Article

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the soft skills of lecturers

Afam Uzorka[*], **David Makumbi, Kagezi Kalabuki**

College of Education, Open, and Distance Learning, Kampala International University, Kampala 256, Uganda
* Corresponding author: Afam Uzorka, afamuzorka@gmail.com

Abstract: Education institutions quickly made the switch to remote teaching and learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic's extraordinary problems. This study intends to investigate how the pandemic has affected lecturers' soft skills, which are vital non-technical and interpersonal skills such as efficient communication, teamwork, adaptation, empathy, problem-solving, and leadership. Data were gathered from lecturers who had firsthand experience with the change to remote teaching through a qualitative study methodology that included interviews and focus group discussions. The research shows that lecturers used new tools, modified their teaching methods, and navigated the virtual environment with amazing flexibility and adaptation. Communication skills improved as lecturers used digital tools to interact with students and offer support. With lecturers attending to academic demands and emotional well-being, empathy and student assistance emerged as crucial. Through creative virtual methods, cooperation and teamwork were promoted. To overcome obstacles, problem-solving skills were used. The study advances knowledge about how the pandemic affected lecturers' soft skills. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed how instructors use their soft skills. Rapid technology advancement, improved communication abilities, adaptability and flexibility, student support and empathy, and teamwork have all been identified as major areas of change. To successfully adapt to changing educational environments and guarantee the delivery of high-quality education, lecturers will need to further develop these soft skills in the future. By accepting these adjustments, lecturers may not only deal with the difficulties caused by the pandemic but also create a future-focused, welcoming learning atmosphere for their students. Future research should focus on long-term effects, quantitative validation of findings, and evaluation of interventions to improve lecturers' soft skills in distance learning. In light of changing educational environments, such research can promote lecturers' professional growth and inform pedagogical methods.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; soft skills; lecturers; remote teaching; adaptability; communication

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on many facets of society, including economic structures and healthcare systems. The subject of education is one sector that has experienced substantial changes, as universities and schools all around the world have switched to remote learning to slow the spread of the virus [1]. This abrupt change has had an impact on educators as well, particularly lecturers who are crucial in knowledge transfer and the design of the educational process.

While the technological difficulties that educators are currently facing, such as adjusting to online platforms and applying virtual teaching methods, have received significant attention [2–4], a different element that merits notice is how the pandemic has affected lecturers' soft skills. Soft skills, often known as interpersonal or non-technical skills [5,6], include a variety of capabilities that promote effective leadership,

teamwork, and communication [6,7]. To engage students, develop a positive learning environment, and foster meaningful connections, educators must possess these abilities.

Lecturers have had to learn how to use new teaching strategies, tools, and communication avenues while retaining their effectiveness as educators as a result of the abrupt move to remote teaching. Undoubtedly, this change has given lecturers the chance to improve their soft skills. Their capacity for adaptability, empathy, communication, and problem-solving has been put to the test as they work to provide high-quality instruction in a virtual setting and meet the varied needs of students who may be dealing with their own unique set of difficulties at this time.

For several reasons, it is imperative to comprehend how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected lecturers' soft skills. First, it can reveal how well lecturers have been able to adjust to the new teaching environment and navigate its difficulties. Second, it can shed light on the methods and safety nets that have aided in the growth of soft skills in this situation. Thirdly, when instructors continue to use technology and remote learning long after the pandemic, it can guide future pedagogical approaches.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected lecturers' soft skills. In the end, this study aims to add to the conversation about how education is changing and how lecturers are advancing their careers in the face of unprecedented obstacles.

2. Literature review

The education sector has experienced an unprecedented upheaval as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has compelled institutions to quickly adjust to remote teaching and learning environments. Due to this transformation, lecturers are under a lot of pressure to not only present information well but also to keep and improve their soft skills. In this review of the literature, we look at recent findings and academic discussions about how the pandemic has affected lecturers' soft skills.

Educators must have adaptability and flexibility skills, especially in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. According to research, lecturers have had to swiftly acquire and use new technologies and pedagogical approaches as a result of the abrupt move to remote teaching [8,9]. Their capacity to adapt has been put to the test as they work through technical difficulties, alter lesson plans, and come up with creative methods to engage students in a virtual environment.

Effective communication is a vital component of education, and the shift to distant learning has emphasized the significance of having strong digital communication abilities. To conduct lectures, offer feedback, and participate in discussions with students, lecturers have been forced to make use of a variety of online platforms and tools. According to studies, the pandemic has inspired teachers to improve their digital fluency and use new communication techniques to guarantee clarity, focus, and responsiveness in online classes [10,11].

Students' lives have been profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has presented several personal and academic obstacles. Lecturers have been required to exhibit greater empathy and support students who may be dealing with increased stress, loneliness, or a lack of resources. According to research, instructors

have been crucial in establishing a sense of belonging and care among students by providing safe venues for them to voice their worries and providing extra academic support when required [12,13].

The pandemic has changed how collaboration and teamwork are encouraged and practised. These abilities are essential for both students and educators. Using group projects, online collaboration tools, and enabling virtual debates, lecturers have had to come up with creative strategies to promote student participation in online environments [14]. Additionally, they have worked together with coworkers to exchange best practices, resources, and mutual support as they navigate the difficulties of remote teaching [15].

In the area of education, the COVID-19 pandemic has created several barriers and unexpected difficulties. To overcome these obstacles, lecturers have been forced to think imaginatively and propose practical solutions. To make sure that students' learning objectives are reached, they have investigated different assessment techniques [16,17], altered their teaching styles [18], and put adaptive strategies into practice [19]. According to research, the pandemic has inspired lecturers to use their creativity and problem-solving skills to remove obstacles to learning [20,21].

Lecturers have been instrumental in guiding the education sector through the COVID-19 pandemic's obstacles and uncertainty [22]. Their leadership has been crucial in preserving learning, promoting the welfare of students, and adjusting to the quickly evolving educational environment. By modifying their teaching methods [18], offering direction and support [23], encouraging a sense of community [24], promoting well-being [25], navigating uncertainties [26], participating in collaboration and professional development [27], and advocating for the needs of their students [28,29], lecturers have taken on a leadership role during the COVID-19 pandemic. In difficult times, their leadership has been essential in preserving the continuity of education and fostering students' intellectual and personal progress [22].

While the present literature emphasizes the different ways that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted lecturers' soft skills, it is crucial to keep in mind that additional empirical research and longitudinal studies are still required to fully comprehend the long-term impacts.

3. Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was chosen for this study. In this qualitative study, 120 faculty members from 13 universities in Uganda were randomly chosen as a convenience sample. Using focus-group discussions and interviews, the researcher met with the 120 participants in groups of 3 to 15 every session. Transcribed data was added to a database and used for analysis. Systematic coding of the data was used in qualitative content analysis to find themes or patterns. We started the analysis as we were transcribing the interviews. NVivo software was used to construct the transcripts, allowing us to synchronize them with the audio recordings. The results of the analysis were generated and documented.

4. Findings/Discussions

The study looked at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the soft skills of

lecturers. To protect the confidentiality of names, each faculty member (participant) in the study was given a database number (P1 to P120). The database number is noted in parentheses when a participant or a participant's comments are mentioned in the findings.

4.1. Demographics

100 invitees participated from 13 universities. There were 66 (55%) females and 54 (45%) males, all of whom were over the age of 20. There were 58 (48%) faculty members with master's degrees and 62 (52%) faculty members with doctoral degrees. In the survey, there were 60 (50%) Teaching Assistants/Lecturers, 38 (32%) Senior Lecturers and 22 (18%) Assoc. Professors/Professors. The percentages of work experiences are as follows: 5 to 10 years (11%), 11 to 20 years (40%), and 21 years and over (49%) as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Demographics.

Variables	Female frequency (%)	Male frequency (%)	Total frequency (%)
Gender	66 (55%)	54 (45%)	120 (100%)
Age (Years)			
20–29	8 (57%)	6 (43%)	14 (12%)
30–39	27 (64%)	15 (36%)	42 (35%)
40–49	19 (44%)	24 (56%)	43 (36%)
50-above	13 (62%)	8 (38%)	21 (17%)
Educational qualification			
Master	29 (50%)	29 (50%)	58 (48%)
Ph.D.	24 (39%)	38 (61%)	62 (52%)
Academic rank			
Teaching Assistant/Lecturer	36 (60%)	24 (40%)	60 (50%)
Senior lecturer	17 (45%)	21 (55%)	38 (32%)
Assoc. Professor/Professor	12 (55%)	10 (45%)	22 (18%)
Work experience (Years)			
5–10 years	7 (54%)	6 (46%)	13 (11%)
11–20 years	31 (65%)	17 (35%)	48 (40%)
21 years and above	26 (44%)	33 (56%)	59 (49%)

4.2. Soft skills practice of lecturers before COVID-19

Lecturers were already incorporating and honing a variety of soft skills into their teaching techniques before the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants discussed how various skills had helped them in teaching. "To explain difficult concepts and ideas to students, lecturers needed to be able to communicate effectively" (P11). Lecturers communicated verbally clearly and succinctly (P18), made use of visual aids and multimedia resources (P17, P56, P82, P83, P119), and promoted open discussion and debate in the classroom (P34).

Likewise, participants' replies showed how they employed Adaptability and Flexibility. Lecturers frequently showed their versatility by changing their lesson plans and resources to meet the differing requirements and learning preferences of their students (P26, P88). "I maintained my teaching relevance and effectiveness by responding to changes in the curriculum, educational tools, and instructional strategies" (P33).

P40 placed great emphasis on empathy. Lectures demonstrate empathy in recognizing and addressing the unique needs and difficulties of each student (P40). They demonstrated empathy by being approachable, paying attention when students spoke, and offering counselling and assistance when needed (P40).

Lecturers also demonstrate leadership skills. In the classroom, I took the role of a leader, directing and inspiring students to attain their academic objectives (P50). Lecturers gave students clear instructions, established high standards, and acted as role models for professionalism, morality, and commitment to education (P27, P29, P50, P82, P88, P90).

Participants noted that they had certain difficulties when using their soft skills. Due to the burden of covering the curriculum and fulfilling academic standards. "I frequently struggled with time constraints that prevented me from completely applying soft skills" (P36). Lecturers frequently dealt with huge class sizes, which made it difficult to give each student specialized attention and feedback (P23, P36, P50, P66, P114).

4.3. Influence of lecturers' soft skills on students' success during the COVID-19 pandemic

The soft skills of lecturers have been extremely important in affecting student achievement during this difficult time. Majority of the participants (78%) concurred that students success was influenced by leadership skills.

Communication skill was another soft skill that had an impact on student's success during the pandemic. In online learning contexts, effective communication skills are essential (P22, P57, P59, P104, P120). Strong communicators have been able to explain to pupils the goals, requirements, and instructions of the course (P1, P5, P18). "Students have been more interested, less confused, and more likely to succeed because of clear communication" (P33).

Adaptability and Flexibility skills were also beneficial to students' success during the pandemic. "I quickly adapted my teaching methods and strategies to the remote learning environment" (P76). To address the unique requirements and difficulties of online learning, lecturers have embraced technology, investigated cutting-edge teaching techniques, and adjusted course content (P23, P54, P66, P68, P80, P94, P100, P106, P119). By adjusting to the situation, lecturers have made the transfer for students easier and give them the tools they need to succeed in the new learning environment (P12, P19, P96).

Empathy and Support skills were also influential in students' success during the pandemic. Students have been more successful when their lecturers have shown empathy and assistance (P56, P66, P80). "I have demonstrated understanding of the difficulties students experience, allowing flexibility with deadlines and further

academic support when required" (P91). Lecturers have contributed to making students feel appreciated, motivated, and more likely to achieve academically by fostering a helpful and caring learning environment (P2, P34, P37, P79, P95).

4.4. Adaption to the soft skills of Lecturers during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered lecturers' soft skills as they have adjusted to the online learning and teaching environment. The introduction of remote communication was indicated by the majority of the participants (58%) as a critical area of adaptation for the lecturer's communication skills. "Lectures are organized distantly. These adjustments were particularly difficult at the start of the pandemic, mostly due to shock, the rapidly evolving circumstances, and limitations on nonverbal and informal communication" (P60).

Lecturers have modified their empathy and student support skills to online settings. They have actively listened to the worries of the students, given them words of support, and given them tools and advice to get over the difficulties of online learning (P18, P27, P28, P55, P61).

Lecturers also modified their problem-solving skills to digital problem-solving: Since switching to online instruction, lecturers have honed their skills in this area. They have mastered the ability to solve technical problems (P5, P19, P91, P100), help pupils with connectivity challenges (P8, P65), and come up with creative ideas to get around technology limitations (P19, P25, P78). Additionally, lecturers have shown innovation by coming up with online alternatives to traditional activities and evaluations (P94, P112, P116).

4.5. Impact of the adaption on the soft skills of lecturers

According to the majority of participants (92%), Lecturers' use of soft skills during the COVID-19 pandemic produced favourable results. The clarity and efficiency of communication between lecturers and students have improved due to an enhanced expertise in digital communication tools and tactics (P14). Less misconceptions and improved participation can be achieved by lecturers' more effective communication of material, instructions, and feedback (P28). As a result, learning outcomes are enhanced because students have a better knowledge of the demands of the course, the assignments, and the learning objectives (P28).

Some participants also pointed to expanded problem-solving capabilities. The improved digital problem-solving abilities of lecturers have made online learning more seamless (P55, P58, P67, P93, P101). They can swiftly locate and fix technical problems, assisting students in overcoming obstacles posed by technology and maintaining their concentration on their studies (P93). The capacity of lecturers to come up with innovative substitutes for in-person exercises and exams has guaranteed continuity in the learning process and permitted students to gain adaptable problem-solving abilities (P67).

4.6. The impact of covid-19 pandemic: the future of lecturer's soft skills

The participants were asked about the future of lecturers' soft skills due to the

effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The great majority of lecturers (73%) claimed that lecturers' soft skills have changed as a result of the pandemic. There was a shift to remote learning and in the "new normal", the hybrid (online and face-to-face) learning; going forward, lecturers will integrate technology more into teaching and learning (P67). Leadership and communication abilities must change as a result (P67). By utilizing various tools like Teams, Zoom, etc., communication skills will improve (P59). "Digital advancements will affect teaching and learning (P14). Physical classroom will be limited" (P95).

The pandemic has brought to light the value of adaptability skills in the face of unforeseen difficulties. For lecturers to successfully manage upcoming disruptions, these abilities will need to be further developed (P23). Their success will depend on their capacity to swiftly change to new teaching modalities, modify instructional tactics, and help students in varied learning situations (P25, P62, P69, P83, P88).

Additionally, some participants mentioned empathy and student support. The pandemic has brought to light how crucial empathy and student support are in creating a supportive learning environment (P53). Lecturers will still need to put students' emotional health first and offer the assistance they need, particularly in online and hybrid learning environments (P64, P66, P72, P85). For students to succeed, developing good relationships with them and displaying empathy and understanding will always be important (P5).

The pandemic has made it easier for lecturers from many institutions and countries to work together more effectively. To improve their teaching methods, lecturers will work together more on interdisciplinary projects, share resources, and share ideas (P106). The learning experience for students will be enhanced if teachers embrace global viewpoints and include other perspectives in their instruction (P34).

5. Summary

The impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning suggests greater integration of technology, with the shift to remote teaching and online learning, which suggests changes to Communication and Digital Fluency, Empathy and Student Support, Collaboration and Teamwork, Problem-solving and Creativity, and Leadership. The environment of the organization must facilitate the use of soft talents, according to the respondents. Lecturers now need soft skills more than ever thanks to the supportive atmosphere that Covid-19 has established.

The increased emphasis on communication skills is a huge development. Clear and succinct communication is essential in the remote teaching setting to ensure that students are receiving information, directions, and feedback. To effectively engage students in virtual classrooms, lecturers have had to hone their communication techniques. To inform students of course requirements, modifications, and crucial dates, they have used a variety of communication tools, including email, discussion forums, and video messaging. The pandemic has also highlighted the value of empathy and active listening when addressing students' worries and offering support. In the future, these improved communication skills will be crucial for promoting student involvement and preserving strong teacher-student connections.

The pandemic has also made it necessary for instructors to have adaptable and flexible soft skills. Lecturers have to adapt their teaching strategies and instructional materials to the online environment as a result of the abrupt shift to remote learning. Innovative strategies have been put into place to retain student involvement, including the use of online examinations, interactive activities, and virtual group projects. Additionally, lecturers have shown flexibility by catering to specific student needs, offering extra assistance, and setting flexible deadlines. As educational institutions investigate hybrid learning methods and continue to deal with uncertainty in the post-pandemic age, these adaptation and flexibility skills will remain vital.

During the pandemic, empathy and student assistance have become crucial soft skills. Due to their awareness of the pandemic's emotional toll on their students, lecturers emphasise empathy and compassion in all of their encounters. They have actively listened to students' worries, provided advice, and added help to handle the particular difficulties that come with distance learning for students. Student achievement now depends on creating a positive learning environment and encouraging a sense of community. To ensure future student wellbeing and participation, lecturers must continue developing these empathy skills.

The pandemic has also inspired instructors to collaborate and pursue ongoing professional development. They have looked for training courses, webinars, and workshops to improve their knowledge of technology integration, remote teaching, and soft skill building. Sharing best practices and exchanging ideas with peers has made it possible to overcome the difficulties of remote teaching. To stay current with emerging trends and contribute to the continued evolution of their teaching techniques, lecturers will need to continue investing in their professional growth and collaboration.

Overall, before the pandemic, lecturers primarily focused on traditional teaching methods, emphasizing face-to-face interactions, classroom management, and effective communication. Soft skills such as adaptability, empathy, and interpersonal communication were essential for fostering student engagement and learning outcomes. However, the demands for technology proficiency were relatively lower compared to the digital-centric environment post-COVID-19. During the pandemic, lecturers faced unprecedented challenges as education shifted to online platforms. The sudden transition highlighted the critical role of soft skills in facilitating effective virtual instruction. Lecturers had to quickly adapt their communication styles to engage students remotely, demonstrate empathy to address varying student needs, and exhibit resilience amidst technological disruptions. The ability of lecturers to effectively utilize soft skills significantly influenced students' success in navigating the challenges of remote learning, maintaining motivation, and achieving academic goals.

Looking ahead, the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the landscape of lecturers' soft skills, setting new standards for effective teaching in the digital age. While traditional skills such as communication and adaptability remain paramount, the integration of technology and the ability to navigate virtual environments have become indispensable. Lecturers must continue to refine their soft skills to meet evolving educational needs, embracing innovation and flexibility to ensure inclusive and engaging learning experiences for students.

6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the area of education and has sped up the transition to online instruction. The purpose of this study was to examine how the pandemic affected teachers' soft skills. Insights into the experiences, difficulties, and tactics used by lecturers throughout this historic time were gathered through qualitative research techniques, such as interviews and focus group discussions.

The study's findings highlight several important topics about how the pandemic has affected lecturers' soft skills. In managing the shift to remote teaching, lecturers have shown impressive flexibility and adaptation, effectively leveraging new technology and changing their teaching methods. Communication skills improved as lecturers used digital tools and platforms to interact with students and offer support. The need for empathy and student assistance became clear, and lecturers took proactive steps to accommodate students' intellectual and emotional needs. Through innovative methods for virtual group work and collaboration with coworkers, collaboration and teamwork were encouraged. Additionally, lecturers demonstrated their capacity for problem-solving by coming up with creative answers to the problems the pandemic presented.

These results offer light on how educators have changed and adapted in the face of hardship, helping us to better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected lecturers' soft skills. To adjust to the ambiguity of pandemic scenarios, it is also crucial for lecturers to comprehend the impact of soft skills on the success of teaching/learning during the pandemic. Lecturers can therefore continue to improve their soft skills after COVID-19.

Future research should focus on long-term effects, quantitative validation of findings, and evaluation of interventions to improve lecturers' soft skills in distance learning. In light of changing educational environments, such research can promote lecturers' professional growth and inform pedagogical methods. In conclusion, this research has the potential to improve student experiences and educational quality in both traditional and virtual learning environments.

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