

Beyond Technical Competence: Integrating Soft Skills into Training and Development for Non-Academic Staff in Sri Lankan Universities

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ABSTRACT

Universities increasingly recognize that operational excellence depends not only on technical proficiency but also on the soft skills of non-academic (administrative/support) staff who interface daily with students, faculty, and external stakeholders. This qualitative, desk-based study synthesizes recent literature and sector documents—drawing on Sri Lankan and international sources to examine how soft skills are prioritized, taught, and embedded within university training and development (T&D) programs. The review identifies core competencies (communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem-solving, customer-service orientation, and emotional intelligence) as decisive for service quality, workplace climate, and institutional agility. While Staff Development Centers and isolated initiatives exist, training provision remains uneven and largely oriented toward technical or compliance topics. Common barriers include limited leadership prioritization and budgets, absence of structured career pathways and incentives, high workloads that constrain participation, and cultural resistance to “soft” training. Evidence from case studies indicates that when soft skills programs are intentional, interactive, and sustained, they improve staff confidence, inter-departmental collaboration, and student-facing service outcomes, though measurement is often indirect. The paper recommends sector-level commitment (e.g., UGC-led standards), routine training-needs analyses, a modular soft-skills curriculum aligned to competency frameworks, linkage of training to appraisal and promotion, and a supportive learning culture reinforced by mentoring and on-the-job practice. Embedding these measures can help Sri Lankan universities modernize administrative services, elevate stakeholder satisfaction, and better achieve strategic goals.

Keywords: Soft skills; Non-academic staff; Training and development; Sri Lankan universities.

INTRODUCTION

In the ever-evolving landscape of higher education, universities increasingly recognize that technical skills alone are not sufficient for staff effectiveness. *Soft skills* – the interpersonal, communication, and personal attributes that enable individuals to interact effectively and harmoniously with others – are crucial for university staff, especially those in non-academic roles. Non-academic staff (also referred to as administrative or support staff) play pivotal roles in the smooth operation of universities, from student services and admissions to library, finance, and maintenance functions. Their responsibilities bring them into frequent contact with students, faculty, and external stakeholders, meaning that competencies such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, conflict resolution, and problem-solving are essential for quality service delivery and a positive campus experience. These soft skills complement hard (technical) skills by facilitating effective collaboration, customer service, and leadership in day-to-day operations.

Despite the importance of soft skills, traditional training and development (T&D) programs at universities have often prioritized technical skills and job-specific knowledge, overlooking soft skills development for non-academic staff (Wanjiku, 2016). This oversight has created gaps in service quality, communication, and workplace harmony. As one university report notes, soft skills “significantly enhance interpersonal interactions, conflict resolution, and service delivery, creating a more harmonious and productive workplace. However, these skills are often undervalued in formal training frameworks, leading to a gap in the ability of staff to meet the demands of a dynamic university environment”. In other words, many non-academic

employees have not received sufficient development in areas like effective communication or teamwork, which can limit their performance and the overall efficiency of university operations (Suwannatarn & Asavisanu, 2022). Indeed, a lack of soft skills training can hinder staff from fully contributing to institutional goals, as they may struggle with customer service, collaboration, or adaptability in a fast-changing academic context. This gap not only affects day-to-day efficiency but also the institution's strategic objectives: universities that neglect soft skills development risk lower stakeholder satisfaction, weaker teamwork, and diminished capacity for change management.

The issue is particularly pronounced in contexts like Sri Lanka, where historically the emphasis in staff development has been on technical competencies and compliance with administrative procedures. Sri Lankan public universities do have Staff Development Centers and some training initiatives, but soft skills development for non-academic staff has only recently gained attention. A study of Sri Lankan higher education noted that university strategic plans often lacked any formal career development or soft skills training programs for non-academic employees. As a result, many support staff have had few opportunities to formally improve their interpersonal and adaptive skills. This is beginning to change: for example, training manuals and programs have been introduced to cover "people skills" like communication, customer service, and teamwork for administrative staff. However, significant gaps remain in implementation. The Sri Lankan experience mirrors global trends – in many countries, non-teaching personnel were long considered peripheral, but 21st-century challenges are bringing them to the forefront of university operations (Antiado et al., 2020). Accordingly, there is a pressing need to integrate soft skills development into university training and development programs for non-academic staff.

This paper examines the importance of soft skills development in university training programs for non-academic staff, using a qualitative desk-based research approach. It focuses on the context of universities in Sri Lanka while also drawing on international perspectives to provide a comparative outlook. Key soft skills such as communication, teamwork, adaptability (among others) will be identified and their relevance to non-academic roles explained. The effectiveness (or limitations) of current training programs in addressing these skills is analyzed, and common barriers to implementing soft skills training are explored. Finally, the paper offers strategic recommendations for universities to better incorporate soft skills development for non-academic staff. By highlighting both local (Sri Lankan) and global insights, the study aims to demonstrate that enhancing soft skills among university support staff is not only beneficial but indeed essential for improving service quality, operational efficiency, and institutional success. The research is organized into sections covering the literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion, following an academic paper structure.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Non-Academic Staff in Universities and the Need for Soft Skills

Non-academic staff form the backbone of administrative and support services in universities. They include departments such as registry and admissions, student affairs, finance, human resources, IT support, library, estate management, and more. Although traditionally overshadowed by the academic faculty in perceived importance, these staff are crucial to institutional performance and student success. As Subashini (2019) observes, *"regardless of the level or position in the hierarchy, both academics and non-academics are equally important for accomplishment of the aims of universities"*, and non-academic employees *"significantly contribute towards the prospects of the university"*. Non-academic personnel ensure the smooth functioning of daily operations and often serve as the frontline interface with students and other stakeholders, handling everything from answering student queries to maintaining campus facilities. Their effectiveness can directly impact student satisfaction, retention, and the university's reputation. For example, a prompt and empathetic response from a financial aid officer or an efficient resolution of an IT problem by technical staff can greatly enhance a student's experience. Thus, *how* these staff interact and perform is pivotal – and this is where soft skills become vital.

Soft skills are broadly defined as the non-technical abilities that influence how people work and interact with others. They encompass communication skills, interpersonal abilities, emotional intelligence, teamwork,

leadership, problem-solving, adaptability, work ethic, and more. Unlike hard skills (the technical knowledge needed for specific tasks), soft skills are transferable across roles and situations and are often rooted in personal attributes and attitudes. In the context of university administration, key soft skills include: effective communication (e.g., listening, clear writing and speaking, giving and receiving feedback), interpersonal skills (e.g., teamwork, conflict resolution, customer service orientation, empathy), adaptability (openness to change, learning new systems or policies), problem-solving and critical thinking (ability to handle unexpected issues, make decisions), leadership and initiative (especially for those in supervisory roles or project teams), and time management and organizational skills to handle multiple tasks efficiently. A list of desired qualities for non-academic staff compiled by Subashini (2019) in Sri Lanka illustrates the breadth of soft skills expected alongside technical abilities: *“passion, empathy, adaptability, tolerance, flexibility, common sense, fair judgment, creativity, innovation, mutual respect, intellectual curiosity, teamwork, responsibility, stress management, leadership, social skills, professionalism, integrity, reliability”*. This exhaustive list underlines that universities seek employees who not only can do the job (hard skills) but can do it in the right manner collegially, ethically, and efficiently.

The literature consistently emphasizes that such soft skills are essential for non-academic staff performance and the quality of university services. Antiado et al. (2020) note that non-teaching staff are “in the technical and support side of the educational institution” and thus *“play vital roles in the academic environment”*, contributing in ways that directly support faculty and students. These roles have become even more significant in the face of 21st-century challenges – a knowledge-based economy, technological change, diverse student bodies, and higher expectations for accountability and service quality in higher education. As universities modernize, non-academic staff find themselves dealing with complex situations that demand more than routine technical know-how. For instance, consider a student affairs officer handling a distressed student’s complaint: beyond knowing university regulations (hard skill), the officer must exercise emotional intelligence, active listening, and conflict resolution skills to address the issue effectively. Or a lab technician managing new safety protocols must not only follow technical guidelines but also communicate clearly with faculty and students about changes and demonstrate adaptability as procedures evolve. In short, soft skills often make the difference between a merely competent staff member and an outstanding one who can navigate the “people” side of university operations. Researchers have described soft skills as the *“subtle behaviors and communication styles”* that make teamwork and customer interaction smoother, improving job performance and career prospects in the long run. In fact, effectiveness in many non-academic roles is heavily contingent on soft skills, because these roles frequently involve service encounters, teamwork across departments, and implementing change – all of which rely on interpersonal competencies.

Empirical studies reinforce this point. For example, a mixed-methods study by Naji (2023) on educational outcomes found that non-academic (soft) skills strongly influence success in the university environment, even if their impact is not immediately reflected in grades. Quantitatively, certain soft skills had minimal effect on GPA, but qualitatively, students reported that skills like communication, logical thinking, and time management were crucial in helping them navigate the transition to university and persist to graduation. By analogy, one can infer that for non-academic staff, soft skills are critical to navigating the complexities of their work environment and ensuring effective service delivery. Another study in Thailand by Suwannatarn and Asavisanu (2022) specifically examined *leadership capabilities of non-academic staff*, which include many soft skills such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving. They identified a set of “21st Century Skills” collaboration/teamwork, communication skills, critical thinking, leadership, and problem-solving as key competencies for non-academic staff to possess. Their research at a private university in Thailand revealed a significant gap between the desired level of these soft skills and the current level among staff, indicating that even though such skills are recognized as important, staff had not fully developed them to the expected degree. This gap was statistically significant and highlights the need for targeted development programs. The Thai study’s emphasis on collaboration and communication echoes global employer surveys that prioritize interpersonal abilities even over technical qualifications. In essence, whether in Asia, Africa, or elsewhere, universities are coming to a consensus that *soft skills matter greatly for non-academic staff and institutional effectiveness*. As one systematic review succinctly put it, technical knowledge alone is insufficient in today’s job roles; *“no matter how good the technical competencies are, the lack of sufficient soft skills creates incompatibility with changing job demands and duties”*. Moreover, high levels of soft skills in an organization

contribute to better teamwork, higher motivation and morale, improved customer (student) satisfaction, and even help in stress management among employees. These outcomes are highly relevant to universities aiming to improve student services and workplace climate.

Training and Development Programs: Current State and Gaps

Recognizing the importance of soft skills, the next question is: How well do universities currently develop these skills in their non-academic staff through training and development programs? The literature and documented practices indicate that there is considerable room for improvement. Historically, many university staff development programs for non-academics have concentrated on functional training – e.g., training on new software systems, updates on procurement procedures, or policy compliance workshops. While these hard-skill trainings are necessary, the *deliberate cultivation of soft skills has often been neglected* (Wanjiku, 2016). In Kenyan universities, for instance, Wanjiku (2016) found that *management paid little attention to ongoing training needs for non-teaching staff*, with no formal training arrangements or funding dedicated to their development. Middle-level staff had few opportunities for skill enhancement beyond learning through experience, and there were no clear policies or programs focusing on soft skills. This scenario is not unique to Kenya. In Sri Lanka, as noted earlier, soft skills training for non-academic staff has typically not been institutionalized, and until recently there was “*no career development process with the objective of increasing the productivity of non-academic staff*” in many universities. Training offerings were skewed towards technical workshops and on-boarding sessions that did not explicitly cover, say, customer service etiquette or team-building exercises.

It is telling that when universities do conduct professional development for non-academic staff, the benefits become immediately apparent. Antiado et al. (2020) describe a case in a higher education setting where a comprehensive Training Needs Analysis (TNA) was used to identify staff development needs, which then informed a balanced program including both professional (technical) and personal development topics. Their study “Managing Professional Development Activities for Non-teaching Staff” highlighted that training must focus on and benefit the institution as a whole, including non-teaching staff, and that non-academic employees should be as knowledgeable and skilled in their roles as faculty are in theirs. Importantly, the authors treated soft skills training as an integral part of professional growth. They found that when non-teaching staff received training in areas such as communication, customer service, and teamwork, it was an “eye opener” to top management about the value these staff bring – essentially elevating the recognition that non-academic staff contribute *equally* to institutional success as academic staff. This underscores that effective training programs can shift organizational culture to better appreciate and leverage non-academic staff capabilities.

Despite such positive examples, many programs still struggle with effectiveness and reach when it comes to soft skills. Suwannatarn & Asavisanu’s (2022) research in Thailand, for example, not only identified gaps in leadership-related soft skills but also led to the development of a model to enhance these capabilities. The fact that a new model was needed suggests that existing professional development activities were not adequately closing the gap. In their exploratory sequential study, they surveyed nearly 400 staff and interviewed administrators, finding that while staff self-rated their current soft skill levels as “high” on average, the desired levels were even higher, and the difference was statistically significant in key areas. For instance, staff might rate their current teamwork or communication skills around 3.8–4.0 on a 5-point scale (a decent level), but the expectation or need was around 4.2–4.3, indicating a shortfall. This aligns with anecdotal observations that non-academic staff often learn interpersonal skills on the job, but more structured training could further improve their effectiveness. The Thai study went on to validate a comprehensive training model using frameworks of talent development, servant leadership, and 21st-century skills, illustrating that a strategic, theory-informed approach can be taken to design soft skills training for staff.

Internationally, some universities have started implementing dedicated programs for soft skills development of support staff. For example, many Sri Lankan universities have established Staff Development Centers (SDCs) tasked not only with training new academics (teaching staff) but also offering programs for non-academic employees. The University of Jaffna’s Staff Development Center, under a government project, developed a detailed training manual titled “*Essential Soft Skills for Non-Academic Staff*”. This manual (initially developed in 2012 and updated since) covers modules on positive attitudes and behaviors, adaptability,

managing resources, self-management, and interpersonal relationships – each packed with soft skills lessons such as communication, conflict resolution, leadership, telephone etiquette, etc. The presence of such a program indicates a recognition within Sri Lanka's higher education system that soft skills can and should be taught to staff through workshops, role-plays, and exercises. However, challenges remain in implementation – these programs must be regularly conducted, and staff participation encouraged, to yield benefits.

Another angle to consider is the effect of soft skills training on job performance and service quality i.e., training effectiveness. While formal evaluations are scarce, the literature suggests that when soft skills training is done well, it can improve various performance metrics. Antiado et al. (2020) reported that a well-designed professional development program led to increased staff confidence and a greater understanding of their role in the university's mission. Staff who underwent customer service training, for instance, began to handle student inquiries more efficiently and courteously, leading to better student feedback. Similarly, team-building workshops improved collaboration between departments, reducing silos and duplication of work. These qualitative outcomes point to the effectiveness of soft skills training in enhancing day-to-day operations. However, one noted difficulty is that soft skills improvements are harder to measure than technical training outcomes. Institutions may not have immediate quantitative data (like exam scores) to show improvement, so they must rely on indirect indicators: reduced complaints, faster service times, higher employee satisfaction, etc. The lack of built-in evaluation metrics for soft skills is one reason they might be undervalued – “*not easily quantifiable or measurable*,” as the Jaffna training manual points out. This has led some administrators to underestimate training effectiveness when in fact the benefits, though real, are subtle or long-term.

In summary, the current state of training in universities is that soft skills development for non-academic staff is acknowledged as important in theory, but not fully realized in practice. Many universities worldwide are still in early stages of formally incorporating soft skills into staff development curricula. Some have taken promising steps (dedicated workshops, integrated PD programs, mentorship and on-the-job learning opportunities focusing on soft skills), and case studies show these can yield a more empowered, efficient support staff cadre. Yet, pervasive gaps and inconsistencies persist. The literature suggests that to improve training effectiveness, universities should adopt a more strategic approach: conduct thorough needs assessments to identify soft skill gaps, embed soft skills modules into all staff training programs, and foster an organizational culture that values continuous personal development. This often requires overcoming various barriers, which we examine next.

Barriers to Soft Skills Development in University Staff Training

Implementing soft skills training for non-academic staff is not without challenges. Multiple studies have identified barriers at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels that hinder the integration of soft skills development into training programs. Understanding these barriers is crucial to formulating effective strategies.

One common barrier is the lack of institutional support or priority for soft skills training. As Wanjiku (2016) found in Kenyan university campuses, management often lacks “*conception of further training needs for non-teaching staff*,” resulting in minimal budget allocation and few formal opportunities for these staff to develop skills beyond their immediate job tasks. In many cases, training budgets for universities are primarily directed towards academic development (e.g., faculty attending conferences, obtaining higher qualifications) or towards mandatory technical training (like new IT systems or regulatory compliance workshops). Soft skills seminars or team-building retreats for administrative staff may be seen as a luxury or an extra – nice to have, but not essential. This mindset can lead to insufficient funding, where programs are planned but not executed due to budget cuts or low resource allocation. Financial constraints are indeed a significant barrier, particularly in public universities in developing countries where overall funding is limited. If administrators do not visibly see the immediate ROI of a communication skills workshop, for example, they might postpone or cancel it in favor of something deemed more urgent.

Another barrier is the lack of a clear career development path or incentives for staff to improve soft skills. Wanjiku (2016) noted that for middle-level non-academic staff, there was *no clear progression structure* – it was unclear how gaining new skills or even additional academic qualifications would help their career. Staff who, on their own initiative, earned diplomas or degrees to improve themselves were “not rewarded

accordingly” in terms of promotion or pay. This situation can breed disillusionment and reduce motivation to engage in voluntary development activities like soft skills training. If a university’s HR policies do not tie training participation or skill acquisition to tangible career benefits, employees may not see value in investing their time. In contrast, where clear incentives exist (e.g., completing certain training hours is required for eligibility for promotion), participation in soft skills programs is likely to increase. Recognition and reward systems are therefore critical – and their absence is a barrier. Wanjiku’s respondents highlighted that a lack of recognition (with 30% reporting they were “*not recognized even after attaining higher skills*”) was demotivating.

A related barrier is workplace culture and attitudes. In some institutions, there may be a cultural resistance to soft skills training. Non-academic staff who have been in their roles for many years might feel that they already know how to do their jobs and may be skeptical about the value of, say, a workshop on emotional intelligence or customer care. There can be a perception that such training is too “basic” or even patronizing. Additionally, if university leadership does not actively champion soft skills, middle managers might not encourage their staff to attend training sessions, or may not allow time off for training due to workload concerns. Indeed, workload and staffing levels themselves are a barrier: many support departments operate with lean staffing, so releasing employees for a day of training can be difficult. Wanjiku (2016) pointed out that *inadequate number of staff* in campuses often leads to multitasking and heavy workloads, leaving little time for employees to engage in development programs. When offices are understaffed, taking time for training could mean falling behind on urgent duties, which discourages participation. This is a classic short-term versus long-term dilemma – skipping training might keep things running today, but it perpetuates skill gaps that could be alleviated for better efficiency in the future.

Furthermore, organizational policy gaps can impede soft skills development. If there is no policy or mandate for continuous professional development of non-academic staff, any training efforts are ad hoc and unsystematic. Antiado et al. (2020) advocate for treating training needs identification as a vital part of institutional planning, arguing that it ensures sustainability and relevance of the workforce. In many universities, however, there is no formal mechanism like a Training Needs Analysis conducted periodically for support staff. Without such data-driven planning, training might miss the mark or fail to address the most pressing soft skill deficits. Additionally, a siloed approach in which each department handles its own staff training (or not) can lead to uneven opportunities – some units might proactively train their staff (perhaps the library might train staff in customer service), while others do nothing. A lack of centralized strategy means inconsistency and potential inequity in who gets developed.

Finally, resistance to change should be noted. Implementing a new soft skills training initiative might face resistance from those who prefer the status quo. University bureaucracies can be slow to change; introducing compulsory soft skills modules or new evaluation criteria (like including soft skills in performance appraisals) may be met with pushback. For example, if an institution tries to incorporate a “communication skills” dimension into annual performance reviews for clerical staff, supervisors and staff might feel uncomfortable with the subjective nature of that assessment, or fear it could be used punitively. Overcoming such resistance requires careful change management something that ironically calls for the very soft skills (communication, leadership, empathy) that are in short supply.

In sum, the barriers to soft skills development in university training programs include limited resources, lack of prioritization by management, insufficient incentives and recognition for staff, high workloads and understaffing, cultural resistance, and absence of formal policies or frameworks. These challenges are interrelated: for instance, if management does not prioritize soft skills, they won’t allocate budget or create policies, which in turn means no incentives or time for staff to train. The literature suggests that addressing these barriers is key to successful implementation of soft skills development – a theme we will revisit with strategic recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative desk-based research methodology to investigate soft skills development in university training programs for non-academic staff. The approach is essentially a comprehensive literature

review and document analysis. Rather than collecting primary data (such as conducting surveys or interviews), the research draws upon existing sources including academic journal articles, theses, organizational reports, policy documents, and training manuals to gather insights. This methodology is appropriate for the topic because it allows for the synthesis of knowledge from diverse contexts (Sri Lanka and international) and from prior studies that have examined related issues. By analyzing and comparing findings from multiple sources, the study can identify common patterns, gaps, and recommendations regarding soft skills training for non-academic university staff.

Data Collection: Relevant literature was identified through database searches and examination of reference lists from key papers. Priority was given to scholarly sources from the past decade to ensure up-to-date perspectives, though seminal works from earlier years were also considered if relevant. The user provided several specific sources (including works by Subashini, Suwannatarn & Asavisanu, Naji, Antiado et al., and Wanjiku) which have been incorporated as core references. Additional sources (such as training manuals and global research on soft skills) were included to enrich the analysis. Documents specific to the Sri Lankan context (e.g., Staff Development Center manuals, university strategic plans if available) were also reviewed to ground the research in the local setting. All sources were evaluated for credibility and relevance. Being desk-based, the study did not involve human subjects or ethical clearance processes; it relied entirely on publicly available information and library resources.

Data Analysis: The gathered literature was analyzed using a thematic content analysis approach. Key themes aligned with the research objectives emerged, such as: the importance of soft skills for non-academic staff, types of soft skills emphasized, current training practices and their effectiveness, barriers to soft skills training, and strategies or recommendations for improvement. The analysis involved comparing and contrasting findings from different studies. For instance, data from case studies in different countries (Sri Lanka, Kenya, Thailand, etc.) were compared to see how soft skills needs and training challenges align or differ across contexts. Notes were made on each source highlighting answers to the guiding research questions (What soft skills are essential? How effective are current programs? What barriers exist? What strategies are proposed?). By aggregating this information, a holistic picture was developed. The desk research approach also enabled the identification of consensus versus divergence in the literature – for example, if most sources agree on certain soft skills being crucial (communication, teamwork) or common barriers (lack of management support), this was noted as a strong finding.

Throughout the analysis, an iterative process was used: as new themes or insights were found in one source, earlier sources were revisited to see if they addressed those points, ensuring that important issues were not overlooked. The qualitative synthesis is presented in the Findings section, where the narrative is supported by direct citations from the sources (in APA in-text citation style with corresponding reference list). Using multiple sources and direct quotations increases the reliability of the findings, as claims are backed by documented evidence. Given that the methodology is qualitative and interpretative, the study does not attempt to generalize in a statistical sense, but rather to provide depth of understanding and a well-reasoned discussion based on the available evidence.

Scope and Limitations: The desk-based methodology means the study is inherently limited by the scope and quality of existing literature. There may be context-specific nuances (especially within Sri Lanka's various universities) that are not captured in published sources. Additionally, much of the literature on training might focus on academic staff or student outcomes, with fewer studies dedicated solely to non-academic staff development – this influenced the need to sometimes extrapolate general training principles or rely on closely related research (e.g., professional development in education sector broadly). However, by including multiple international perspectives and also focusing on Sri Lanka, the study attempts to mitigate biases and provide a balanced view. Another limitation is that the analysis is qualitative and does not produce quantifiable metrics of training effectiveness; instead, it relies on reported perceptions and outcomes from the literature. Despite these limitations, the desk research offers a valuable consolidation of knowledge in an area that is comparatively under-researched and sets the stage for future empirical work.

FINDINGS

Using the qualitative synthesis of literature, this section presents the key findings organized around the major themes of the research: (1) the essential soft skills required by non-academic staff and their impacts, (2) the effectiveness of existing training and development programs in addressing soft skills needs, (3) barriers to incorporating soft skills training in university contexts, and (4) strategies and best practices to enhance soft skills development for non-academic staff. These findings draw on both the Sri Lankan context (the focal reference point) and broader international experiences, highlighting both common patterns and context-specific observations.

1. Essential Soft Skills for Non-Academic Staff and Their Impact

Key Soft Skills Identified: The literature demonstrates a broad consensus on several core soft skills that are most essential for non-academic university staff. Foremost among these are communication skills. This includes both verbal and written communication – the ability to convey information clearly, listen actively, and respond courteously. In a university setting, non-academic staff often act as a bridge between the institution and students or the public, so strong communication is indispensable. For example, staff should know “*how to welcome people, email etiquette, phone etiquette, how to deal with senior staff members within the university system, how to deal with students with their respective needs*”. These examples (noted by Subashini, 2019) show that day-to-day interactions require tact and clarity.

Another universally cited soft skill is teamwork and collaboration. Universities are highly departmentalized, yet interdependent organizations. A faculty course administrator must collaborate with the scheduling office; a library assistant works with IT support to implement a new system; an academic department’s secretary coordinates with student services on convocation arrangements. The ability to work as part of a team, to understand one’s role, and to appreciate colleagues’ contributions is crucial. Suwannatarn & Asavisanu (2022) explicitly listed “Collaboration/Teamwork” as one of the five key attributes in their leadership capabilities framework for non-academic staff. Teamwork skills facilitate smoother decision-making and problem-solving in offices. Effective teams often outperform individuals working in silos, especially in handling complex tasks such as organizing large events or implementing policy changes.

Adaptability (or flexibility) is another critical soft skill. Universities operate in dynamic environments – consider the rapid pivot to online services during the COVID-19 pandemic, or the frequent policy updates from higher education authorities. Non-academic staff who can adapt to new procedures, learn new technologies, and adjust to organizational changes are invaluable. Subashini (2019) included adaptability, tolerance, and flexibility in the constellation of qualities expected from non-academic staff. Adaptability also implies being open-minded and willing to up-skill, which is essential in an era where roles can evolve (for instance, a clerical officer might need to take on social media communication duties, or a facilities manager might need to implement sustainable practices).

Problem-solving and critical thinking are frequently highlighted as well. Non-academic staff often encounter unforeseen issues – a scheduling conflict, a student complaint, a technical glitch – and the ability to think on one’s feet and find solutions is a valuable trait. Suwannatarn & Asavisanu’s (2022) study recognized “Critical Thinking” and “Problem Solving” as key 21st-century skills needed in staff. Moreover, Antiado et al. (2020) emphasize that non-teaching staff are increasingly brought to the frontlines of processes and thus must be able to handle challenges effectively. If an administrative assistant can resolve a scheduling mix-up before it escalates or if a lab technician can troubleshoot an instrument failure quickly, they minimize disruptions to the academic mission.

Other important soft skills include customer service orientation, empathy, and emotional intelligence, which collectively influence how staff relate to students and colleagues. For example, student-facing staff benefit from empathy and patience to understand student issues (be it stress over fees or personal challenges affecting studies). Emotional intelligence helps in gauging and moderating one’s own reactions and understanding others’ emotions, which is useful in conflict resolution and providing supportive service. Integrity and work ethic were also mentioned in the literature (e.g., integrity, professionalism, and reliability were part of the traits

listed by Subashini). These underpin a culture of trust and accountability. A support staff member with a strong work ethic and integrity will follow through on tasks, respect confidentiality, and uphold university policies – qualities that are the backbone of a well-functioning institution.

Impact of Soft Skills on Performance: The presence (or absence) of these soft skills has a noticeable impact on both individual job performance and broader institutional outcomes. When non-academic staff possess strong soft skills, service quality improves. Communication skills, for instance, lead to clearer information dissemination – fewer misunderstandings with students and faculty, and a more approachable university administration. Teamwork and adaptability among staff result in more efficient operations; departments collaborate instead of working at cross-purposes, and staff readily adjust to new methods (like a new online enrollment system) rather than resisting them. Studies have observed that universities where staff show high soft skill proficiency tend to have better student satisfaction with administrative services (Antiado et al., 2020). Students and faculty essentially experience the institution through their interactions with administrative staff; a helpful, empathetic staff member can turn bureaucracy into a positive encounter, whereas a staff member lacking soft skills can cause frustration even if the technical task is completed.

Additionally, soft skills contribute to a positive work environment and culture. Staff with good interpersonal skills foster teamwork and camaraderie, which can boost morale and job satisfaction. Non-academic staff often work in teams (an admissions office, a departmental office, etc.), and their ability to get along and support one another affects staff retention and productivity. As one report noted, *fostering soft skills contributes to a collaborative environment where staff feel valued and supported, leading to increased motivation, satisfaction, and retention*. Such an environment not only benefits the staff themselves but also reduces turnover costs and preserves institutional knowledge.

On the flip side, deficiencies in soft skills can have negative repercussions. If staff are poor communicators or lack customer service skills, the university may face more complaints, lower satisfaction ratings, and even reputational damage (students might voice their frustrations publicly or on surveys). Internally, a lack of teamwork or poor adaptability can result in inefficiencies – for example, tasks might get duplicated or neglected because people aren't effectively coordinating, or a new initiative may falter because staff resist change or fail to learn new skills. Wanjiku (2016) pointed out that limited skills and competencies among staff, exacerbated by multitasking and lack of development, were a challenge in Kenyan campuses. This implies that when staff do not develop their soft (and hard) skills, their performance plateaus and can even impede the institution's growth or adaptation.

In summary, the essential soft skills for non-academic staff – communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem-solving, empathy, and the like – are well-recognized and critically important. Their presence elevates staff performance, enhances the student and faculty experience, and contributes to a healthy organizational climate. These findings underscore *why* universities must invest in developing these competencies among their non-academic personnel as part of any comprehensive training and development program.

2. Effectiveness of Existing Training Programs in Addressing Soft Skills Needs

Current Training Practices: The effectiveness of existing training and development programs for non-academic staff in universities varies widely. Generally, traditional training for these staff has focused more on orientation and technical skill development rather than explicitly on soft skills. New hires typically receive induction training about university rules, administrative procedures, and job-specific tasks. Periodic workshops might be held when a new software system is introduced (e.g., a new student information system) or when a new policy needs to be disseminated (like a procurement guideline or exam procedure). These are important, but they do not directly teach skills like communication or teamwork.

In many universities, soft skills learning has been largely informal or on-the-job, where employees gradually pick up interpersonal skills through experience and observing others. For instance, a junior administrative officer might learn how to handle difficult student questions by watching a more experienced colleague, or staff might improve teamwork through trial and error in committee projects. While experiential learning is valuable, it can be inconsistent and slow. Recognizing this, some institutions have started incorporating soft

skills topics into their staff development offerings. For example, as noted earlier, Sri Lankan universities (under initiatives like the World Bank-funded HETC project) developed structured programs for non-academic staff that include modules on positive attitudes, adaptability, and interpersonal relations. The availability of a training manual covering these soft skills is a step in the right direction. Similarly, at certain universities in other countries, human resources or staff development units have run seminars on customer service excellence, effective office communication, or stress management for administrative staff.

Effectiveness Outcomes: The literature and reported experiences indicate that where such soft skills training has been implemented, it often shows positive outcomes. One clear measure of effectiveness is improved self-confidence and awareness among staff. Antiado et al. (2020) reported that their professional development intervention (which included identifying staff training needs in personal development) was eye-opening for both staff and management – staff became more aware of areas they could improve, and management became more aware of the untapped potential and equal importance of non-teaching staff. Trainees often give feedback that learning about communication techniques or teamwork strategies helps them in their daily tasks. Even if these skills seem like common sense, formal training provides frameworks and opportunities to practice (for example, role-playing a difficult customer interaction in a workshop can prepare an employee for real-life encounters).

Another sign of effectiveness is when we see service improvements post-training. In anecdotal accounts, after a batch of front-line staff (like reception, student inquiry desk staff) underwent customer service and communication training, universities saw a decline in complaints and an increase in positive feedback from students. Staff learned techniques such as maintaining a polite tone, active listening, and how to de-escalate angry visitors, which directly translated into smoother service delivery. For example, as part of soft skills training, staff might be taught to use phrases like “I understand your concern, let me see how I can help” instead of a brusque “That’s the rule, nothing can be done.” Small shifts in communication can greatly change the client’s (student’s) experience. When such changes take place across an institution, the overall quality of support services rises, which can be captured indirectly in student satisfaction surveys or internal audits.

Measurement of Effectiveness: Evaluating the effectiveness of soft skills training is admittedly challenging, because improvements are often qualitative. However, some studies have attempted to measure it through pre- and post-training assessments or gap analyses. Suwannatarn & Asavisanu (2022) effectively did this by measuring current versus desired skill levels. While their study found a persistent gap even after identifying the need (since implementing the training model was a subsequent step), the methodology itself is instructive: using self-assessment and supervisor feedback surveys to quantify soft skill levels. If universities regularly assessed staff on aspects like communication and teamwork (in a developmental, not punitive manner), they could track improvements over time as training is provided.

The Thai model’s development also included expert validation, suggesting that incorporating expert guidance (e.g., industrial trainers or organizational psychologists) in designing training can enhance effectiveness. Effective programs often use interactive and practical training methods – workshops, group activities, and scenario-based learning – rather than lectures. According to the Jaffna SDC manual guidelines, “*lectures are conducted to impart theoretical knowledge but much of the activities must be conducted using workshop methodology... interspersed with activities... long-winded discourses should be avoided*” (Perera, 2012, p.vi). This aligns with adult learning principles and tends to result in better retention and application of soft skills.

Despite these positives, many existing programs are not as effective as they could be, simply because they are not sufficiently implemented or prioritized. Wanjiku (2016) found that in her Kenyan sample, there were hardly any structured soft skills programs to evaluate – the challenge was more foundational, that development programs were minimal and not meeting needs. In such contexts, effectiveness is low by default due to lack of programming. Similarly, in some Sri Lankan universities, SDCs might offer a few workshops, but if attendance is optional and work pressures high, turnout can be low, limiting the program’s impact. There’s also the issue of follow-up: a single workshop can raise awareness, but without ongoing reinforcement (refreshers, mentoring, or practice opportunities), the initial gains might fade. Effective training is thus seen where there is a continuous development plan – e.g., a series of modules over time, or integration of soft skills objectives into daily management.

Interestingly, one indirect measure of the pressing need (and thus the shortfall in effectiveness to date) is the consistent finding of *soft skills gaps* in studies. The fact that Suwannatarn & Asavisanu's respondents rated current soft skills lower than desired, or that Antiado et al. felt the need to make a case to management of staff value, indicates that current training efforts have not fully bridged these gaps. From these findings we can surmise that while some progress has been made (awareness of soft skills importance is higher now than a decade ago), universities are still in the early or middle stages of effectively training their non-academic staff in these areas.

In conclusion for this aspect, existing training programs have pockets of success: where soft skills development has been integrated, results include improved service quality, higher staff confidence, and recognition of non-academic staff's contributions. However, many universities have yet to implement comprehensive soft skills training, resulting in persistent skill gaps. The overall effectiveness of training in addressing soft skills needs is therefore mixed – promising in isolated cases but inadequate at scale. This finding points to the need for more systematic effort, which ties into the barriers and strategies discussed next.

3. Barriers to Implementing Soft Skills Training Programs

The analysis of literature surfaced several barriers that hinder the implementation or success of soft skills training for non-academic staff, many of which were already discussed in the Literature Review and earlier in Findings. These can be summarized and reinforced here:

- **Lack of Management Support and Prioritization:** A recurring barrier is that university leadership may not prioritize soft skills training for support staff. This can manifest as lack of budget (as noted, training programs often require funding for materials, external trainers, or staff time off) and lack of initiative. Wanjiku's (2016) research clearly identified management's lack of conception and planning for non-teaching staff development as a critical issue. If top management does not explicitly value such training, it tends not to happen. In some cases, even if mid-level managers see the value, they might not be able to implement programs without senior administration backing.
- **Resource Constraints (Budget and Time):** Many universities operate under tight budgets, and training is sometimes one of the first areas to face cuts. The literature indicates that institutions in developing countries struggle with providing even basic resources; convincing them to allocate funds for "soft" training can be difficult unless external funding or mandates exist. Time is another resource issue – offices that are short-staffed find it hard to release employees for training days. As Wanjiku (2016) noted, inadequate staffing resulted in multitasking and left little room for training engagement. This is a structural issue: without hiring sufficient employees or arranging workflow coverage, training participation will suffer.
- **Cultural and Attitudinal Resistance:** Another barrier is the mindset that soft skills are innate or secondary. Some employees might think, "I've been doing this job for 20 years, I don't need a workshop on communication." Similarly, some supervisors might not encourage their staff to attend, believing it's a waste of time compared to doing regular work. The undervaluing of soft skills in formal training ("often undervalued in formal training frameworks" as the earlier quote highlighted) is itself a cultural issue. There can also be skepticism about the outcomes – unlike a course that teaches a measurable technical skill (like Excel or accounting rules), a course on attitude or teamwork might be met with "what's the point" cynicism if the benefits are not immediately clear.
- **Lack of Structured Career Development Frameworks:** When there is no structure that ties training to career progression, staff have less motivation to participate. This was clearly indicated by Wanjiku (2016), where staff who improved themselves felt no career benefits. A barrier thus is the absence of policies linking training, certifications, or skill acquisition to promotions or recognitions. Without an HR framework that institutionalizes development (such as requiring a certain number of training hours per year, or offering promotions based on competencies gained), training can seem futile to employees.

- **Policy Gaps and Siloed Training Efforts:** In some instances, the barrier is not that training doesn't happen at all, but that it happens in a piecemeal and siloed fashion, reducing effectiveness. For example, one department might run a customer service training for its front desk, but those skills are not trained across other departments. The university lacks an overarching policy or program to ensure all non-academic staff receive core soft skills training. This lack of consistency is a barrier to widespread improvement; an uneven skill distribution can still cause institutional issues (e.g., if only the admissions office trained in customer care but the finance office did not, students will still encounter unpleasant experiences in the latter, undermining overall service quality).
- **Workload and Academic Focus:** Non-academic staff often support the core business of academia. During peak times (admissions season, exam periods, etc.), their workload skyrockets, and any training is simply not feasible then. The academic calendar thus can be a barrier to scheduling training – one must find windows of time, which might be infrequent. Moreover, universities traditionally focus training resources on academics (workshops on pedagogy, research, etc., for faculty) under the assumption that improving teaching/research yields more direct benefits. Changing this focus to equally address admin staff needs can be a slow process, and the inertia itself is a barrier.

The findings on barriers underscore that they are mostly institutional and attitudinal, rather than inherent to the staff. Non-academic staff generally are willing to improve their skills if given the opportunity and incentive. The barriers preventing soft skills development are surmountable, but they require conscious effort from university leadership to address.

4. Strategic Recommendations and Best Practices for Enhancing Soft Skills Training

Drawing from the challenges and successes noted in the literature, several strategic recommendations emerge for universities aiming to bolster soft skills development among non-academic staff:

a. Elevate Institutional Commitment: Universities should formally recognize soft skills training for non-academic staff as a strategic priority. This could involve including staff development goals in the institution's strategic plan, with explicit mention of soft skills. As Subashini (2019) implied, aligning staff development objectives with required soft competencies is critical. One actionable step is to create a policy or directive from the University Grants Commission or equivalent body that mandates periodic training for all administrative staff, similar to how faculty development is mandated in some contexts. Institutional commitment also means allocating a dedicated budget line for staff training and development (not just for faculty, but a separate allocation for non-academic staff programs).

b. Implement Structured Training Programs: Develop a comprehensive training curriculum for non-academic staff that covers key soft skills. This might take the form of a certificate program or a series of modules that staff undergo over a certain period (for example, new staff take an introductory soft skills course within their first year, and existing staff attend refresher or advanced workshops every few years). The *Essential Soft Skills for Non-Academic Staff* training manual used in Sri Lanka provides a template – modules on communication, adaptability, managing relationships, etc., with interactive content. Universities can adapt such content to their context and perhaps even collaborate – for instance, one idea is a joint university training center where multiple universities pool resources to conduct high-quality soft skills workshops for their staff. This could be especially useful in regions where each single university may not have the capacity individually.

c. Tie Training to Career Development and Incentives: To motivate participation, universities should link soft skills development to recognition, career progression, or performance appraisal. For example, completing certain soft skills workshops could be made a criterion for eligibility for promotion to supervisory grades. Performance evaluations for non-academic staff can incorporate soft skill criteria (such as communication effectiveness, teamwork) – this sends a message that these skills are valued, and it encourages staff to improve. Wanjiku (2016) recommended creating a *progression path* for non-teaching staff based on acquired qualifications and presumably skills. In practice, this might involve establishing clear job competency profiles. For each administrative grade, list required competencies including soft skills; then provide training to help staff meet those competencies and promote those who do. Additionally, introducing awards or recognition

(like “Outstanding Service Award” that often implicitly rewards good soft skills, or “Team of the Year”) can reinforce and incentivize soft skill excellence.

d. Conduct Regular Training Needs Assessments (TNA): A lesson from Antiado et al. (2020) is the importance of using Training Needs Analysis to pinpoint what development activities to offer. Universities should periodically survey both the staff and their supervisors to identify skill gaps or areas of improvement in soft skills. For example, a survey might reveal that many staff feel uncertain about handling student mental health issues – indicating a need for training in empathetic communication and basic counseling referral techniques. Or it might show a desire for training in time management due to work overload. TNAs ensure that training programs remain relevant and targeted, thereby increasing effectiveness and buy-in (staff are more likely to attend when they see the training addresses an area they struggle with). It also helps in prioritizing – which soft skills are most urgently needed can be tackled first.

e. Use Effective Training Methods: Soft skills training should employ active, experiential learning methods. As suggested in the Jaffna manual and adult education theory, workshops should include role-play, group discussions, case studies, and real-life simulations. For example, conflict resolution training might involve staff practicing a scenario where a student is upset about a fee issue; one plays the staff, another the student, and then they discuss what communication strategies worked or didn't. This hands-on approach is far more effective than a lecture on conflict theory. Additionally, employing skilled trainers or facilitators – possibly bringing experts from the hospitality sector or corporate sector who excel in customer service training – can make sessions engaging and insightful. Universities can also consider **e-learning modules** for certain soft skills to allow flexibility; short interactive online courses on topics like email etiquette or stress management could complement in-person workshops.

f. Encourage a Supportive Culture and Continuous Learning: Beyond formal training sessions, soft skills development should be embedded in the workplace culture. Managers and senior staff should model good soft skills (leading by example in how they communicate and collaborate). Mentoring programs can be established where seasoned staff with strong soft skills mentor newer staff. Some institutions set up communities of practice or regular forums where staff can share experiences – for instance, a monthly lunch-and-learn where staff discuss challenges and solutions in dealing with difficult situations. This continuous, informal learning reinforces the formal training. Antiado et al. (2020) emphasized continuous updates and orientations to employees in view of global challenges– essentially, maintaining an environment where learning is ongoing.

g. Address Barriers Proactively: To implement the above, universities must also directly address the barriers. Secure management support by presenting evidence (perhaps from literature or pilot programs) that soft skills training has ROI – such as improved student feedback or reduced staff turnover. Seek external funding or grants for staff development if internal budgets are tight; many international capacity-building grants exist that could fund training programs in developing countries' universities. Schedule training intelligently to avoid peak work periods, and hire temporary staff or arrange duty rotations to allow people to attend training without work piling up. Making training mandatory (with support) can also overcome individual reluctance – if everyone has to do it and it's endorsed from the top, resistance often diminishes. Also, highlight success stories: for example, if a staff member used skills from a workshop to successfully resolve a campus issue, share that story in internal newsletters to show tangible benefits.

h. Leverage International and Cross-sector Insights: Sometimes universities can benefit from looking at how other sectors train soft skills. The hospitality industry, for instance, excels in customer service training; banks train their staff in communication and decorum; corporates train teamwork and leadership extensively. Adapting these best practices to higher education can accelerate improvement. Additionally, as suggested by some international projects (like the ENACT project in Sri Lanka which aimed to develop comprehensive training strategies), collaborating with universities abroad or international agencies can introduce new perspectives and resources for soft skills development.

These recommendations align with what Wanjiku (2016) concluded and suggested: define clear job roles and expectations, establish progression paths, continuously update skills (especially with new technology), provide proper facilities and support, and implement reward systems and decision-making forums for staff

development issues. The overarching principle is that universities should view non-academic staff development (including soft skills) not as a tangential administrative task, but as a strategic investment in human capital that yields returns in institutional efficiency, stakeholder satisfaction, and adaptability to future challenges.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this desk-based study highlight a compelling narrative: while soft skills development for non-academic staff in universities is undeniably important, there exists a significant gap between recognition and action. In this discussion, we interpret the findings in light of the study's objectives, examine the implications for universities (especially in Sri Lanka), and explore how international perspectives both converge with and diverge from the local context. We also consider the broader impact on higher education management and suggest directions for future research or practice.

Bridging the Gap between Awareness and Implementation: One striking point is that the *importance* of soft skills for non-academic staff is now broadly acknowledged in theory. Across different contexts – Sri Lanka, Kenya, Thailand, etc. – the literature and institutional rhetoric agree that non-academic staff need competencies like communication, teamwork, and adaptability to effectively support the university's mission. This marks progress from a decade or two ago, when discussions of staff development in universities might have largely ignored the “soft” aspect for administrators. However, the implementation of comprehensive training and development programs remains patchy. In Sri Lanka, for example, despite the existence of Staff Development Centers and a national emphasis on improving higher education quality, soft skills training for non-academic staff has not been uniformly rolled out in all universities. Some universities might have active programs, while others do very little beyond orientation. Similarly, internationally, we see exemplary cases (like the Thai PHEI's model development) coexisting with institutions where non-teaching staff development is minimal.

This suggests that the challenge is not about convincing stakeholders of importance anymore, but about mobilizing resources and overcoming inertia to act on that importance. The discussion thus shifts to figuring out how to implement what we conceptually know is needed. In Sri Lanka's case, the University Grants Commission could play a pivotal role by possibly mandating staff development initiatives and facilitating resource allocation across universities to ensure no campus is left behind. The presence of a 2012 training manual (Perera, 2012) indicates that the foundational work has been done – it now requires consistent execution and updating. It would be beneficial for Sri Lankan universities to perhaps evaluate how widely that manual or similar curricula have been used and what outcomes resulted, then refine the approach.

Comparative Perspective – Sri Lanka and Beyond: It's insightful to compare the Sri Lankan context with international examples. The Kenyan study (Wanjiku, 2016) and the general findings from Antiado et al. (2020) in the UAE context both highlight very similar issues – lack of structured training, lack of incentives, and undervaluation of non-teaching staff development. This indicates a global trend in universities: traditionally, the focus was on academic excellence (for faculty and students), and the professional growth of administrative staff was an afterthought. Now, as higher education becomes more service-oriented and competitive, universities around the world are realizing they must pay attention to the development of all their human resources. Sri Lanka, grappling with modernizing its higher education, is essentially facing the same tasks as a private Thai university or a public Kenyan university in this regard. The convergence is that *soft skills are universally relevant* to higher education administration – a student's need for a supportive and efficient administrative experience is the same whether that student is in Colombo or Nairobi or Bangkok.

However, contexts can diverge in terms of available resources and perhaps cultural factors. In more developed systems, there might be greater availability of funds or external training providers; in Sri Lanka or Kenya, funding is tight and training might have to be more creative or piggyback on donor projects. Culturally, notions of hierarchy and communication styles differ – for instance, in some cultures, very assertive customer service might be expected, whereas in others, a more formal approach is the norm. Training programs need to be sensitive to these nuances. A Sri Lankan non-academic staff training might include elements on serving with humility and respect (aligning with local cultural values of politeness and deference), whereas an

American one might emphasize assertiveness and initiative. The core soft skills are the same, but training must contextualize how they manifest.

Implications for University Management: The synthesis of findings implies that university leadership (councils, vice-chancellors, registrars, etc.) should broaden their view of quality in higher education to explicitly include the quality of administrative support. Non-academic staff development should be seen as part of the quality assurance mechanism. For example, when evaluating the performance of a university, one might traditionally look at faculty research output, graduate employment rates, etc., but perhaps one should also look at metrics like administrative service satisfaction or efficiency, which tie back to staff soft skills. With the global push towards better student experiences and holistic education (where universities compete on providing supportive environments), investing in staff's soft skills becomes a strategic move. A university that is known for its friendly and effective administration can distinguish itself and improve its stakeholder relations.

Another implication is in human resource management within universities. HR departments in universities may need to adopt practices from corporate HR in terms of continuous professional development, competency frameworks, and succession planning. Typically, universities have clear tracks for academic promotions, but for administrative staff, the career ladder may be less structured. Incorporating soft skills and training achievements into HR decisions (as recommended in findings) could professionalize the administrative workforce further, making those careers more attractive and dynamic.

Overcoming Barriers – Feasibility: The discussion acknowledges that while barriers are real, they are not insurmountable. For instance, budget constraints are tough, but not impossible – often it's about prioritization. The cost of a training program might be far less than the cost of inefficiency or staff turnover due to poor work climate. University administrators might need to see a business case: effective training could reduce errors (saving money), improve student retention (tuition income), or reduce conflicts (less time spent on grievance handling). By framing soft skills development as an investment with returns, it may be easier to justify even in tight budgets. Additionally, partnerships (with other universities, NGOs, or online platforms) can stretch resources. The rise of online training resources means some content can be accessed at low cost if in-person sessions are expensive.

The barrier of staff resistance can be mitigated by demonstrating quick wins. Often, once staff attend a well-run workshop and find it enjoyable and useful, word of mouth can change attitudes. People realize “this isn't a waste of time; I learned something that makes my job easier.” Therefore, starting with some pilot sessions that are high-quality and voluntary could generate positive buzz. Engaging staff in designing the training (asking them what they want to learn) also helps break skepticism, as it gives them ownership.

Toward a Strategy – The Role of Soft Skills in University Excellence: Strategically, universities striving for excellence (especially in an era of rankings and student satisfaction surveys) cannot ignore the competence of their administrative services. Non-academic staff are the face of the institution's bureaucracy and support system. A strong takeaway from this research is that developing their soft skills is not just an HR initiative; it is central to educational quality and institutional effectiveness. For Sri Lankan universities, which are aiming to become more student-centric and globally competitive, strengthening non-academic staff capabilities could be a low-hanging fruit that yields noticeable improvements in how the university functions and is perceived.

For example, consider initiatives like creating “one-stop” student service centers in universities – these only work if the staff manning them are cross-trained not just in multiple procedures but also in customer service and empathy. The discussion thus circles back that soft skills development has to marry with structural improvements. If universities introduce new service models (like online portals, integrated service desks, etc.), they should concurrently train staff in the soft skills needed to run those models effectively (like online communication etiquette, teamwork in a multi-function office, etc.).

Future Outlook: Looking forward, the emphasis on soft skills may increase as higher education becomes more globalized and service-oriented. The COVID-19 pandemic also taught institutions the importance of adaptability and communication in crisis – skills largely falling into the “soft” category. Non-academic staff

were crucial in pivoting to online operations, assisting students remotely, and keeping campuses running; their ability to adapt and maintain service was a direct result of individual soft skills and team coordination. This might have given many universities a real-life demonstration of why those skills matter. It is likely that post-pandemic, institutions will put more effort into training for resilience, stress management, digital communication, and other soft competencies as part of disaster preparedness and general efficiency.

Conclusion of Discussion: The discussion reinforces that enhancing soft skills among non-academic staff is a multifaceted endeavor requiring leadership will, resource allocation, and cultural change in universities. Sri Lanka's universities stand to benefit significantly from these improvements, and the global perspective shows they are not alone in this journey. By learning from each other and from other sectors, universities can implement effective soft skills development programs. Overcoming the traditional neglect of non-academic staff development and integrating these efforts into the strategic fabric of university management will be key. If done successfully, the payoff is a more agile, responsive, and people-friendly university administration that complements academic excellence with operational excellence.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the importance of soft skills development in the training and development programs of universities, with a focus on non-academic staff and a special reference to Sri Lanka. Through a qualitative desk-based analysis of literature and documented practices, several clear conclusions can be drawn.

First and foremost, it is evident that soft skills are critically important for non-academic staff in universities, as they directly impact service quality, operational efficiency, and the working environment. Non-academic employees are the interface between the institution and its students, faculty, and public; their abilities in communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem-solving, and other interpersonal domains enable them to perform their roles effectively. The research showed that when these staff possess strong soft skills, universities benefit from smoother administration, higher stakeholder satisfaction, and a more collegial campus culture. Conversely, neglecting soft skills can lead to service gaps, misunderstandings, and internal friction that undermine the institution's mission. In the context of Sri Lankan universities, improving soft skills among administrative staff is particularly pertinent as the sector modernizes and aims to deliver student-centered services on par with global standards.

Secondly, the study finds that training and development programs at universities have not yet fully addressed the soft skills needs of non-academic staff, although awareness is increasing. Traditional T&D programs have emphasized technical training and orientation, often overlooking soft skills integration (Wanjiku, 2016). Some institutions, both in Sri Lanka and abroad, have begun implementing workshops and modules on soft skills for their support staff, which is a positive trend. These programs, when in place, have shown beneficial outcomes such as improved staff communication and teamwork, as well as greater confidence and job satisfaction among employees. However, the reach and consistency of such programs remain limited. The effectiveness of existing training in bridging soft skill gaps is moderate at best – as evidenced by persistent skill gaps reported in studies (e.g., the Thai case where current staff skills fell short of desired levels). This indicates that universities need to significantly ramp up and systematize their soft skills training efforts to meet the identified needs.

Thirdly, the research highlights several barriers that must be overcome to successfully implement soft skills development for non-academic staff. These include limited budget allocations, lack of leadership prioritization, cultural resistance to training, unclear career advancement pathways, and workload constraints that inhibit staff from taking time for training. In Sri Lanka's case, while structures like Staff Development Centers exist, they often face resource and mandate limitations. Addressing these barriers is crucial: universities will need to secure leadership commitment, perhaps by demonstrating the strategic value of soft skills (e.g., linking it to university performance indicators or accreditation criteria). They will also need to embed training into work schedules and HR policies, ensuring staff are encouraged and rewarded for skill development.

Finally, based on the analysis, the paper concludes with strategic recommendations for universities aiming to enhance soft skills training for non-academic staff. Key recommendations include: integrating soft skills objectives into institutional strategy; developing comprehensive, ongoing training programs tailored to

identified needs; providing incentives and clear links between skill development and career progression; and fostering a supportive culture that values continuous learning and the contributions of non-academic staff. For Sri Lankan universities specifically, it would be beneficial to adopt a coordinated approach – possibly led by the University Grants Commission – to ensure all universities implement a baseline standard of soft skills development (for example, a common training curriculum or certification for administrative staff across the sector). This could help uplift the overall quality of higher education administration nationally, complementing academic improvements.

In conclusion, soft skills development for non-academic staff is not merely an HR exercise, but a strategic imperative for universities seeking excellence in the contemporary higher education landscape. A university's success and reputation rest not only on its academic outputs but also on the efficiency, responsiveness, and humanity of its administration. By investing in the soft skills of their support staff, universities cultivate a workforce that is adaptable, student-friendly, and capable of navigating the complexities of modern academia. The findings and discussions in this paper reinforce the idea that universities – in Sri Lanka and around the world – stand to gain enormously from making soft skills training a central component of their training and development programs. Doing so will help bridge current gaps and barriers, ultimately leading to more effective institutions that better serve their students, empower their employees, and achieve their educational missions.

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