. 23.
- Barnett, R. (2004). Learning for an unknown future. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 23, 247–260. [10.1080/072943604200023538](https://doi.org/10.1080/072943604200023538)
- Barrie, S. C. (2012). A research-based approach to generic graduate attributes policy. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 23, 261–275.
- Bartolome, L. (1994). Beyond the methods fetish: Toward a humanizing pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 64(2), 173–195. [doi:10.17763/haer.64.2.58q5m5744t325730](https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.64.2.58q5m5744t325730)
- Binkley, M., Erstad, O., Hermna, J., Raizen, S., Ripley, M., Miller-Ricci, M., & Rumble, M. (2012). Defining Twenty-First Century Skills. In P. Griffin, E. Care, & B. McGaw (Eds.). *Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills*, Dordrecht, Springer
- Braun, V & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3:2, 77-101, DOI: [10.1191/1478088706qp063oa](https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa)
- Braun, V & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18:3, 328-352, DOI: [10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238](https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238)
- C21 Canada (Canadians for 21st Century Learning and Innovation). (2012). *Shifting minds 1.0: A 21st-century vision of public education for Canada*. <http://www.c21canada.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Shifting-Minds-Revised.pdf>
- Chapple, M. & Tolley, H. (2000). Embedding key skills in a traditional university. In S. Fallows & C. Steven (Eds.), *Integrating Key Skills in Higher Education*. London: Kogan Page, pp.67-76
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. Simon & Brown.
- Docherty-Skippen, S. & Woodford, E. (2017). Indigenous Knowledge as 21st Century Education: A Taxonomy of 21st Century Learning and Educational Leadership as Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit (IQ). *Journal of Transformative Dialogue*. 10.
- Forbes. (2017). *16 Essential Leadership Skills For The Workplace Of Tomorrow*.
- Freire, P. (1970/2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

- Fullan, M. (2013). *Great to excellent: Launching the next stage of Ontario's education agenda*. Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education. [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/FullanReport\\_EN\\_07.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/FullanReport_EN_07.pdf).
- Fullan, M., & Scott, G. (2014). *New pedagogies for deep learning whitepaper: Education PLUS*. Seattle: Collaborative Impact SPC.
- Gee, G., Dudgeon, P., Schultz, C., Hart, A., & Kelly, K. (2014). Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander social and emotional wellbeing. In: P. Dudgeon, H. Milroy & R. Walker (Eds.). *Working together: aboriginal and Torres Strait islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice*. 2nd ed. Canberra: Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet; 2014. p. 55–68.
- Gillinson, S., & O'Leary, D. (2006). *A disconnect exists between young people and the organisational cultures they encounter in the workplace*. London: Demos Demos.
- Hill, J., Walkington, H & France, D. (2016). Graduate attributes: implications for higher education practice and policy, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 40 (2), 155-163
- Hounsell, D. (2011). *Graduates for the 21st century: Integrating the enhancement themes*. Gloucester: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.
- Hughes, C., & Barrie, S. (2010). Influences on the assessment of graduate attributes in higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(3), 325-334.
- Jackson, T. (2000). *Career development*. London: Institute of Personnel and development.
- Kampylis, P. & Berki, E. (2014). *Nurturing creative thinking*. International Academy of Education, UNESCO. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002276/227680e.pdf>
- Lemke, C. (2002). *enGauge 21st century skills: Digital literacies for a digital age*.
- Litchfield, A., Frawley, J. & Nettleton, S. (2010). Contextualising and Integrating into the Curriculum the Learning and Teaching of Work-Ready Professional Graduate Attributes. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 29 (5), 519-534.
- Maimon, E. P (July 30, 2020). From Triage to Transformation. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/07/30/higher-ed-institutions-should-use-covid-crisis-rethink-their-systems-and-create-new>
- Mehta, R., Creely, E. & Henriksen, D. (2020). A Profitable Education: Countering Neoliberalism in 21st Century Skills Discourses. In *Handbook of Research on Literacy and Digital Technology Integration in Teacher Education* (pp.359-381), IGI Global.

- Mager, S., & Spronken-Smith, R. (2014). Graduate attribute attainment in a multi-level undergraduate geography course. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*. 38. 238-250.
- Muukkonen, H. & Lakkala, M. & Lahti-Nuuttila, P., Ilomäki, L., Karlgren, K. & Toom, A. (2019). Assessing the Development of Collaborative Knowledge Work Competence: Scales for Higher Education Course Contexts. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*. 64. 1-19. 10.1080/00313831.2019.1647284.
- NACE (National Association of college and employers). (2016). *Job outlook 2016: the attributes employers want to see on new college graduates' resumes*. <http://www.naceweb.org>.
- OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). (2018). *The future of education and skills Education 2030*. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/education/2030>
- Passig, D. (2007). Melioration: A higher thinking skill to enhance future intelligence. *Teachers College Record*, 109(1), 24-50.
- Payscale. (2016). *Workforce-Skills Preparedness Report*. Research report. Payscale.
- Plucker, J. A., Beghetto, R. A. & Dow, G.T. (2004). Why Isn't Creativity More Important to Educational Psychologists? Potentials, Pitfalls, and Future Directions in Creativity Research, *Educational Psychologist*, 39(2), 83-96
- Pozin, I. (2018). *Why Many 'C' Students End Up Most Successful*. From: <https://www.inc.com>.
- Rushkoff, D. (2019, March 21). What if Mark Zuckerberg had stayed in school? *Medium*. <https://medium.com/team-human/what-if-mark-zuckerberg-had-stayed-in-school-321aa3129af5>
- Rychen, D. S. & Selgenik, H. L. (Eds) (2003). *Key Competencies for a Successful Life and a Well-Functioning Society*. Cambridge, MA: Hogrefe & Huber.
- Sawchuk, S. (2009). Motives of 21st-century-skills group questioned. *Education Week*, 29(14), 18–21
- Schulz, B. (2008) The Importance of Soft Skills: Education beyond academic knowledge. *Journal of Language and Communication*.
- Smith, B. L. N. (2018). Public transparency, student privacy, and technological persuasion in education: Refining some concerns of opt out. *Thresholds in Education*, 41(3), 19.
- Su, Y. (2014). Self-directed, genuine graduate attributes: The person-based approach. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33, 1208–1220.
- The foundation for Young Australians. (2016). The new basics: Big data reveals the skills young people need for the New Work Order. *New York Order*. AlphaBeta.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21). (2019). Framework for 21st Century Learning Definitions. <http://exploresel.gse.harvard.edu/frameworks/3>