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SOFT SKILLS AS CULTURAL CAPITAL: BRIDGING ACADEMIA AND INDUSTRY THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND SUSTAINABLE BEHAVIORAL CHANGE

Sangeetha Noval[1], Kiran Shekhawat[2], Prerna Srivastava[3], Kuldip Sharma[4], Namita Soni[5], Esha[6]

[1]Associate Professor, Faculty of General Education, Bhartiya Skill Development University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India. Email: sangeetha.noval@ruj-bsdu.in Orcid ID: 0000-0002-3178-8051
[2]Assistant Professor, Faculty of General Education, Bhartiya Skill Development University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India. Email: kiran.shekhawat@ruj-bsdu.in. Orcid ID: 0000-0002-0331-3059
[3]Associate Professor, Faculty of Science & Humanities, Poornima University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India, Email: srivastavaprerna2008@gmail.com. Orcid ID: 0009-0000-2609-2204
[4]Associate Professor, Department of Humanities and Applied Sciences, Poornima College of Engineering, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India, Email: shashikul.sharma098@gmail.com. Orcid ID: 0000-0002-9818-0622
[5]Assistant Professor, Faculty of Science & Humanities, Poornima University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India, Email: namitagautam009@gmail.com. Orcid ID: 0009-0008-0097-3044
[6]Assistant Professor, Department of English, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan College (Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University), New Delhi, India, Email: choesha@gmail.com. Orcid ID: 0009-0004-6103-4594

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Corresponding Author: Prerna Srivastava (srivastavaprerna2008@gmail.com)

ABSTRACT

Soft skills are an essential type of cultural capital that has been instrumental in facilitating the process of bridging the gap between the educational and the professional experience in modern management education. This paper redefines the concept of soft skills training as experiential learning and cultural adjustment, which is needed to encourage long-term behavior change in future managers. The study incorporates the Four-Level Training Evaluation Model created by Kirkpatrick with the Structural Equations Modeling (SEM) in order to investigate the efficacy of soft skills teaching among 188 MBA students with different academic socialization levels. The results show that training in soft skills contributed greatly to internship performance (Impact 2 mean = 2.36; $p < 0.001$), behavioral internalization (Behavior mean = 1.81; $p < 0.001$), and long-term socio-professional resilience (Results mean = 1.64; $p < 0.001$). The reliability of the integrated model was confirmed by a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (0.83). The analysis indicates that students in the technical streams were initially perceived to have adaptation gaps and their learning curves were steepest in reflective and context-rich pedagogies. Mentor ratings also supported the behavioral change, which showed a perception-performance discrepancy which reinforced the social learning concept of competence development. The paper suggests a proven, scalable model of integrating experiential modules of soft skills, 360-feedback and mentorship-based learning into management education as a tool of cultural and institutional change. Connecting the idea of employability to the concept of social adaptability, the study places soft skills in a new context of professional property; however, it shows that they are the forces of sustainable educational and workplace culture.

KEYWORDS: Soft Skills, Cultural Capital, Experiential Learning, Management Education; Behavioral Change; Social Adaptation; Academia–Industry Integration; Sustainable Development

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today's globally interconnected and increasingly sustainable workplace technical abilities alone are not enough to guarantee managerial success. Nowadays employers are looking for behavioral competencies to help them position the decision making in face of the dynamic complicated business environment such as good communication, emotional intelligence, adaptability, good teamwork and ethical judgment (Shiwakoti et al., 2024; Beenen et al., 2018). Given this, an MBA program must move towards more than just standard instruction in finance, strategy and operations to enhance leadership capability commensurate with the domain of the modern workplace.

There is a direct link between soft skills and innovation, inclusivity, employee wellbeing; all of which are the foundational pillars of Cultural and Workplace Sustainability. Pons et al. (2024) as well as Costa and Cipolla (2025) write that studies show that these competencies are not only necessary for professional growth but are enablers for change leadership, ethical decision making and cross functional collaborations as well. For example, approximately 39% of the variance in innovative work behaviour amongst MBA graduates (or in other words, soft skills and emotional demands) are stated to be accounted for (Akinbobola, 2020). Moreover, self-reliance and adaptability skills are most beneficial for graduates as they raise their contribution capacity to sustainable development (Kumar & Sharma, 2018).

While there has been growing acceptance, agreement nevertheless remains mixed as to how soft skills should be best incorporated and assessed in the MBA curriculum. Questions continue to be asked about instructional design, experiential method, and longer-term school outcomes when institutions try to test stand-alone courses or embedded modules (Benn et al., 2006). This gap is compounded by a rarely examined area of influence of students' adaptability to soft skill development, more specifically, among graduates from a technical or theoretical field of study transitioning into management practice. In order to meet this challenge in its totality, the study makes use of two existing models. The Four Level Training Evaluation Model designed by Kirkpatrick provides a systemic framework in terms of assessing outcomes of training into four different levels; reaction of learners, knowledge acquisition, behavioral application, and long-term results of learning in the workplace. This model provides an all-round evaluation of learning in the short term as well as in practice performance. In this, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is used as a strong statistical tool to identify the hypothesized relationships amongst soft skills training, internship performance and career sustainability. Second, SEM facilitates investigating complex, multidimensional relations and increases the empirical rigor of the study.

In order to fill in these gaps this study adopts Kirkpatrick's Four-Level Training Evaluation Model and Structural Equation Modeling in examining the effectiveness of soft skills training within MBA Programmes. In particular, it examines the effect of soft skills training on internship performance and long-term resilience in career, as well as how undergraduate background moderates such effect. It assesses not only learning results but also compares students' self-assessment with externally validated feedback of learning. Figure 1 provides the conceptual linkage between soft skills, experiential learning, and sustainable career outcomes.

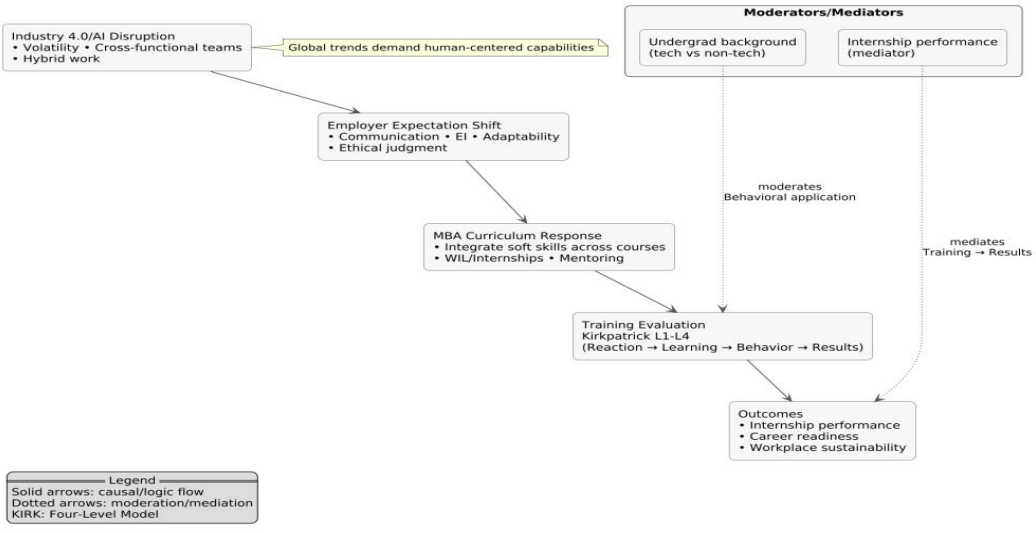

Figure 1: Framework Linking Soft Skills to Sustainable Career Outcomes.

In Figure 1, it is illustrated how the transformations in the global industry and the

expectations of the employer influence the inclusion of soft skills in MBA programs. Based on the evaluation model by Kirkpatrick, the pathway links training to quantifiable results including internship performance and career readiness. It also shows the moderating effect of the undergraduate background and the mediating effect of internship performance in attaining sustainable career outcomes.

This study extends these two related models by integrating these two complementary models to analyze data from 188 MBA students to cover a broad range of academic and specialization profiles to contribute a validated evaluation framework for soft skills training. The findings provide businesses practicing providers of business education with a recipe for adopting experiential, feedback driven soft skills instruction. The conceptualization of soft skills in this study is not based on the means of employability, but rather as a cultural capital mediating aspects between academic learning conditions and professional organizational cultures to enable sustainable behavioral change. Finally, this work seeks to bridge the long-standing gap between academia and industry by graduating leaders with the human centered competencies necessary for pursuit of sustainable leadership in the complex world.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Increasingly, with increasing acknowledgement of the importance of soft skills in management education for producing such future ready graduates, who will be able to be adaptive in the modern workplace, comes recognition of their strategic role in developing graduates. From consistently available research, competences such as verbal, nonverbal and presentational communication, leadership, teamwork, adaptability, and buy in emotional intelligence are rated higher than technical skills alone in the hiring and leadership development process (Shiwakoti et al., 2024; Devkota et al., 2022; Beenen et al., 2018). The increase in a diverse and volatile environment, in which organizations operate in, calls for the need for collaboration cross culturally and practicing ethical judgment.

In response to this industry expectation, business schools have been enacting curricular reform, but how different degrees of support for curricular reform are enacted by business schools varies widely by institution and geography. Integrating soft skills is often successful through simulation, collaborative projects, and reflective tools (Shuayto, 2013; Maulana, 2023). According to Akinbobola (2020), soft skills and emotional fit together account for about 39 percent of the variance in innovative work behavior among MBA students, attesting to the actual effects of soft skills on professional innovation.

Kumar and Sharma (2018) furthered this line by shifting their focus on soft skills being enablers for sustainability thinking, that included self-reliance and adaptability as pivotal tools to achieving sustainable thinking and that soft skills are not merely about employability but it is to nurture organizational responsibility and ethical leadership. Soft skills are also central to change management and in leading sustainability initiatives irrespective of the sector, whether in a technology driven, service-oriented sector, which is the argument of Costa and Cipolla (2025) and Pons et al. (2024).

Although the importance of soft skills is acknowledged, the integration of soft skills into management education is not evenly handled. Maulana (2023) declares that there are institutions that provide stand-alone soft skills courses and institutions that embed soft skills into bigger curricula but do it without robust evaluation frameworks. As noted by Benn et al. (2006) soft skills should be embedded into the learning of sustainability and ethics from real world case studies and industry engagement in order to enable both critical thinking and change in behaviour.

In this regard academic-industry partnership is essential. Tong (2024) and Sa'diyah et al. (2024) consequently point out that co designed internships, mentorship supported learning and the 360-degree feedback mechanisms enhance the transformation of soft skills from training to the workplace. Kirkpatrick based evaluation of Faculty Development Program (FDP) by Srivastava et al (2024) revalidate the fact that professional growth is driven by structured feedback and experiential learning, and the same approach can be adapted within MBA contexts.

According to Jackson (2020), moving from extracurricular internships to structured work integrated learning (WIL) greatly improves career readiness; the curriculum of which should be designed so that soft skills are at the core of academic outcomes rather than ancillary. Likewise, Poon (2020) also achieved positive behavioral outcomes and long-term career perspective of the MBA students through a hybrid learning environment (online and experiential format) which utilized a Kirkpatrick evaluation, this indicating the flexible and context sensitive instruction can play a larger role.

Accordingly, Krishnan and Scullion (2020) proposed a talent management framework that

emphasizes the addition of a dynamic organizational standpoint with adaptability and soft skills added as dynamic capabilities, especially more important to SMEs working under resource limitations. As with Zare, Esmaeili, and He (2019), they maintain that risk-sharing and adaptive strategies would make performance better in a volatile environment, which is paralleled conceptually with the need for management graduates to acquire adaptive, collaborative, and resilient skills to achieve sustainable career outcomes. It has also been proven that human capital development connected to the corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts influences an organization's performance significantly. Furthermore, these findings promote soft skills in a bigger ethical and sustainable management education agenda.

More recent research confirms that interpersonal communication, teamwork, adaptability, and emotional intelligence are rated by employers as determinants to early-career success, and frequently higher than technical skills.

In 2024- 2025 the perspective is extended through large-scale analyses that map clusters of soft-skills (personal, social, methodological) and correlate them with postgraduate cohort employability signals (Hussein, 2024; Chiu et al., 2024). Parallel, scholarship focused on sustainability frames soft skills (e.g., collaboration, ethical reasoning, change leadership) as conditions of institutional and Cultural and Workplace Sustainability, and design-based models of higher education integration (Pons et al., 2024; Costa and Cipolla, 2025).

There is no doubt about the significance attached to soft skills but a great gap exists to link soft skills training to concrete career outcomes through validated, model driven evaluation frameworks. Second, the idea of undergraduate academic background, for how it may moderate the adaptability and receptivity of students towards soft skills training, has yet to be investigated, particularly with regard to its relationship with technical and non-technical fields.

As such, this underscores the importance of an extensive empirical study that merges Kirkpatrick's Four Level Evaluation Model with Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach to evaluate both self-perceived outcomes and validated performance outcomes to fill this void between academia and industry.

2.1. Research Gap

Despite the growing emphasis on soft skills in business education, significant gaps persist in the literature. Most existing studies lack a structured, model-driven approach to evaluating the effectiveness of soft skills training, particularly in linking learning outcomes to tangible workplace performance. There is still little empirical validation of the model on the basis of Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) where limited studies have been conducted to determine the multidimensional relation between soft skills acquisition, internship success and long-term career resilience. Moreover, undergraduate academic background which moderates the influence of adaptability on performance has not received enough academic attention. It is also significant to note that there is a significant lack of correlation between self-reported soft skills and externally validated internship feedback among students and thus an underexploited perception-performance gap is identified. These shortcomings are some reasons why a multi-faceted, empirically-based research is required that will connect theoretical frameworks with living feedback to guide curriculum change and sustainable management education.

3. OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

Considering the aforementioned gaps, the present study will assist in filling it by offering a comprehensive empirically confirmed framework to assess the effectiveness of soft skills training in MBA programs and its significance to Cultural and Workplace Sustainability.

The study unites the Four-Level Evaluation Model by Kirkpatrick with Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to examine the relationship linkages between training outcomes, internship performance, and undergraduate background and career readiness of students. Another gap that is critical in the study is the gap in perception and performance through comparison of self-rated competencies to the ratings made by mentors in internship.

Based on these aims, the following specific research objectives are proposed:

- **Objective 1**: To evaluate the effectiveness of soft skills training in MBA programs using Kirkpatrick's Four-Level Model.
- **Objective 2**: To analyze the influence of undergraduate academic backgrounds on MBA students' adaptability and soft skills receptiveness across specializations.
- **Objective 3**: To examine the relationship between soft skills training, internship performance, and long-term career outcomes using Structural Equation Modeling.

To operationalize these objectives, the study tests the following hypotheses:

- **H1**: Soft skills training significantly influences internship performance across MBA specializations.
- **H2**: Internship performance mediates the relationship between soft skills as cultural competencies and perceived long-term Cultural and Workplace Sustainability.
- **H3**: Undergraduate academic background moderates the relationship between soft skills training and student adaptability, particularly in the behavioral application of competencies.

Based on these objectives and hypotheses, the following conceptual framework and empirical analysis form the basic framework to bridge the academia-industry gap with outcome-based MBA curriculum reform.

This integrated approach reinforces the argument that soft skills constitute a form of actionable cultural capital, shaping behavioral adaptation in professional ecosystems.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The dual model of conceptual framework has been adopted to explore the complex interplay between the soft skills as cultural competencies and the sustainable workplace outcomes in the MBA programs. Kirkpatrick's Four-Level Training Evaluation Model is the first model used, which is a globally accepted framework of training effectiveness.

This model gauges the outcome over four constituents: *Reaction* i.e. satisfaction and engagement with soft skills learning, *Learning* (appraisal of assimilated interpersonal competence) *Behavior*, application of those skills in internships and academic projects and *Results* (long term perceived impact on Cultural and Workplace Sustainability and career advancement (De los Santos, J. A., & McNaughton, M. (2022).

Applying this model makes certain that there is a full cycle of soft skills instruction starting from learner feedback that is immediate to metrics that are observable and outcome based (Prerna et.al, 2024).

The second model incorporated in the framework is Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to be able to statistically validate hypothesized relationships among latent variables.

The influence of soft skills training effectiveness on internship performance is examined and, at the same time, Cultural and Workplace Sustainability while moderating effect of undergraduate academic background is evaluated. In this way, the study can rigorously test the hypothesis that training leads to behavioral change and sustainable employability outcomes and develop empirical evidence on the structural processes involved in the development of soft skills in management education. The study is in a format of a cross-sectional, explanatory study that is predominantly quantitative though with some qualitative details.

The data was gathered using an online structured questionnaire which was applied to a sample of 188 MBA students in specializations in Marketing, Human Resources, Finance, and Operations. The samples also comprised a variety of undergraduate educational experience (Engineering, Commerce, and Humanities) which increased the generalizability of the results to a wide variety of learner profiles.

A purposive–convenience sampling method was used, given the targeted focus on MBA students enrolled in soft-skills modules at the participating institution.

This sampling approach allowed the inclusion of students across all specializations and undergraduate backgrounds, improving representativeness for SEM analysis.

The tool contained close-ended and open-ended questions. Measures of constructs of the Kirkpatrick model -Reaction, Learning, Behavior, and Results were taken to Likert type scales of 1-5 or 1-6, depending on the construct. These indicators were well matched with the latent variables in the SEM analysis.

The study employed 1–5 and 1–6 Likert scales depending on the construct measured. A 5-point scale was used for constructs related to behavioral frequency and reaction due to its higher interpretability in training evaluations, whereas a 6-point scale was applied for learning-related constructs to avoid neutral mid-point bias and capture more sensitive variations in perceived competence.

This mixed-scale approach is consistent with previous studies using the Kirkpatrick model and SEM-based evaluation frameworks. Cronbach alpha was used to test the reliability and internal consistency of the measurement scales, whereas the open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis that helped to put the adaptive nature of students as well as their correspondence between their perceived competence and the reality they saw in the workplace.

Figure 2 presents the integrated Kirkpatrick–SEM model with consistent formatting and clarified

directional paths.

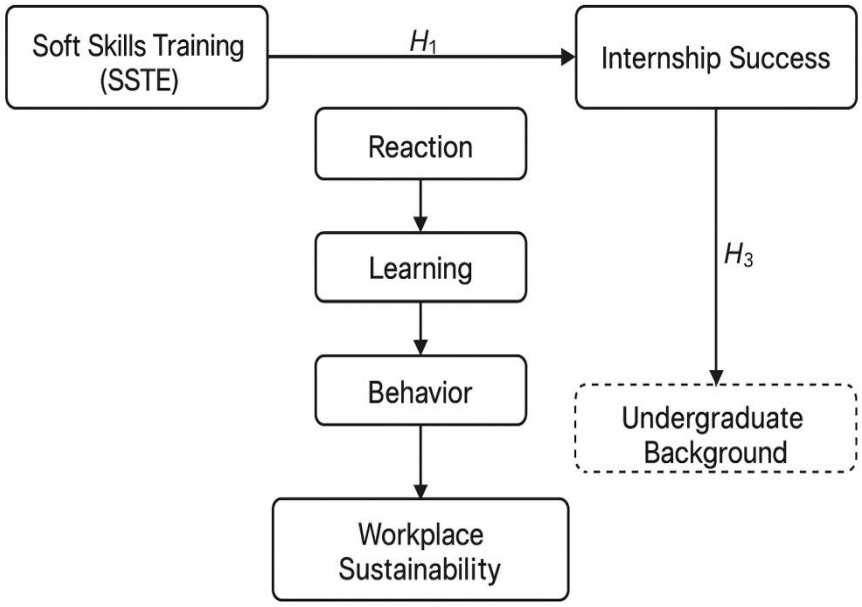

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework: Integrated Kirkpatrick–Sem Model.

Figure 2 demonstrates the conceptual framework of the combination of the model by Kirkpatrick and SEM. The Soft skills training (SSTE) is rated in four levels i.e. Reaction, Learning, Behavior and Results resulting in Cultural and Workplace Sustainability. The mediating relationship is between internship success and undergraduate background (H2) and between behavioral adaptability and internship performance (H3).

4.1 Analytical Tools

- **SPSS**: For descriptive statistics, reliability testing (Cronbach's alpha), and t-tests.
- **AMOS / R (Lavaan package)**: For Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and SEM.
- **Thematic Analysis**: Applied to open-ended responses to enrich findings on UG adaptability and perception gaps.
- Reliability Testing (Cronbach's Alpha): To ensure internal consistency of the measurement scales used in the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for each latent construct. The results indicated acceptable to high reliability across key dimensions: Reaction (α = 0.84), Learning (α = 0.78), Behavior (α = 0.81), and Results (α = 0.76). The composite Soft Skills Training Effectiveness construct recorded an overall reliability score of α = 0.83, affirming the robustness of the instrument used for data collection and SEM analysis. These values meet the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978), validating the internal consistency of the constructs used in this study.

4.2 Ethical Considerations: Participation was voluntary and anonymous. All possible participants were approved through their institution, and informed consent was obtained pursuant to ethical research practice.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In this paper, a structured analysis of the data gathered is carried out which is related to the research objectives and hypotheses.

To assess the effectiveness of soft skills training and its influence on an internship and a Cultural and Workplace Sustainability, both descriptive and inferential statistics were utilized. In the validation process of the study's latent variables relationships, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) were used. Key findings are presented below.

The validated measurement model (CFA) further supports the structural coherence of the constructs used in linking soft-skills training to sustainable career outcomes.

5.1 Descriptive Statistics

The demographic and model variables are

summarized in Table 1. Undergraduate background, gender distribution, and specialization in the dataset is adequately variable, which allows for generalization of results.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics.

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
UG Background	188	2.31	1.06	1	5
Gender	188	1.31	0.46	1	2
Specialization	188	2.32	1.03	1	5
Reaction	188	1.9	0.78	1	5
Learning	188	2.84	1.35	1	6
Behavior	188	1.81	0.73	1	4
Results	188	1.64	0.48	1	2
Impact_1	188	2.92	1.32	1	6
Impact_2	188	2.36	1.05	1	5
Overall	188	2.32	1.05	1	5

Table 1 gives a summary of the sample (N = 188) and key constructs applied in the research. It provides demographic data including undergraduate background, gender, and specialization, mean values, standard deviations and ranges of the four levels of Kirkpatrick: Reaction, Learning, Behavior and Results, and measures of impact of internship. Such statistics can be used to define the diversity of the student cohort and determine the starting point of the analysis of soft skills as cultural competencies translate into workplace performance.

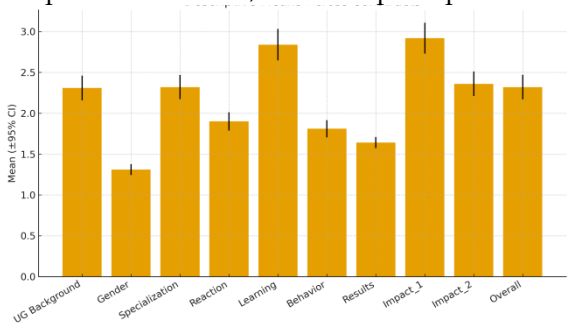

Figure 3: Descriptive Means With 95% Cis for Soft-Skill Constructs (N = 188).

Figure 3 illustrates that the value is a summary of the average scores of all constructs that are measured. Error bars are the 95% confidence intervals which can be easily used to compare the central tendencies on the measures of Reaction, Learning, Behavior, Results and internship impact.

5.2 Evaluation of Soft Skills Training Effectiveness (Objective 1)

Soft skills training effectiveness evaluation, measured through Kirkpatrick's four level evaluation model, indicates that soft skills training shows statistically significant results on all dimensions. Reaction scores indicated that students responded positively to the training modules, suggesting high levels of satisfaction and engagement. Learning outcomes demonstrated a meaningful increase in students' perceived knowledge and competence in interpersonal and managerial skills. The behavior level showed that students were moderately confident in applying these skills in real-world settings, particularly during internships and group projects. Finally, results-level analysis reflecting long-term benefits demonstrated that students attributed a measurable improvement in career preparedness and workplace adaptability to their training (Jackson, 2020). The statistical significance of all four levels ($p < 0.001$) confirms the overall effectiveness of the soft skills training program and validates the use of Kirkpatrick's model in assessing pedagogical outcomes in MBA contexts.

Table 2: Kirkpatrick Model - One Sample T-Test.

Variable	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% CI (Lower, Upper)
Reaction	-19.24	187	0	-1.1	(-1.21, -0.99)

Learning	-4.72	187	0	-0.45	(-0.64, -0.26)
Behavior	-22.44	187	0	-1.19	(-1.30, -1.09)
Results	-38.75	187	0	-1.36	(-1.43, -1.29)

The results of the one-sample t-tests comparing the effectiveness of the training of the soft skills to the benchmark values are presented in Table 2. It demonstrates that at all four levels of the model created by Kirkpatrick (Reaction, Learning, Behavior and Results) students stated that they had statistically significant changes ($p < 0.001$). They are not all the same returns because are the confidence intervals and evidence that training has not simply raised short-term satisfaction and learning, but transfer to observed behavior and career preparation in the long-term.

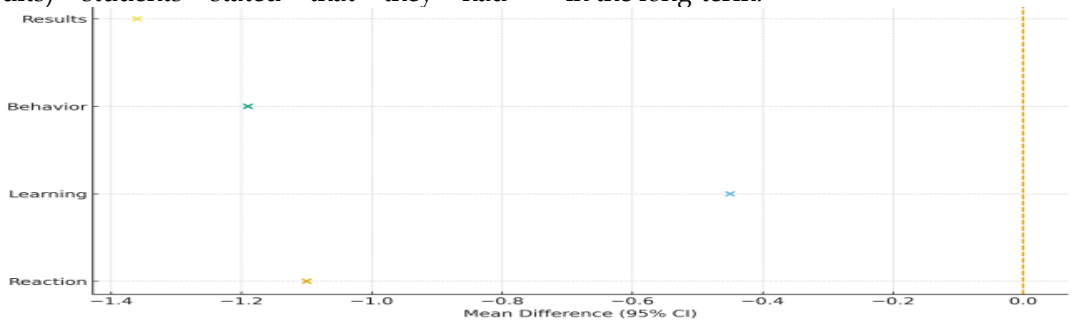

Figure 4: Mean Differences With 95% Cis for Kirkpatrick Levels (L1–L4).

According to figure 4, the forest plot shows the sizes of the effects among four levels of evaluation by Kirkpatrick (Reaction, Learning, Behavior, Results). The mean difference is the value of each point and the horizontal lines are the 95 percent confidence intervals. The positive values approve meaningful gains on all levels.

5.3 Influence of Undergraduate Background on MBA Adaptability (Objective 2)

The one-sample t-test assessing adaptability to soft skills training across undergraduate backgrounds revealed that students from technical streams, particularly engineering, initially found it more challenging to adapt to communication-heavy and emotionally intelligent environments. Conversely, students from commerce and humanities backgrounds reported a greater initial ease with such training, likely due to their prior exposure to group work, presentations, or humanities-based critical thinking. However, structured and context-rich training interventions enabled technically oriented students to gradually close the adaptability gap, resulting in comparable outcomes by the end of their internship experiences. It proves the hypothesis that undergraduate background moderates the readiness and uptake of the soft skills training among students and proves the relevance of it as a differentiating variable in instructional design.

Table 3: Ug Background Influence - One Sample Test.

Variable	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% CI (Lower, Upper)
Overall	-8.88	187	0	-0.68	(-0.83, -0.53)

Table 3 examines how academic background (undergraduate) influences the creation of flexibility of students to soft skills training. It highlights the initial poor performance of students in technical streams in terms of communication and emotional intelligence that improved dramatically upon organised interventions and ultimately closed in on their counterparts in the commerce and humanities. The significant difference in the means shows the significance of academic background as one of the strongest factors that influence the rate and efficiency of the student's adaptation to the process of soft skills development.

5.4. Internship Performance and Cultural and Workplace Sustainability (Objective 3)

In determining the practical applicability of soft

skills in the internship, two indicators were taken into account: self-reporting (Impact_1) and outside rating by mentors or supervisors (Impact_2). Although the former did not show any statistically significant ($p > 0.05$) results, the latter showed a strong and significant correlation with training outcomes ($p < 0.001$). Finally, this divergence suggests that students may overly overestimate the application of soft skills in the workplace, and such belief is not always consistent with that of their workplace supervisors. While the external feedback is significantly more statistically robust than the norm, a key insight is the strong external validation provided by third parties on the transferability of soft skills. These results corroborate the significance of sending feedback loops and performance-based evaluations to MBA training structures to fill gaps that exist between perceived and demonstrated workplace readiness.

Table 4: Internship Impact – Self Vs. Mentor Ratings

Variable	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% CI (Lower, Upper)
Impact_1	-0.83	187	0.408	-0.08	(-0.27, 0.11)
Impact_2	-8.43	187	0	-0.64	(-0.79, -0.49)

Table 4 showcases the comparison of how students rate themselves in the application of soft skills during their internship and the assessments of their workplace mentors. Although there was no statistically significant improvement in the self-ratings of students (Impact_1), those of the mentors (Impact_2) are the strongest and significant improvements ($p < 0.001$). A perception-performance gap is the point of contrast: students generally overestimated themselves, whereas external feedback was more dependable as evidence of impact on the workplace. This places a strong stress on the role of mentor validation in measuring skill transfer in the real world.

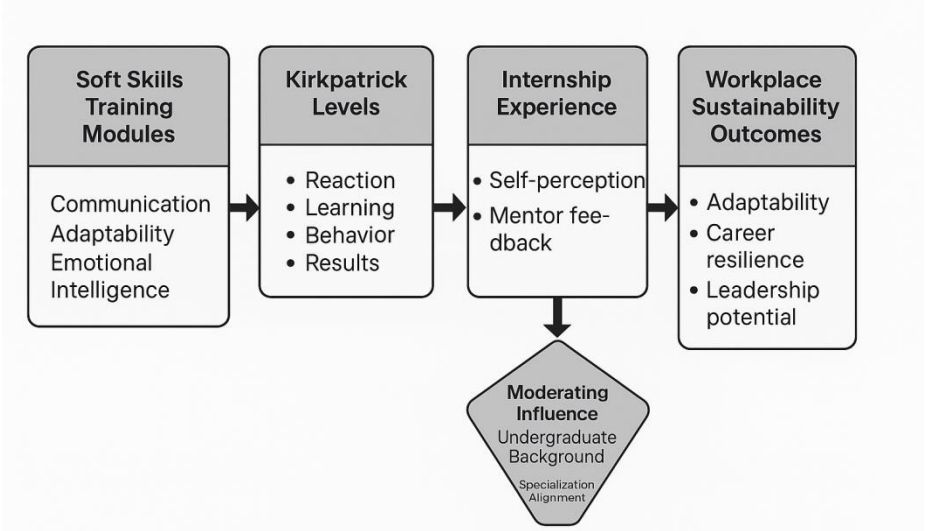

Figure 5: Pathway From Soft Skills Training to Sustainable Career Outcomes.

Figure 5 illustrates the progression of structured soft skills training to Cultural and Workplace Sustainability outcomes and associated Kirkpatrick Four-Level Model. It emphasizes the impact of students' reactions, learning, behavioral application and results (Level 1-Level 4) on the internship performance. Self-assessment and mentor evaluations are encapsulated as dual outcome indicators for the model. It then channels to adaptive and leadership readiness sustainable career competencies. It is demonstrated that undergraduate academic background serves as a moderating factor impacting behavioral application and final skill transferability. This model of this study is flow-based and integrates the pathway of empirical evaluation with the theoretical foundation of the study.

5.5 Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) And Structural Relationships

Empirical validation for the proposed conceptual model was obtained via the Confirmatory Factor

Analysis (CFA), which indicated that the observed indicators successfully measured the latent constructs of the same. Surviving the first dimension of Reaction to Soft Skills Training was found to be an essential yardstick, controlling all other dimensions of training effectiveness. The third and the fourth dimensions of Learning and Behavior were found to load largely on the factor Soft Skills Training Effectiveness (SSTE). The two internship outcome variables, Impact_1 and Impact_2, also loaded onto the Internship and Workplace Impact (IWI) for this study while undergraduate background and specialization, both variables related to demographic and background influence (DBI), loaded together. Accordingly, the model established that SSTE had an impact on IWI and that this association was accountable. The hypothesized interdependencies were validated as well as verified that a well-structured soft skill curriculum is valuable to sustainable career outcomes with students' academic history as context.

5.6 Summary of Findings

Through the analysis, it is discovered that soft skills training substantially improves student's performance during internships and ultimately throughout careers. All four levels of improvement, reaction, learning, behavior, and results were meaningful when applying Kirkpatrick's model. Internship success was found to be a key mediator in converting the training of soft skills into some Cultural and Workplace Sustainability, according to SEM analysis. It was observed that undergraduate academic background moderated the adaptability and engineering students have an uphill climb. However, the mentor feedback in evaluating the practical application of soft skills proved to be more reliable than the self-assessments.

6. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

An analysis of the utilization of structured soft skills training as a component of MBA curriculum was undertaken in order to ascertain the extent to which MBA education contributes to alignment with industry expectations and the relative benefit to the individual MBA graduates, this study highlights matching the MBA education with industry expectations. Applying Kirkpatrick's Four Level Model, statistically significant outcomes were found at every level i.e. reaction, learning, behavior, and results, which demonstrated that the intervention did not only increased students' sense of competence, but also translated into observable improvements in workplace performance. Thus, these findings corroborate evidence that soft skills are not peripheral but evidenced as being fundamental to the development of sustainable professional skills.

As shown by the analysis of undergraduate academic background, this came up as one of the most compelling insights. Whereas students from commerce and humanities streams found interpersonal and communication-based learning process more adaptable, students from engineering backgrounds had (as an initial experience) difficulty in adapting to interpersonal and communication-based learning. Nevertheless, post training evaluation showed that these students improved the most in terms of steepest improvement trajectories as well as when experience learning methodologies were introduced. So, we conclude that the differentiated instruction tailored to both cognitive and disciplinary diversity can speed up the soft skill acquisition and reduce performance difference.

Another aspect which is equally important is the divergence of the students' self- assessment and of the various mentors' evaluations. External assessments showed that while many students rated their own soft skills application highly there exists a possibility that they overestimate their application. There is a big perception-performance gap which has important implications for designing the MBA curriculum. Robust mechanisms of feedback like 360 degrees evaluation, peer reviews and simulation-based assessment are required to be incorporated in institutions to promote reflective learning and self-awareness.

In terms of pedagogy, the results suggest devaluing the curriculum of an MBA program. Instead of separating soft skills to dedicated workshops, business schools must incorporate the abilities in fundamental classes, case-studies, and internship courses. Additionally, partnering with industry through co-design and mentoring of course can also be used to guarantee real-time relevance and that learning in the classroom is transferred to the workplace. By softening skills through creating a developmental process as opposed to a single event, MBA programs are able to create a professional not just employable but flexible, tough and ethically sound. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in sharpening the cultural-capital perspective of soft skills by demonstrating measurable behavioural transfer validated through a dual-model evaluation approach.

7. SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

Although this study provides robust empirical

evidence, several limitations should be noted. The findings are based on a single-institution sample, which may limit external generalizability. The cross-sectional design captures perceptions at one point in time and does not reflect long-term career trajectories.

Additionally, the study relies partly on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Mentor evaluations were included to mitigate this concern, yet future research should incorporate multi-source and longitudinal data for stronger causal validation.

8. CONCLUSION

This study reaffirms the strategic importance of soft skills training as an essential pillar in modern MBA education. In this study, one research in particular offers a validated, two-model scenario of measurement that combines the Four Level Evaluation Model by Kirkpatrick with Structural Equation Model (SEM) of measuring the instructional impact and workplace relevance of soft skills development. It has been empirically demonstrated that well-designed interventions based on soft skills have a strong positive impact on the performance of the internship, the adaptability of students in various student profiles, and the perception of long-term sustainability in career.

Among the most important contributions to the study is the fact that undergraduate academic background is one of the moderating factors. Technical students - though less experienced at first showed the greatest gains in the exposure to experiential context, rich learning. What is more, the difference between the perceived competence and the assessments of the mentor underlines the significance of the incorporation of formative assessment and feedback systems into the MBA programs.

Finally, the results can be used practically by academic institutions, accreditation organizations, and industry players. MBA curricula ought to not bear soft skills as ancillary skills, but as entrenched, quantifiable outcomes which are essential to graduate employability, ethical leadership, and social-professional sustainability. The confirmed system and factual knowledge presented by this study can be used as an upscale example to mediate academic and industrial cultures in business education. Although the study provides an important input into the effects of soft skills training in MBA programs, it is restricted by its cross-sectional study and sample. The results are upheld by the strong analytic framework and the mentor-authenticated feedback, multi-institutional or cross-cultural research would be useful. Nevertheless, the research has a solid empirical background and an established framework that can be used in future studies and curriculum design regarding business education. These findings confirm that the evolution of soft skills as a deeper construction of cultural adaptation and social learning proves that management education must be regarded as the location of long-term cultural change rather than the one-time learning of skills. Clarifying the perception–performance gap adds conceptual depth to existing scholarship by revealing that soft skills operate not only as competencies but also as socially mediated cultural artifacts influencing workplace adaptation

9. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research needs to focus on the long-term impacts of soft skills training through longitudinal research designs, which evaluate career advancement, leadership growth, and work-related flexibility in the long run. The comparative study across the institutions and different cultures might be able to give a great understanding of the impact of the background and environment on acquiring and utilizing soft skills. More research in the field of innovative teaching strategies, including gamified learning, virtual simulation, and interactive case-based modules, can be used to maximize the design of instruction. Besides, it is possible to include psychological constructs (emotional intelligence and self-efficacy) to make a more comprehensive picture of how soft skills can be used to make a person successful in his/her professional life.

10. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the validated outcomes of this study and using the dual application of Kirkpatrick's Training Evaluation Model and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), the following recommendations serve as a guide for policy makers, academic institutions, and industry partners on how to integrate soft skills into MBA education in a sustainable and impactful manner.

10.1. Curriculum Design and Integration

Soft skills training must be integrated and credit bearing as a core component of the MBA program across all specializations. Structured development in interpersonal communication, leadership, emotional intelligence and decision making is also covered. One solution is the creation of cross disciplinary skill labs that combine characteristics of behavioral economics,

psychology, and management to provide students with missing skills in a very hands-on, interdisciplinary manner. This can be enhanced with a Soft Skills Heatmap followed during student induction, to provide a personalized baseline, and hence, instructors can chart the intensity and scope of development efforts to be made for a given student, during his/ her academic tenure.

10.2. Pedagogical Innovation

The MBA programs, therefore, need to shift towards adopting multiple strategies of pedagogy that are immersive and more experiential in nature so that learning is meaningful and behavioral change is achieved. It is possible to simulate complexity in workplaces by tools that game them, real-time simulations, and digital storytelling platforms, and thus, to generate decision making in the face of uncertainty. According to a one week pre-internship boot camp on applied behavioral training, one can be prepared at once to participate in the workplace. Lastly, it will also be used in establishing a Behavioral Insights Laboratory within the business school which will be used to provide the students with the room to test models, role play, reflect on behaviors, and experiment with team dynamics thereby allowing the nexus in between theory and application of the theory.

10.3. Industry-Academia Synergy

Good industrial academic cooperation is essential in transfer of soft skills acquired in the classroom to the career. An example is that an internship can integrate a 360-degree feedback model where students receive self, peer, and supervisor feedback, and all of their behavioral skills are addressed. One of the ways this is enabled is through active mentorship in the industry during the internship years that assists students to overcome interpersonal obstacles in real time. In addition to that, the design of business school curriculum needs to include industry professionals and alumni to enhance the process of aligning the learning outcomes with the changes in professional demands and industry sectoral need based soft skills.

10.4. Assessment and Long-Term Tracking

The institutions will have to implement solid structures on the continuous assessment of the soft skills learning to make it possible to keep being relevant and responsive. A Skills Index that is underestimated can include different dimensions of evaluation by using some of the qualities of adaptability, resilience and empathy. Through long term longitudinal follow up of the alumni, you can have information on the aid of soft skills training to further career, innovate in other fields, adjust in other situations etc. over a period of 5 to 10 years. This then provides long term insights that can inform back into curriculum improvement cycles, dealing with redesigning of the instructional design and the learning goals.

10.5. Inclusivity and Diversity in Training

The diverse diversity of learning styles, backgrounds and career aspirations should be taken into account for any pedagogy regarding soft skills. Gender sensitive modules should be designed by programs according to traditional and modern patterns of communication and leadership and be inclusive of gender through peer learning environments. Further, there is a need for cross-cultural communication modules and participation in international collaborative projects in order to prepare students for global workforce demands. This results in cultural agility, increased capacity to work well in hybrid teams and global employability.

10.6. Policy-Level Recommendations

The learning outcomes of the soft skills with outlined rubric and cycles of evaluations can be implemented on the business school level by the accreditation bodies such as AACSB, EQUIS and NAAC as part of the educational policy. The development of soft skills competency ought to be part of the institutional reporting systems and not just academic indicators. In a bid to promote such academia-industry collaboration, government agencies and national education councils should be incentivized by concentrated funding in this type of innovation. The systemic reinforcement will make sure that issues related to scalability, quality assurance, and national workforce/global workforce issues are taken into account.

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