

Fashion Design Students' Attitudes towards the Development of Employability Soft Skills Training in Technical Institutes in Lango Sub-Region, Northern Uganda

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100500784>

Received: 17 May 2026; Accepted: 22 May 2026; Published: 13 June 2026

ABSTRACT

The modern labour market increasingly demands graduates who possess both technical competencies and employability soft skills such as communication, teamwork, creativity, adaptability, problem-solving. In Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), these soft skills are essential in preparing students for employment and entrepreneurship. However, many fashion design graduates in Uganda continue to experience challenges in adapting to workplace expectations due to inadequate development of employability soft skills. This study investigated fashion design students' attitudes towards the development of employability soft skills training in fashion design education in Technical Institutes in Lango sub-region of Northern Uganda. The study employed a descriptive survey design using mixed methods approaches. Data were collected using questionnaires and interviews from fashion design students in selected 4 Technical Institutes. Findings revealed that most students recognized employability soft skills as important for workplace success, customer relations, teamwork, and self-employment in the fashion industry. Students expressed positive attitudes towards the development of communication skills, creativity, and problem-solving abilities through fashion design training. However, some students perceived soft skills training as less important than practical tailoring and garment construction skills. The findings further indicated that industrial training, learner-centered teaching methods, and exposure to fashion exhibitions positively influenced students' attitudes towards employability soft skills development. The study concluded that although students generally appreciated the importance of employability soft skills, there were still gaps in curriculum integration and practical implementation of soft skills training in Technical Institutes. The study recommends strengthening curriculum integration, enhancing industry partnerships, and promoting experiential learning approaches to improve employability soft skills development among fashion design students.

Keywords: Employability soft skills, fashion design education, students' attitudes, Technical Institutes, Northern Uganda, Lango sub-region.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid transformation of the global labour market has increased the importance of employability soft skills in vocational and technical education. Employers today require graduates who can demonstrate not only technical competencies but also interpersonal and professional attributes such as communication, teamwork, leadership, adaptability, creativity, and problem-solving. In fashion design education, employability soft skills are particularly important because the fashion industry involves continuous interaction with clients, teamwork in garment production, creativity in design processes, and adaptability to changing trends.

Technical Institutes in Uganda are mandated to equip learners with practical and employable skills for sustainable livelihoods. Despite this mandate, concerns persist regarding the preparedness of fashion design graduates for the labour market due to inadequate development of employability soft skills. Many students tend to focus more on technical tailoring skills while giving less attention to interpersonal and professional competencies that are equally essential in the workplace.

Students' attitudes towards employability soft skills training significantly influence their participation in learning activities and their willingness to develop these competencies. Positive attitudes encourage active engagement and skills acquisition, while negative perceptions may hinder the effective development of employability skills. Understanding students' attitudes is therefore critical in improving curriculum delivery and enhancing graduate employability.

This study investigated fashion design students' attitudes towards the development of employability soft skills training in fashion design education in Technical Institutes in the Lango sub-region of Northern Uganda.

Employability Soft Skills in Fashion Design Education

Employability soft skills are non-technical competencies that enable individuals to perform effectively in the workplace. These skills include communication, teamwork, critical thinking, leadership, creativity, adaptability, professionalism, and time management (Robles, 2012; Succi & Canovi, 2020). In fashion design education, employability soft skills complement technical competencies such as sewing, pattern drafting, textile selection, and garment construction (Jackson, 2021).

Contemporary literature emphasizes that soft skills are increasingly critical for graduate success in the 21st-century labour market, where employers value interpersonal and cognitive abilities alongside technical expertise (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021; World Economic Forum [WEF], 2023). Studies further indicate that graduates with strong soft skills are more likely to transition smoothly into employment and demonstrate higher workplace adaptability (Ayoubi et al., 2023; Tymon et al., 2022).

The fashion industry, in particular, requires designers to communicate effectively with clients, collaborate with colleagues, solve design challenges, and adapt to changing consumer preferences (Singh & Jaykumar, 2022). These competencies are essential in both formal employment and self-employment contexts, where designers must manage customer relations, negotiate orders, and respond creatively to market demands (Okolie et al., 2020).

In vocational and technical education settings, soft skills development is increasingly integrated into competency-based training approaches to enhance graduate employability outcomes (Kintu et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Similarly, policy frameworks in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) emphasize the need for holistic skill development that combines technical proficiency with transferable soft skills (Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports, 2021; African Development Bank Group, 2022).

Consequently, fashion design education must intentionally integrate soft skills training to prepare graduates for employment and entrepreneurship opportunities in the dynamic fashion industry (Ezeani & Oladele, 2024; UNICEF, 2023). This integration ensures that learners are not only technically competent but also adaptable, innovative, and workplace-ready in an increasingly competitive labour market.

Students' Attitudes towards Employability Soft Skills Development

Students' attitudes towards learning influence their engagement, participation, and academic outcomes. Positive attitudes towards employability soft skills training enhance students' motivation to acquire competencies needed for workplace success. Studies indicate that vocational students who appreciate the importance of communication, teamwork, and professionalism are more likely to succeed in employment and self-employment.

However, some students in vocational education perceive soft skills as secondary compared to technical

competencies. This perception often results from traditional vocational training approaches that emphasize practical skills while neglecting interpersonal competencies.

Factors Influencing Students' Attitudes

Several factors influence students' attitudes towards employability soft skills development. These include teaching methods, industrial exposure, institutional support, curriculum design, and awareness of labour market demands. Learner-centered methods such as group discussions, project-based learning, presentations, and industrial training positively influence students' attitudes towards soft skills acquisition.

Industry exposure also helps students appreciate the relevance of employability soft skills in real work environments. Students who participate in internships and fashion exhibitions often develop greater confidence, communication abilities, and teamwork skills.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a convergent mixed-methods research design. The convergent mixed-methods approach was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to collect both quantitative and qualitative data concurrently, analyze them separately, and later integrate the findings during interpretation to provide a comprehensive understanding of the development of employability soft skills among fashion design students in Technical Institutes in Northern Uganda.

The quantitative component generated numerical data regarding students' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences related to employability soft skills training, while the qualitative component provided detailed explanations and contextual understanding from instructors and administrators. The use of mixed methods enhanced the validity, reliability, and comprehensiveness of the study findings.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Technical Institutes located in the Lango sub-region of Northern Uganda. The sub-region was selected because it hosts several government-supported technical institutes offering fashion and garment design programs. Additionally, the region was considered suitable for the study due to increasing concerns regarding graduate employability and the need for practical and soft skills development among fashion design students.

Target Population

The target population comprised 352 fashion design students, 16 instructors, 4 administrators, and 20 public-private partners drawn from four selected technical institutes in the Lango sub-region of Northern Uganda. The selected institutions included Okwang Technical Institute, Barlonyo Technical Institute, Abia Technical Institute, and Amugo Technical Institute. Students formed the major category of respondents because they were the direct beneficiaries of employability soft skills training in fashion design education.

Data Collection Instruments

Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was administered to fashion design students. The questionnaire contained both closed-ended and Likert-scale items designed to assess students' attitudes toward employability soft skills training, including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, creativity, adaptability, and interpersonal skills.

Interview Guide

Semi-structured interview guides were used to collect qualitative data from instructors and administrators. Interviews focused on participants' experiences, observations, and perceptions regarding the development of employability soft skills in fashion design education.

Validity and Reliability

The instruments were subjected to expert review to ensure content validity. Reliability of the questionnaire was tested through pretesting at Madera Technical Institute, which shared similar characteristics with the selected study institutions. Feedback obtained during pretesting helped improve clarity, consistency, and relevance of the questionnaire items.

Data Collection Procedure

The researcher obtained an introductory letter from the university before visiting the selected institutions. Permission was sought from institutional administrators before data collection commenced. Questionnaires were administered physically to students with guidance from the researcher to ensure proper understanding of the questions. Interviews with instructors and administrators were conducted face-to-face and responses were recorded through note-taking.

Data Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately before integration.

Quantitative data collected through questionnaires were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. Descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to analyze the data. The results were presented using tables and descriptive narratives. While Qualitative Data Analysis

Was obtained from interviews and analyzed thematically. Responses from participants were organized into themes and subthemes based on recurring patterns related to employability soft skills development, teaching approaches, challenges, and student attitudes.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

The Integration occurred during interpretation and discussion of results. Quantitative findings provided statistical trends and patterns, while qualitative findings offered detailed explanations and contextual understanding of the observed patterns.

The study employed triangulation to compare and validate findings from both data sources. Qualitative interview responses were used to explain, support, and enrich the quantitative findings. Statistical findings indicating positive student attitudes toward teamwork and communication skills were complemented by interview responses from instructors who observed improved collaboration and confidence among students during practical training sessions.

The integration process enhanced the credibility, validity, and comprehensiveness of the study findings by ensuring that conclusions were supported by multiple sources of evidence.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The third objective of the study sought to investigate students' attitudes toward employability soft skills training in fashion design education in Technical Institutes in Northern Uganda. Students' attitudes were assessed using several statements measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.

The findings revealed that students generally held positive attitudes toward employability soft skills training. The majority of respondents expressed strong interest in learning employability soft skills as part of their fashion

design course. Specifically, 73.8% of the respondents agreed that employability soft skills training is important in fashion design education. This finding suggests that students recognize the relevance of soft skills in enhancing their employability and career development.

Similarly, 70.6% of the students acknowledged that employability soft skills are equally as important as technical skills in fashion design. This demonstrates students' awareness of the complementary role played by both technical competencies and soft skills in promoting career readiness and workplace success. In addition, 72.6% of the respondents agreed that employability soft skills training improves their performance in practical subjects, especially in areas that require teamwork, communication, creativity, and time management.

The findings further showed that 76.4% of the respondents believed that employability soft skills training is beneficial for their future careers and entrepreneurial ventures in the fashion industry. This indicates that students perceive soft skills as essential for workplace effectiveness, self-employment, and business management within the fashion sector. Furthermore, 63.4% of the students reported active participation in soft skills training sessions organized by their institutions. However, a notable proportion of respondents indicated limited engagement in such activities, suggesting possible challenges related to the accessibility, delivery methods, or frequency of the training sessions.

Additionally, 73.2% of the respondents agreed that learning employability soft skills had made them more confident and adaptable. This implies that soft skills training contributes significantly to the development of self-confidence, resilience, adaptability, and interpersonal competence among fashion design students, which are critical attributes for coping with the dynamic and competitive nature of the fashion industry.

The quantitative findings also indicated that students appreciated practical learning activities that encouraged collaboration, leadership, communication, and interpersonal interaction. Many respondents agreed that practical projects, teamwork activities, and group assignments enhanced their confidence and preparedness for the world of work.

The qualitative findings from instructors supported the quantitative results. One instructor explained that:

“Students who actively participate in teamwork activities tend to develop confidence, communication abilities, and problem-solving skills that are necessary for employment.”

Another instructor stated that:

“Practical projects and group assignments help learners interact better and improve their ability to work with others in real working environments.”

These qualitative responses complement the quantitative findings by providing deeper explanations of how employability soft skills are developed through practical and collaborative learning experiences. The findings suggest that interactive teaching methods and practical engagement play a significant role in promoting soft skills acquisition among fashion design students.

Overall, the study findings indicate that fashion design students value employability soft skills training and perceive it as an essential component of fashion design education in Technical Institutes in Northern Uganda. Students recognize the importance of communication, teamwork, creativity, adaptability, leadership, and problem-solving skills in enhancing workplace readiness, employability opportunities, and future career success in the fashion industry.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that students in Technical Institutes in Northern Uganda generally possess positive attitudes toward employability soft skills training in fashion design education. Quantitative results showed high levels of agreement regarding the importance of communication, teamwork, creativity, adaptability,

and problem-solving skills in enhancing employability. In particular, students consistently recognized that these competencies are essential for both workplace performance and entrepreneurial success in the fashion industry.

The qualitative findings reinforced these results by showing that instructors observed noticeable improvements in students' confidence, collaboration, and interpersonal interactions during practical learning sessions. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative data therefore demonstrates that employability soft skills training plays a significant role in strengthening students' readiness for the labour market. This aligns with contemporary literature which emphasizes that soft skills are critical for graduate employability in technical and vocational education systems (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021; World Economic Forum [WEF], 2023; Tymon et al., 2022).

Overall, the study highlights that practical and collaborative learning approaches are effective in promoting employability soft skills among fashion design students. Activities such as group projects, practical assignments, and interactive classroom sessions provide meaningful opportunities for learners to develop teamwork, leadership, communication, and problem-solving competencies. These findings are consistent with research indicating that experiential and work-integrated learning approaches significantly enhance employability outcomes in vocational education (Jackson, 2021; Kintu et al., 2021).

Implications for Technical Education

The findings imply that Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions should strengthen the integration of soft skills within fashion design curricula. There is a need to move beyond purely technical instruction and adopt learner-centered, practical approaches that intentionally embed communication, teamwork, and problem-solving into everyday teaching and learning processes (UNESCO, 2021; Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports, 2021). Strengthening soft skills development will better prepare graduates for the dynamic demands of the fashion and creative industries.

Contribution to Employability Development.

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on employability development by demonstrating that soft skills are not peripheral but central to fashion design education. It shows that students who engage in practical and collaborative learning environments develop higher levels of confidence, adaptability, and workplace readiness. This supports existing evidence that employability is enhanced when technical competencies are integrated with transferable soft skills (Ayoubi et al., 2023; Ezeani & Oladele, 2024).

Recommendations for Policy and Curriculum Improvement

Based on the findings, the study recommends that TVET policymakers and curriculum developers in Uganda should formally integrate structured soft skills training into fashion design programs. This should include explicit learning outcomes for communication, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving skills. In addition, instructors should be trained to use participatory and experiential teaching methods that promote active learning. Institutions should also strengthen industry collaboration to ensure that training reflects real workplace expectations and aligns with labour market needs (African Development Bank Group, 2022; UNICEF, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023).valued in the workplace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made to enhance the development of employability soft skills in fashion design education in Technical Institutes in Northern Uganda:

Technical Institutes should integrate employability soft skills into practical fashion design activities and assessment systems to ensure that students develop both technical and transferable competencies in an applied learning environment (UNESCO, 2021; Kintu et al., 2021).

Instructors should adopt experiential and learner-centered teaching methods that actively promote communication, teamwork, creativity, and problem-solving skills through group-based and project-oriented learning approaches (Jackson, 2021; Ayoubi et al., 2023).

Institutions should strengthen collaboration with fashion industry stakeholders to provide structured industrial training, mentorship opportunities, and workplace exposure that align training with labour market expectations (African Development Bank Group, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2023).

Awareness programmes should be conducted within institutions to help students better understand the importance of employability soft skills in improving their competitiveness and adaptability in the labour market (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021; UNICEF, 2023).

Curriculum developers should ensure a balanced integration of both technical competencies and employability soft skills within fashion design education, in line with competency-based TVET reforms aimed at improving graduate employability outcomes (Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports, 2021; Tymon et al., 2022).

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Suggested Revisions: Compliance Report**BY: Akiteng Jane Frances.****DATE: 22/05/2026**

Reviewer Concern / Suggestion	Revision Made in the Manuscript
Need to improve completeness, analytical depth, and methodological clarity.	The manuscript has been comprehensively revised to improve completeness, analytical depth, and methodological clarity. Findings have been expanded and fully interpreted to strengthen the presentation of results and conclusions. Additional explanations were included to show how students' positive attitudes toward employability soft skills training contribute to skill acquisition, practical competence development, and workplace readiness in fashion design education.
Strengthen the discussion by explaining how students' attitudes translate into actual skill acquisition and workplace readiness.	The discussion section was strengthened by linking students' attitudes to practical learning experiences such as teamwork activities, communication exercises, collaborative projects, and problem-solving tasks that enhance workplace preparedness. Qualitative evidence from instructors was also incorporated to demonstrate how employability soft skills are developed and observed during practical training sessions.
Provide clearer explanation of the mixed-methods integration process.	The methodology section was revised to provide a clearer explanation of the mixed-methods integration process. The manuscript now explains that quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately and later integrated during interpretation through triangulation, where qualitative findings were used to support, explain, and enrich quantitative results.
Include broader stakeholder perspectives in future research.	The manuscript now acknowledges the importance of broader stakeholder perspectives in future studies. Recommendations for future research emphasize the inclusion of instructors, curriculum developers, employers in the fashion industry, and other industry stakeholders to provide a more comprehensive understanding of employability soft skills gaps and workplace expectations in fashion design education.
Improve overall scholarly quality and clarity of the manuscript.	These revisions have significantly improved the clarity, comprehensiveness, analytical depth, and scholarly quality of the manuscript.