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Paideia Patristic Education: Analysis into the acquisition of soft skills in Universities in Machakos County, Kenya

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Abstract

The acquisition of soft skills is increasingly recognized as a crucial component of higher education, essential for preparing students to meet the challenges of the modern workforce. This study investigates the process of acquiring soft skills through Paideia Patristic Education (PPE) in universities in Machakos County, Kenya. This quantitative study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the PPE framework in promoting key soft skills such as communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and flexibility. Purposive sampling technique was used to target specific faculty members and students. Data was collected using structured and semi-structured questionnaires. The study's results show that PPE has a positive effect on students' soft skills, particularly in enhancing their ability to work effectively in teams and collaborate. Universities in Machakos County and beyond should strongly consider incorporating Paideia Patristic Education principles into their curricula. This would help cultivate crucial soft skills in students, better equipping them for the challenges of the contemporary job market.

Keywords: higher education, Paideia Patristic Education, professional advancement, soft skills, teamwork.

1. Introduction

Employers in today's highly competitive job market are increasingly concerned about the gap between the capabilities that graduates possess and the industry's expectations. Although graduates may have strong technical skills, they often face challenges in developing essential soft skills such as effective communication, collaboration, analytical thinking, and adaptability (Munir, 2022).

These abilities are critical for achieving personal and professional success and are frequently cited by companies as areas where new employees commonly lack proficiency. This growing concern underscores the necessity for educational institutions to provide both technical knowledge and comprehensively cultivate students' soft skills (World Economic Forum, 2023).

It is important to cultivate soft skills among graduates. Success and failure in the workplace can often be predicted by an individual's soft skills. Educators and businesses alike have emphasized the need for these skills to achieve favourable career outcomes and promote lifelong learning (Dubey & Tiwari, 2020). Employers prefer to hire candidates who will be productive, as this reduces re-training costs. However, a lack of soft skills among undergraduates can lead to a high rate of unemployment. Those who are employed often rely on mentorship and in-service training programs to boost their productivity at work (Igwe et al., 2022).

Ahmed et al. (2012) reveal that there is a demand for soft skills in the software sector, albeit this demand is restricted. The work of Fulgence (2015) on employability of university graduates in the workforce, establishes that communication skills, attitude, curriculum vitae presentation and behavioural qualities are important aspects that influence the decisions made by corporate recruiters to recruit graduates. Further, Kalufya and Mwakajinga (2016) show a substantial disparity in the emphasis on employability skills between employers and final-year students. The research shows that employers rank self-awareness, knowledge application, and teamwork as first, second, and third, whereas final year students placed them as first, second, and sixth.

Rather than focusing on the connection between graduates' development and acquisition of soft skills, the studies examine employers' perceptions of graduate skills and soft skill gaps in the labour market. While the research has not extensively explored the obstacles of obtaining and developing soft skills, some studies have concentrated on the teaching and learning of soft skills in higher education. Sanga (2019) establishes that teaching and evaluating soft skills in Tanzanian universities pose considerable difficulties, while Cornali (2018) analyses the significance of tertiary education in developing and perhaps enhancing soft skills. In Kenya, few studies have explored the use of Paideia Patristic Education (PPE) to acquire soft skills.

Paideia Patristic Education (PPE) is an educational approach that combines the ancient Greek concept of comprehensive development, known as Paideia, with the theological and ethical teachings of the early Christian Church Fathers, or Patristics (Jaś, 2013). This strategy aims to foster individuals who possess a wide range of skills and qualities, encompassing intellectual and cultural knowledge as well as spiritual and moral characteristics rooted in Christian beliefs. Central to this approach are classical writings and ideas, which are analysed and understood from a Christian perspective (Tarnas, 1993). The goal is to cultivate the holistic growth of individuals, addressing their intellectual, physical, and spiritual dimensions. PPE emphasises the development of both knowledge and virtue by placing a strong emphasis on community, tradition, and the transfer of wisdom. This educational approach, influential in early Christian schools and medieval universities, is currently experiencing a renaissance in classical Christian institutions. These schools combine rigorous academic study with profound spiritual formation (Watkins, 2015). The study seeks to assess the efficacy of this teaching strategy in cultivating fundamental soft skills among graduates. Using a quantitative approach, we evaluate the effectiveness of the PPE framework in fostering the growth of soft skills.

2. Literature Review

This section contains two parts – the theoretical review and the empirical review. The theoretical review discusses the Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism while the empirical review summarizes the key literatures related to acquisition and development of soft skills.

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study takes a Vygotskian social constructivism approach. Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism posits that individuals actively develop their knowledge and understanding. The theory states that as active learners, humans generate their own knowledge. It emphasises the importance of an integrated curriculum, where students explore a subject from multiple perspectives. Additionally, constructivists emphasise learner-centred teaching approaches (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). The theory highlights the significance of the interplay among interpersonal, cultural, and individual factors in human growth. Vygotsky believed that engaging with others speeds up the growth and improvement of cognitive abilities. He places great importance on the social environment in the process of learning and contended that interactions with others have an impact on learning experiences. Vygotsky and Cole (1978) claim that the social environment serves as the primary origin of all advanced cognitive functions in the brain.

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a fundamental term in Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism, which refers to the difference between a person's current level of development achieved by individual problem-solving and their potential level of growth achieved through adult supervision or collaboration with more advanced peers. The ZPD quantifies the extent of attainable knowledge within ideal instructional conditions. Within the ZDP, a teacher and a student engage in collaborative work on a task that the student cannot complete alone due to its demanding nature. Cognitive change in the ZDP takes place when an instructor and a learner collaborate and utilise cultural resources, resulting in the student internalising culturally mediated interactions (Schunk, 2012).

Vygotsky’s theory of social constructivism offers valuable insights into the acquisition of soft skills within PPE in universities across Machakos County, Kenya. In this context, soft skills like communication, teamwork, and critical thinking are not simply taught but developed organically through engaging with diverse philosophical, theological, and historical viewpoints. Educators act as facilitators, encouraging students to actively participate in discussions and reflective practices, thereby fostering skills essential for navigating complex societal challenges.

2.2 Empirical Review

Many college graduates aim to secure employment where they can apply their hard skills and knowledge. However, according to Meeks (2017), college graduates need to possess soft skills to thrive in the workplace. Soft skills are fundamental for individual success and the overall success of the company. In today's work environment, characterized by less repetitive tasks and increased autonomy, employees are required to make decisions independently, interact with diverse stakeholders, and communicate effectively across various organizational levels. Essential soft skills for any employee include teamwork, problem-solving, decision-making, and communication (Brungardt, 2011). Therefore, there has been rising interest in the need for soft skills training to enhance the overall quality of graduates from institutions of higher learning.

Soft skills, which are also referred to as employability skills, transferable skills, life skills or 21st century skills, are highly valued by employers and have been shown to significantly improve the quality of life and success in the workplace. Tushar and Sooraksa (2023) find a total of 87 distinct skills categorised into three separate temporal themes: the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s.

Notably, problem-solving, communication, teamwork, adaptability, and willingness to learn emerges as the most often mentioned talents throughout all time periods. Furthermore, Ngek Shillie and Nchang (2023) show that soft skills can produce a positive impact on the job performance of an individual. It is therefore emphasized that soft skills could be learned and acquired.

Soft skills should be integrated into the curriculum and evaluated separately, given the growing demand from employers for graduates proficient in these areas (Warrner, 2021). However, educators face challenges in integrating soft skills into courses without compromising essential course content. Additionally, the educational needs of college students and corporate employees are constantly evolving, necessitating educators to stay updated on these changing needs and required skills (Anthony & Garner, 2016). Further, Aljohani et al. (2022) demonstrate that institutions have a noticeable deficiency in providing students with the necessary training to gain these skills.

Factors contributing to unemployment among Kenyan graduates include mismatches between labour market demand and supply, as well as a lack of life skills training (Kapfudzaruwa et al., 2018). The current emphasis on global competitiveness in higher education has led to a competitive, commercially driven, and often low-quality massification of university education (Ireri, 2023). Furthermore, there is an excessive focus on subject area content, neglecting the crucial development of life skills or soft skills among students (Muyaka & Kitainge, 2021). However, in some higher education institutions, soft skills training is inadequately implemented, resulting in graduates who may struggle to meet the demands of the workforce (Bergin et al., 2019).

3. Methodology

3.1 Aim and Research Question

The aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of PPE in fostering the acquisition of soft skills among university students in Machakos County, Kenya. The research question is therefore: How does the implementation of Paideia Patristic Education influence the development of soft skills among students in universities within Machakos County, Kenya?

3.2 Research Design

The study used a quantitative approach and focused on applying PPE to analyse the acquisition of soft skills in universities in Machakos County, Kenya. This design allows for the collection of numerical data, which can be statistically analysed to provide objective and reliable insights (Black, 1999). Survey design was used to collect information from students and faculty staff from major universities in Machakos County. Surveys are useful in describing the characteristics of a large population (Gideon, 2012). The universities were of interest since they were the only ones with main campuses in the region and it was important to know how they impart soft skills to the students who then go on to join the employment sector in the county and beyond.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected using questionnaires which comprised of closed and open-ended questions. Questionnaires can be administered anonymously, encouraging respondents to provide honest and unbiased answers without fear of judgment or repercussions which permitted a greater depth of response (Jenn, 2006). The questionnaires were piloted at Daystar University, Nairobi. The data analysis process involved data cleaning, coding, keypunching into a computer and finally analysing. Data analysis has been done using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.

4. Results

The study's findings offer valuable insights into the efficacy of a PPE framework aimed at cultivating interpersonal and communication skills among pupils residing in Machakos County, Kenya. The findings provide a thorough analysis of the present condition of soft skills development and educational practices in the region, emphasising areas of proficiency and potential for enhancement.

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

	Gender	Frequency	Percent
Faculty	Male	5	55.60%
	Female	4	44.40%
	Total	9	100.00%
	Gender	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Students	Male	24	53.30%
	Female	21	46.70%
	Total	45	100.00%

Source: own compilation/calculations, based on survey data (2023).

The gender distribution among instructors and students in Machakos County is approximately equal, with a small male predominance in both groups Table 1.

The faculty is comprised of 55.60% males and 44.40% females, whereas the student body is composed of 53.30% males and 46.70% females. This equilibrium signifies a comprehensive environment in relation to gender representation inside educational institutions.

4.2 Student Results

4.2.1 Do Universities in Machakos County, Kenya offer classes on soft skills?

TABLE 2. WHETHER THE UNIVERSITY OFFERS CLASSES ON SOFT SKILLS

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	34	75.6%
No	11	24.4%
Total	45	100%

Source: own compilation/calculations, based on survey data (2023).

Table 2. addresses the question whether the University offers any classes on soft skills. The results indicate that a substantial majority of participants, up to 75.6%, confirmed that the institution provides courses specifically designed to enhance soft skills. This demonstrates a firm dedication by the institution to provide students with crucial interpersonal and professional skills, including teamwork, communication, and problem-solving. Nevertheless, a minority of students (24.4%), indicated that the university did not offer such lectures. This disparity indicates that although most individuals derive advantages from soft skills training, there remains a segment of the student body that may not be availing themselves of these valuable educational prospects.

4.2.2 Which soft skills are the most important for Universities in Machakos County, Kenya?

The participants were asked about the specific soft skills that are given priority in their universities. As per Table 3., the top ranked attribute was integrity, accounting for 33.3% of the total. Interpersonal skills followed closely with 13.3%, while oral communication and critical thinking tied at 11.1%. Teamwork, work ethics and morals, and professionalism each accounted for 11.1% as well. Analytical skills had the lowest ranking at 2.2%. Although most scholars have different views on what are the most important soft skills, they place communication as a must-have skill (Robles, 2012). Brungardt (2011) has identified teamwork, problem solving, decision making, and communication as the four soft skills necessary for any employee.

TABLE 3. IMPORTANCE UNIVERSITIES IN MACHAKOS COUNTY KENYA, PLACE ON THE ACQUISITION OF SOFT SKILLS

	Frequency	**Percent**
Integrity	15	33.30%
Interpersonal skills	6	13.30%
Oral communication	5	11.10%
Critical thinking	5	11.10%
Teamwork	5	11.10%
Work ethics and Morals	5	11.10%
Professionalism	2	4.40%
Analytical skills	1	2.20%
Total	44	97.80%

Source: own compilation/calculations, based on survey data (2023).

4.2.3 What co-curriculum activities are used in universities in Machakos County, Kenya to impart soft skills to the students?

The students were asked to choose from a list of activities provided by the university that are aimed at developing soft skills. According to Table 4., 60% of the respondents reported the availability of sporting activities, 20% reported long-term apprenticeships, and 8.9% reported field trips. Other activities included learning to play an instrument, such as the guitar or violin (4.4%), international and domestic travels (4.4%), and seeking the help of students with good soft skills to train their friends (2.2%).

We note that extended apprenticeships provide students with the chance to observe and acquire soft skills in real-life environments. It is advisable to motivate students to participate in hands-on learning experiences by actively engaging in real-world job settings to cultivate contextual soft skills. Research has demonstrated that contextual learning is an efficient method for acquiring soft skills (Arat, 2014).

While there are multiple activities that can assist students in cultivating soft skills at university, the research did not address these specific activities. Engaging in long-term workshops, engaging trainers who specialise in soft skills, and improving English proficiency are all highly effective in facilitating the acquisition of soft skills among students.

TABLE 4. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACTIVITIES OFFERED TO STRENGTHEN SOFT SKILLS ACQUISITION AND UNIVERSITY

Activities to strengthen soft skills acquisition	Daystar	Machakos	Total
Sports	12	15	27
Long term apprenticeship	15	4	9
Field trips	3	1	4
International travels and domestic travels	2	0	2
Learning to play an instrument (guitar, violin, etc.)	2	0	2
Taking the help of students who possess good soft skills to train their friends	1	0	1

Source: own compilation/calculations, based on survey data (2023).

As shown in Table 5., the small chi-square statistics (5.96) and its significance $p > 0.05$ indicate that it is very likely that the two variables – activities offered to strengthen soft skills acquisition and university- are independent of each other. Therefore, we conclude that there is no relationship between the university and activities offered to strengthen soft skills acquisition at the universities χ^2 (5, $N = 45$) = 5.96, $p = 0.31$. Therefore, there is not a strong link between the university and the events that are meant to help people learn soft skills.

TABLE 5. CHI-SQUARE TESTS

	Value	*df*	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.963[a]	5	.310
Likelihood Ratio	7.867	5	.164
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.860	1	.091
N of Valid Cases	45		

Source: own compilation/calculations, based on survey data (2023)

4.3 Faculty Results

4.3.1 How often do faculty members use the following strategies in teaching your courses?

TABLE 6. STRATEGIES USED BY FACULTY MEMBERS TO IMPART SOFT SKILLS

	Often	Sometimes	Always	Never	Rarely
Group discussion	55.60%	22.20%	22.20%	0.00%	0.00%
Case studies	44.40%	44.40%	11.10%	0.00%	0.00%
Role play	22.20%	33.3.0%	22.20%	11.10%	33.30%
Quizzes	55.60%	0.00%	33.30%	11.10%	0.00%
Mock interviews	11.10%	22.20%	11.10%	33.30%	22.20%
Debates	0.00%	11.10%	11.10%	33.30%	44.40%

Source: own compilation/calculations, based on survey data (2023).

As discernible in Table 6., group discussions and quizzes are often utilised instructional strategies, regularly employed by most educators. Case studies are frequently employed, although their usage is not as uniform. Role plays and mock interviews are infrequently employed, with a significant proportion of educators never or rarely utilising them. Debates are infrequently employed as a teaching approach, as most educators rarely or never integrate them into their instructional practices. This suggests a predilection for participatory and evaluative approaches, with less emphasis placed on role-based and debate activities.

4.3.2 How would faculty members assess soft skills development among their students?

According to Table 7., the lecturers agree that the course is highly effective in fostering teamwork skills. A significant majority (88.89%) believe it aids in developing organizational skills. Feedback is mixed for written communication: 55.56% agree it improves these skills, 22.22% are neutral, and 22.22% disagree. Educators focus more on understanding than memorization, with 55.56% disagreeing that memorization is prioritized. Opinions on problem-solving skills are also split: 55.56% agree, 22.22% are neutral, and 22.22% disagree. Feedback is mostly in grades, with 55.56% neutral. Good memory is not crucial, as 44.44% disagree. The course effectively sharpens analytical skills (77.78% agreement). The training is often successful in cultivating essential soft skills among students in Machakos County, namely in the areas of teamwork and analytical abilities.

TABLE 7. SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT BY FACULTY OF UNIVERSITIES

Skills development	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
The course helps students to develop teamwork skills	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%
The course helps students to develop organizational skills	88.89%	11.11%	0.00%
The course helps students to improve skills in written communication	55.56%	22.22%	22.22%
I test on what the students have memorized than what they have understood.	33.33%	11.11%	55.56%
The course has developed students' problem-solving skills	55.56%	22.22%	22.22%
I give feedback on the work only in the form of marks or grades	33.33%	55.56%	11.11%
To do well in this course all students really need is a good memory	33.33%	22.22%	44.44%
The course sharpens the students' analytical skills	77.78%	11.11%	11.11%

Source: own compilation/calculations, based on survey data (2023).

4.3.3 What do faculty members think is their students' proficiency level in the following skills?

TABLE 8. STUDENT PROFICIENCY LEVELS IN DIFFERENT SKILLS

	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Writing	11.1%	33.3%	44.4%	11.1%
Speaking	11.1%	33.3%	44.4%	11.1%
Problem solving	22.2%	22.2%	55.6%	0.00%
Presentation	11.1%	44.4%	44.4%	0.00%
Teamwork	0.00%	33.3%	55.6%	11.1%

Source: own compilation/calculations, based on survey data (2023).

According to Table 8., the students in Machakos County exhibit commendable proficiency in writing, speaking, and teamwork, with a majority being evaluated as "Good" or "Excellent" in these domains. The majority rates problem-solving skills as "Good," while there are concerns regarding inadequate proficiency. The students' presentation abilities are perceived as somewhat weak, since none of them were rated as "Excellent" and a considerable proportion were ranked as "Fair." In general, students demonstrate proficiency in teamwork and problem-solving, but there is potential for enhancement in presentation skills and, to a certain degree, writing and speaking abilities.

5. Discussion

This study investigates the process of acquiring soft skills through PPE in universities located in Machakos County, Kenya. PPE, rooted in classical and early Christian traditions, emphasizes comprehensive growth, ethical values, and community-based learning.

The findings show that universities in Machakos county offer lessons on soft skills. Among the most important soft skills are integrity, followed by interpersonal skills and oral communications. Others include critical thinking, teamwork, work ethics and morals. These are among the most important soft skills according to the World Economic Forum (2023). Accordingly, analytical thinking is seen as the most essential skill by a greater number of firms than any other skill and accounts on average for 9% of the core skills stated as desirable by companies. Creative thinking, a cognitive talent, is ranked second in importance. It surpasses three self-efficacy skills: resilience, flexibility, and agility. Additionally, creative thinking is considered more significant than motivation and self-awareness, as well as curiosity and lifelong learning. Dependability and attention to detail, which are the fourth self-efficacy skill in the Global Skills Taxonomy, are ranked eighth, following technological literacy (World Economic Forum, 2023).

This training is expected to have a positive impact on soft skills training as seen in other studies. The results of Yan et al. (2019) indicate that training has a statistically significant favourable effect on the evaluated human traits, specifically in the development of soft skills. However, Ngang et al. (2015) establish that teachers expresses apprehension regarding the inadequate acquisition of soft skills during teacher training, which hampers their ability to effectively support their work environment.

The findings on methods for teaching soft skills reveal that group discussions and quizzes are often used as instructional strategies, frequently adopted by most lecturers. This concurs with Nazaré de Freitas and Assoreira Almendra (2022) who show that active learning strategies that emphasize constructivism and collaborative practices developed in exchange milieus and groups are the most widely used teaching methodologies. Case studies are commonly used, yet their usage is not consistent. Role plays and mock interviews are rarely used, with a substantial number of educators never or rarely employing them. Debates are seldom utilised as a pedagogical method, as many instructors rarely or never incorporate them into their teaching strategies. Other strategies that are used include games (Viviers et al., 2016) in which they show educational games are effective in requiring students to apply the full spectrum of soft/pervasive skills.

Apart from class activities, Universities in Machakos use co-curriculum activities to impart soft skills. Most respondents emphasized that sporting activities were the most frequently mentioned approach for cultivating soft skills. Mareque et al. (2019) find that students who engage in certain proposed activities exhibit better levels of creativity, on average. Additionally, a favourable link was found between the quantity of recreational pursuits and the analysed measures of creativity. de Prada Creo et al. (2020) establish a strong association between participating in extra-curricular activities and developing crucial teamwork abilities.

A small fraction of respondents emphasized the inclusion of extended apprenticeships, which are essential for acquiring practical, context-specific knowledge of soft skills. Moreover, the chi-square test findings revealed that there is no statistically significant correlation between the place of instruction and the activities provided for the acquisition of soft skills. Vaughan (2017)

establishes that specific context of apprenticeship provides a distinct advantage in developing attitudes and interpersonal skills, which are distinctive to a certain area and may be acquired through learning, rather than being universally applicable, theoretical, and unchanging.

According to the academics, the PPE framework is seen as being highly efficient in promoting collaborative abilities. Most people agree that it helps in cultivating organizational skills, however opinions are divided when it comes to its influence on written communication. In addition, children in Machakos County demonstrate an impressive ability in writing, speaking, and collaboration, with a majority receiving evaluations of "Good" or "Excellent" in these categories. Although many individuals assess their problem-solving abilities as "Good," there are apprehensions over insufficient proficiency. Thus, we might deduce that the PPE framework is successful in instilling soft skills.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study highlights the efficacy and constraints of the PPE framework in fostering important soft skills among university students in Machakos County, Kenya. The main programs for cultivating soft skills include sporting activities and long-term apprenticeships, according to the key findings. Integrity was the most highly valued skill, followed by interpersonal skills. Finally, the participants unanimously acknowledged that the course they were enrolled in much improved their capacity to collaborate effectively within a team.

According to the results of this study, we suggest taking the following measures. Universities should prioritize the provision of specialized courses that specifically target the development of soft skills. Furthermore, it is imperative to enhance the coordination of sporting events and apprenticeships to offer students genuine opportunities to apply and develop their soft skills in real-world scenarios. Moreover, institutions must implement strategies to incorporate soft skills training into all academic programs, guaranteeing uniform and comprehensive cultivation of these skills across various fields of study. Furthermore, it is essential to continuously evaluate the advancement of soft skills, integrating input from both students and employers to consistently enhance and optimize the training structure. Ultimately, the efficacy of soft skills education can be heightened by engaging expert trainers who specialize in soft skills and organizing extensive workshops. These trainers possess expertise and training techniques that surpass what is generally offered by university instructors.

Potential avenues for future investigation include the following: initially, carrying out longitudinal research to observe the extended consequences of PPE on graduates' employment achievements and utilization of interpersonal skills will provide more profound understanding of its effectiveness. Furthermore, conducting comparative analyses between institutions in Machakos County and those in other regions or nations could yield useful insights into the most efficient approaches and areas for improvement in the instruction of soft skills. Furthermore, doing research that focuses on certain industries and their unique soft skills prerequisites could aid in tailoring training programs to better meet the needs of various sectors.

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