



## Assessing 21st-Century Soft Skills Capacity Building Needs and Preferences among Academic Staff in Universities in North-Central Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

The study assessed the capacity-building needs and preferences for 21st-century soft skills among Academic Staff in Universities in North-Central Nigeria. Four (4) research objectives and four (4) corresponding research questions were formulated to guide the study. The study employed a concurrent mixed-methods research design. The population for this study comprised all the University Lecturers in North-Central State of Nigeria and participant consist of One Hundred and Twenty-Four (124) University lecturers in North-Central, Nigeria consisting of ten (10) Graduate Assistant, thirty (30) Assistant Lecturer, twenty-five (25) Lecturer II, three (3) Lecturer I, twenty (27) Senior Lecturer, twelve (12) Associate Professor and nine (9) Professors. Ninety-four (94) are male and thirty (30) are female lecturers. The participants were selected using accidental sampling techniques. A questionnaire titled "Soft Skills Capacity Building Needs and Preferences among Academic Staff in Universities", Observation Schedule, and Interview Protocol were used to collect data. The instruments were validated by experts. The reliability of the questionnaire was established using internal consistency reliability, and the index was found to be 0.850, calculated using the Cronbach Alpha formula. Mean and SD were used to analyse the quantitative data using SPSS version 27.0, while thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. The findings revealed that capacity-building initiatives are widely regarded as important and necessary, with a fairly consistent perception across the sample. Overall, the findings demonstrate a consistent pattern of high demand for capacity training across all competency domains. The findings also demonstrate a broad and consistent demand for soft skills development, particularly in areas related to critical thinking, innovation, professionalism, and inclusive practices. The findings from the interview revealed that participants emphasised the need for university curricula to reflect current industry demands and reduce the mismatch between graduate skills and labour market expectations.

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### INTRODUCTION

The rapid transformation of the global knowledge economy in the 21st century has significantly reshaped the expectations placed on higher education institutions and their academic staff. Beyond subject-matter expertise, there is

increasing emphasis on the acquisition and application of soft skills, including communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, and digital literacy as essential competencies for effective teaching, research productivity, and graduate employability.

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Contemporary literature underscores that these skills are indispensable for navigating complex academic environments and preparing students for dynamic labour markets (Mohammed & Ozdamli, 2024; Wordu & John, 2024).

Soft skills have become central to educational discourse due to their strong linkage with employability outcomes and professional success. Studies reveal that graduates often possess adequate technical knowledge but lack the interpersonal and cognitive competencies required in modern workplaces, creating a persistent skills gap (Mohammed & Ozdamli, 2024). This mismatch has prompted universities globally to reconsider their curricula and teaching approaches to integrate 21st-century skills more effectively.

Consequently, academic staff are expected not only to possess these competencies but also to model and transmit them through innovative pedagogical practices. In higher education, academic staff play a pivotal role in fostering students' holistic development, making their own capacity in soft skills critically important. Research indicates that soft skills such as communication, emotional intelligence, teamwork, and leadership significantly influence teaching effectiveness, classroom management, and institutional performance (Garuba, 2024; Adeoye, 2025). Furthermore, these competencies enhance collaboration, innovation, and adaptability within academic environments, thereby contributing to sustainable educational development.

Despite the recognized importance of soft skills, evidence suggests that their integration into higher education systems remains inadequate, particularly in developing regions. A systematic review by Ndibalema (2025) highlights that the development of 21st-century skills in Sub-Saharan Africa is hindered by factors such as limited digital infrastructure, insufficient training opportunities, and unprepared lecturers. Similarly, traditional teaching methods in many universities continue to prioritize theoretical knowledge over practical and interpersonal skills, thereby limiting the effective development of soft skills among both staff and students (Wordu & John, 2024). In the Nigerian context, the need for integrating soft skills

into higher education has become increasingly urgent. The country's educational system faces challenges related to graduate unemployment, low global competitiveness, and gaps in professional competencies. Scholars argue that the integration of soft skills into teaching and learning processes is essential for addressing these challenges and promoting socio-economic development (Isijola *et al.*, 2024). However, achieving this integration requires that academic staff themselves possess adequate soft skills and receive continuous professional development through targeted capacity-building initiatives.

Capacity building in soft skills involves structured training and professional development programs designed to enhance individuals' competencies in areas such as communication, leadership, problem-solving, and digital literacy. Recent studies emphasize that effective capacity-building interventions such as workshops, project-based learning, and collaborative training can significantly improve soft skills and overall performance in educational settings (Orih *et al.*, 2024). These interventions not only enhance academic staff effectiveness but also contribute to improved student outcomes and institutional quality. However, the success of capacity-building programs depends largely on understanding the specific needs and preferences of academic staff.

Different categories of staff may have varying priorities based on factors such as rank, years of experience, disciplinary background, and institutional context. For instance, early-career academics may require foundational skills such as communication and time management, while senior academics may prioritize leadership, mentoring, and strategic thinking. Without a clear understanding of these needs, capacity-building initiatives may be misaligned with actual demands, leading to limited effectiveness.

In North-Central Nigeria, universities operate within a unique socio-economic and institutional context characterized by resource constraints, increasing student enrolment, and evolving technological demands. These conditions place additional pressure on academic staff to adapt to new teaching methodologies, integrate digital tools, and address diverse student

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needs. Consequently, there is a growing recognition of the need to strengthen soft skills among academic staff to enhance teaching quality, research productivity, and institutional competitiveness.

Moreover, the concept of preferences in capacity building is gaining attention in recent literature. Preferences refer to the preferred modes, formats, and delivery mechanisms of training programs, such as workshops, online learning, mentoring, or collaborative learning environments. Understanding these preferences is crucial for designing effective and engaging professional development programs that align with the expectations and learning styles of academic staff. Research suggests that tailored and context-specific training approaches are more effective in promoting skill acquisition and application than generic programs (Orih *et al.*, 2024).

Additionally, the increasing integration of technology in education has introduced new dimensions to soft skills, particularly in areas such as digital communication, virtual collaboration, and online teaching. Academic staff are now required to navigate hybrid and online learning environments, which demand advanced digital competencies and adaptability. However, studies indicate that many educators in Sub-Saharan Africa lack adequate training in these areas, further emphasizing the need for targeted capacity-building initiatives (Ndibalema, 2025).

Given these challenges and opportunities, it is imperative to systematically examine the capacity-building needs and preferences of academic staff in relation to 21st-century soft skills. Such an investigation will provide valuable insights into the specific areas where training is required and inform the design of effective professional development programs. It will also contribute to the broader goal of enhancing the quality of higher education and improving graduate outcomes in Nigeria. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the capacity-building needs and preferences for 21st-century soft skills among academic staff in North-Central Nigerian universities. By identifying key areas of need and preferred training approaches, the study aims to provide empirical evidence that

can guide policy formulation, institutional planning, and the development of targeted interventions for academic staff development. Ultimately, strengthening soft skills among academic staff is essential for fostering innovation, improving teaching effectiveness, and ensuring that universities remain relevant in an increasingly competitive and knowledge-driven global environment.

### **Research Objectives**

The main aim of the study is to assess 21st-Century Soft Skills Capacity Building Needs and Preferences among Academic Staff in Universities in North-Central Nigeria. The following objectives are set to guide the study

1. To determine the Competencies Needed by Lecturers for the 21<sup>st</sup> – Century Soft Skills Capacity Training in North-Central Nigeria?
2. To examine the Level of need for capacity training on specific soft skills by Lecturers in North-Central Nigeria?
3. To identify the Policy statement relevant to the need for capacity training on soft skills by Lecturers in Nigeria in comparison to the skills needed for the present labour market?
4. To explore lecturer's preference on the specific soft skills that could necessitate the need for capacity training in North-Central Nigeria?

### **Research Questions**

In line with the stated research objectives, the following research questions were raised to guide the study:

1. What are the Competencies Needed by Lecturers for the 21<sup>st</sup> –Century Soft Skills Capacity Training in North-Central Nigeria?
2. What is the Level of need for capacity training on specific soft skills by Lecturers in North-Central Nigeria?
3. What are the Policy statement relevant to the need for capacity training on soft skills by Lecturers in Nigeria in



comparison to the skills needed for the present labour market?

4. What are the lecturer's preference on the specific soft skills that could necessitate the need for capacity training in North-Central Nigeria?

### METHODOLOGY

The study employed a concurrent mixed-method research design. The population for this study comprised all the University Lecturers in North-Central State of Nigeria and participant consist of One Hundred and Twenty-Four (124) University lecturers in North-Central, Nigeria consisting of ten (10) Graduate Assistant, thirty (30) Assistant Lecturer, twenty-five (25) Lecturer II, three (3) Lecturer I, twenty (27) Senior Lecturer, twelve (12) Associate Professor and nine (9) Professors. Ninety-four (94) are male, and thirty (30) are female lecturers. The participants were selected using accidental sampling techniques.

A questionnaire titled "Soft Skills Capacity Building Needs and Preferences among Academic Staff in Universities", Observation Schedule, and Interview Protocol were used to collect data. The capacity training needs section of the questionnaire was rated using a 5-point

Likert scale, with real limits defined as: Very Highly Needed (4.50–5.00), Highly Needed (3.50–4.49), Moderately Needed (2.50–3.49), Slightly Needed (1.50–2.49), and Not Needed (0.50–1.49). and the level of need for capacity training on specific soft skills section of the questionnaire was rated using a 5-point Likert scale with real limits defined as: Very Highly Needed (4.50–5.00), Highly Needed (3.50–4.49), Moderately Needed (2.50–3.49), Slightly Needed (1.50–2.49), and Not Needed (0.50–1.49).

The instruments were validated by experts. The reliability of the questionnaire was established using internal consistency reliability, and the index was found to be 0.85, calculated using the Cronbach's Alpha formula. Mean and SD were used to analyse the quantitative data using SPSS version 27.0, while thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data.

### RESULTS

**Research Question One:** What are the Competencies Needed by Lecturers for the 21<sup>st</sup> – Century Soft Skills Capacity Training in North-Central Nigeria? To answer this research question, Mean and Standard Deviation were used and the result is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of the Competencies Needed by Lecturers for the 21<sup>st</sup> –Century Soft Skills Capacity Training

S/No	Items	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Remarks
<b>Core Professional Competency</b>					
1	Training to improve work efficiency and enhance job performance.	124	4.36	.616	Highly Needed
2	Capacity training to enhance teaching relevance and career advancement in the 21st century.	124	4.34	.610	Highly Needed
3	Capacity training to enhance teaching relevance and career advancement in the 21st century.	124	4.19	.833	Highly Needed
4	Soft skills training to complement subject matter and pedagogical knowledge.	124	4.12	.942	Highly Needed
5	Capacity training on setting priorities, achieving deadlines, and managing office distractions effectively.	124	3.85	1.002	Highly Needed
<b>Communication &amp; Collaboration</b>					
6	Training on maintaining productivity during transitions (e.g., remote or hybrid environments)	124	4.10	.759	Highly Needed
7	Training on managing and settling workplace or classroom conflicts.	124	4.10	.821	Highly Needed

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S/No	Items	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Remarks
8	Capacity training on effective communication, collaboration, and teamwork	124	4.30	.775	Highly Needed
9	Digital communication etiquette for professional interactions across online platforms.	124	3.96	.769	Highly Needed
	Cognitive Skills & Problem Solving				
10	Training on cross-cultural communication within a diverse academic community.	124	3.96	.859	Highly Needed
11	Training on identifying complex problems and devising systematic solutions.	124	4.18	.963	Highly Needed
12	Skills to formulate open-ended, real-life problems for student inquiry.	124	4.03	.979	Highly Needed
13	Training on critical thinking, creativity, and innovation.	124	4.08	.842	Highly Needed
<b>Instructional Soft Skills</b>					
14	Skills in teacher facilitation of student group and individual investigations.	124	3.94	.872	Highly Needed
15	Capacity training on integrating technology seamlessly into classroom instruction.	124	4.13	.836	Highly Needed
16	Designing instructional modules to implement 21st-century instructional techniques.	124	4.15	.871	Highly Needed
17	Skills in equity and inclusive instruction and communication.	124	4.00	.855	Highly Needed
18	Training in effective assessment and classroom management	124	4.12	.705	Highly Needed
	Valid N (listwise)	124	4.11	0.83	Highly Needed

Very Highly Needed (VHN) 4.50 – 5.00; Highly Needed (HN) 3.50 – 4.49; Moderately Needed (MN) 2.50 – 3.49; Slightly Needed (SN) 1.50 – 2.49; and Not Needed (NN) 0.50 – 1.49

Table 1 presented Mean and Standard Deviation of the Competencies Needed by Lecturers for the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Soft Skills Capacity Training in North-Central Nigeria. The table indicates that all the listed competencies were perceived as highly needed, as their mean scores ranged from 3.85 to 4.36, falling within the benchmark for “Highly Needed.” Under the domain of core professional competency, respondents indicated a high need for training to improve work efficiency and enhance job performance (M = 4.36, SD = 0.62), as well as capacity training to enhance teaching relevance and career advancement in the 21st century (M = 4.34, SD = 0.61; M = 4.19, SD = 0.83). Similarly, soft skills training to complement subject matter and pedagogical knowledge (M = 4.12, SD = 0.94) and training on prioritization, meeting deadlines, and managing distractions (M = 3.85, SD = 1.00) were also rated as highly needed.

In the area of communication and collaboration, all items were similarly rated as

highly needed. These included training on maintaining productivity during transitions such as remote or hybrid environments (M = 4.10, SD = 0.76), managing and resolving workplace or classroom conflicts (M = 4.10, SD = 0.82), and capacity training on effective communication, collaboration, and teamwork (M = 4.30, SD = 0.78). Digital communication etiquette across online platforms also recorded a high mean score (M = 3.96, SD = 0.77), indicating its importance in professional interactions. For cognitive skills and problem solving, respondents reported high need for training in cross-cultural communication (M = 3.96, SD = 0.86), identifying complex problems and devising systematic solutions (M = 4.18, SD = 0.96), formulating open-ended, real-life problems for student inquiry (M = 4.03, SD = 0.98), and developing critical thinking, creativity, and innovation skills (M = 4.08, SD = 0.84).

Furthermore, in the domain of instructional soft skills, all items were rated as highly needed, including skills in facilitating

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student group and individual investigations ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ), integrating technology into classroom instruction ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ), designing instructional modules aligned with 21st-century techniques ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ), promoting equity and inclusive instruction ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ), and training in effective assessment and classroom management ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ). The overall average mean score of 4.11 ( $SD = 0.83$ ) indicates that respondents perceived the capacity training needs as highly needed, based on the established real limits (3.50–4.49). This suggests a strong and consistent demand for the identified competencies across all domains. The standard deviation of 0.87 reflects a moderate level of variability in respondents' ratings, indicating that while there is general agreement on the importance of these training needs, some differences in opinions exist among respondents.

Overall, the result implies that capacity-building initiatives are widely regarded as important and necessary, with a fairly consistent perception across the sample. The findings demonstrate a consistent pattern of high demand for capacity training across all competency domains, with relatively low standard deviation values indicating moderate agreement among respondents. None of the items reached the threshold for "Very Highly Needed," suggesting that while all competencies are important, the perceived needs are evenly distributed rather than concentrated in a few specific areas.

**Research Question Two:** What is the Level of need for capacity training on specific soft skills by Lecturers in North-Central Nigeria? To answer this research question, Mean and Standard Deviation were used, and the result is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of the Level of Need for Capacity Training on Specific Soft Skills by Lecturers in North-Central Nigeria

S/No		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Remarks	Rank
1	Critical thinking skills and Problem-solving	124	4.24	0.832	Highly Needed	1
2	Creativity and Innovation	124	4.22	0.842	Highly Needed	2
3	Professionalism and work ethics	124	4.12	0.861	Highly Needed	3
4	Teaching for equity and inclusiveness	124	4.05	0.795	Highly Needed	4
5	Time management skills	124	4.02	0.95	Highly Needed	5
6	Digital Literacy	124	3.98	0.975	Highly Needed	6
7	Communication skills	124	3.95	0.854	Highly Needed	7
8	Emotional intelligence	124	3.93	0.808	Highly Needed	8
9	Adaptability and flexibility	124	3.88	0.861	Highly Needed	9
10	Leadership skills	124	3.87	0.945	Highly Needed	10
11	Teamwork and collaboration	124	3.8	0.946	Highly Needed	11
12	Interpersonal relationship skills (empathy)	124	3.71	0.863	Highly Needed	12
	Average Mean		<b>3.98</b>	<b>0.87</b>	<b>Highly Needed</b>	

Very Highly Needed (VHN) | 4.50 – 5.00; Highly Needed (HN) 3.50 – 4.49; Moderately Needed (MN) 2.50 – 3.49; Slightly Needed (SN) 1.50 – 2.49; and Not Needed (NN) 0.50 – 1.49

Table 2 shows the level of need for capacity training on specific soft skills by University Lecturers in North-Central Nigeria. The results presented in Table 2 indicate that all the identified soft skills were perceived as highly

needed, as their mean scores ranged from 3.71 to 4.24, falling within the "Highly Needed" category. Specifically, critical thinking skills and problem-solving recorded the highest mean score ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ), ranking first, indicating that

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respondents considered it the most essential soft skill requiring capacity training.

This was closely followed by creativity and innovation ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ), ranked second, and professionalism and work ethics ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ), ranked third. These findings suggest a strong emphasis on higher-order thinking skills and professional conduct as key areas for development. Other highly rated skills included teaching for equity and inclusiveness ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) and time management skills ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ), indicating that respondents also value inclusive pedagogical practices and effective personal management skills. Additionally, digital literacy ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ) and problem-solving skills ( $M = 3.97$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) were rated as highly needed, reflecting the importance of technology integration and analytical abilities in contemporary educational contexts.

Furthermore, communication skills ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ), emotional intelligence ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ), and adaptability and flexibility ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ) were also identified as highly needed, highlighting the relevance of interpersonal effectiveness and responsiveness to change. Lower-ranked, yet still highly needed skills included leadership skills ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ), teamwork and collaboration ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ), and interpersonal relationship skills (empathy) ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ). Overall, the average mean score of 3.98 ( $SD = 0.87$ ) further confirms that capacity training on soft skills is highly needed among respondents. The standard deviation indicates a moderate level of agreement, suggesting that while respondents generally concur on the importance of these skills, there is some variation in the degree of perceived need. Collectively, the findings demonstrate a broad and consistent demand for soft skills development, particularly in areas related to critical thinking, innovation, professionalism, and inclusive practices.

**Research Question Three:** How are the Policy statements relevant to the need for capacity training on soft skills by Lecturers in Nigeria in comparison to the skills needed for the present

labour market? To answer this research question, document analysis was conducted and the result is presented below:

The assessment of the relevant document was done based on the researcher's observation. A critical observation of the National Policy of Education in Nigeria (NPE) to identify policy statements relevant to this research study and higher institutions, to compare them to the skills needed for the present labour market. In view of this, some of the objectives of tertiary education includes:

- "Reduce skill shortages through the production of skilled manpower relevant to the needs of the labor market;
- Generate and disseminate knowledge, skills, and competencies that contribute to national and local economic goals, which enable students to succeed in a knowledge-based economy (FRN, 2004)."

The focus on knowledge, skills, and competencies for a knowledge-based economy underscores the importance of soft skills, including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, and digital literacy. To effectively achieve these objectives, academic staff must engage in continuous professional development, particularly in emerging areas such as digital pedagogy and interdisciplinary teaching. This reinforces the importance of capacity-building programmes, especially in 21st-century competencies. The objective of reducing skill shortages implies that tertiary institutions must align their programmes with labour market demands. This requires regular curriculum review, collaboration with industry stakeholders, and capacity building

**Research Question Four:** What could necessitate the need for capacity training on specific soft skills by Lecturers in North-Central Nigeria? To answer this research question, thematic analysis was used and the result is presented below:

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### Interview Data

Participants stressed that soft skills are essential but often underemphasized in formal instruction. This was demonstrated by the following excerpts;

*“Communication, teamwork, and problem-solving are just as important as subject knowledge...”* (Lecturer I)

*“We need structured programmes to help develop soft skills...”* (Graduate Assistant)

This is consistent with literature identifying critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and digital literacy as core 21st-century competencies necessary for academic and professional success (Garuba, 2024; Mohammed & Ozdamli, 2024).

### Analysis of Interview Excerpts with Supporting Literature

The interview excerpts were organized into key findings reflecting the implications of tertiary education objectives and the need for soft skill capacity building. Participants emphasised the need for university curricula to reflect current industry demands and reduce the mismatch between graduate skills and labour market expectations.

*“Our curriculum still emphasizes theory more than practical skills... graduates often struggle to meet industry expectations.”* (Senior Lecturer)

*“We need to redesign our courses to reflect what is happening in the labour market...”* (Associate Professor)

This finding aligns with studies that highlight the persistent skills mismatch between graduates and employers' expectations in developing countries (Mohammed & Ozdamli, 2024; Worldu & John, 2024). Universities are therefore required to adopt industry-driven and competency-based curricula.

Interview excerpts revealed gaps in training and the need for ongoing capacity building for academic staff, especially in the area of soft skills.

*“Many lecturers have not received training in modern teaching methods and soft skills...”*

(Assistant Lecturer) *“Continuous training is necessary to keep up with global trends...”*  
(Senior Lecturer)

This supports evidence that continuous professional development (CPD) is essential for enhancing teaching effectiveness and adapting to evolving educational demands (Orih *et al.*, 2024). The interview excerpts demonstrate that achieving the objectives of tertiary education requires a holistic transformation involving curriculum reform, staff capacity building, and research enhancement. The integration of participants' perspectives with existing literature strengthens the validity of these findings and highlights the urgent need for context-specific interventions such as soft skills in Nigerian universities.

### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal a strong and consistent demand for 21st-century soft skills capacity building among academic staff in universities in North-Central Nigeria. The results from Research Question One indicate that all identified competencies across core professional skills, communication and collaboration, cognitive skills, and instructional soft skills were rated as “highly needed.” This suggests that academic staff recognize the growing importance of soft skills in enhancing teaching effectiveness, research productivity, and overall professional performance. The high mean scores across all domains further imply that these needs are not isolated but rather cut across multiple aspects of academic work, reinforcing the holistic nature of soft skill requirements in contemporary higher education.

The findings align with existing literature which emphasizes that modern academic environments require more than subject-matter expertise. Skills such as critical thinking, communication, adaptability, and digital literacy are increasingly essential for navigating complex teaching and learning contexts. The relatively moderate standard deviations observed indicate a general consensus among respondents, although slight variations suggest differences in individual



experiences, institutional contexts, and career stages.

Findings from Research Question Two further demonstrate that specific soft skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and professionalism were ranked highest in terms of training needs. This prioritization reflects the increasing demand for higher-order cognitive skills and ethical conduct in academic practice. The prominence of digital literacy and adaptability also highlights the impact of technological advancement and the shift toward hybrid and online learning environments. These findings corroborate earlier studies that stress the need for educators to be technologically competent and pedagogically innovative.

The document analysis in Research Question Three reveals that national educational policies emphasize the development of competencies relevant to the labour market, including soft skills. However, there appears to be a gap between policy expectations and actual practice. While policy documents advocate for the production of skilled manpower, the findings suggest that academic staff may not be adequately equipped to deliver these competencies without targeted capacity-building initiatives. This mismatch underscores the need for aligning institutional practices with policy objectives through structured professional development programs.

Furthermore, the qualitative findings from Research Question Four provide deeper insights into the underlying factors necessitating capacity building. Participants highlighted issues such as outdated curricula, overemphasis on theoretical instruction, and lack of exposure to modern teaching methods. These challenges contribute to the persistent gap between graduate skills and labour market expectations. The emphasis on continuous professional development and curriculum reform reflects a growing awareness among academic staff of the need to adapt to global educational trends. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the need for soft skills capacity building is both urgent and widespread. The convergence of quantitative and qualitative data strengthens the validity of the results and highlights the critical role of academic

staff development in improving higher education outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that 21st-century soft skills are highly essential for academic staff in universities in North-Central Nigeria, and there exists a significant need for structured capacity-building programs to enhance these competencies. The findings reveal that academic staff require a broad range of soft skills, including critical thinking, communication, digital literacy, and instructional innovation, to perform their roles in a rapidly evolving educational landscape effectively. Despite the recognition of these needs, there remains a gap between policy expectations, institutional practices, and actual competencies possessed by lecturers. This gap is further exacerbated by inadequate training opportunities, outdated curricula, and limited integration of practical and industry-relevant skills in teaching.

The study also concludes that academic staff preferences and experiences should be considered in designing capacity-building initiatives to ensure effectiveness and sustainability. Ultimately, strengthening soft skills among academic staff is critical for enhancing teaching quality, improving student learning outcomes, and aligning university education with labour market demands. Without deliberate, continuous efforts to develop capacity, universities may struggle to remain competitive in a knowledge-driven global economy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Universities should design and implement regular, structured training programs focused on 21st-century soft skills such as critical thinking, communication, digital literacy, and innovative teaching methods.
2. Higher education institutions should review and update their curricula to integrate soft skills explicitly, ensuring alignment with current labour market

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- demands and global educational standards.
3. Academic staff should be encouraged and supported to participate in ongoing professional development through workshops, seminars, online courses, and collaborative learning platforms.
  4. Educational policymakers and university administrators should ensure that policy objectives related to skill development are effectively translated into actionable institutional practices.
  5. Universities should collaborate with industry stakeholders to ensure that training programs and curricula reflect real-world skills and competencies required in the labour market.
  6. Capacity-building initiatives should be tailored to meet the specific needs of different academic ranks, with early-career lecturers focusing on foundational skills and senior academics emphasizing leadership and mentoring.

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