

IMPORTANCE AND ASSESSMENT OF SOFT SKILLS IN SCHOOL CURRICULUM¹

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Abstract

This paper analyses the importance of soft skills and provides a brief explanation of how they could be assessed in our school curriculum. It also makes some recommendation toward ensuring the assessment of soft skills in Botswana primary and secondary schools.

1.0 Introduction

There are two kinds of skills sets needed for success in the workplace – technical (“hard”) and interpersonal (“soft”) (Heckman, Slixrud, & Urzua, 2006). Technical skills are cognitive in nature and these are called hard skills. Soft skills are interpersonal traits that influence an individual’s relationship to and interaction with others, as well as ones career prospects and performance on the job. They underlie the exhibition of all types of hard skills. In other words, a hard skill cannot be exhibited to a level higher than that dictated by the relevant soft skills. This means that two people can have the same level of hard skill but perform significantly differently because they differ in the level to which they possess and exhibit related soft skills. The differentiation between hard- and soft-skills is akin to the differentiation between hard wares and soft wares in computing. Like robots, hard wares operate under the directives of soft wares. Some of the related names of soft skill education are: value education, character education, affective education, emotional Intelligence education, consciousness development education, moral education, and social competence education. Just like other latent traits, soft skills have both genetic and environmental origins.

The inability of formal education to ensure the development and hence the assessment of affective or soft skills constitute a problem of validity in human resource development process through education (Mahapatro, 2010). Human beings are imbued with cognitive, affective and psychomotor traits and education, to provide for the development of the whole child, is expected to identify and develop skills in all these areas for the benefit of self and society. Formal education, especially at the primary and secondary levels, tends to assign the development of affective skills to religion through churches or mosques or to the educating influences of tradition. Currently, formal education is designed to emphasize the exploration and development of cognitive and psychomotor skills. Despite the importance of soft skill in enhancing the development and beneficial utilization of cognitive and psychomotor skills, there has not been consensus effort by educators at formal incorporation of the teaching and assessment of these skills in school curriculum. Mainly because of “uncertainty about the construct of soft skill” (University Forum for Human Resource Development (UFHRD), 2012, p. 11) there has been some form of resistance among African educators, at all levels of education, to assessing and hence incorporating soft skills in the school curriculum (UFHRD), 2012). This uncertainty tends to discourage the development of technical knowledge of how best to do it. This has deprived learners and African society of several benefits derivable from the development and utilization of these important skills.

For a valid description of the learner's achievement from schooling, objective description must be made of his/her physical and psychological gains from schooling. This implies that he/she should be assessed in all aspects of human behaviour, be it cognitive, psychomotor, or affective. Given the results from internal and external examinations, so far a good degree of success has been achieved in the assessment of cognitive and psychomotor skills in related school subjects. This has not been the case with affective or soft skills. The paper intends to expound on the importance of soft skills and how they could be assessed in the African school curriculum.

2.0 Importance Of Soft Skills

The importance of soft skills cannot be over-emphasized. In fact, educating soft skills is the soul of education. For example, in many West African universities, a degree is earned by a person who is said to be "worthy in character and learning." This underscores the of soft-skill education even at the university level. The ancient Roman Empire had a very valid test of soft skill exhibited by engineers when building bridges in the empire. As an imperial war engineer, when one completes the building of a new bridge, he must stand under the bridge when the first troop with all elephants of war and war machinery move through it (McGaghie, 1991). One wonders how many of our engineers, of today could pass such test. Cases abound when though with sound technical competence engineers build bridges or houses that collapse under or over us; even cognitively competent medical doctors out of one irresponsible act or the other cause the death of patients that would otherwise not die; unwillingness to teach by even our well qualified classroom teachers has caused 'death at an early age' of our children (Kozol, 1967); "the professor has done a lot worse by failing to provide our students with rich and varied academic foundation with which they, in the future, can wriggle out of the syndrome of incompetence" (Nenty, 1991).

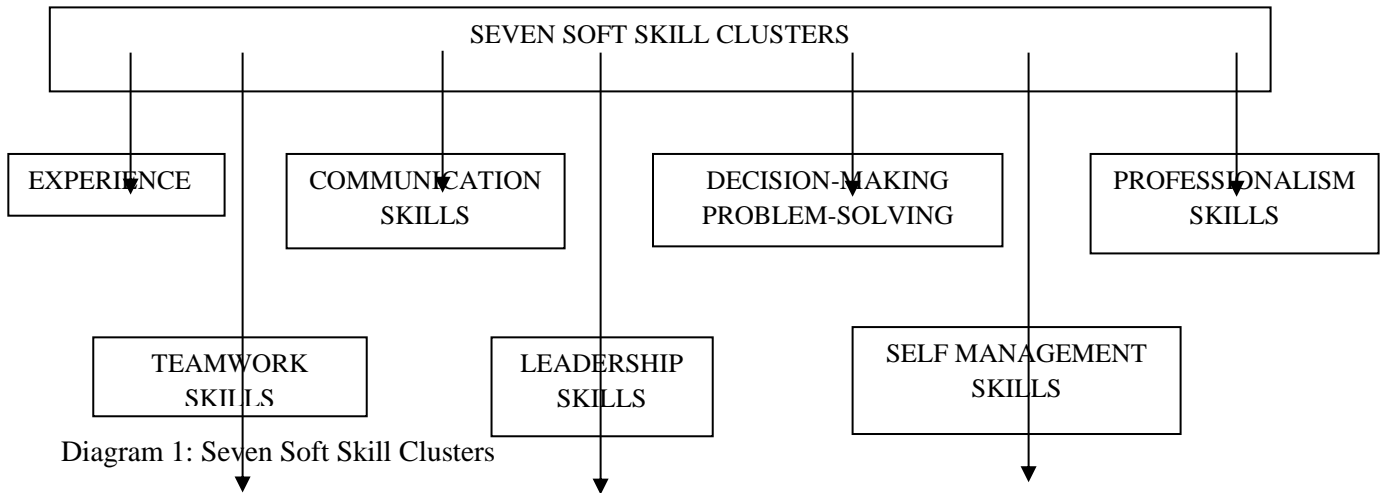
Soft skills cut across academic and job environments and have a strong impact in achievements in areas well beyond these two environments. According to Eric Davis, quoted in Prowl Public Relations (2009),

More often than not, it's who we are, not what we know, that seals the deal. . . . The most technically competent people will still flounder if they can't communicate properly or play well with others in the . . . setting. This goes to show that skills some may look past as being simple, may actually be the most marketable (p. 1).

According to Schulz (2008) "Soft skills shape human beings' personality. A graduate should not only be an expert in a certain field but matured personalities with a well-balanced, rounded off education. This characteristic is reflected in soft skills, not in hard skill" (p.151).

3.0 Literature Review - Soft Skill Clusters

Through an elaborate USA-wide study with 8,111 subjects involving employers, alumni, staff and students from 31 randomly sampled universities in USA; Crawford, Lang, Dalton, and Fielitz (2011) under the supervision of The Michigan State University that partnered with University Industry Consortium (UIC), finalized seven comprehensive soft skills clustered that employees look for in graduates. These are shown in Diagram 1.



4.0 Experiences

Crawford, Lang, Fink, Dalton and Fielitz (2011, p. 9) list experiences through human interactions as: work; internship; teamwork; leadership; management; cross disciplinary involvements; community engagement and international contacts and involvement.

Experience can be gained through previous related work or internship. Totality of such activities in the past of an individual leads to accumulation of knowledge and skills. Related work, internship, can teach one beyond their hypothetical thought on their work area to the actual realities of a job. All internships teach soft skills. There is no better way to acquire interpersonal, communication and team work skills without experience in the corporate environment. Mehlhorn, Robert, Cain and Parrott (2012) carried out a research study on developing cross disciplinary skills through an undergraduate research project. They stated that the benefit of developing research skills among undergraduate students has been well documented. “The main focus has been on the relationship between undergraduate research participants and the likelihood of attending a graduate program. One factor that has become increasingly important for career development is the ability for students to see problems from a broad point of view.” (p. 2). Furthermore it is important for students to take an active role in the educational process. Mehlhorn, Robert, Cain and Parrott (2012) found out that the use of undergraduate research programs to teach communication, critical thinking and problem solving is consistent with a student’s centered active learning environment. The multi-disciplinary team approach formulated by the authors was to improve students problem solving skills through mentorship-based undergraduate research program.

5.0 Teamwork Skills

A productive team member is an individual belonging to a group with the drive and energy around the mission of the team to meet up to his/her specified tasks and also to meet the groups target or goal. To Crawford et al. (2011, p. 9) teamwork skills include: productivity as a team member; positive and encouraging attitude; punctuality and meeting deadlines; accountability to team; working with multiple approaches; awareness of and sensible to diversity; and sharing ideas with multiple audiences was ranked

4th by employees and 6th by students. Among the sub-skills in this cluster, “while productivity, punctuality and meeting deadlines are important over half the employers ranked having ‘positive attitude’ as 1 or 2” (p.15). A Positive and encouraging attitude is required to have good team work skills. In a team with a number of members with different beliefs, experiences and backgrounds can result in tension amongst the team. A positive mindset is therefore crucial. One has to find ways to actively listen to everyone point of view and help to restate it for the group so everybody understands all sides of the issue. Tension may come about due to multiple approaches hence awareness and sensitivity to diversity should be adapted. Norris (2008) explains that sensitivity begins with understanding that there are differences among cultures and that cultural sensitivity includes placing value on diversity. Developing a culturally competent attitude is an ongoing process. It is important to view all people as unique individuals and realize that their experiences, beliefs, values and language affect their ways of interacting with others and the larger community. It is wrong to assume that a common culture is shared by all members of a racial, linguistic or religious group.

6.0 Communication Skills

Communication skill is listed by Crawford, Lang, Fink, Dalton & Fielitz (2011) as occupying a prime of place among soft skills. They break this important skill further into: listening skills; communicating accurately and concisely; effectiveness in oral and written communication; communicating pleasantly and professionally; communicating appropriately and professionally using social media.

In Crawford, et al.’s (2011) study, communication was ranked the most important soft skill and 31.1% of the employers rated listening effectively as the most important communication skills. To an alumni “except in very unique work environments, being an effective employee is impossible if one cannot communicate effectively” (p.12). Listening attentively is a good communication skill and constitutes a good character and engenders interpersonal relationship. Listening is key to all effective communication, without the ability to listen effectively messages are easily misunderstood – communication breaks down and the sender of the message can easily become frustrated or irritated. Good listening skills also have benefits in our personal lives, including: a greater number of friends and social networks, improved self-esteem and confidence, higher grades in academic work and increased health and well-being (Norris, 2008). Schulz (2008) explains the importance of soft skills in connection to language. He stresses that the talent of communication among graduates from colleges and universities is lacking.

Minimum requirements for a graduate of a tertiary institution should be ample proficiency in spoken and written language, a certain amount of self-esteem that will be reflected in conversation skills and body language, adequate discussion skills, and of major importance, good presentation skills in order to be able to market oneself and one’s ideas (p.149).

While knowing the correct usage of English is a hard skill, knowing when to use only a standard form and in what tone to use them is a soft skill.

7.0 Leadership Skills

Leadership skills include being a visionary, seeing the ‘big picture’ and thinking strategically; recognizing when to lead and appreciating when to follow; appreciating, respecting and acknowledging contributions from others; recognizing and dealing maturely with conflict; nurturing building professional relationships; motivating and leading others; and recognizing when change is needed and leading the

change effort (Crawford, Lang, Fink, Dalton and Fielitz, 2011, p. 9). The ability to lead effectively is based on a number of attributes. For instance, a head of a department is required to lead people effectively. Being a leader involves manage resources, conflicts, delegating and authorizing, networking and developing relevant skills in subordinates. Kaipa and Milus (2005) explain that a leader manages activities like production quality, customer care, work place safety, decision making, meeting management, and problem-solving. Leaders have to think strategically and most importantly they have to recognize when to lead and when to respect and acknowledge contributions from others so as to follow. Leaders build professional relationships, motivate and lead others, recognize change is needed and lead the change effort.

8.0 Decision-Making/Problem-Solving Skills

According to Crawford, et al. (2011, p. 9) these skills include: ability to identify and analyse a problem; take effective and appropriate action; realize the effect of decision; come up with creative and innovative solutions; transfer knowledge from one experience to another; engage in life-long learning; and think abstractly about problems. Crawford, et al.'s (2011) found this skill as the as the second highest soft skill for employees. "In today's economy, it is CRITICAL to be a problem solver and evaluate problems strategically . . . , students are not trained in these areas" (p. 13). Everyday living requires decision-making skills. Effective problem solving requires being able to make decisions. Schulz (2008) highlights the importance of critical and structured thinking. This pair of soft skills allow for problem solving which is a necessity in this fast developing world. Creativity allows thinking outside the box. Schulz (2008) recognizes creativity as a soft skill and stresses that thinking outside the box means breaking conventional rules and restrictions in order to find innovative approaches to problem solving. Kaipa and Milus (2005) explains that a graduate with a high IQ (intelligence quotient) gets a job but requires a high EQ (emotional quotient) to keep it. IQ represents logical – mathematical intelligence, it's based on what needs to get done yet EQ addresses the "context sensitivity and helps you come up with the right process, when and how to get things done" (Kaipa & Milus, 2005, p.6) EQ is a soft skill.

9.0 Professionalism Skills

Crawford, et al.'s (2011) see this as involving ability to deal effectively with ambiguity, maintain appropriate décor and demeanor; selecting appropriate mentor and acceptance of advice; effective relationship with clients and mentors; give, accept and apply critique and direction in the work place or group work; trustworthy with sensitive or confidential information and show high level of understanding to role and realistic career expectations. Professionalism is defined by our inner character, the behavior we exhibit, and the image we project. It is about high quality service to others through our environment and a keen respect for others. Professionalism involves skills crucial to success in the workplace and is often considered more important than hard skills. An individual with professionalism is honest, trustworthy with sensitive information, arrives to work on time, have high ethical standards and good communication skills.

10.0 Self-Management Skills

According to Crawford, et al.'s (2011) study, this skill was ranked 3rd by non-students and 4th by students. It includes: efficient and effective work habits; self-starting; well-developed ethic, integrity and sense of loyalty; sense of urgency to address and complete tasks; ability to work well under pressure; adapt and apply appropriate technology; dedicate self to continued professional development. Self-management

skills can be demonstrated in various settings. These are methods and skills with which individuals can effectively direct their own activities towards achievement of objectives. for instance, a student who finishes her homework, one who makes good use of free time, managing school and extra curriculum activities well. Self-drive motive leads to sense of urgency to address and complete tasks. As a result one is efficient and effective in their work habits. With self-management skills, one can do their work well under pressure as long as they have the dedication to continued professional development. Despite have mentioned the importance of experience, employees are willing to hire someone inexperienced but with good self-management skill than an experienced worker without the skill.

11.0 Assessing Soft Skills

There are several soft skills listed in literature (WorkBloom, 2014; DuncanNuggets, 2014; San Diego Figure Skating Communications [SDFSC], (n.d.)). Each of these could be elaborately defined with several action words, and it is based on such action words that items could be developed to measure the related soft skill (see Table 1).

Table 1: Listing of some Soft-skills

Clusters of Soft Skills	Examples of Soft Skill Behaviors	
Communication Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaks clearly and eloquently; • writes eligibly; • listens attentively; • passes out only accurate information; • asks insightful questions; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discusses with rich information; • communicates meaningfully; • makes convincing points; • attracts others through communication; • makes rich contributions through few words.
Decision-making/Problem Solving Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • insightful at analyzing problems; • fluent of ideas; • thinks abstractly and divergently; • productive at imagination; • good at ideation ; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rich at analyzing and conceptualization; • shows innovation and creation; • leads at brainstorming sessions; • effective at taking productive actions; • foresees consequences of an action.
Self-management Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shows self-motivation • works under pressure • dedicated professionally • displays good time management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • loyalty to profession • shows self-appraisal • shows self-awareness • displays good work ethics • shows self-discipline

Teamwork Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • efficient work habits • effective work habits • well organized • persuades other team members • shares amongst members • meets deadlines and punctual • works with multiple approaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • encourages other team members • compromises • maintains accountability for the team • contributes ideas • evaluates thoughts proposed
Professionalism Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • delegates to others • good interpersonal skills • gives advise • deals effectively with ambiguity • shows trustworthiness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • coordinates within institution • mentor others • Shows appropriate décor and demeanor • Understands role and realistic career expectations
Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exhibits spirit of confidence • good communication skills • portrays international experience • portrays teamwork experience • shows perseverance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • portrays cross disciplinary experience • portrays leadership experience • project management experience • analytical within organization • solve problems well • Thinks strategically • Shows flexibility to encroaching ideas and experiences • Creates and maintains opportunity for feedback from the lead • Show evidence of mental alertness; • Critical insight
Leadership Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Matches task to ability to maximize results; • Aspires or motivates others towards success • Foreseeing, preparing for and dealing with challenges and conflicts • Recognizing and rewarding outstanding achievement • Readily accepting followership and exploiting specific or unique skills and ability 	

In some schools, the class teachers send their students home at the end of every term with a report card which besides indicating their scores on each of the subject examined had a column with entries like:

(1) Punctuality –	Excellent
(2) Cleanliness –	Fair
(3) Friendliness –	Good
(4) Honesty -	Very Good
(5) Discipline –	Very good
(6) Academic drive/energy –	Excellent.
(7) Leadership skills-	Good
(8) Attitude towards learning-	Excellent
(9) Respect-	Good
(10) Initiative-	Excellent

Let's say that a teacher was to provide a rating for this assessment where Poor = 1; Fair = 2; Good = 3; Very Good = 4; and Excellent = 5; then a student that has the above ratings would have scored: $5 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 4 + 5 + 3 + 5 + 3 + 5 = 39$. A score 39 out of 50 possible points. This translates into a percentage score of 78. This is what his classroom teacher would have recorded in the student's report card for under the subject 'soft skills'. His classroom teacher could therefore measure and assign a grade to him/her on soft skills. According to UB grading system, this would have fetched him/her a grade of B+. It is based on the same basis that "the best well behaved student of the year", "the most punctual student of the year," etc. are determined. Given this example, who says that soft skill cannot be measured? Schools have been doing it all along; the only difference is that there has been no concerted effort to convert soft skill behaviour into hard data. To enhance the validity of the measurement of soft skills, all principal stakeholders in each learner's education should be involved in its measurement. This might include assessment by parents, teachers, class teacher, sports master, agriculture master, administrator, peers (Zhang, 2012), etc. An average of the results of such assessments will represent a more valid indication of a learner's soft skill than that from a classroom teacher only.

12.0 Involvement of Stakeholders in the Assessment of Soft Skills

All stake holders should be involved in the determination of those behaviour deemed important as soft skills in the society. Given the almost endless list of possible soft skills (Rediff.com, 2007), there is the need to select and even sometimes combine related ones for use in assessment in the school setting (see an example in Table 2). This should be done with input from all stakeholders in the education setting. In that case stakeholders should be consulted, in the first place, to list all possible behaviour they deem to be important soft skill in the society, that is, what they think are pertinent soft skills in the area of education. And then, each of them should be required to rank their listing. Based on a compilation of such ranks a manageable number of popular soft skills could be selected for the society for the year in question. Based on the selected skills, a rating scale could be developed (see Figure 1) for the principal stakeholders who will be required to rate each student, in each school. Reasons, including favoritism, familiarity, and collegiality are always advanced against rating of soft skills by parents, peers (Zhang, 2012), teachers, etc. but on considering both sides of the coin the mean score derived from several ratings of the same learner on each of the identified skills provides a good and valid measure of the skill than that based on scores given only one person. And merely informing the learners that their behaviour is going to be assessed by their peers, parents and teachers, at the end of the term may influence desirable changes in their behaviour.

Hence the procedure of assessing soft skill can contribute to the training of learners on the development of desirable soft skills. Figure 1 represents examples of such a rating instrument for classmates.

This can also be used by teachers and administrators. This could be adapted for parents, and others stakeholders. Example of a rating scale through which hard data could be derived from the measurement of soft skill is that by Wilson-Ahlstrom, Yohalem, DuBois and Ji (2011).

Table 2 List of Some Important Soft skills

Adaptability	Courtesy	Integrity	Punctuality
Assertiveness	Discipline	Kindness	Reliability
Attitude	Drive	Leadership	Respect
Cleanliness	Empathy	Motivational skills	Responsibility
Collaboration	Energy	Optimism	Self-respect
Commitment	Enthusiasm	Patience	Sociability
Communication	Flexibility	Perseverance	Team-spirit
Compassion	Friendliness	Persistence	Time management
Confidence	Good judgment	Personal appearance	Tolerance
Cooperation	Honesty	Personal energy	Wanting to do a good job
Courage	Initiative	Personal integrity	Willingness to learn

This can also be used by teachers and administrators. This could be adapted for parents, and others stakeholders. Example of a rating scale through which hard data could be derived from the measurement of soft skill is that by Wilson-Ahlstrom, Yohalem, DuBois and Ji (2011). Besides rating scale as presented, there are other ways through which the level of possession of soft skills could be determined. Related methods are the use of surveys and interview. With well-developed survey items and interview schedules, learners' level of possession of soft skills could be determined. For example, statements could be developed and validated that require the learners to rate the level to which they possess each of the soft skills. For example, statements like:

- I am always motivated to tackle any task that seems to demand more than my ability; or,
- I am motivated enough to tackle a task that seems to demand more than your ability;
- I am always present at the start of every class lesson;
- It does not bother me to see a student vandalize others' property as long as it is not mine;
- I am verbally very articulate;
- I readily adapt to challenges and new situations;
- I hate going through stressful situations due to pressure to meet deadlines and crises;
- I am always optimistic and upbeat in tackling unknown problems;

- I view all criticisms, especially those from my adversaries, as a rich learning experience;
- Others are always looking to me with assurance for leadership; etc.,

Grid for Anonymous Peer (and Teacher) Assessment of Soft Skills [Sample]

School Name _____ Class _____ Class
 Teacher _____ Date _____

On a scale of 0 to 10 [0 means has none of it or not good at it; ... 5 means have an average of it; ... while 10 means has much or maximum of it], rate each of your class-/course-/room-mates or each learner (skip your own name) whose name is indicated on the second column under each of the following skills:

#	Name of Student Assessed	Soft Skills												
		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
1.	Asare, Q.													
2.	Bale R.													
3.	Chilume, S.													
4.	Dakpo, T.													
5.	Eyman, U.													
6.	Fani, V.													
7.	Gadile, W.													
8.	Hiri, X.													
9.	Itshekeng, Y.													
10.	Jorosi, Z.													

1. Honesty/Integrity; 2. Punctuality; 3 Drive/Persistence; 4. Oral communication; 5. Leadership/team-spirit; 6. Discipline; 7. Patience/persistence; 8. Motivation/Energy drive; 9. Self-respect; 10. Kindness/Tolerance; 11. Friendliness/Sociability; 12. Compassion/Empathy; 13. Optimism/Confidence

Figure 1: Sample grid for the assessment of soft skills

One other method is developing and presenting examples or stories that validly portray each of the soft skills and asking the learner to indicate the level to which he/she sees him/herself as exhibiting the behaviour portrayed in the examples or stories. These consist of brief stories or experiences which portray the exhibition of the desired behaviour. Related to this is the presentation of role-playing exercises to the learners. Another means is through the use of portfolio assessment method which demands a documentation of daily exhibition of soft skills by each learner. Another method of assessing soft skills is through observation, but since soft skills in potency and frequency are not amenable to instant exhibition, assessing it through observation may be a difficult task. Rather, what is observed across time may guide or influence one’s rating of the level to which a learner possesses the soft skill under consideration. These methods range in reliability from low to very poor and hence are of questionable application especially when the intention is to generate, for public-based behaviour, scores with which learners’ level of possessing soft skills is described

13.0 Conclusion

The success of two people with the same level of hard skill is differentiated by the level of soft skill they possess. Hence soft-skill education is essential. Like hard skills, soft skills are exhibited with differing intensity by learners in primary, secondary and tertiary schools. That is, it varies from one individual to another. According to Thorndike (1918), anything that varies could be measured. So soft skill could be operationalized and assessed at all levels of education just like hard skills are.

14.0 Recommendations

- Studies to develop and validate measures of soft skills for Botswana education should encouraged supported.
- Similarly, broad-based consultation should be organized to develop and validate instruments for the assessment of soft skills.
- The Department of Curriculum Development and Evaluation (CDE) and the Botswana Examinations Council (BEC) should recruit and train stakeholders in the assessment of soft skills of learners.

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