TITLE OF RESEARCH: Exploring the perceptions of employers on the 'soft skills' deficiencies of University graduates: Evidence from the service sector in Guyana.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Edinburgh Napier University,
for the award of Doctor of Business Administration

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Abstract

This study explored whether the perceived soft skill deficiencies of university graduates are impacted by deficiencies in the signaling process between employers and graduates from the employers' perspective. This was achieved by understanding employers' conceptualization of desirable soft skills and the recruitment and selection practices and associated signals utilized by employers, from the perspective of employers in the private service sector of Guyana and to inform practice in this area to provide managerial relief.

The study adopted an interpretivist ontology, an epistemology of subjectivism/social constructivism and a lens of signaling theory supported by graduate capital views. A purposive sampling approach was undertaken to identify employers with responsibility for graduate recruitment and selection. The purposive approach was also used to select a senior representative from the higher education sector with experience of developing graduates for organizations in the service sector and an independent recruiter to add richness to the data. In-depth semi-structured interviews enabled fourteen respondents to provide detailed accounts of their experiences of how employers conceptualize graduate soft skills and, how they recruit and select graduates for their desired soft skills. Thematic analysis was used to analyze participant responses and a simple content analysis was done on documents provided and publicly accessible which facilitated answers to the research questions.

The study produced four key findings. Firstly, employers' conceptualizations of soft skills were identified as a contributing factor to employers' perceptions of graduate soft skill deficiencies. Secondly, communication and articulation of the soft skills desired are challenges which affect the recruitment and selection of graduates with the desired soft skills. Thirdly, a range of employer hurdles contributed to employers' perceptions of graduate soft skill deficiencies. Fourthly, the study identified that environmental and

contextual factors affect the messaging of employers' desired soft skills and their ability to identify them in graduates.

Acknowledgements

TO GOD BE THE GLORY!!!!!

FOR ALL THE ANGELS HE PLACED IN THE PATH ALONG MY JOURNEY

TO EACH AND EVERYONE I SAY THANK YOU

MAY MY VALUE BE TRULY SEEN IN THOSE I AM ABLE TO HELP HENCEFORTH

TO GOD BE THE GLORY!!!!!

Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction, Purpose, and Outline of the Study

This study explores the recruitment and selection practices and related signals used to identify graduates with the desired soft skills to support individual and organizational success from the perspective of employers in the private, service sector in Guyana (Chowhan, 2016). This study adopts an interpretive research paradigm and a qualitative approach to gathering data from the perceptions of employers.

The main purpose of the study is to contribute to the understanding of the recruitment and selection practices and associated signals from the perspective of employers in the private service sector of Guyana and to develop a Toolkit for practice in this area. This study will explore whether the perceived soft skill deficits of university graduates are possibly because of a deficiency in the signaling process between employers and potential graduate applicants (Hurrell, 2016; Stewart et al, 2016).

This introductory chapter will first establish the reasons and motivation for the study. This will be followed by the identification of the aims and objectives. The location of the study in terms of its context, study area and ethical guidelines will also be discussed. The research gap in the literature will be identified and the chapter will end with details on the structure of the thesis.

1.2 Background to the Study

In a 2019 LinkedIn survey of talent professionals, 92% reported that soft skills are equally if not more important at recruitment and selection while further noting that when hiring is unsuccessful, 89% of the bad hires lacked soft skills. Fleming (2013) reported that more than seventy-five percent of employers surveyed said that soft skills were as important as – or more important than – technical skills, which mirrors the informal feedback from employers in Guyana. Like employers, graduates and stakeholders within the Higher Education sector agree that soft skills are important for the success of

graduates and desirable organization performance (Gruzdev et al, 2018). Yet, with this awareness and agreement, and with the implementation of various initiatives over the last two decades, there continues to be feedback from employers on soft skills' deficiencies of graduates (Clarke, 2017). This suggests that another approach to this problem should be considered – do employers know what they want and are they asking for it (Stewart et al, 2016).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that despite the local print media being inundated with advertisements and re-advertisements for graduates, and the main institution of higher education – the University of Guyana - producing approximately one thousand five hundred graduates annually (Guyana Chronicle, November 2017), employers either cannot find employees to fill their vacant positions or have to separate with those they do find due to unsatisfactory performance (T. Campbell, personal communication, July, 2021). Employers in Guyana critique graduates' inability to demonstrate the use of soft skills, despite meeting the certification requirements for entry level managers and other positions associated with graduate recruitment and selection (T. Williams, personal communication, June 2021).

The development of Guyana's economy, like that of many other countries, is connected to the contribution of its human capital. With a continuously growing service sector in Guyana, which contributed forty-five percent of the Gross Domestic Product (2017 estimates, CIA World Factbook), and a small population of under 800,000 persons, it is critical that graduates are properly positioned to be successful in business and take up leadership positions. It should be noted that while the sector continues to grow, the contribution of the services sector has reduced to 31.3% in 2021 as a result of oil and gas activities disproportionately increasing Guyana's GDP, but this in no way diminishes the graduate human resource needs of employers (Statista.com, n.d.).The Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) 2015 report, "Youth are the Future", identified Guyana as one of the territories with the highest youth unemployment rates (Parra-Torrado, 2014) - said rate being persistently high since

2000 at around 40%. Among the causes identified by the CDB report was "lack of relevant skills" and "lack of experience". Further exacerbating the readiness challenge is the declaration that Guyana has one of the world's highest rates for 'brain drain' of tertiary graduates aged 25 and older – 89.1% in 2015 based on a statement from the Minister as he referenced the World Bank Report by Frederic Docquier et al, and while no new information is available, private sector employers and the US State Department indicated up to 2018, that this brain drain continues (Kaieteur News, October 2018). A look at Guyana's population distribution by age groups shows an increase of 4% in the 15 – 64 age group from 2010 to 2021 – the most productive age group (Statista.com, n.d). The enrolment data from the University of Guyana shows 48% between the age of 16 to 25 and 29% between the age of 26 to 41 representing a young student population (UG 2019-2020 Annual Report, 2021). This majority of young students and a presence of only 2.8% percent of the working population with undergraduate degrees, represents a small and relatively young, qualified human resource pool (Guyana Labour Force Survey, 3rd Quarter 2021). These youths will likely possess limited work experience but be in demand across various sectors. This readiness is hinged on the presence of desirable soft skills to complement the hard skills gained by university graduates. Literature about soft skills suggests an opportunity for a multi-pronged approach where several stakeholders – students, higher education institutions, employers, and governments – each have a role to play in reducing these soft skill deficiencies (Succi & Canovi, 2020; Gruzdev et al, 2018; Pazil & Razak, 2019). The main university in Guyana, has implemented several initiatives to mitigate the soft skills deficits that employers have highlighted - such as internships, work placements, communication workshops, guest employer talks, resume writing – but the deficiencies continue to be highlighted by employers (L. Lucas, personal communication, March 2022). Employers have identified the need to employ graduates who show passion, have similar values to the organization, can communicate, show resilience, have empathy, and can work in a team (J. Nedd,

personal communication, July 2021), which are just some of the soft skills that they have identified are deficient in graduates.

Several international bodies providing development support to Guyana have identified that human capital development is critical (World Bank Publication, December 2020; Inter-American Development Bank, n.d.). Therefore, to contribute to the solution of improving the recruitment and selection of graduates with desired soft skills from the labour force, this study will explore employers' perceptions and investigate whether the perceived soft skill deficits are due to a deficiency in one or more elements of the signalling process and how these elements can be improved for the benefit of employers and their organizations. Additionally, this study will provide a resource Toolkit to support employers in their recruitment and selection processes with a focus on graduate soft skills.

1.3 Rationale for the Research

The overall aim of the study is:

> *To Explore the soft skill deficiencies of university graduates from the perspective of employers in the service sector in Guyana by reviewing their recruitment and selection practices.*

To achieve the aim of the study, the following objectives were identified:

1.   To examine employers' perceptions of the soft skills that graduates need and the deficiencies encountered in the service sector in Guyana.

2.   To explore recruitment and selection practices which employers utilise to identify soft skills in graduates.

3.   To make recommendations for improving the recruitment and selection of graduates with the soft skills desired by employers in the service sector in Guyana.

This study is focused on increasing the understanding of graduates' lack of soft skills - an issue that employers in Guyana have complained about continuously (J. Nedd, personal communication, July 2021; T. Williams, personal communication, June 2021; T.

Campbell, personal communication, July 2021). The ultimate aim of this dissertation is to add to a national conversation and make practical recommendations to equip employers to identify the soft skills they need in graduates and to recruit and select these potential employees with the required skills. This will support employers in identifying graduates from the national workforce and be better equipped to achieve their objectives and ultimately contribute to national development.

1.4 Locating the Study

A number of shifts in the skills required by graduates have occurred but the question is raised on whether the recruitment and selection practices of organizations have evolved to signal what is important to employers. A further concern is whether the signals of the past can still be trusted, especially within the changing Guyanese socio-economic context alongside its historical and political influences. This study is based in the service sector of Guyana. The participating employers' organizations are all members of the main and oldest local employer organization, The Georgetown Chamber of Commerce and Industry (GCCI). A further qualifying criterion for participating organizations, is the presence on staff of a minimum of five graduates which will be used as an underlying assumption for experience with recruitment and selection for graduate soft skills. The study is a qualitative study that will utilize the phenomenological approach to garner insight into the lived experience of managers involved in recruitment and selection for the participating organizations.

The study will be approached from an interpretivist standpoint guided by the Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973).

A larger number of organizations would have led to more generalizable results, however, the service sector in Guyana is small and only sixteen organizations met the qualifying criteria. Only one organization was chosen from each of the six industries in the study.

1.5 Research Gap

Previous studies have explored concerns over graduates' soft skills within the service sector and in developing countries and many have suggested that contributing factors include the curriculum in undergraduate programs (Pazil & Razak, 2019; Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010). However, the question raised by Stewart et al., (2016) of whether employers can truly define and communicate what they want from graduates in the form of soft skills has not really been addressed. This study aims to fill this gap.

Most of the research done on graduate soft skill needs was quantitative and focused on the rankings of different soft skills and identifying correlations between specific soft skills and certain functional areas (Abbasi et al., 2018; Jackson & Chapman, 2012; Jones et al., 2017). This study will explore the lived experiences of employers and their recruiters as they participate in the recruitment and selection process of employers thus providing insight on how the presence of soft skills in graduates are being requested and identified with the aim of highlighting commendable or problematic areas and providing recommendations to improve the process.

Secondly, employers have expressed concern about the lack of quality of graduates, specifically mentioning that even after being successful at interviews their soft skills are below the acceptable level. The university has indicated adjusting their programs to better prepare graduates. This scenario highlights the need for another approach to understanding why there is a lack of alignment with the claims from stakeholders.

In this study, the signalling process during the recruitment and selection of graduates informs the theoretical framework to examine whether this gap between employers' expectations and graduates is an actual gap or a breakdown in signalling (Spence, 1973; Stewart et al., 2016).

Finally, this study complements previous research and fills an information gap in current literature by exploring how employers conceptualize desirable graduate soft skills, how do they currently experience the tasks of recruitment and selection as they search for graduates with the soft skills desired by employers in the service sector in Guyana, and a Toolkit of key considerations to support the improvement of recruitment and selection of these graduate skills. Studies conducted previously in organization behaviour, psychology and education (Grugulis & Vincent, 2009; Hurrell et al., 2013; Parente et al., 2012; Robles, 2012) have looked at the top soft skills that employers desire while other studies in recruitment and selection (Pollard et al., 2015) have looked at utilising behavioural and competency-based interviews for selection of soft skills. These studies on which are the top soft skills and what are the techniques to be used for selection, presume that employers understand the meanings and conceptualizations of the different soft skills and they know how to communicate to and evaluate graduates for their desired soft skills. No framework was seen in the literature that provided specific guidance to recruiters on how to signal the soft skills desired during recruitment and further how to identify those soft skills during the selection of graduates. This study aims to fill this gap for employers in the service sector in Guyana by utilizing Spence's (1974) signaling theory, to explore whether there is a challenge of employers not knowing what soft skills they want, not knowing how to communicate what they want and further not knowing how to get graduates with the desired soft skills, that contributes to the perceived graduate soft skill deficiencies (Stewart et al, 2016).

Literature and electronic searches revealed no literature on graduate soft skills or signalling theory research in Guyana. Several studies looked at the relationship between soft skills and employability or work readiness in other countries (Succi & Canovi, 2020; Damoah et al, 2021; Suleman & Laranjeiro, 2018). Most of the research done was quantitative, focusing on ratings, and correlations, while others focused on

classifications and producing lists (Pazil & Razak, 2019; Noah & Abdul Aziz, 2020; Gruzdev et al, 2018; Wesley et al, 2016; Cinque, 2016; Jones et al, 2017). Stewart et al (2016) explored the signaling of soft skills by employers and 'job candidates' but their study was from the perspective of college graduates rather than from employers' perspectives. No research was identified that explored the lived experiences of employers and recruiters in the graduate recruitment and selection process with a focus on soft skills. Another gap in the literature was found in the combination of soft skills and signalling in the service sector. No research was seen on feedback loops, signaller competence and the signalling environment as they relate to graduate recruitment and selection. Thirdly, little research has been done on escalation and adaptation of graduate recruitment and selection practices in the service sector. Some research was done on signalling and soft skills; however, this was done mostly in Europe (Gruzdev et al, 2018; Succi & Canovi, 2020; Cinque, 2016; Suleman & Laranjeiro, 2018), North America (Wesley et al, 2016; Jones et al, 2017), Asia (Noah & Abdul Aziz, 2020; Pazil & Razak, 2019), Australia, and some African countries (Damoah et al, 2021). Consequently, the findings of this study will fill critical gaps in the literature on graduate soft skill deficiencies, in addition to its primary purpose of resolving an organizational issue.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis
The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows:

CHAPTER 2 – THE HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE AND THE SERVICE SECTOR IN GUYANA

This chapter provides some insight to the macroenvironment, the education sector of Guyana and information on the local service sector of Guyana to provide an understanding of the context and variables impacting graduates and employers. An overview of the industries of participant employers in the Service Sector is also provided. Details about some of the issues and challenges faced by organizations are then presented. The Chapter also provides a conclusion which highlights some of the research challenges that are likely to impact the study.

CHAPTER 3 – LITERATURE REVIEW

The chapter starts with a brief discussion on human resource management and its role in contributing to individual and organization performance. This discussion references some of the theories and perspectives of HRM, the resource-based view, HRM practices then narrowing to Recruitment and Selection, which will be the centre of this study. A brief review of the literature on human and social/cultural capital theory is presented with a view to highlighting the relationship to the formation or development of skills in individuals. This is followed by a discussion of the literature on skills, competencies, soft skills, employability skills and the soft skills employers want and the skills deficiencies of graduates from employers' perspectives. The literature on Signalling theory is then engaged as a framework and lens for examining the perceived soft skill deficiencies of graduates. An integrated model illustrating the highlights of the review of literature and the contextual discourse is presented.

CHAPTER 4 – PHILOSOPHY AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses elementary aspects of philosophy along with interpretivism, which is the philosophical approach underpinning this study. The chapter then discusses the methods used in this study along with the sampling strategy and data analysis used. The ethical principles guiding this study and the practical steps taken to ensure conformity are described in detail. A brief report on the pilot study, its results and impact on the main study are also presented.

CHAPTER 5 – FINDINGS

The findings present a summary of secondary data collected and the responses of interview participants. The chapter is structured around the outcomes of the main study which was achieved through qualitative data analysis where the data is examined iteratively with information from the context and the literature to produce the findings. Thematic analysis was used.

CHAPTER 6 – DISCUSSION

The findings are then used to answer all of the research questions of the study. A conceptual model based on signaling activities was constructed to reflect the findings and provide context for the discussion.

CHAPTER 7 – CONCLUSION

This chapter reviews achievements of the study viz-a-viz the research objectives. The contribution of the study to knowledge is detailed the areas where the study of graduate soft skills during employers' recruitment and selection processes can benefit based on the literature and the findings of this study. This is followed by the study's contribution to practice, which is starts with a Toolkit to be used in graduate recruitment and selection. A Framework of Practice is also developed with specific actionable items that are tied to the desirable soft skills, recruitment and selection processes, the challenges faced and recommended mitigation. The chapter ends with recommendations for future research and the final thoughts of the author.

CHAPTER 2: OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT AND THE SERVICE SECTOR LANDSCAPE IN GUYANA

2.1   Introduction

This Chapter seeks to present elements of the macroenvironment of Guyana, the education sector of Guyana and information on the local service sector in order to provide the national context where the research problem exists and where the study was conducted.

Within the chapter, information on the Political Organization and context (Section 2.2), the Social and Economic context (Section 2.3), an overview of the Guyanese Education sector (Section 2.4), and characteristics of the main sub-sectors of the Service sector in Guyana involved in the study (Section 2.5) are presented. The Chapter ends with a summary of the Key Employers' realities (Section 2.6) and a section outlining the Contextual Research Challenges (Section 2.7).

2.2   Political Organization and context

Guyana's Central Government system is a Parliamentary government headed by an Executive President.   Ministers are typically chosen by the President from leading political figures while to a lesser extent some are from technocrats. According to the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Guyana, the Minister responsible for education has a structure which includes a Permanent Secretary who is responsible for management of the education system and a Chief Education Officer with responsibility for professional matters such as specialized oversight for the different segments through the education officers. At the level of the education districts, education is the responsibility of the Regional Education Officers who fall under the political supervision of the Minister responsible for Local Governance. This reporting split between Ministries presents quite

a matrix of responsibility and a challenge for alignment, consistency, and accountability in the achievement of strategic education objectives. Guyana's education policy making process has been criticized as inefficient (MOE, 2020a) and is vulnerable to political control.

The political system in Guyana revolves around the transfer of power through constitutionally determined elections every five years. Successful political parties implement their education and staffing policies through a mixture of governmental actions, legislations, fiscal and budgetary measures along with data from the monitoring and evaluation department on previously executed projects.

Guyana is an ethnically plural society with six primary ethnic groups and an unofficial but growing seventh group in the form of a mixture of races. The makeup of the main groups of the population by percentage are: Indian ancestry Guyanese – 39.8%; African ancestry Guyanese – 29.2%; Mixed race Guyanese – 19.9%; Indigenous Amerindian Guyanese – 10.5% (Bureau of Statistics, Guyana, 2016c, p.2). The political landscape in Guyana is dominated by two parties, largely supported by different (the two main) ethnic groups which causes division and tension during electoral cycles and policy changes in the event of changes in the governing party (Stone et al., 2021). This tension pervades the general environment and can have sustained effects that can impact graduate recruitment and selection. Political polarization also affects the success of educational policies and priorities which are conceptualized for implementation within the electoral five-year period.

The Political Stability and Absence of Violence Index of 2017 places Guyana at -0.037. The index assesses the stability of countries across the globe on a scale of -2.5 to 2.5 with the positive number being the highest level of stability. With an index of -0.037, Guyana is seen as less politically stable than many of its neighbours who belong to the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). The political Stability Index for five selected

CARICOM neighbours are as follows: Barbados 0.976, Grenada 1.027 Jamaica 0.255 Suriname 0.135 Trinidad and Tobago 0.288 (CEIC Data, n.d.).

The political landscape can be described as polarized. Roth et al (2020) in their experiment found that identification and disidentification of a job applicant's actual political affiliation influenced hireability decisions, and political affiliation similarly had a positive correlation with expected performance hireability. Zhang et al (2020) also found that personal information affected staffing decisions. The country's political polarization and applicants' political affiliation, while a very sensitive area, could influence recruiters' hireability decisions whether consciously or unconsciously. This polarization renders real or perceived political affiliation as having the potential to influence graduate recruitment and selection in organizations in Guyana (Roth et al., 2020).

In addition to political will and direction, social conditions affect employers' activities and ability to find graduates that will be suitable for their organizations while economic conditions affect human resource development in terms of the quantity of resources the Government and employers can afford to dedicate to financing education, technology, and training.

2.3   Social and Economic context

Guyana is a small third world, English speaking country on the South American continent with economic, social, and cultural ties to the Caribbean. According to the most recent census of 2012, Guyana has a population of 746,955 people which supports the classification of a small state (less than 3 million people) (Bureau of Statistics, Guyana, 2016a, 2016b). The country's Human Development Index was 0.67 in 2019, with a ranking of 123 out of 189 countries globally which reflects negatively on the country's educational development for persons 25 years or younger. On the

other hand, according to the 2012 census, the Guyanese literacy rate averages 90% nationally (UNDP, 2019; Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

Pre-pandemic GDP statistics show that Guyana's main economic activities include Agriculture, forestry, and fishing (approximately 26%), Extractive industries (17%), Manufacturing (6%), and Services (51%) (Bureau of Statistics, 2019). However, with the drilling and production of oil commencing in 2019, the size of Guyana's GDP has changed significantly with the main economic contributor now being Extractive industries (46%) (called Mining and Quarrying in other reports) followed by Services (31%). This shift was attributable to the Petroleum, gas and support services subsector which contributed 81% to the Extractive industries sector. The emphasis here is the importance of Guyana's Service sector to GDP, and the influence and impact of the growing Petroleum (Oil and Gas) sector to Guyana's macro-environment which is seen as a factor impacting recruitment and selection of graduates in Guyana. Overall, Guyana's GDP per capita was less than US$7,000 (Table 1).

GDP per capita in US$	
YEAR	GDP US$
2014	$5,407
2015	$5,577
2016	$5,811
2017	$6,125
2018	$6,146
2019	$6,610
2020*	$6,956
2021**	$9,375

Table 1: Guyana GDP per capita 2014-2021

Source: https://data.worldbank.org

* Signifies less than half year earnings from first oil lift   ** Signifies full year earnings from oil

Unemployment, and in particular youth unemployment continues to be a challenge in Guyana which impacts the University graduates as well. While the World Bank figures show youth unemployment percentage in 2016 in the twenties, the Minister of Finance in Guyana, referenced youth unemployment at 40%. According to the Guyana Labour Force Survey in the third quarter of 2021, youth unemployment in the first three quarters in 2021 averaged 26% and 38% for men and women respectively (Bureau of Statistics, 2021a).

With approximately 70% of the population being under 35 years old, one can infer that the high levels of youth unemployment have a marked effect on unemployment statistics in general. It should be noted from the same Labour Force report, that youth unemployment is double national unemployment (Table 2).

Guyana Unemployment		
YEAR	% National	% Youth (15 - 24)
2014	12.92	24.16
2015	13.21	24.53
2016	13.46	24.93
2017	13.85	25.45
2018	14.02	26.00
2019	13.99	26.16
2020	16.43	30.07
2021	16.43	29.85

Table 2: Guyana Unemployment – National and Youth 2014-2021

Source: Guyana Labour Force Survey 2021

Further, while there are no statistics available to support the level of graduate unemployment experienced in Guyana, the increase in youth unemployment can be seen as suggestive of graduate unemployment since many graduates are under 35 and typically between the ages of 19-25. This is supported by the presence of graduate unemployment stories in the media especially around the graduation events. In

recognition of this youth unemployment challenge, the Finance Minister of Guyana proposed that graduates look at entrepreneurship and innovation as an alternative to traditional jobs to address the shortage (Kaieteur News, 2016). The University of Guyana has responded with both a Bachelors and a Masters degree in Entrepreneurship.

Data available from the World Bank on Guyana's Gini Index was from 1998 and measured 45.1. The CIA Factbook indicated that in 2007 Guyana's Gini Index measured 44.6 (World Bank, n.d.). While current statistics are unavailable, the activities of the oil and gas sector, the advocacy for local content employment and the rising youth unemployment all point to a worsening of Guyana's distribution of income.

As of 2010, 30% of the population lived in moderate poverty while 17% lived in extreme poverty (MOE, 2020, p.13). The World Bank fact sheet of September 2020, states that 43.4% of the population live on less than US$5.50 per day and close to half of graduates of the University of Guyana migrate in search of better living opportunities. The distribution of income and the opportunity to earn/pay a livable wage can impact the priorities and availability of a graduate labour pool and employers.

There are other socio-economic elements that affect the Guyanese workforce. The prevalence of youth involvement in crime is high and worrying. As stated by the CEO of the Rights of the Child Commission, Amar Panday, there is a greater likelihood of youths between the ages of 14-17 of committing a criminal offence and these offences are all centered around multi-dimensional poverty. "They have all, or most of them have, dropped out of school for one reason or the other. Most of them have been subjected to physical or sexual abuse in their earlier life," Panday disclosed (Kaieteur News, 2018). The Guyana Prison Service Inmates Survey conducted by the Citizenship Security Strengthening Program in conjunction with UG, published findings in 2018 indicating that six out of ten inmates were physically punished to some degree by their parents or guardians when they were children, one out of four respondents reported

that their father or mother's partner used to beat their mothers, in four out of ten cases, the inmates' parents or adults with whom they lived as children, drank alcohol frequently, one out of five inmates said they were gang members or belonged to criminal groups in the neighbourhood where they lived as minors, and four out of ten inmates stated that they had a family member who had been sent to prison. These findings provide some insight into the social conditions within which graduates are raised, employed, and continue to exist.

Similar to various parts of the world, single parent homes are a concern in Guyana. Several agencies were researched in the quest for statistics on Guyana, but none were obtained. However, according to Guyana's Response to the OHCHR Request for information in preparation of its Report to the High-Level Political Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals and the Rights of the Child- Human Rights Council Resolution 37/20 "Rights of the Child" of November 2020, Guyana has approximately 30% of its households headed by women. Anecdotally, this continues to be a general concern since it has been linked to criminal activity by juveniles when they are unsupervised because of the activities of the parents which is amplified when there is only a single parent who must go out to work. This can impact the jobs graduates are willing to consider.

The World Bank as of 2017, indicated that 37.3% of Guyanese have access to the internet. Internet connectivity can be seen as a necessity in the 21st century, not only for education or work but also for the broadening of perspectives and providing virtual exposure.

Generally, the socio-economic conditions suggest a challenging environment for graduate recruitment and selection. The next section provides some contextual information on the Education sector and its operating landscape.

2.4   Education Sector

2.4.1   Contextual realities

Guyana's education sector is governed by the Education Act, Chapter 39:01 while the Ministry of Education, the main body that oversees the Guyanese education system, conducts its planning through its Education Sector Plan (ESP). These plans are usually structured around strategic objectives that guide interventions and funding for the sector which includes all levels of education in Guyana. The most current plan of 2021-2025 was launched in September 2021. The evidence suggests that Guyana is shaped by a context that is multifaceted and challenged as highlighted by the Minister of Education, Honourable Priya Manickchand during the launch of the 2021-2025 ESP:

> "We are acutely aware of the need to both recognise and effectively address the contextual realities of our various educational environments. Our approaches must adapt to the unique demands of our complex, multilayered education context. Relevance and responsiveness must be at the forefront of our approaches."

Because of those realities, the minister highlighted that in the ESP implementation, sharp focus will be placed on policies and programmes that are customised within the context of Guyana's highly varied and multifaceted education system, which requires a "significant shift from traditional approaches to education that too often demanded conformity to standard practices across the entire education spectrum." This shift is not just limited to the education sector but rather the whole country as it grapples with its wider contextual realities.

Guyana's education expenditure exists between 12% and 18% of the National Budget between 2008 to 2018 (MOE, 2020a). This has historically affected the initiatives that could be implemented due to limited finance and resources to be spread over a wide geographical area.

A summary of the education system in Guyana shows that there are approximately four hundred and twenty-six institutions providing nursery education, four hundred and forty for primary education and just fewer than four hundred for secondary education. Although precise figures are not available, an estimated 10% of Guyanese children are currently educated in private schools (MOE, 2020, p.34). Technical/vocational institutions numbered approximately ten while special education and teacher training institutions were seven and two respectively in number. University education institutions had to be estimated since this level includes a relatively large number of online and distance education models. The main University which accounts for more than 90% of university graduates in the workforce is the local semi-autonomously managed University of Guyana (UG). UG was established in 1963 and currently has seven faculties and two campuses which provide certificate, diploma, degree, and post graduate programs. This University certifies approximately 1,800 persons annually. In addition to UG, Guyana has extension campuses for at least five universities (a number which is continuously growing) while a small number of graduates who studied abroad are evident in the workforce. The Chief Educational Officer and the Permanent Secretary who are both political appointees in the Ministry of Education (MOE), both sit on the University of Guyana Council, which facilitates the MOE's engagement with UG.

2.4.2 University of Guyana realities

The University of Guyana formally requires a minimum of five ordinary level (CSEC) subjects with passes in Mathematics and English with a minimum grade that represents a working knowledge of the subject. Mature students (over twenty-six years old) are admitted based on work experience and an entrance examination. As a country, over the past ten years, Guyana's performance at the Caribbean Secondary Examinations Council examinations has been problematic with 2019 scores of 43% pass rate for Mathematics and 77% for English Language – Guyana's official language (Stabroek News,

2019). Approximately half of those passes are at the grade which is interpreted as simply a working knowledge. This low attainment of foundational requirements for admission affects students and can impact their ability and performance during employment.

The University is impacted by the lack of availability of funds - it receives a subvention from the Government of Guyana which is inadequate for the management and administration of the University. Revenue to support this subvention is expected to come from fees charged to students. The fee for a four-year Bachelors is approximately US$4,000. Because of the inability of many persons to afford the fee, the Government has in place a revolving student loan which provides for students to be granted tuition and other University fees at the Government's expense. The amount to cover the students' fees is expected to be transferred to the University's account. This has not been happening efficiently, resulting in the University being starved for funds to execute on their most basic needs. Additionally, students are given five years of moratorium after they graduate, before they are required to start repaying the Government. Reports in the media as recent as 2015 from the Minister of Finance has indicated that billions of dollars in unpaid student loans exist resulting in the fund not revolving and the Government's claim to have a compromised ability to provide the subvention to the University. It should be noted that the University has experienced some political impact in the past where decisions that were not sanctioned by the Government were not given the relevant support and reports from members of the University Council suggest that such decisions correlated with a posture of non-disbursement of subventions to the University. The impact of this low, irregular, and politicized funding continues to impact the outcome of graduates from the University of Guyana, where lecturers strike for increased wages and students protest for improved conditions and other challenges (News Source, 2015; Stabroek News, 2010).

The continued shortage of trained teachers/lecturers within the education sector and the inability to pay comparative salaries has resulted in limited resources and large class

sizes. University of Guyana salaries for lecturers, range between US$960 to US$1,920 per month depending on seniority (Khan, 2020, as cited in Stone et al., 2021). Large class sizes (more than one hundred per lecturer), negatively impact the opportunity for one-on-one feedback and continuous assessment with associated corrective action. This, among other challenges, results in some compromises with student development, which becomes evident as employers look for graduates with the ability to apply the knowledge gained during their studies. This is further compounded as a large majority of the graduates entered the University straight from either a secondary school or a technical/vocational college resulting in them having little or no relevant work experience. Graduates are, however, unhappy with filling vacancies below the managerial level which would afford them the opportunity to gain the required experience since this means low earnings. This lack of experience along with graduates' unwillingness to spend time at lower levels acquiring the relevant exposure are two of the contributing reasons for the high unemployment rate among graduates, despite the continued advertisement of vacancies in the local media.

Guyana's path to socialism as an ideology resulted in the state taking vast resources to support free education from nursery to university. The success of this sector was seen as a direct representation of the success of the Government. Therefore, whatever was required to suggest that the education policies were effective was done. Access to information was denied to decision makers and instructions were passed down with no justification proffered. Though the ideology of the country has changed to a democratic society practicing capitalism through an open economy, it is understood that information is crucial to control, and it is therefore managed in a way that reflects this belief. To that end, complete statistics pertaining to the education sector are usually not released for public consumption in a timely manner and details are usually with-held in preference for aggregates which lend themselves to generalizations. Leaders in the public sector (which includes UG) are not fully equipped with information for making optimal decisions nor is this a practice that is encouraged. Additionally, the educators in the private segment of the education sector have little or no national data for analyses

and decision making. This impacts the quality and timeliness of decisions and policies that can be considered and implemented. The sector can be described as underdeveloped and relatively archaic when assessed against the various developments that exist in the field of education in the Caribbean and further afield.

2.4.3. Human Resource Management and Development challenges

The human resources development (HRD) sector in Guyana is immature with persons practicing in human resources management (HRM) who have not been formally trained and accredited in this field. A contributing factor that fuels this deficiency is the fact that the main source of tertiary development in Guyana, UG, does not offer a degree program in HRM up to 2022. There are some tertiary institutions offering HRM courses from the Association of Business Executives (ABE) where the Level 6 completion is claimed to be the equivalent of a degree program but there is no evidence of a Level 6 graduate from Guyana (ABE, n.d.). There is a local industry organization (Consultative Association of Guyanese Industry), spearheaded by an Industrial Relations practitioner which meets every two months, allowing local human resource (HR) professionals to share challenges, best practices, and any other learnings, local or international (cagi.org.gy, n.d.). This association was formed out of the need to deal with industrial relations and labour issues and is the recognized employers' organization in Guyana. The challenges in the HRD sector are further compounded by the fact that HRM is practiced by many persons who are not formally trained and who do not fully appreciate the specialization of the sector, relevant competences, and recent developments. To compound these HRM challenges, there are no courses or formal initiatives focused on soft skill development in the higher education institutions in the move towards massive numbers of graduates and the quest for competitive results at examinations.

2.5   The Services Sector

Based on the Guyana Private Sector Assessment Report of 2014, approximately 73% of registered businesses in Guyana employ fewer than five people, while 22.3% employ 5-15 people and 4.7% employ more than 15. Most firms sell their goods and services only in the domestic market, with only 15% reporting that they sell to the Caribbean region and a mere 3.8% selling beyond the Caribbean (Compete Caribbean, 2015). This illustrates the relative underdevelopment of the private sector.

The services sector in Guyana while showing steady growth is unregulated and unstructured as a sector. According to the Governor of the Central Bank of Guyana, "The services sector in Guyana is also one of the largest employers of labour" and noted that companies in this sector have a pattern of continuously seeking expansion (Kaieteur News, 2017), hence the growth of the sector. Most industries in the sector are either populated by one or two large companies or proliferated by a variety of small businesses. This is expected based on the small, scattered population of 750,000 persons, low GDP, several infrastructural limitations and an insignificant visiting tourist or migrant population. There are no educational channels which support the development of the service sector broadly and directly, however recently, some subsectors are supported such as Marketing, Tourism Management, Banking, Entrepreneurship, and Supply Chain Management. Currently, the large companies in the services sector continue to participate in a human resources relay, passing 'talent' from one company to another depending on the offered compensation, non-financial benefits and working conditions.

The employers' perspectives to be explored in this study will come from organisations in the services sector. The services sector in Guyana employs University graduates across the spectrum of faculties and programs available at UG. This sector covers a broad range of activities in the form of hard skills, but it is recognized that at the

minimum level of junior management that would be attained by new graduates, the skills being discussed are those that can be transferred across industries. The services sector in Guyana has the largest number of industries which is part of the reason that it accounted for the largest share of output in the Guyana economy. The economy was dominated by the services sector which, from 2006 to 2012 accounted for an average 62 per cent of the country's output and 58% of the income. The complete service sector in Guyana currently contributes just above thirty percent of GDP (Bureau of Statistics, 2021b) which, while still significant shows a decline that is reflective of the growth of the economy and the emergence of new sectors, most notably the Oil and Gas sector. The services sector however, reflects the fastest growing absolute employment numbers. Since this study will be focusing on employers in the money transfer/remittance, telecommunications, quick service, education, health services and retail and distribution industries, the contextual sectoral discourse will focus on these industries.

Money Transfer sub-sector

The formal and regulated money transfer/remittance industry in Guyana is relatively young and small compared to developed countries and developing countries with larger populations. The first provider to begin operations in the market was Western Union in 1993. The competitive landscape features six companies, five of which operate under license from a non-Guyanese entity. The local provider is the Government network of Post Offices. The remittance industry is regulated by the central bank – Bank of Guyana (BOG) under regulation which became effective for the first time in 2010. In the last decade, remittances contributed between 15 – 25% to the country's GDP. This industry is characterized by large networks of sub-contracted businesses who operate on a commission basis. Most of the employees in the industry, therefore, do not belong to the licensees but rather the contracted agents and sub-

agents. These employees are generally high school graduates since basic computer skills, passes in ordinary level Mathematics and English along with a customer service ethic is mainly what is required. However, licensees require varying skills at their head office that would utilize university graduates.

Internet and Communications Technology (ICT) sub-sector

Telecommunications in Guyana is somewhat characterized by a history of public sector monopoly. The Guyana Telecommunication Corporation (GTC) was a government run entity until on June 18th, 1990, when the Government of Guyana (GOG) and Atlantic Tele-Network (ATN) signed an agreement that would create a new, private limited liability company, Guyana Telephone and Telecommunication Incorporated (GTT). ATN purchased 80 percent of the issued share capital and the GOG retained 20 percent of the company until January 28th, 1991, when GTT began operations. The GOG later sold these shares to Hong Kong Golden Telecoms Company Limited (GTT, n.d.) making the sole telecommunications provider in Guyana a private entity. As a consequence, this entity/industry has a history and culture of the public sector. Upon 'privatisation', GTT agreed to provide services to secondary operators in the areas of mobile phone service and internet connectivity at a cost. The current situation is that there is one provider for fixed landline phone service, two providers for mobile phone service, approximately four internet service providers and several new licenses granted but not yet operational. According to the Department of Public Information in Guyana (DPI), before October 2020, when all aspects of the liberalization of the Telecoms sector came into force, all providers were granted access to ICT through GTT's switch which means that they required cost management and creativity in order to survive against GTT (DPI, 2020). This industry is now characterized by a growing number of licensees, independent retailers to support licensees, company owned branches and corporate head offices. From a graduate recruitment and selection perspective, this necessitates

the employment of graduates at corporate offices and to a lesser extent at company owned branches.

Quick service sub-sector

Guyana's food services sector is unstructured and diverse, including but not limited to specialty restaurants, quick services (fast food services), and creole restaurants. Each sub-sector has different contextual realities and operational circumstances. This contextual description is therefore limited to an understanding of the context associated with the interviews conducted. Before the early 1990s, the quick service sector was occupied by local players, only one of which had the benefit of a network chain. By 2005, there were six operators, five of which were operating under license from non-Guyanese franchisors. This number has since doubled. Despite the absence of data to illustrate the size of this sector, one can infer from the increased footprint of the network chains, which moved from sixteen stores to forty-five stores (at the time of this study) and conclude that the increased numbers of competitors and stores suggest growth. While most of the frontline employees are high school graduates, University graduates are employed at the managerial level at the head office to support the achievement of organizational objectives.

Retail and Distribution sub-sector

Retail and distribution as a segment is the largest contributor in the service sector but there are no statistics to ascertain the contribution of the individual industries relevant to this study. The distribution industry, unlike the others mentioned, is more complex. There are four large distributors (those who have more than fifty employees and ten distribution trucks) and a large and changing number of medium and small distributors. This is an industry without specific regulation which allows for free movement in and out of the provision of this service. The only requirements for

operation would be to meet the terms and conditions of importation laws and regulations in the country and the relevant general company and labour laws. Typically, this service is largely staffed by administrative and sales employees. There is a requirement for graduates to be employed but these persons would be in smaller numbers compared to the size of the staff complement and are usually in sales or at the head office in various operational departments.

Private Health services sub-sector

The private health services sector in Guyana is diversified. Service providers range from those providing specialized niche services to those operating full-service establishments. Health services are governed by the Health Facilities Licensing Act in the Laws of Guyana. Health service providers are also governed by a Code of Ethics. Certain specialized services require professionals to be registered with the relevant council such as doctors, dentists, and pharmacists. These licenses and registrations are not always done. This results in a very chaotic industry where different service propositions match different customer segments. This sub-sector continues to grow with the licensing of new facilities each year. Many graduates are employed in this sub-sector which is not a labour-intensive industry.

Private Education sub-sector

Private education in Guyana ranges from nursery to university. While there is a requirement to register with the MOE, as at 2017, only 20% were recognized and registered (DPI, 2017). There is also a requirement for institutions providing education services above secondary level to register with the Guyanese Accreditation Council. This is not always done. This sector is therefore characterized by extremes in organization size, profiles of customers and operating procedures to name a few. This

sub-sector continues to grow and has recently attracted expatriate interest and establishment. In addition to utilizing graduates in classrooms, education service providers utilize graduates in the administration and operation of their services.

Summary of the Services Sector (for the study)

Managers are expected to be cross-functional and collaborative in their orientation and attitude to be successful in organizations as the world changes (www.CIPD.org, 2022). In all the industries mentioned, graduates fill roles associated with, at minimum, finance, operations, marketing, human resources, information technology and internal and external customer service. In addition to and alongside the growth of the service sector is the growth of small and medium-sized organisations. This necessitated specific strategies for doing business and resourcing optimally. Information from the local Georgetown Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Guyana, indicated growth of more than 100% in members of the small and medium sized category in one calendar year in 2016 and a similar momentum in 2017. This business model is usually flat and will dictate the need to have managers who are well rounded and can contribute holistically to the organizations' objectives.

2.6   Key Employers' realities

Demographic statistics from the Guyana Labour Force Survey (Bureau of Statistics Guyana, 2021a), show a population for Guyana with a median age of approximately twenty-six years old, with twenty seven percent being fourteen years old or younger. This means that just over a quarter of the population is below the age when they can legally work.   Further, the survey results show that 84.6% of the population is fifty-four years old or younger with 39.5% representing the age group 25 – 54 which is the group most representative of university graduates. This illustrates a young population which when intersected with flat organisations results in very few opportunities for role models, understudying and true succession planning. Based on a historically small

service sector, there is a very small segment of mature and experienced persons that can provide mentorship to graduates and potential graduates.

Notwithstanding the fact that persons are certified, there is a significant brain drain of top performing graduates. Due to the 'shortage' of high paying jobs, graduates prefer to either migrate for better pay or go on to graduate studies overseas. This poses a challenge for managers since they are forced to choose from a pool of lower calibre graduates which compounds the issue of having a small pool (89% of graduates of the University migrate). Added to migration, is the movement of talented staff from one organization to another due to the avid head-hunting techniques that organisations utilize to fill vacancies. The pressure of meeting objectives with reduced staff results in additional challenges for managers where the remaining team members are expected to produce Herculean efforts to ensure objectives are met. This leads to burnout, demotivated staff, and other counter-productive effects for management.

Another issue for managers is the extended learning curve of new graduates. Managers with stretched goals and objectives are pressured to perform and when new graduates are unable to 'hit the ground running' this can impact their ability to achieve their goals. An alternative is utilizing graduates from foreign countries, in particular CARICOM countries where a regional skills certificate makes such employment possible. The issue with this alternative is the high cost associated with such resources due to the low value of the Guyanese currency compared to other countries where employees may be employed from.

The review of Guyana's context has highlighted many environmental realities that can impact employers' perspectives of the soft skills that graduates possess (example, Succi & Canovi, 2020; Crowley & Jeske, 2021; Gebreiter, 2019). This has generated the first research question:

RQ1: How may employers' perceptions of graduates' soft skills be influenced by the political, business, socio-economic and labour market context of Guyana?

2.7 Conclusion – Research Challenges

Research challenges for this area of study are many due to the 'softness' of the subject which has been overlooked with the expectation that these skills would have been assimilated somewhere along the graduate's journey with no distinct owner for their cultivation.

Lack of access to secondary data within the primary (service) and secondary (education) sectors of this study are key challenges. Sufficient and current education and service sector statistics are not available to the general public and in some cases are not even collected. This will pose a problem with the identification of trends or other opportunities for supporting (or contradicting) primary data collected.

The lack of availability of a wide pool of literature on 'soft skills' within Guyana and the Caribbean which could serve as a research building block, is another challenge for the researcher of this study. Literature existing outside of the region can be useful but there will be a need to be mindful of the context of the conclusions and findings, taking into account the characteristics of Guyana which includes the historical and political influences, a small population and graduate labour force, an education sector with limited financial resources and an immature but growing service sector as identified earlier in this chapter. While no specific literature exists to highlight the impact of the context on graduates in general, Williams (2023) in his research on the employability of Computer Science graduates in Guyana, found that the social, cultural, and political environments in the public sector present unique challenges for graduates to fit their environment as a result of harsh conditions experienced at work. While this study had respondents mainly from the public sector, it is reasonable to infer that as the public sector is the largest employer in Guyana, this impact is unlikely to escape graduates

employed elsewhere in the country and supports the discussion of the country context in earlier sections of this Chapter.

While there has been much discussion and anecdotal evidence of a lack of soft skills in Guyana, there is no hard evidence to support same. No agency or organization has collected or documented this deficiency. To that end, it will be important to ensure that the supposed shortage is confirmed through the study. Questions to be asked of interviewees must unearth whether there is a shortage of these skills or not and said questions need to be structured in such a way to prevent researcher bias. Additionally, the researcher will need to pay special attention to defining and operationalizing the term 'soft skills' within the study since there are many definitions, characteristics and skills that fall into the pool called 'soft skills'.

Because the concept of soft skills is still such an abstract one, there is much confusion about whose responsibility it is to develop these skills in graduates. As such, it is anticipated that there will be a tendency to shift this responsibility to others as each stakeholder group protects itself from the additional responsibility, blame and use of resources.

This study can unearth differing responses depending on which persons are interviewed which could impact the outcome in a way that affects the claims that can be made by the researcher. The researcher will need to ensure that the persons with the relevant information are identified and interviewed. People who interview graduates, who have direct responsibility for graduates and those who prepare graduates for the working world are among the groupings considered relevant.

Continued turnover of staff within organisations can be a research challenge since turnover can affect the persons identified to be interviewed. The researcher will have to prepare alternative plans for such an eventuality. Alternative approaches would be to interview the new or acting person in the same role, reach out to the identified interviewee wherever they may be and/or identify a new interviewee within the

earmarked organization. The first preference would be to interview the manager with the most graduate recruitment and selection experience from the options identified.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Introduction

Employers recruit graduates to fill positions within their organizations to achieve organizational objectives. The focus of the organization is to identify and recruit an applicant with the relevant skills to contribute to organizational success and support them through their tenure with the organization to facilitate their ability to add value. Various factors have contributed to a changing business environment as a result of economic, technological and demographic trends which impact employers in the execution of their businesses (Caballero & Walker, 2010).

These changes have caused employers to recognise human resources as an asset have resulted in the need to manage human capital in a strategic manner thus highlighting the importance of recruitment and selection, and retaining high quality individuals (Caballero & Walker, 2010; Geetha & Bhanu, 2018). This management of human capital begins before a potential applicant is employed and extends to the point of exit or continued retention. A key ingredient to the management of human resources is the presence of the desired skills and/or the ability to learn the required skills. While skills have been identified as a 'catch all' phrase for knowledge, skills and abilities, there has been a growing demarcation between hard and soft skills. This study focuses on the soft skills which employers frequently highlight are deficient in the graduates they recruit and select. In the UK Employer Skills Survey (2013), approximately half of employers surveyed identified workers with a skills gap to be deficient in soft skills (UKCES, 2014 cited in Hurrell, 2016).

There is considerable evidence in the literature of accounts of graduates lacking the soft skills that employers need and also prevalent are articles and studies placing the blame for this deficiency on one or more of the members of the triangle of stakeholders - educators, employers and graduates (Handel, 2003; Heckman, 2000; Hurrell, 2016). However, this study intends to examine a different perspective centred on the question of whether the perceived absence of soft skills is really about the signalling of employers and their HRM practices to identify required soft skills – specifically during recruitment and selection.

To this extent, the review will begin with an initial discussion of the literature on organization performance and competitiveness and its relationship with employee performance. A brief exploration of the theories underlying HRM follows to provide some context for the ensuing discussion on the resource-based view (RBV) as an antecedent to SHRM. An analysis is then undertaken about HRM practices seen as most relevant to the identification of soft skills amongst graduate applicants, namely, recruitment and selection.

3.2 Organization performance, effectiveness, and competitiveness

Organization or firm performance has been defined as a set of financial and non-financial metrics which indicate the level of achievement of organizational goals and objectives where it is necessary to optimize all dimensions of performance (Guest, 2011). While financial results are common and traditionally featured, some non-financial results include operational outcomes like quality and market results such as customer satisfaction (Šikýř, 2013). Many organizations after 1992 have used the Balanced Scorecard management tool to manage organizational performance where four dimensions are considered – human capital and resource management being one of them (Kaplan & Norton, 1992). It should be highlighted that some literature differentiates between organization performance and organization effectiveness where the latter includes broader indications such as operational effectiveness, customer satisfaction, corporate social responsibility, and other non-financial outcomes (Richard

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et al., 2009). Further there is a distinction by some authors between organizational performance and organizational competitiveness where the competitiveness of the organization is deemed as its ability to gain market share and meet the needs of its key stakeholders (Noe et al., 2008). Within the context of this study, there is significant evidence in the literature that supports a relationship between organization performance, its effectiveness and competitiveness and employee performance (Huselid, 2011). Succi & Canovi (2020), highlighted the increased relevance of soft skills to improve graduate employability from employers' perspectives, in a continuously changing environment. This was supported by Cimatti (2016) who identified in their research several instances where soft skills deficits negatively impacted organizational performance.

3.2.1 Employee Performance

Šikýř (2013) defines employee performance as "results and behaviour, determined by employees' abilities and motivation, which enable organizations to achieve expected goals" (p. 43) emphasizing the critical link between employee performance and the organization's performance. This relationship underscores the categorisation of employees as assets which need to be managed for excellent performance and sustained competitiveness thus providing one of the reasons for the focus on human resource management (Šikýř, 2013).

3.2.2 Human Resource Management

Human Resource Management refers to practices that influence employees' abilities, motivation, and performance (Noe et al., 2008). A review of the HRM literature reveals a varied discourse of theories, perspectives, and criticisms.

Bowen and Ostroff (2004) in their review of literature, identified two perspectives of the HRM – firm performance connection, that is the systems approach and the strategic perspective. The authors posit that within the systems view, the focus is on the overall

set of HRM practices and firm performance, rather than looking at the effects of individual HRM practices or on individual performance. On the other hand, the literature reveals different paths for the strategic perspective. Firstly, there is the view that organizations must align their various HRM practices toward their business strategy. An extension of this approach has at its centre the resource-based perspective where a firm's human resources provide a unique source of competitive advantage that is difficult to imitate. This resource-based view (RBV) has prompted work on how HRM practices contribute to firm performance by leveraging human capital's characteristics of being valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable or organised. Wright et al. (1994) however, find it necessary to distinguish between a firm's human resources and its human resource practices from the perspective that the human resource practices by themselves are unlikely to create sustained competitive advantage since they posit that these practices could easily be copied by competitors.

3.2.3 Strategy, the Resource Based View, and Competitive Advantage.

The RBV provides a link between a firm's human resources and the achievement of its strategic objectives to obtain sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). This framework is grounded by two assumptions, namely, the heterogeneity of strategic resources and the imperfect mobility of said resources (Barney, 1991). Further to the underlying assumptions, the author posited that for sustained competitive advantage, the firm's resources should have the following four attributes: be valuable; rare; imperfectly inimitable; and should have no strategically equivalent substitute. As a consequence of the ability of human resources to quit and transfer their human capital to another employer, the sustainability of competitive advantage embedded in human resources is tied to the ability and willingness of employees to remain with their employer, that is their lack of mobility (Campbell et al., 2012).

Extant theory often emphasizes that it is firm-specific human capital that provides a source of competitive advantage since this type of human capital is limited in its mobility

and redeployment (Campbell et al., 2012). "Firm-specific human capital refers to worker level knowledge, skills and abilities that have limited applicability outside of the focal firm while general human capital refers to worker skills that are broadly applicable outside the firm." (Campbell et al., 2012, p. 377). It is proposed that general human capital does not support sustained competitive advantage since employees can move easily and hence erode and transfer any advantage to their new employer. Campbell et al. (2012), in their contribution to the literature, however, propose conditions from both the demand and supply side, under which human capital, independent of its specificity, can contribute to sustained competitive advantage by influencing reduced mobility of the human capital. The conditions proposed, which are not exhaustive, include undervalued 'high quality' workers due to the imperfectly observable nature of the quality and quantity of their general skills, other stigma that may be attached to the workers, incorrect assumptions about worker productivity or a low labour market valuation of general skills from the demand side and employees' information asymmetries about their exchange value in the labour market and employees' search, bargaining and switching mobility costs from the supply side of the labour market (Spence, 1973; Campbell et al., 2012).

It is this contribution of human capital, from both the demand and supply side, to sustained competitive advantage of the firm that is central to the growing recognition of strategic human resource management (SHRM) and its benefits.

3.3 From Competitive Advantage to SHRM

SHRM is seen as focusing human resources on aligning with a firm's strategies (Boxall et al., 2007) and ultimately improving the various parameters related to organizational effectiveness (Mekonnen & Azaj, 2020) and the achievement of objectives. It involves designing and implementing a set of internally consistent policies and practices (Baird & Meshoulam, 1988) that ensure a source of sustainable competitive advantage and its impact on organizational performance (Gurbuz & Mert, 2011).

Three perspectives were identified in the literature for theorizing SHRM and the importance of human resource practices for organization performance, namely, the universalistic, contingency and configurational perspectives (Delery & Doty, 1996).

While the configurational view combines elements of the universalistic and the contingency approaches and proposes better insight to the dynamics of an HR system, it is touted as the most difficult to interpret and apply (Lai et al., 2017). On the other hand, the "Contingency theories posit that the relationship between the relevant independent variable and the dependent variable will be different for different levels of the critical contingency variable" where the "organization's strategy is considered to be the primary contingency factor" (Delery & Doty, 1996, p. 807) seems to lack strong supporting evidence. This may or may not be the reason why the literature has shown a dominance of the simplistic but easily understood and accepted universalistic or best practice model (Lai et al., 2017) which proposes that HRM systems that involve intensive investments in employees enable firms to gain competitive advantages (Huselid, 1995).

In spite of the inherent differences of the three perspectives, there is a common inference that in terms of human resources (HR) practices, the more practices implemented the better, and that there is usually a positive effect of HR on individual and organization performance (Kaufman, 2015).

3.3.1 HRM Practices

An effective bundle of HRM practices can be defined as a system of HR activities that includes selective recruitment and selection, extensive training and development, regular performance appraisal, performance related rewards and high levels of employee involvement and engagement (Snape & Redman, 2010). Elrehail, H., Harazneh, I., Abuhjeeleh, M., Alzghoul, A., Alnajdawi, S. and Ibrahim, H. (2019) discussed HRM practices as a set of internally consistent practices aimed at reinforcing employee competence among other things. Several researchers posit that recruitment and selection of the right staff seems to be one of the first HRM practices and if these are

optimal then the deficits perceived by employers will not exist within new graduates or at least will be at a minimum (Abbas et al., 2021; Velasco, 2012). Recruitment procedures and practices that provide a high 'quality' pool of the right applicants along with "a reliable and valid selection regimen" (Huselid, 1995. p. 637) will contribute significantly to the soft skills of new employees and their ability 'to hit the ground running' and could improve organizational performance (Kepha, O., Mukulu, E. & Waititu, G.A., 2014; Phillips, J.M., & Gully, S.M., 2015). This position is not a new one as Koch and McGrath (1996) also posited the positive effects on the productivity of labour for organizations that utilize sophisticated recruitment and selection strategies.

Relative information asymmetry of an employee's skills and abilities exists at the stages of recruitment and selection where any identified deficiencies can be considered as a known factor in selection for later mitigation through training. In recognition of the pivotal role that recruitment and selection can play in the acquisition and utilisation of the human resource asset, these practices will be the focus of this study and will be discussed in the following sections of the literature review. The section entitled Recruitment provides an introductory outline of how the literature defines recruitment and looks at the Planning and timing of recruitment, the General approaches to recruitment utilised by employers and a summary of the key methods used. There will be a brief look at who is involved in the recruitment process, some issues that employers are faced with and changes that are expected in recruitment. The following subsection on Selection will provide a review from the literature starting with an introduction that defines the concepts of person-job and person-organisation fit followed by sections discussing the phases of the selection process, the combination and timing of selection methods and the outsourcing of selection processes.

3.3.1.1 Graduate Recruitment

Recruitment involves a series of activities emanating from an organization, designed to present the best image of the company to potential candidates of different types while attracting the most qualified applicants and gaining a talent pool of employees (Abbasi et al., 2020; Suazo et al., 2009). These practices and decisions can affect either the number or types of individuals applying for a vacancy (Rynes et al., 1991) and further, their decision to accept a job. The literature shows the use of the term 'applicant attraction' as a synonym for recruitment where the focus is on the purpose of recruitment activities - to attract high-quality applicants (Suleman & Laranjeiro, 2018). Graduate recruitment can be from internal sources or external sources where in both cases, persons have recently gained their degree and are thus graduates. In addition to the usual elements of recruiting, graduate recruitment has another dimension to be considered which is different from general recruitment, since in many cases, new graduates have little or no work experience at that level where they now seek employment (Velasco, 2012).

Uggerslev et al. (2012), in their meta-analysis of correlates of recruiting outcomes, identified several predictors of applicant attraction, namely, job and organisation characteristics, recruiter behaviours, perceptions of the recruitment process, applicant's perceived fit with the job and with the organization, and hiring expectancies. The researchers went on to examine the moderating effects of gender, race, and applicant type. However, the effect of soft skills as a predictor of applicant attraction was not specifically considered, even though it may be considered as an element in an applicant's perceived fit with the job.

A poorly designed and ineffective recruitment process can yield less than optimal results by missing attractive applicants, not creating enough interest in the right persons or worse not motivating the desired potential applicants to apply and see the process through to the end (Breaugh, 2009). Worse, this situation can result in employers

proceeding with selection from a poor pool of candidates (Abbas et al., 2021; Gamage, 2014).

The recruitment process needs to start with clear objectives. In addition to technical knowledge and education, some of the areas to be considered would include what knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and interests are being sought. Is there a clear understanding of what a 'good hire' would look like? The establishment of these objectives should include both functional as well as hiring managers in order to add dimension and perspective to the objectives (Breaugh, 2009). A contributing factor to recruitment is the visibility of the organization which can also be translated into an objective of the process.

Once objectives have been determined, a strategy for the achievement of these objectives needs to be outlined. Strategy development involves curating a plan of action which begins by identifying who to target and includes where to find them and how best to reach them and communicate with them (Breaugh, 2009). In order to strengthen their ability to attract high-quality applicants, employer or workplace branding is a strategy utilized by organizations to differentiate themselves from their competitors and create an image of positive, credible practices as a form of attraction for potential applicants (Breaugh, 2009; Vinayak et al., 2017).

Two main strategies to recruitment surfaced in the literature, namely, 'Spreading the net wide' and 'Restricting the flow' (Pollard et al., 2015). In the first case, the recruitment net is spread far and wide to catch as many applicants as possible from the perspectives of quantity and diversity. In addition to applicants caught in the relevant drive, small employers who have less resources for recruitment drives indicated retaining and including those speculative applications that they had on file that were deemed suitable. Large employers on the other hand, focused resources on marketing the organization and the associated opportunities. The goal in this approach is to raise

the organization profile, generate interest and get persons to see themselves as potential employees (Pollard et al., 2015).

The other approach of 'restricting the flow' is mainly employed by large or well-known/branded employers who usually receive more applications than they need. With this approach the goal is to receive the right quality of applicants rather than a focus on quantity. Practices to support the 'right' applicants included pre-application activities with applicants by phone or in person in order to share inside details of the job, scope out the applicants' fit and where necessary and suitable, discourage further progression within the recruitment process (Pollard et al., 2015). Some employers found that depending on the type of vacancy being the focus of recruitment, there was a mixture of over or under supply of applicants. Further, in an environment where there are a limited number of high-quality graduates, recruitment can be influenced by factors such as applicant reputation, applicant public profiles and other initiatives that graduates can change to suit their objectives and plans (Pollard et al., 2015). Implementation of the recruitment plan/strategy should then follow. Employer branding as an activity, makes use of the marketing concept of brand equity, thus utilising initiatives such as publicity, word of mouth, employee referrals and recruitment advertising to name a few (Collins & Stevens, 2002; Abbas et al., 2021) utilising medium such as recruitment literature, the organization's website, contracted agencies, job boards, social media sites and other online portals, and sponsored campus events (Abbas et a.l, 2021; Breaugh, 2009; Donald & Pychtin, 2022; Zhang et al., 2020). Bharadwaj (2024) found that social recruiting could act as an effective tool for leveraging an organization's image and can communicate unique brand values to the target market of applicants. The literature provides a distinction between "low involvement" and "high involvement" recruitment practices, suggesting that firms with limited reputation utilise practices that are "low involvement" (such as recruitment ads) versus those that have an established reputation utilising practices like employee endorsement ("high involvement") (Collins & Han, 2004, as cited in Vinayak et al., 2017).

Breaugh (2009) makes the assertion that recruiters tend to be focused on pre-recruitment activities and outcomes and neglect post recruitment activities and the evaluation of recruitment efforts. Performance measurement and evaluation are necessary activities towards the improvement of recruitment outcomes. All stakeholders involved in the process learn from past efforts and can improve their methods in the future by paying attention to the how, when and, where of high-quality applicant attraction as insights to strategic HRM decisions (Donald & Pychtin, 2022). Some of the metrics collected include where to get the most applicants and which employees received the strongest performance reviews (Breaugh, 2009). A focus on graduate soft skills should be no different from the other aspects of recruitment and therefore measuring and monitoring of graduate soft skills and post recruitment analyses can support the organization's improvement of their recruitment outcomes through a better understanding of the how, when and whereas highlighted by Donald & Pychtin (2022).

Planning and Timing of recruitment

Graduate recruitment in the literature was to a large extent characterized by annual recruitment cycles and the suggestion that the earlier interviewers get the better applicants (Breaugh, 2009). These were typically known as Graduate Schemes where employers planned recruitment campaigns and launched marketing activities typically between July and September – one year ahead of when recruits would join. Some literature spoke of more than one intake while other literature which was sector specific, e.g., lawyers, reported starting their recruitment two years ahead (Pollard et al., 2015). Yet further, there was evidence of some employers maintaining a continuous presence in the labour market. In most cases, large employers were the ones with Graduate schemes while smaller employers tended to be more reactive in their recruitment, going to market when vacancies needed to be filled. Pollard et al. (2015) noted that the competition for graduates has resulted in companies with Graduate Schemes going earlier to market to the point where an undergraduate's first year is now considered the

best year for the recruitment cycle. Good timing was noted as critical throughout the entire recruitment process for attracting and keeping good quality applicants engaged to the end of the process (Breaugh, 2009). This understanding of the timing of recruitment can be a contributing factor of recruitment success in an environment where there is competition for graduates with desirable soft skills thus allowing employers to signal their needs and develop proactive relationships.

Recruitment methods

A multi-method approach to recruitment appeared in the literature to be common. The combinations used included face to face activities with online interactions, formal with informal approaches and online advertising using own and student centre websites (Pollard et al., 2015). The methods chosen by employers took into consideration the strengths of the various methods, the resources available to them and the opportunity to be innovative. Some of the attraction and marketing methods highlighted in the literature were:

- Specialist industry or sector-based media
- Professional bodies and employer associations
- Organizational Websites are common and considered inexpensive, however, an evaluation of whether they will reach the desired target is necessary, whether the site will be viewed as credible or whether it will work as it should (Breaugh, 2009; Pollard et al., 2015)
- Online job-boards were heavily relied upon. However, critical to note would be the type of job board relevant to the proposed target market (Breaugh, 2009; Donald & Pychtin, 2022; Pollard et al., 2015). In addition to choosing the correct type of board, a common mistake was the wording of ads that did not differentiate the organization
- Networks, word of mouth and personal recommendations
- Employee referrals were found in the research to be rated as one of the most common and successful methods (Abbas et al., 2021; Overman, 2008).

- Working with universities (e.g., graduate recruitment fairs)
- Unusual methods such as focus groups at non-work locations, outreach programs that visited other businesses that potential applicants would visit and even looking at your own customers

Recruitment actors/players – who is involved in the process?

Internal recruitment specialists were common across a range of employers. Some specialists were responsible for specific aspects of the process, some for the entire process and that alone, while others had recruitment as one of their Human Resources duties within the organization. To a large extent, the amount of specialization seen was related to the size of the organization with larger organizations having more specialization in the recruitment process (Pollard et al., 2015).

Recruitment agencies as a group represent another player in the recruitment process. Companies of varying sizes utilized these agencies to provide one or more services such as marketing and how to promote the organization, sourcing of candidates and managing the application process (Devin, 2017; Pollard et al., 2015). These were typically private sector agencies, but some countries showed evidence of such services offered by the public sector such as JobCentre Plus in the UK (Pollard et al., 2015). On the one hand, recruitment agencies can be an efficient use of resources, doing what they are good at with some pre-selection activities and freeing up the organization to carry on other activities (Abbas et al., 2021). Their strategic skills and networks are also useful in graduate recruitment (Devin, 2017). On the other hand, some employers feel that they are too small to support such costs, some feel this approach removes the personal connection between the employer and applicant, while others felt such action would go against their values (Pollard et al., 2015). Some additional disadvantages associated with recruitment agencies highlighted were differences in agenda for the agencies and their clients, the loss of control and the associated financial and reputational risks for an organization, as well as costs that could be incurred as a result of inefficient communications (Devin, 2017).

Graduate trainees and former interns or placement students represented another group of recruitment actors identified in the literature. In order to recruit successfully you need to consider the job applicant's perspective (Breaugh, 2009). Potential applicants usually want more information than what is available on traditional advertisements such as job title and salary details. Some of the information that graduates want to know includes information that could only come from within the organization. The best 'messenger' for potential applicants is likely to be someone they can relate to, someone who can understand their perspective (Pollard et al., 2015). This interaction can take the form of one on one or groups, face to face or online. Some initiatives utilized include videos/video diaries, case studies, blogs, responding to online discussion forums and threads and secondary unstructured soft skill interviews (Pollard et al., 2015).

Issues for employers

Increasing visibility and developing a brand is an area of increasing importance for employers (Pollard et al., 2015). Larger employers with access to greater resources tend to have greater visibility and some spend large amounts on their brand. Smaller companies struggle with visibility and the perception that they will not be good to work for nor add any value to a person's resume. An alternative view is that smaller companies can provide opportunities for early responsibility and challenge which would be beneficial to new graduates (Pollard et al., 2015). Initiatives to gain and maintain an elevated image include competing for awards, published results for internal surveys, corporate socially responsible activities, and placement on ranked lists.

The increased access of the internet and associated social media has been identified in the literature as playing a significant role in applicant attraction strategies and while it is a vehicle for information by itself, it was also found to drive traffic to company websites (Pollard et al., 2015). Johns et al., (2007) had a slightly different view where their study findings revealed that while advertising vacancies on the organization's website was important, it was not the best method for attracting potential graduate employees. Further, studies have argued based on their findings that recruiters penalise

job seekers using information found on applicants' social media sites which goes against equal employment laws or additional information which is not related to their employment search (Zhang et al., 2020).

In addition to the initial attraction, social media and the internet were seen as useful for continued engagement with applicants throughout the recruitment process with networks and spaces for them to interact and build community. The internet and social media are seen by employers as a cost-effective way to reach a broad cross-section of applicants and meet a younger target group where they usually congregate. The main vehicles used were Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, ((Potential-park, 2011 and Jeske & Shultz, 2016) cited in Slavic et al, 2017), however, there were others such as Viadeo, XING and Google Hangouts (Pollard et al., 2015). From the perspective of employers, social media and the internet is used to communicate the culture of the organization, recent news, hold webinars and live chats. The main challenge is ensuring that it is monitored for currency, engagement, and effective targeting, however, some employers do not feel that their target graduates utilise this medium, especially the more social platforms like Facebook and Twitter (Zhang et al., 2020).

Some employers noted that a wider pipeline of activity for recruitment is valuable where the literature shows several recruitment methods being utilised simultaneously (Abbas et al., 2021). Engaging with younger students way ahead of their university tenure, sometimes as far back as primary school as a new approach can yield organizational recruitment benefits, as well as donating funds to universities for scholarships and subject prizes also created a positive employer reputation (Pollard et al., 2015; Johns et al 2007). Research noted that this type of activity tended to be from larger organizations and is usually linked to certain types of jobs. Larger organizations tended to have these engagement activities performed by a team that is separate from the one performing graduate recruitment. Some employers however, tended to engage with these school-based activities within the concept of 'giving back' and considered their wider pipeline activity as an aspect of their social responsibility (Pollard et al., 2015). Typically, this type

of activity is accomplished by partnering with partner organizations and wider-industry bodies. Initiatives within the wider pipeline activity include employer ambassadors going into schools and communities to do presentations and discuss career paths, competitions, games, projects, talks, workshops, presentations with equipment, workplace visits, providing workplace placements, and internships, running mock assessment centres, summer holiday projects and secondary school mock interviews with valuable feedback. There were employers who felt that this type of activity would utilise too many resources or it would be too far removed from their actual recruitment for there to be a real benefit to them (Pollard et al., 2015).

Employers identified several areas where they intended to focus to increase the effectiveness of their recruitment. These were to build brand awareness, be targeted about their marketing activity, be more proactive and innovative in their initiatives inclusive of utilizing the internet, build more opportunities for interactivity with graduate trainees, present a more coherent and consistent message about opportunities, and adjusting their timing for engaging students (Pollard et al., 2015; Slavic et al., 2017). However, several authors pointed to the discriminatory practices in graduate recruitment which mitigated against diversity and applicants from poorer socio-economic backgrounds due to the absence of certain characteristics and/or different types of access (Gebreiter, 2019; Slavic et al., 2017). Rozario et al., (2019) found that recruitment was negatively impacted from the insufficient use of technology that can assist in tracking, monitoring progress and recording activities related to the processes in a centralized way.

3.3.1.2 Graduate Selection

Personnel selection involves the exchange of information between organizations and applicants while searching for alignment of goals after potential employees have been recruited (Abbas et al., 2021; Bangerter et al., 2012). Traditionally, selection focused on applicants' knowledge, skills, and attitudes, however, in the last few decades, there has been a focus on selecting employees based on their fit with the culture and goals of the

organization. To this end, studies of person-job fit, and person-organization fit have pervaded the literature, providing supporting evidence that recruiters utilise both types of perceived fit in their hiring recommendations (Brown, 2000).

Person-job fit refers to how well the applicant matches the requirements of the job in question and is usually assessed by factors such as the applicant's knowledge, skills, abilities (KSAs), qualifications and job demands (Edwards, 1991, as cited in Sekiguchi & Huber, 2011 and Brown, 2000). Despite this relationship, researchers report that "GPA, job-related coursework, work experience, articulateness, and interpersonal skills" are also used by recruiters in their assessment of person-organisation fit. This connection is supported by Cable and Judge (1997) who also highlight a weak but significant relationship between applicants' GPA and recruiters' perceptions about person-organization fit. However, it is unlikely that recruiters will make extensive use of KSAs to judge person-organization since KSAs have a strong relationship with task related performance.

The characteristics associated with person-organization fit are values and personality traits with the focus being on broad organizational attributes (Brown, 2000). Most studies of person-organization fit have referenced the concept of 'supplementary fit' where the applicant and the organization share similar characteristics and are therefore compatible. This concept is extended to recruiters where it was highlighted that recruiters should be more likely to recommend hiring applicants who share their organizations' values because the extent to which employees share values determines the strength of an organizations' culture" (Chatman, 1989; Schein, 1990, as cited in Brown, 2000). Cable and Judge (1997) supported this position by reporting that perceived individual-organizational value similarity was a stronger predictor of person-organization fit than demographic or human capital variables. Similarly, recruiters have better interactions and increased attraction to applicants with similar personalities and it is expected that they will use personality traits to judge applicants' person-organization fit (Brown, 2000). Earlier, Rynes and Gerhart (1990) found that recruiters

used subjective judgments of interpersonal skills, future goal orientation, and personal appearance to assess person-organization fit. More recent research from Crowley and Jeske (2021) found that graduates should be a match to the job, the team, and the organization through their ability to meet existing and emerging needs as well as being mobile, flexible, and open to learning new skills for a changing job and world.

Despite, the distinctions, "research has shown that both PO fit, and PJ fit are related to a number of positive employee attitudes and behaviors including satisfaction, commitment, retention, citizenship behaviors and performance (for reviews, see Arthur et al., 2006; Edwards, 1991; Hoffman & Woehr, 2006; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Verquer et al., 2003 as cited in Sekiguchi & Huber, 2011). While soft skills have not been specifically highlighted, it is reasonable to expect, that they would be considered as a part of the 'fit' that would be evaluated for a match by recruiters. A caution to the prescriptive characterization of fit, is that it may negatively impact diversity within the organization which should be protected (Crowley & Jeske, 2021).

Phases of Selection

Graduate selection poses different challenges from other forms of selection as a consequence of the lack of direct job-related experience that characterizes many graduates (Caballero & Walker, 2010; Keenan, 1995). Many selection methods assess knowledge, skills and attitudes based on previous experience which poses a unique challenge especially in light of studies that indicate that past experience scenarios demonstrate higher validity than future oriented questions (Keenan, 1995; Salgado, 1999 cited as Caballero & Walker, 2010).

The literature identified three phases of selection, namely, the initial screening/selection phase, the intermediate selection stage, and the final selection phase (Donald & Pychtin, 2022; Pollard et al., 2015). The first screening stage is characterized by applications being received in response to an advertised vacancy and screened based on some essential eligibility criteria. This screening may also be done

against a competency or strengths-based framework. In some cases, applications are also judged based on how well candidates can express their motives and their potential contribution. There is a notable increase in the use of technology at this stage, especially where e-applications, social media platforms and the internet are utilised benefitting from advantages of cost and time (Donald & Pychtin, 2022; Slavic et al., 2017). The usage of social networks and other websites also support the process of graduate screening by providing information that would be difficult to access formally (Slavic et al., 2017). Challenges at this stage mostly center around reducing large numbers of applications with objective screening criteria, since large numbers can overwhelm manual screening and automated screening can be impacted by the same skills being represented in different ways and one term having different skill meanings based on the context (Caballero & Walker, 2010; Zhao et al., 2015). The literature did not suggest any significant difference between the initial screening of graduates versus non-graduates.

The intermediate phase refers to any additional and subsequent selection activities that candidates participate in after their formal application submission. These activities are not used to make the final selection decision but rather to gather further information from the applicants while also giving them more information about the vacancy and the organization. This stage is useful in helping to reduce the number of candidates by screening the candidates further to facilitate the 'right' applicants getting to the final phase. At this stage, activities are usually conducted remotely and present a disadvantage for applicants with limited access to resources and mitigate against those who are susceptible to failing verbal and numerical tests (Anderson & Tomlinson, 2021; Donald & Pychtin, 2022).

The final selection stage is characterized by activities that have a significant influence on the employer's final decision. These activities are usually completed with a final shortlist of applicants resulting from the intermediate phase. The methods utilised are focused on gathering more in-depth information on skills, behaviours, and experiences of the candidates. This stage is usually completed in a face-to-face format, whether in person

or online. This stage also involves providing feedback to agreed applicants which has been shown to enhance the organization's image and support self-improvement of graduates (Donald & Pychtin, 2022; Vinayak et al., 2017). Studies further posit that technology should be used to seek feedback from as many channels as possible in order to identify issues and improve future HRM decisions (Donald & Bureau, 2021; Donald & Pychtin, 2022).

A review of the literature showed that some of the trends in the selection practices used by employers included interviews (telephone, video and face-to-face), aptitude tests, graphology, biodata, assessment centers, group interactions, role plays, presentations, personality and psychometric tests, problem solving exercises and abstract reasoning (AGR, 2013a; Branine, 2008; Keenan, 1995; Pollard et al, 2015). There is evidence of increasing use of competency-based approaches to selection to test the presence of generic, transferable and demonstrable skills which is a positive development in light of their ability to mitigate potential bias and increase diversity in applicant pools (Dubois and Rothwell, 2004 cited as Pollard et al, 2015: Raybould and Sheedy, 2005)

Combination and timing of selection methods

There are some noteworthy variations in the combination and timing of selection methods utilized by employers. The literature revealed that it is a common practice for organizations to carry out initial screening based on applications – larger employers tended to have bespoke online forms for candidates to fill while smaller employers required the submission of a CV and cover letter, while of those using application forms, only approximately half of employers interviewed had specific application forms for graduates (Pollard et al, 2015). It was noted that the use of references for pre-selection was not common (Branine, 2008). A notable and growing trend was the use of online self-selection tools by employers where potential candidates can make decisions regarding fit and screen themselves out against criteria set by the organization (Pollard et al., 2015; Van Hooft et al, 2021).

The intermediate stage was the basis for the greatest variation of selection methods utilised by employers especially since some employers, mainly small ones, did not have this middle stage especially as the literature shows that they are more focused on cost and convenience (Pollard et al., 2015). Pollard et al. (2015) also found evidence to indicate this stage could incorporate between one and three separate methods with larger employers tending to utilise the most methods as again cost is a factor for smaller organizations. According to the literature, methods utilised during this period included psychometrics tests such as numerical and verbal reasoning exercises, situational judgement tests, various modes of interviews conducted by telephone, video, or face to face and various forms of online testing (Pollard et al., 2015; Slavic et al., 2017).

At the final selection stage, the usual practice is for employers to assess a candidate's suitability in person. The literature highlighted large and medium sized firms utilizing the practice of recruiting for schemes rather than vacancies thus requiring graduates to attend an assessment day. On the other hand, smaller organizations tended to recruit for existing vacancies using a face-to-face interview and an individual assessment (Pollard et al., 2015). This final stage results in a decision based on the results of all previous stages and typically results in an offer being made to the 'best' candidate – reference and physical checks are also involved in this phase (Abbas et al., 2021; Slavic et al., 2017).

Outsourcing of selection processes

Some employers, especially those who lacked the in-house resources to conduct these activities themselves, outsourced aspects of their selection processes such as initial screening of applicant CVs, the development and administration of psychometric tests and assistance with candidate management including sending email invitations, prompts and reminders for assessments and interviews (Pollard et al., 2015).

On the flip side, some employers preferred to keep selection activities to themselves since it provided the opportunity to ensure a desired quality of candidate experience and having an input in to which candidates make it to the final selection stage.

Formal Assessment Methods

The first step in developing or choosing an assessment method for recruitment is a job analysis. This is to understand what is required from employees, specifically, "the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) individuals must possess to perform the job effectively (Pulakos, 2005, p.3.).

There are many assessment methods for use in selection and these methods can be divided into two main groups, namely, KSA-based assessments and task-based assessments (Pulakos, 2005). The literature identified cognitive ability tests, job knowledge tests, personality tests, biographical data, integrity tests, structured interviews, and physical fitness tests as KSA-based assessments, situation judgment tests, work sample tests, assessment centers, and physical ability tests were identified as task-based assessments and competency-based approaches to test for generic and transferable skills (Pollard et al, 2015; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005).

Additional areas to be considered for selection include the mode of assessment, the validity of the assessment, the cost of development and/or the administration of the assessment, the utility/value of the assessments used and the legal requirements surrounding the assessments (Pulakos, 2005).

Rozario et al., (2019) in their study found that there was insufficient professional training for hiring managers on how to do selection interview, limited guidance on questions and questioning, and the provision of detailed feedback to all applicants was uncommon – all having the potential to negatively impact recruitment and selection.

3.3.2 Summary

The focus of recruitment and selection HRM practices would be to attract the right potential applicants and identify the desired skills, knowledge and abilities possessed by applicants at the point of selection. Graduate recruitment provides an additional hurdle where the experience of new graduates for the job they apply for is likely to be limited. The review of the recruitment and selection practices highlights that while they can be combined in to one process, there are characteristics that are inherent in each process. It is further highlighted that these processes continue to evolve with changes in environmental factors such as technology and applicant demographics. The review of literature thus far has also stressed that recruitment and selection practices should be strategic and should follow the steps involved in strategic planning such as analysis of the environment, planning the strategy to reach the desired audience, implementation of the plan and continuous monitoring, evaluation, and control to ensure that the objectives set are achieved. The review of literature has highlighted a relative paucity of literature on graduate recruitment and selection processes and practices and further, that research has not kept pace with the changes in the graduate recruitment and selection environment. Changes in the environment have supported an emphasis on graduate soft skills and this nexus is not prevalent in the literature reviewed. With a globally agreed focus on human capital, more research is needed in a timely manner to guide employers, especially in light of the level of change being experienced globally. A greater understanding of employer practices during recruitment and selection and the outcomes from these practices can positively impact their communication and signalling efforts to attract and select the soft skills they desire (Guest et al. 2020). Further, there seems to be a paucity of research in certain geographic locations around the world, most notably for South America and the Caribbean. Literature on recruitment and selection has shown tendencies to be contradictory, suggesting that these practices are highly contextual, and care needs to be exercised when adopting recommendations. Further, the literature suggests that most of the practices associated with graduate recruitment and selection are similar to general recruitment and selection with the exception of

assessment centers and university recruitment drives which does not take account of the characteristics of graduates as they transition from study to work.

3.4 The Concepts of Skill and Competence

Frederick et al. (1998) stated that skills are a series of discernible comportments or sets of actions that relate to attaining an objective while Hurrell et al. (2013) in their preamble to analyzing soft skills, discuss that skills can be seen as what is required by an individual for performing specific tasks in particular situations. Attewell (1990), argues that even though a skill signifies the ability to do something well, there is double meaning in the definition. He has questioned whether skill is a competence or an ability, or does it denote a level of quality. Claxton et al. (2016) posit that skill is generally considered a procedure for which someone is trained. Therefore, even though developing a skill seems like a technical matter, developing a specific attitude would not be the same as training someone to use a piece of equipment. In the same vein, Peterson and Van (2004), define skill as being capable of either performing some specific behavioural tasks or some specific cognitive process that is functionally related to a particular task. The authors suggest three (3) unique components of skills: a) domain-specific knowledge base; b) the means to access that knowledge; c) the ability to take actions or thoughts using that knowledge to carry out a task. The first two (2) components are prerequisites to the third which is what we consider to be 'skill' according to the authors.

According to Grugulis and Vincent (2009), skill has always been an elusive concept with organisations developing their own local languages of the term as activities, priorities and desirable qualities are likely to change from firm to firm. Payne (2010) has noted that 'skill' is ubiquitous as a result of the term being applied to many diverse phenomena. Payne (2010) further posits that skill means whatever employers and policy makers want it to mean thus criticizing the expansion of the concept of skill. The definition of skill is further complicated when economists, sociologists and psychologists discuss skill, since they often appear to be talking about different things and hence skill can vary according

to the disciplinary perspective of value (Green, 2011). In his interdisciplinary analysis, Green (2011), proposes a cross-functional concept of skill as a personal quality with three key features, namely, that it is productive – adding value, expandable – through training and development, and social – contextually constructed . It should be noted that among the various definitions of skill, most emphasize that skills are learned and involve an observable performance of particular types of activities and tasks and relate to three types of human functioning, namely, knowledge, skills and attitudes. It should be noted that while there are disciplines that do not consider attitudes as a 'skill', economists include it since many employers when referring to skill shortages, include the shortage of employees with the right attitudes and values (Green, 2011). Kechiagias (2011) in his report on the European Union funded project to highlight the importance of soft skills, opined that "skills are not stable characteristics but rather the demonstration of an appropriate response in particular situational/contextual conditions" (p.31). The Measuring and Assessment of Soft Skills (MASS) project was completed in the format of a report which presented concepts, examined frameworks, provided definitions, and reviewed practices of soft skills in several countries or from international organizations. This report stressed that the acquisition, development, and utilisation of skills are influenced by personal and situational characteristics and the interaction between them, which lends credence to the changing and contextually influenced nature of skill. This highlights the challenge of not only a disciplinary perspective of skills but also a situational one.

There is a fine line between skill and competence which in many cases is blurry and in fact sometimes the terms are used interchangeably or with slightly different meanings in different countries, languages or contexts (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009; Cinque, 2016; Mattheson et al., 2016). According to Cinque (2016), competences are a dynamic combination of knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities and is therefore broader than knowledge or skills (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). Further, Cinque (2016) went on to highlight that sometimes skills are defined as the 'visible' and/or 'behavioural' parts of a competence. An example of this would be basic reading, writing, and calculating skills

being a part of many competences such as decision making or problem solving, thus competencies include knowledge and skills (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009; van Laar et al., 2020). Competences refer to the ability to meet demands of a high degree of complexity, encompassing cognitive, motivational, ethical, social, and behavioural components while skills refer to the use of knowledge to perform simple tasks (Rychen & Salganik, 2000). It is felt that the site of a competence exists at the interface between a person and the demands of the real world which supports the view that they are acquired in an ongoing, lifelong learning process (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). This review and study will adopt a definition for skills that will include both skills and competences since there is still no agreement in the literature on a specific definition for the term skills and will utilise either one or both of these terms depending on the specific context (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). The term skills for this review is defined to mean the ability to perform simple and complex tasks with the integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes, strategies, routines and appropriate emotions while endowed with the personal and contextual characteristics to support effective management of all the components in an ongoing, lifelong learning process.

3.4.1 Hard Vs Soft Skills

Employers typically look for two types of skills and the competencies of superior managers have been categorised as 'hard' or 'soft' skills (Doyle, 2014; Rainsbury et al., 2002). The decision is not a choice between hard or soft skills, since it has been established that it is the combination of hard and soft skills that creates the advantage for employees (Clarke, 2017). Hard skills are technical, they refer to technical ability and factual knowledge needed to do the job and are generally mentioned as the traditional skills employers have always required (Tulgan, 2015; Klaus, 2010). These are skills that are acquired through formal training and are quantifiable and certifiable since hard skills are so much easier to assess and standardize. Further, the majority of formal education places emphasis on hard skills. According to Laker and Powell (2011) and Stewart et al (2016), hard skills are technical, tangible skills and measurable competencies which

imply working with equipment, data, software and so on while soft skills are intrapersonal and interpersonal skills associated with one's personality, attitude and ability to interact effectively, which are only evident through day-to-day interactions on the job. Soft skills necessitate self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills while 'tough' skills apply to intelligent, analytical or technical, single-minded, rigorous and visionary qualities (Goleman, 2000). Hard skills are skills where the rules are unchanging irrespective of people, situations or organizations with which one works. However, the rules are not static for soft skills; contingent with company culture and people, the rules will change accordingly (Han, 2017). Han (2017) even goes further to suggest that hard skills are associated more with the left brain or logical centre while soft skills tend to require engagement of the left brain or emotional centre. This specific association has not been expressed in this manner elsewhere in the literature, however, along similar lines, Newell (2002) and Muzio and Fisher (2009) posit that soft skills are demonstrations of emotional intelligence, behaviours, motivation and facets of human interaction whereas hard skills are signs of cognitive and innate intelligence (Levasseur, 2013). Consistent with the ongoing discussion, Dixon et al. (2010) posit that soft skills are a combination of interpersonal and social skills while hard skills include the technical or administrative procedures that can be quantified and measured. The authors posit that though divergent in numerous ways, both types of skills complement each other.

The aggrandizement of tough or hard skills and the constraint of soft skills in the previous decades have resulted in a general understanding that depending on the field of work and position, confidence, charm and superior knowledge should take precedence over "inter-human sensitivity" (Marques, 2013). So, the question is what has changed? Why an emphasis now for soft skills? Sharma (2018) and Wilderom (2009), as quoted in Sharma (2018), have noted that the shift from production to service oriented economies and people-oriented processes has contributed to a dominance of human attributes in commercial activities where there is a focus on creating information and knowledge and people play a more crucial role than ever before.

Developments in technology, shifting customer demands and government policy all affect products and services and these in addition to workplace changes have implications for skills (Grugulis, 2007). A paradigm shift from production to service oriented economies has led to a dominance of human attributes and people oriented processes in commercial activities where the focus is on creating information and knowledge for developing management practices (McDowell, 2009; Sharma, 2018). Rapid advancements worldwide depend on creativity and innovation of teams and organisations, which means that people need to be creative, aligned and empathetic towards one another among other skills while exhibiting technical acumen (Sharma, 2018). Tulgan (2015) in his book Bridging the Soft Skills Gap, identifies a confluence of epic historical forces – globalization, technology, institutional insecurity, the information environment and human diversity - which make it necessary for soft skills to be a competence of employees. Undeniably hard skills are required, but as he alludes, soft skills have become vital for tasks to be accomplished. Moreover, Tulgan (2015) points out that the pace of technological advancement can cause anything to become obsolete at any time, requiring self-regulation and hence soft skills in order to be successful. Schulz (2008) explains that soft skills are very vital in fashioning a person's character and social competence. These skills not only complement hard skills but are equally important if not more so than hard skills to remain competitive in a global world (Andreas, 2018; Jones et al., 2017; Stewart et al., 2016). On the flip side however, authors have expressed concerns that if findings are not interpreted and the need for soft skills applied properly, soft skills can be misrepresented to mask a person's lack of knowledge in specific areas or replace hard skills, both of which would be undesirable outcomes (Grugulis & Vincent, 2009; Hurrell et al., 2013). Grugulis and Vincent (2009) express concern that the skills that employers require are changing with privileging soft skills and replacing and marginalising technical ones. There is a growing awareness that technical skills, even for technical positions, are inadequate for consequent success beyond an entry-level position much less for professional fields (Cinque, 2016; Hurrell et al., 2013). Ensuing success beyond these preliminary levels typically requires

expertise in soft-skill areas such as leadership and conflict resolution. Moreover, attainment of soft skills will not only contribute to the general success of the business, but also fashion a calculated advantage for the firm (Dixon et al., 2010). In today's competitive job market, the minimum acceptable skills are being substituted with higher standards among which are soft skills (Lazarus, 2013) and based on the literature, soft skills have become very important in many fields such as accounting, information systems, project management and leadership to name a few (Levasseur, 2013).

Soft skills are frequently highlighted as a necessary complement to hard skills making a balance of the two a differentiator for graduates (Clarke, 2017). Unfortunately, critics of this stance point to the challenges surrounding creating optimal balance in education. As stated by Tulgan (2015), employers frequently have so few applicants with the required hard skills that they should not disregard persons due to apparent deficiencies in soft skills. New employees still require on-the-job training in the organization's systems, policies and practices and soft-skill training should be incorporated as a part of the program. He insisted that employers must address the soft skills gap in every area of human capital management.

This study does not seek to pronounce on whether soft skills are more important than hard skills but rather takes the stance that soft skills are necessary for graduates to perform optimally in the current dynamic world of work which means complementing knowledge and technical skills for their specific professions with interpersonal skills to manage business relationships and personal skills to support decision making and lifelong learning (Deepa & Seth, 2013; Damoah et al., 2021; Noah & Abdul Aziz, 2020). Hard skills help in gaining employment while soft skills contribute to keeping the job, and further, their combination contributes to on-the-job success (Gruzdev et al, 2018).

3.5 Terminologies and Taxonomies of Soft Skills

In their study, *"Soft Skills": A Phrase in Search of Meaning*, Matteson et al. (2016) elucidate the complexities of the phrase 'Soft Skills' through examples of definitions

from some authors: Hurrell et al. (2012) define soft skills as nontechnical and not reliant on abstract reasoning, involving interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular contexts. Grugulis and Vincent (2009) outline soft skills as communication, problem-solving, teamwork, motivation, judgement, leadership, and ingenuity, coupled with the ability to improve personal learning and job performance. Using people management as the overarching idea, Parente et al. (2012) delineate soft skills as clear communication and meaningful feedback, resolving and/or managing conflicts and understanding human behavior in group settings. There are some clear commonalities among the various definitions, and this will be the foundation for acceptance of what are soft skills. These commonalities are the ability to structure, enable and enhance personal development, participation in learning and success in employment (Gibb, 2014).

The attempt to operationalize 'soft skills' results in a variety of forms from generic to all-encompassing constructs such as emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) to many multiple item arrays of soft skills such as communication skills, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, organizational skills, self-motivation skills and creativity skills (Gallivan et al., 2004). Several authors support popular examples of soft skills such as communication and interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, leadership qualities, team skills, negotiation skills, time and stress management and business etiquettes and consider that they are skills, attitudes, personal and non-academic attributes and behaviours displayed in interactions among individuals that affect the outcomes of various interpersonal encounters and can affect the 'ability' to cooperate, communicate and solve problems (Deepa & Seth, 2013; Muir, 2004; Robles, 2012; Succi & Canovi, 2020).

Varying terminologies and classifications have resulted in some soft skills being defined as subsets of others. According to Fraser (2001), soft skills are those skills, abilities and personal attributes that can be used within the wide range of working environments that graduates operate in throughout their lives or the level of commitment of a person

that differentiates them from other individuals with the same skills (Perreault, 2004) which adds the element of control.

On the other hand, Grugulis and Vincent (2009) argue that this new expansion to the meaning of the term skill simply serves to expand the number of skills a person could claim to have with the increasing prominence of 'soft skills' adding to this complexity. By their very nature, attributes, attitudes and individual qualities are difficult to measure, resulting in proxies being used which tend to be subjective (Grugulis & Vincent, 2009). Further it has been documented that soft skills vary with context (Schulz, 2008) as well as with the employer sector and company size (Succi & Canovi, 2020). Grugulis and Vincent (2009) comment that when personal attributes and behaviours are redefined as skills, an individual's character can end up being judged which can lead to gendered and racialized evaluations as being the 'right' fit for a particular job (Erikson et al., 2000 cited as Grugulis and Vincent, 2009). The categorization of soft skills also simplifies the qualities described, for example, equating communication for a primary school graduate with communication from a Chemistry graduate (Kensington-Miller, 2017).

Further criticism of the 'soft skill' perspective suggests that this focus can be seen as a way to ensure compliance and social control in education and employment (Hurrell et al., 2013). Despite this criticism, it is clear that there is knowledge, skills and abilities that are necessary to complement hard, technical, certified skills in order for success in organisations.

In this study, soft skills are defined as intra and inter-personal skills essential for personal development, social participation and functioning in a specific employment environment showing positive contribution to organizational objectives (Taylor, 2016). It is accepted that there is no universally accepted and all-encompassing taxonomy of soft skills that meets the needs of all employers. One of the terms that is prevalent in the literature as a synonym for soft skills is employability skills. The two terms are, however, not equal in all contexts.

Yorke (2004) defines employability as "a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes, that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations (p. 410). Batistic and Tymon (2017) posit that employability has both an internal and an external component where the internal relates to abilities, attributes and skills to name a few while the external component includes areas such as labour market factors and demographics which are outside the control of individuals. Hugh-Jones et al. (2006) in Tymon (2013), suggest that the complexity of employability comes from the three different perspectives of employer, student and educator.

Andrews and Higson (2008), in an attempt to bring clarity to the term employability, synthesized the literature and "identified a number of key 'transferable' soft skills and competencies integral to graduate employability" (p. 413), thus linking employability and soft skills.

Cleary et al. (2006) define general employability skills to be:

- Basic/Fundamental skills
- Conceptual/Thinking skills
- Business skills
- Community skills
- People-related skills
- Personal skills

While Cinque (2016) posits that soft skills are a subset of generic skills and identified common elements of various lists of generic skills to be:

- Basic/fundamental skills
- People-related skills
- Conceptual/thinking skills
- Personal skills and attributes

- Skills related to the business world

- Skills related to the community (pp. 170-171)

A comparison of the two lists above shows the similarity of generic skills and employability skills which will be further explored.

In an effort to give relevance to generic skills in Australia, two employer organizations implemented an initiative in the form of an employability skills project. They defined employability skills as "skills required not only to gain employment, but also to progress within an enterprise to achieve one's potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions" (Curtis, 2004, as cited in Kechagias, 2011, p. 45). Within the employability skills project report, the author suggested a taxonomy of thirteen personal attributes and eight key skills. It was argued that each of these skills was generic but it is noteworthy that each of these skills and many of the key attributes have also been identified as soft skills within many studies and further, soft skills are seen as enhancing graduate employability (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Bancino & Zevalkink, 2007; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Damoah et al., 2021; Kechagias, 2011; Robles, 2012; Succi & Canovi, 2020).

Some definitions of employability focus on the set of achievements that persons should have in order to successfully gain and keep employment (Yorke, 2006). These skills should be transferrable (Kearns, 2001) and should support progression or allow transfer between positions within the organization (Finch et al., 2013). It has been argued that, in order to achieve a positional advantage, graduates need to develop and acquire a combination of skills, notably core/hard skills and transferable/soft skills (Clarke, 2017).

Andrews and Higson (2008) did an exploratory study to analyze the perceptions and experiences of business graduates and employers in four European countries (UK, Austria, Slovenia and Romania). The study, *Graduate Employability, 'Soft Skills' versus 'Hard' Business Knowledge: A European Study* sought to conceptualise and detect key individual and business-related skills and competencies required by employers of

business graduates and holders of other higher-level qualifications and to ascertain whether higher education business programs are meeting the needs of the European labour market. The researchers combined accessible literature to gain insight of the concept 'employability'. From the literature, they identified vital transferable skills and competencies that are fundamental for graduate employability: professionalism, reliability the ability to cope with uncertainty, the ability to work under pressure, the ability to plan and think strategically, team work, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, good written and verbal communication skills, good self-management and time-management skills and a willingness to learn and accept responsibility (Elias & Purcell, 2004; Mclarty, 1998; Nabi, 2003; Tucker et al., 2000, as cited in Andrews & Higson, 2008).

Employability and any perceived related gap are difficult to measure due to the subjectivity associated with how it is decided who is employable. Wilton (2011, p. 87) in Tymon (2013, p. 843) states that "it is possible to be employable, yet unemployed or underemployed". A further complication is that the terms 'employable' and 'employability' are often considered synonyms leading to the belief that one who is employed is employable. This can distort the perceived reason for those graduates who are unemployed. Evidence, however, suggests that soft skills are an important predictor of employability (Damoah et al., 2021; Finch et al., 2012; Lievens & Sackett, 2012; Nickson et al., 2012; Rynes et al., 1997; Succi & Canovi, 2020).

A review of the literature points to the extensive use of the term employability skills which in most cases is aligned to the conceptual use of soft skills in this study. There are instances where soft skills are a subset of the employability identified. In such cases, the technical skills will be ignored in deference to the soft skills within the employability skills framework. Further, the term, employability skills will be used interchangeably to refer to soft skills as it appears in the literature and whenever it will be inappropriate to use the phrase 'soft skills'. However, at all times the skills that will be under review will be the skills operationalized as soft skills and not the technical or hard skills that also contribute to the employability of graduates.

The focus of this study is on exploring the problem employers face with not finding the desired soft skills in the graduates they recruit, select, and employ. It is therefore important to appreciate the soft skills that employers across the spectrum deem as desirable and also those that their experience shows are missing from the graduates.

3.5.1 Desired Soft Skills and Perceived Skills

One of the challenges for stakeholders has been the identification of which soft skills are the most important ones and what definition is being utilized. Researchers have indicated that the relative importance of various types of core skills depends on the socio-economic context and timeframe, since various jobs, organizations and industries require and value different sets of skills. In a survey conducted by the National Association of College Educators (NACE), the top five soft skills employers look for in a candidate's resume are Leadership, teamwork, written communication, problem solving and verbal communication (NACE, 2016). While the results from another survey found that employers viewed the top five important skills when hiring college graduates as verbal communication, teamwork, written communication, ethical judgement, and decision making and critical/analytical thinking/reasoning (Hart Research Associates, 2015). The Society of Human Resources Management (SHRM) in a similar survey found that the top five applied skills that employers believe college graduates lack are professionalism/work ethic, relationship building skills, business acumen, written communication and critical thinking/problem-solving (SHRM, 2015, as cited in Stewart et al., 2016). An evaluation of the three surveys above shows that while there is some convergence on some soft skills, there is also quite a bit of divergence. There are clear differences through what has been categorized as soft skills over behaviours or in some cases, subsets of soft skills being identified as soft skills in themselves by different authors and researchers. Further, researchers may also have combined skills with other ambiguously defined concepts (Matteson et al., 2016). It causes the reader to question whether 'ethical judgment' from the HART Research is an element of 'leadership' that was identified by NACE or whether both soft skills could be considered elements of

'business acumen' or 'professionalism' from SHRM? This critical review highlights that while it can be agreed that though widely used, authors are unable to agree on what the term 'soft skills' actually denotes.

Matteson et al. (2016) discuss this challenge as a conceptual problem where there is the mixing of soft skills with values, beliefs, traits, and behaviours which is exacerbated by an absence of clear definitions or taxonomies of discrete soft skills. Matteson et al. (2016) further posit that some definitions render some soft skills as virtually interchangeable which is problematic because this hampers a clear understanding, consistent application and reliable measurement across different contexts.

Klein et al. (2006) in an effort to clarify 'interpersonal skills', conducted a literature search and condensed their findings to twelve (12) discrete skills which are distinct from personal qualities and which the authors define as indicators of personality traits which can be used to increase their capacity to perform. The authors placed these skills in a broader framework which designates antecedents of the skills: life experience, personality traits, situational characteristics, task type, goals, motivation, roles, rules and norms, noting that the interpersonal skills can develop from the antecedents or precursors. This type of framework helps with the understanding of soft skills, their antecedents, precursors and the impact they can have (Matteson et al., 2016). Similarly, Chamorro-Premuzic et al. (2010) produced a catalogue of fifteen soft skills founded on previous literature: self-management, communication, interpersonal, teamwork, the aptitude to work under pressure, resourcefulness, critical thinking, readiness to learn, attention to detail, assuming responsibility, planning and organizing, perception, maturity, professionalism and emotional intelligence (Matteson et al., 2016). A comparison of these frameworks shows convergence and divergence in the detail of which soft skills employers need.

The review of the literature discussed has highlighted that the concept of soft skills is widely debated. "Most conceptualizations of soft skills describe traits and skills and

define them in ways that are virtually interchangeable. Moreover, including dispositions in soft skills shifts the focus from what someone can do to how someone is, which can lead to issues such as accurately evaluating an employee's performance" (Matteson et al., 2016, p. 81). Further, the authors questioned a few ambiguities concerning soft skills, such as: even though traits are omitted, should cognitive and reasoning ability be considered soft skills? Is the ability to analyze situations, to think strategically about them and to make effective decisions a hard or soft skill? Can soft skills include cognitive and affective skills alike? (Matteson et al., 2016, p. 81-82). This debate continues even as researchers continue to study this phenomenon.

Syntheses of the literature from more than twenty-five sources on the graduate soft skills most desired by employers, has identified communication in various forms (oral, written, effective listening), teamwork, problem solving, interpersonal skills and leadership within the top ten skills (Pazil & Razak, 2019; Noah & Abdul Aziz, 2020). While there is a seeming consensus with the soft skills desired most by employers, literature has established that soft skills needs are highly contextual. Thus, these results need to be considered with context in mind.

3.6 Human and Social Capital

3.6.1 Human Capital Views

Human capital can be broadly defined as the stock of knowledge, skills and other personal characteristics embodied in people that helps them to be productive. According to OECD (1998, p. 9.), human capital is defined as "the knowledge, skills, competencies and other attributes embodied in individuals or groups of individuals acquired during their life and used to produce goods, services or ideas in market circumstances". From the perspective of the classical labour economics, human capital is the combination of a person's skills and attributes that enhance their work productivity (Blair, 2011). Some of the theoretical paradigms of human capital are the Becker view, the Gardener view, the Schultz/Nelson-Phelps view, and the Bowles-Gintis

view (Blair, 2011). The Becker (1962) view holds that human capital is an input in an organization's operations, and it is directly proportional to a worker's output. The contribution of human capital to an employee's productivity varies according to the context, and some of the contextual factors in this case are the nature of a job, the organizational setting, and the employee's aptitude (Becker, 1962). Becker (1964) further feels that higher education and hence the development of human capital explains the differential of income for graduates. The Gardner view holds that human capital is a multidimensional construct that encompasses a diverse set of skills (Lanzi, 2007), meaning that there are different types of human capital. An example of this would be a graduate who has poor leadership or creative skills. According to the Schultz/Nelson-Phelps paradigm, human capital is a dynamic capability that enables an individual to handle the challenges that come with the constant changes in their work environment (Benzoni & Chyruk, 2015). This capability enables an employee to withstand the potentially adverse impacts of the developments in the workplace. The view posited here is that human capital should be assessed from the ability to adapt especially as the nature of work continues to change globally. The Bowles-Gintis view has some similarity to the Schultz/Nelson-Phelps view because its fundamental premise is that human capital is an individual's ability to fit in the hierarchical systems in which the modern organizations undertake the production activities (Lundberg, 2017). Therefore, from a labour economics perspective, a common theme throughout the different views is that firms prefer their employees to possess a desirable set of skills and are willing to pay more for the presence of higher education.

3.6.2 Human Capital Theory

According to Tomlinson & Anderson (2021) from the individual perspective, human capital formation is undertaken by individuals seeking to maximize their interests, through some form of education among other things (Blaug, 1992). Human capital theory (HCT) posits that education increases the productivity and earnings of individuals, in other words why graduates earn more than non-graduates; therefore, education is

an investment (Rospigliosi et al., 2014; Tan, 2014). He further noted a common view within the literature, that people will invest in education up to the point where the personal benefits from education are equal to the private costs (Tan, 2014). As Schulz (1960) noted, college graduates earned more with the embodied education becoming human capital. The literature on human capital goes on to claim that education and training are the most important ways of improving the quality of a workforce which has far reaching generic economic benefits for society. Over time and in the tertiary/service sector/knowledge economy, the definition of human capital has broadened to include a greater variety of skills, traits and characteristics such as interpersonal skills and the ability to work in a team (Pettinger, 2019). However, while education remains as its centre, human capital can also be formed through work experience (Kasemap, as cited in Bhattacharrya, 2017) and certainly exceeds cognitive measures.

Research has provided evidence to support that non-cognitive skills in addition to cognitive skills are developed during the process of education and these non-cognitive skills drive workplace success (Levin, 2012). An example of this is found in Lindqvist and Vestman (2011), who tracked 14,000 Swedish 18–19-year-old military enlistees who had been given both a two-hour cognitive test and a 25-minute non-cognitive interview. They were required to use a nine-point scale to rate their willingness to assume responsibility, independence, outgoing character, persistence, emotional stability, initiative, social skills, and lack of personality disorders. The researchers found that both the cognitive and non-cognitive measures predicted employment outcomes (earnings and unemployment) of those same men, now 32 to 41 years old, the non-cognitive measure was a stronger predictor of earnings and employment.

Some of the criticisms of this theory as relevant to this study are posited by Gillies (2015). Gillies (2015) has stated that the HCT tends to exclude areas such as expressive arts when education is being viewed in economic terms and further, it does not take into account altruistic motives, public good or concern for others. It should be noted that though this study is not focused on the economic benefits of human capital on the

individual, this criticism is relevant since some of the areas overlooked have been categorized as soft skills by some authors. A limitation of the HCT occurs when the supply and demand for graduates is complicated by mass higher education such that employers have to choose between many applicants similarly educationally qualified - other mechanisms to differentiate between graduates are required (Tomlinson & Anderson, 2020). Another criticism levelled at the HCT states that it focuses on the individual with choices and overlooks the overarching economic, social and political system which forms the context for educational provision and experience (Gillies, 2015) and further, employment opportunities. This is of relevant concern particularly in a developing country with socio-political idiosyncrasies.

Notwithstanding the varying debates in the literature, it is the broader definition of human capital, that employers are willing to pay higher salaries for higher education, as a predictor of higher levels of productivity which will be relevant to this study that focuses on soft skills.

Any discussion on human capital will not be complete without reference to social upbringing, continuous relations, and the ensuing social capital. Social capital enables the harnessing of relationships and social relations which shape the realization of human capital's potential and enhance perceived employability for graduates (Schuller, 2001; Tomlinson & Anderson, 2020).

3.6.3 Social Capital Views

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that human capital is closely related to social upbringing through the collection of resources or potential resources that our network of relationships connects us to. Social capital is defined as "the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit. Social capital thus comprises both the network and the assets that may be mobilized through that network" (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998, p.248.). Putnam (2000) shared this view by positing that

social networks have value by providing information, 'mutual aid', collective action and identity and solidarity. The common theme found in these views is that people leverage relationships to facilitate outcomes whether it is based on the 'weak tie' theory where the strength of a social relationship is used to find a job (Granovetter, 1973; Seibert et al, 2001) or supported by the 'structural holes' concept where there are benefits to unique and timely access to information, greater bargaining power, greater visibility and career opportunities (Burt, 2018; Seibert et al., 2001). A third conceptualization of social capital focuses on the content of the network and the social resources that it controls or has access to that creates the capital – the social resource theory (Lin et al., 1981; Seibert et al., 2001). It should be noted that there are claims of dark and dysfunctional sides to social capital which stifle innovation and exclude information (Schuller, 2001).

Critiques of all three social capital theories, and the suggestion in the literature that they are not mutually exclusive have led to the proposal of a model that integrates them all, that posits that the social capital construct encompasses both the network structures that have an effect on access and the nature of the social resources within the network (Seibert et al., 2001). Further criticism posits that the outcomes of SCT are variable and depend on contextual factors (Haynes, 2009). This variability means that without clarity it can be difficult for initiatives to be implemented that would be successful at enhancing employees' skills.

In a study on the role of human and social capital in the implementation of environmental practices which contribute to better firm performance, researchers surveyed 141 small manufacturing firms in a developing country and found a positive effect from forms of capital such as managerial talent, knowledge, skills, social ties, and networks (Roxas et al., 2017). This can be meaningful for a developing country like Guyana, providing proxies and cues, where there is need to differentiate between graduates, as employers execute recruitment and selection. Tomlinson & Anderson (2021) have concluded that employers' perceptions of graduates that can add value to

an organization are influenced by the capitals they can display – a signal of their employability – which can be useful as a filtering mechanism.

3.6.4 Summary of Capital views

Soft skills development is an element of human capital which graduates are expected to have by potential employers. It is further expected that the social capital acquired throughout life will also provide a contribution to soft skills development. While human capital has at its centre the individuals, social capital focuses on the relationships between them and the networks they form which underlies the position that the individuals and these forms of capital are not discrete entities (Schuller, 2001). While graduates have hard evidence of their technical skills, there are still questions about clear signals of their soft skills competences. A number of studies and articles have provided evidence where both graduates and employers agree that graduates are lacking soft skills and place the blame within the domain of higher education institutions (Clarke, 2018). Andreas (2018) posits another hypothesis stating that it is the decline in social capital that is affecting the ability of graduates to form and master soft skills.

This review acknowledged the relationship of HRM and performance along with a brief look at HRM and the strategic perspective that is embedded in the resource-based view of the firm (Chowhan, 2016). The concept of HRM practices was reviewed and the focus was then narrowed to those that were deemed relevant to this study of employers' challenges of identifying and employing new graduates with desirable soft skills during recruitment and selection. The review then provided an understanding of what the literature says about the concepts of skill and competence, followed by a synopsis of the differences and comparison of soft skills versus hard skills. The literature pointed to a cacophony of alternative terms and taxonomies for the term soft skills, and these were explored in the review. Special mention was given to the terminology 'employability skills' since the literature showed a significant number of studies on this phenomenon which was eventually determined to be in large part a synonym for soft skills. This was followed by a synthesis of the literature on capital, both human and social, which both

provide a foundation upon which soft skills are built. The major question for this study is an understanding of whether employers are able to indicate to applicants the soft skills they desire. This central question brings the review of literature to the point of reviewing the signalling theory as a framework for understanding the problem. An integrated model of the review of literature and the context of this study are summarized and presented as a visual representation of the problem that is the focus of this research.

The review of literature has established the connection between soft skills, human capital, social capital and an individual's attributes and behaviours, even as the debate continues on a consistent conceptualization of soft skills. These variables combine to determine a graduate's perceived employability. Holmes (2013) in his research produced three perspectives of employability which align with the review of literature for this study. Building on this finding, Clarke (2018) produced an integrated model of variables impacting graduate employability which has been adopted for this study as a summary of contributors to graduate employability (Figure 1). Holmes' first perspective of 'possession' aligns with the concept of 'human capital' in Clarke's model, where graduates possess certain knowledge, skills and competences that make them employable (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2015). Holmes' second perspective posits that graduates are more employable based on their ability to position themselves due to advantages gained from their social class, networks and their upbringing – in other words, their social capital (Clarke, 2018). Holmes' third perspective of employability, namely, 'process' represents the graduates' use of skills, attributes and behaviours gained during study that can set the graduate apart from non-graduates and competing graduates during recruitment and selection, such as career management and guidance seeking (Clarke, 2018; Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2015). The conceptual model designed for this study combines the individual attributes and behaviours of Clarke's model for ease of understanding since the literature is rife with examples of these areas being considered 'soft' skills and contributing to graduates' career success (Chamorro-Premuzic et al. 2010; Cinque, 2016; Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2015) which were

identified during the review of literature on employability. The review of the Guyanese context has revealed the macro-environmental factors, including labour market factors that have an impact on graduates and employers and hence Clarke's integrated model was expanded from only 'labour market factors to include 'environmental factors' in the conceptual model for this study. These factors impact employers' activities during recruitment and selection as well as employers' perceptions of graduates' employability. Figure 1 therefore provides a conceptual illustration of how soft skills are present in three perspectives of graduate employability and these perspectives contribute to employers' perception of graduates' employability. Further, the perceptions that employers hold are impacted by environmental factors and the recruitment and selection processes that employers implement in their quest for suitable graduates. The literature on soft skills, employability and environmental factors as they are related to employers' search for graduates with desirable soft skills have been discussed. This review will now turn to employers' 'communication' to graduates during recruitment and selection, which will be discussed through the lens of signalling theory to provide a framework for understanding the problem and providing a basis for answers to the research questions.
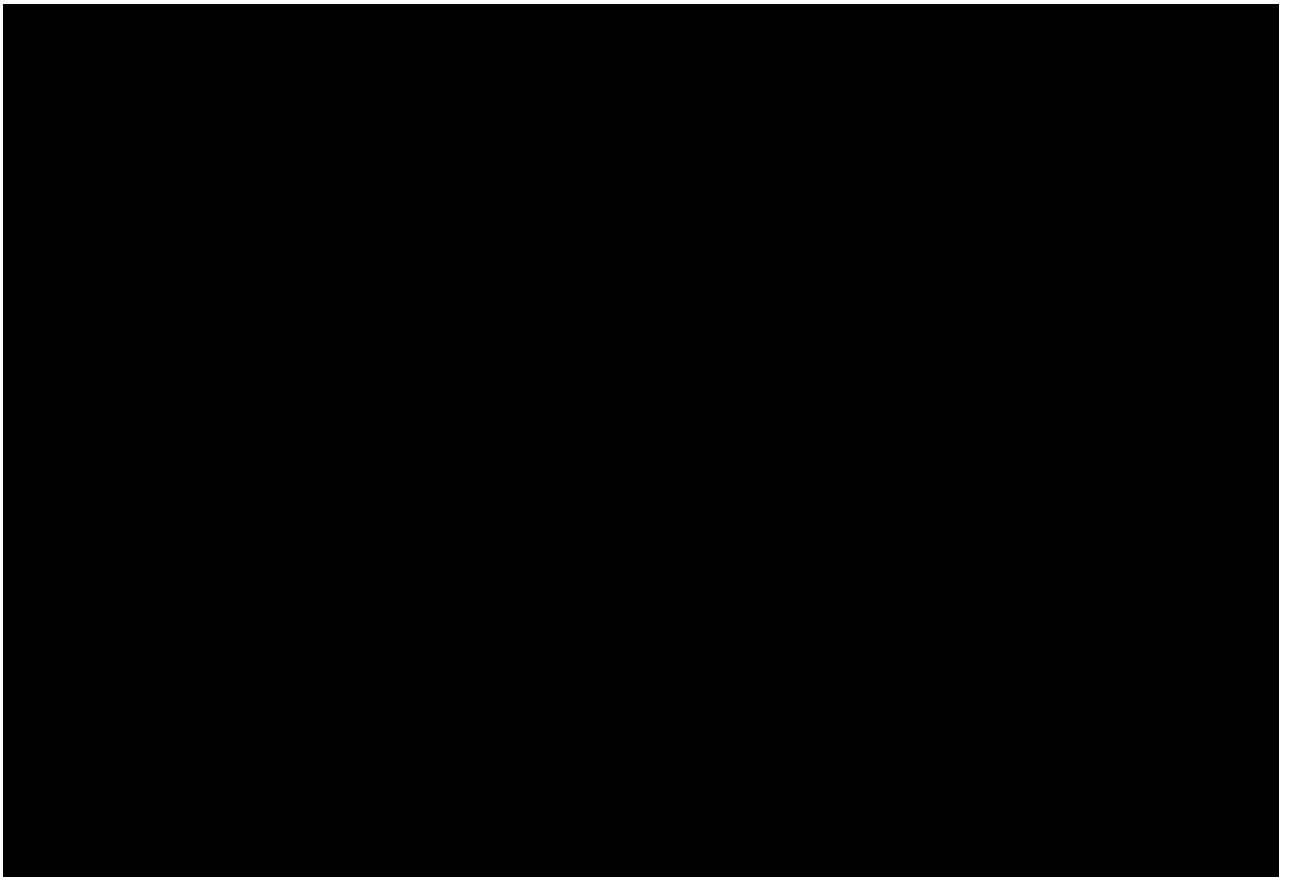
Figure 1. Integrated model of variables impacting graduates perceived soft skills deficiencies.

Source: Adapted from "Rethinking graduate employability: the role of capital, individual attributes and context." By M. Clarke, 2018. Studies in Higher Education, 43: 11, p 1931.

3.7 Signaling Theory and Soft Skills

3.7.1 Overview

Signalling theory seeks to explain cooperative behaviour between rational organisms (Frank, 1988, as cited in Bangerter et al., 2012). It therefore addresses the conditions under which exchange of accurate information is possible among rational individuals with partly divergent interests (Bangerter et al., 2012) and is useful for describing behaviour when two parties have access to different information (Connelly et al., 2011).

The signalling theory framework utilises three main elements namely, the signaller, the receiver, and the signal. Signallers are defined as insiders whereby they have privileged information and perspective about an underlying quality of an individual, product or organization that is not available to outsiders. Receivers lack information about an

individual, product or organization that they would like to receive, and they stand to gain from making decisions based on the information received. Signalling theory focuses primarily on the deliberate communication of positive information to convey positive attributes (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973). Connelly et al. (2011) added another dimension to the definition of signalling when they describe it as the amount of time or the number of times something stays in the market.

"Principles of signalling have been successfully applied to dilemmas of cooperative behavior in many disciplines, including evolutionary biology (Zahavi & Zahavi, 1999), political science (Poundstone, 1993), anthropology (Cronk, 2005), economics (Spence, 1973), management (Connelly et al., 2011), and organizational behavior (Salamon & Deutsch, 2006)" (Cited in Bangerter, 2012) and job market and applicant attraction signalling (Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005; Spence, 1973). This review will focus on signalling theory's role in employers' perceptions of graduates' soft skills during recruitment and selection for organisations in the service sector.

Spence (1973), who outlines a model that will help to explain signalling, refers to signals as observable characteristics of an individual that can be manipulated by him. Spence further intimated that a signal is only as good as it allows the signaller to set itself apart from others. With respect to the job market, Spence posited that of the observable personal attributes that collectively constitute the image the job applicant presents, some are fixed while others are alterable. He referred to unalterable attributes as indices, e.g., race, sex and the characteristics that are alterable as signals, e.g., education. His conclusion was that since signals are alterable then they are therefore potentially subject to manipulation by the job applicant. Spence (1973) further went on to make the point that a characteristic may be a signal with respect to some types of jobs but not with respect to others. The theory therefore posits that with reference to higher education, University degrees provide a signal to employers that graduates possess skills and competencies that set them apart from non-graduates.

For signalling to take place, the signaller should benefit by some action from which the receiver would not otherwise have done, i.e., signalling should have a strategic effect. Management researchers find that signalling effectiveness is determined in part by the characteristics of the receiver. It is determined that the signalling process will not work if there is no receiver attention which is defined as the extent to which receivers vigilantly scan the environment for signals (Connelly et al., 2011). Receivers may apply weights to signals in accordance with preconceived notions about importance or cognitively distort signals so that their meanings diverge from the original intent of the signaller (Branzei et al., 2004; Ehrhart & Ziegert,2005). This will impact receiver interpretation which is the process of translating signals into perceived meaning. It should be noted that some receivers interpret signals differently than others do (Perkins & Hendry, 2005; Srivastava, 2001) and further when decisions need to be made without complete data or information, individuals make inferences about missing information (Connelly et al., 2011).

A weakness of signalling theory In the literature is that it is "laden with inconsistent terminology" (Connelly et al., 2011, p. 41) which can create a challenge for researchers and practitioners. Other weaknesses in the theory include the absence of a scale that can measure several signals at the same time and the financial understanding of signal costs (Karasek & Bryant, 2012).

A further limitation of the signalling theory is its failure to anticipate the circumstances under which some signals of the prospective employees' soft skills could fail (Connelly et al, 2011). Some authors claim that the soft skills do not have the quantifiable measures in the way the hard skills do, and this means that the academic credentials that signal the possession of the technical skills are unlikely to alleviate the problem of information asymmetry (Balcar, 2016; Heckman & Kautz, 2012). However, there have been great strides with several government and education projects focused on developing and implementing measurement frameworks for soft skills. Unfortunately, these frameworks are not ubiquitous even as universities include courses to cover soft

skills in their curriculum. In addition, new graduates do not have the experience that would signal their possession of the soft skills, nor do they possess the professional contacts that would attest to their ability to perform the work tasks that require these skills. However, there are a number of methods seen in the literature such as presentations and role playing which could be used as the relevant signals. Again, these methods are not being utilized everywhere.

The notion of honest signals has gone unacknowledged in the twin selection and recruitment literatures, as have the notions of reciprocal adaptation and escalation and their implications for the long-term stability of signalling systems. These areas are significant especially in certain environments where cheating does not have a significant enough penalty because of the inherent characteristics of the environment, for example in societies where there is a strong socio-political agenda by governments.

More research is needed in the areas of employer attractiveness, employer success and compensation issues, especially as it relates to the Caribbean. While these concepts provide positive signals for employers in the process of applicant attraction, this relationship has not been established in the research in the Caribbean region. A major challenge perceived for a country context like Guyana would be the signalling environment. With a mix of environmental factors as discussed in the context chapter, distortions are expected to be prevalent. Further, one of the assumptions associated with the market disciplinary mechanism – costly and hard to fake signals – will not apply as intended in the theory. The literature does not state the relative weight that the individual elements of the signalling process have on the effectiveness of signals so no pronouncements can be made on the outcome of a noisy signaling environment. Country specific macro-environmental factors create noise in the environment which is further impacted by environmental factors beyond the Caribbean shores, e.g., 2008 financial crash in the USA which severely impacted economies in the Caribbean region (IMF.org, 2010). Further, as identified by the context chapter, small complements of

graduates within the organizations in the service sector could have an impact on signalers' competence and signals sent.

Without readily available data on employer performance and relatively little focus on branding based on the associated cost, employer attractiveness and success are mostly perceptual conclusions. This can result in distortions in the signalling process. Compensation is another source of data that is guarded by organizations. Unlike many jurisdictions, Guyanese advertisements typically do not include salary information, even though this is starting to change with employers stating a range and indicating that the salary paid will be commensurate with the qualifications and experience of the successful applicant.

Many of these contextual peculiarities can result in unintentional signals being sent and even negative signals being sent (Guest et al, 2020). Without any guidance from the literature on the effects of signal precedence, procedures for identifying and mitigating negative signals and unintentional signals, this represents new insight for the geographic context of Guyana.

Signaling theory does not explicitly state whether the parties in the process operate within some form of regulated market. However, as stated in the context chapter, the service sector in Guyana is made up of a diverse set of industries, some regulated and others not, some established for decades and others not, some large and labour intensive and others using more technology. This diversity can add another variable that could impact the outcome of the signaling process of employers during graduate recruitment and selection.

The model identified below indicates the main actors in the signaling process, where the signaler is the employer, the receiver is the graduate, and the signal is the message being conveyed to graduates during recruitment and selection. The model shows those factors that influence the effectiveness of the signal conveyed to receivers. Since this study is

from the employers' perspective, the receiver is illustrated as static with no characteristic factors identified.
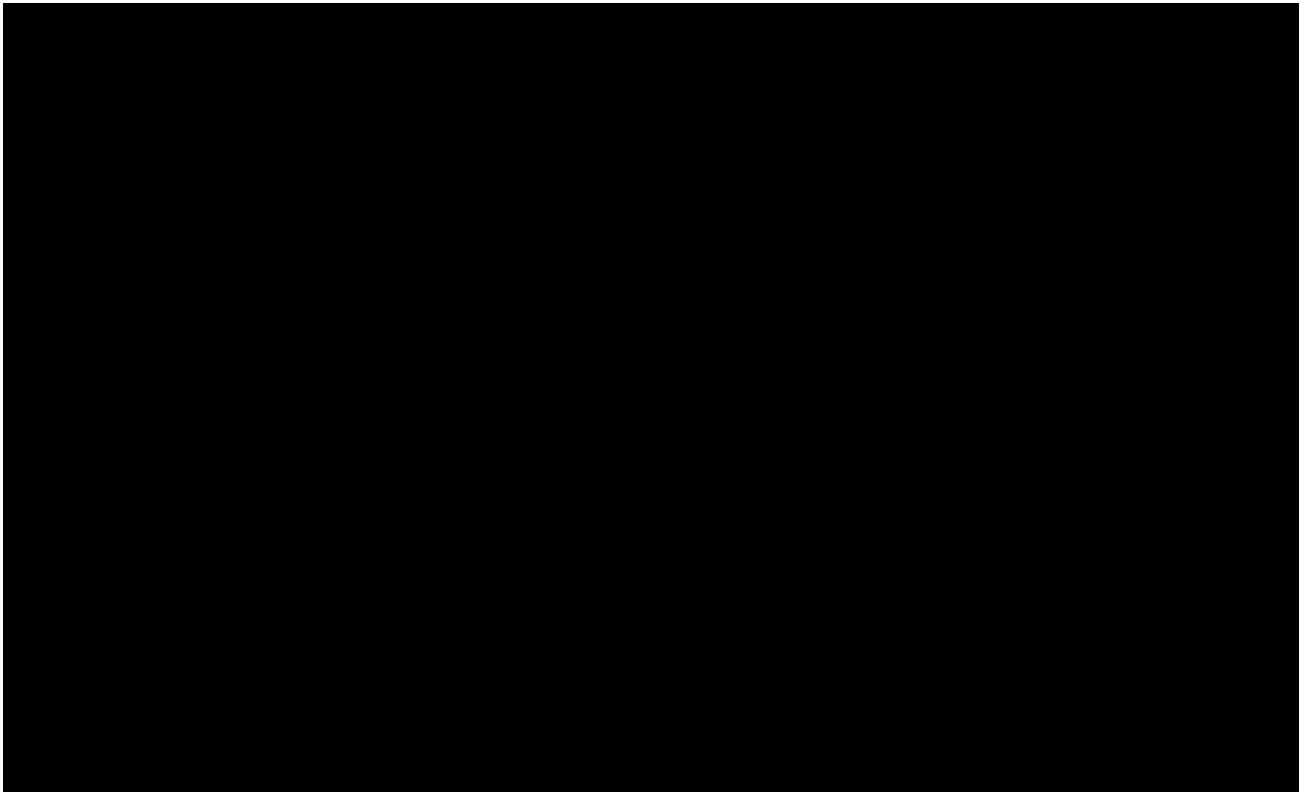
Figure 2. Theoretical Model based on Signaling Theory using an aggregation of key signaling constructs. NOTE: * (+) indicates a positive relationship; (-) indicates a negative relationship; (M) indicates a non-directional relationship.

Source: Adapted from "Unblackboxing IT certifications: A theoretical model explaining IT certification effectiveness." by Sebastian Lins & Ali Sunayaev. 2017. *In* ICIS.

Karasek and Bryant (2012) in their review posit that some of the weaknesses in signalling theory as it stands, is information on how alternative signals might be signalled during the recruitment process, the lack of a multi-dimensional scale for measuring many signals at a time, the financial backing of what a signal costs and an understanding of the distal and proximal events related to signalling. These are all areas that can certainly demystify the signalling process even as the antecedents, predictors and outcomes continue to evolve with macro-environmental factors. This would collectively be

beneficial information for employers as they design signals with consistency in a way that their collective impact can have a positive impact on the effectiveness of the signals sent to graduates. It should be highlighted though, that while multiple signals can be useful, in some instances, several signals can be viewed as noise, thus having a negative effect – context must be considered.

3.7.2 information asymmetry and cooperative behaviour

Information asymmetry can be described as a state of being where "different people know different things" and the unknown information would be useful to make better decisions (Stiglitz, 2002, p. 469). This state of being is characteristic of the recruitment and selection process where employers make decisions about potential employees and employees make decisions about organisations to accept employment. According to Spence (1978), an organization lacks the knowledge of a potential employee's capabilities and unobservable qualities before hiring and he referred to the hiring decision from the perspective of employers as an investment decision made under uncertainty. Similarly, employees have limited information about the organization they intend to join which they hope will help them fulfil their goals supporting the contention that information asymmetry works in two directions (Connelly et al., 2011). This information asymmetry has been studied extensively in the literature (Anderson & Tomlinson, 2021; Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 2002; Taj, 2016;) including applicant, organization, and business contexts.

The dilemma of information symmetry is increased when applied to soft skills. While the degree acquired by applicants sends a signal about the expected human capital gained on technical competences, graduate certifications typically do not provide any guarantees that soft skills have been acquired. This means that employers and their recruiters are left with unknowns about an applicant's qualities with respect to the soft skills demanded by the job. One of the ways that employers fill this void is by working

with universities to understand their curriculum as well as to indicate their needs. Employers also attempt to reduce information asymmetry through medium like their website which provides information well in advance of any intention on the part of an applicant. In the case of specific vacancies, information placed in advertisements is used to signal the soft skills that employers want from graduates. Applicants also look for ways to reduce information asymmetry about their knowledge, skills and abilities in a continuous way. An example is the focus on LinkedIn profiles which are known to be checked by recruiters and where there are a number of soft skill programs that allow a listing of the competences once the course has been completed. Applicants have been utilizing other initiatives to send signals of their soft skill abilities, e.g., participation and leadership positions in clubs. Applicants are also facing information asymmetry about the organization with respect to the relevant vacancy. Research has shown that attention has been paid and analysis done to understand outcomes, predictors and moderators of applicant attraction and employer branding as a means of removing information asymmetry from an organization's perspective (Chapman et al., 2005; Collins & Stevens, 2002; Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005). This sometimes results in the organization putting its best forward leading to unrealistic expectations of individuals (Rynes et al., 1991); Arthur, 2001 cited in Suazo et al., 2009) and some level of dissatisfaction after joining the organization. Notwithstanding this potential drawback, research has shown that organizations can use realistic job previews to increase job satisfaction and reduce turnover while signaling organizational honesty to potential employees thus allowing for employees' self-selection from the process if the conditions are deemed unsuitable or an adjustment of their expectations (Capitano, J., Thomas, B. J., & Meglich, P., 2022). In addition to intentional signals sent by organizations, there could be unintended signals sent by recruiter behaviours which applicants may use to resolve some of their information asymmetry (Celani & Singh, 2011; Uggerslev et al., 2012).

As mentioned before, an employer branding strategy can help organizations to reduce information asymmetry and ambiguity experienced by job seekers (Wilden, R.,

Gudergan, S., & Lings, I., 2010). Research provides examples where potential applicants search for and review information that is publicly available, relying on social networks to reduce information gaps (Younis, R. A. A. & Hammad, R., 2020). Social media gives employers another channel for strengthening their image through employer branding and interacting with potential applicants early in the recruitment process (Kissel, P. & Buttgen, M., 2015). Most of the literature on the use of social media content in recruitment and selection focuses on the utility, reliability, and ethics of using information gathered from the personal social media profiles of job seekers (Hurrell, S. A., Scholarios, D., & Richards, J. (2017); Zhang et al., 2020). The use of personal profiles is not limited to applicants as job seekers also search for ways to reduce information asymmetry about organizations and their recruiters. El-Menawy, S.M.A. and Saleh, P.S. (2023) have noted in their study that respondents identified LinkedIn as the most trusted platform for job seekers. It is likely that job seekers search for not only the organization that they are interested in but also the profiles of key personnel and potential recruiters associated with the organization to make inferences about the organization and this search may not be limited to LinkedIn but rather extend to other social media sites. In Guyana's context where information is limited, the likelihood of job seekers use of personal and professional information available on social networking platforms is great.

Human beings for the most part exhibit rational behaviour where they seek to further their interests (Frank, 2006 as cited in Bangerter et al., 2012). In this pursuit, they "may seek to cooperate with other individuals to achieve better outcomes than they could achieve than acting in isolation" (Bangerter et al., 2012, p. 720). While Bangerter et al. (2012) have noted that parties can still cooperate with those who may have opposed interests, Zahavi and Zahavi (1999) cited in (Bangerter et al., 2012), have noted that in situations of potential cooperation, parties are motivated to gather information of the other's trustworthiness, commitment, and the ability to cooperate usefully. This situation is somewhat characteristic of the recruitment and selection process where employers and employees have somewhat competing interests but need to cooperate

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for each party to gain. However, Dawkins & Krebs (1979) cited in (Bangerter et al., 2012) proposed the 'life-dinner' principle which could result unequal pressures on the parties in the recruitment and selection process. Social and economic pressures on graduates to earn to improve their challenged standard of living could impact the signalling process as graduates feel pressured to cheat or 'die' like the proverbial rabbit dinner.

Signalling theory has been chosen as the main theoretical framework for this study since "it addresses the conditions under which exchange of accurate information is possible among rational individuals with partly divergent interests" (Bangerter et al., 2012, p. 720). Research in personnel selection has used signalling theory to study how recruiters infer unobservable information about applicants (e.g., value congruence, soft skills) from observable attributes (e.g., cognitive ability, technical skills) (Aguinis et al., 2005; Cable & Judge, 1997). Research in recruitment, on the other hand, has studied how applicants infer unobservable characteristics of organizations from known characteristics (e.g., inferring information about the organization from the characteristics of recruiters encountered during the selection process, employer/workplace branding and corporate reputation) (Celani & Singh, 2011; Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005; Ryan et al., 2000; Rynes, 1989; Rynes et al., 1991; Vinayak et al., 2017). According to Bangerter et al. (2012), in both cases, however, researchers have focused on only a part of signalling theory, i.e., how actors infer unobservable characteristics of their partners from observable characteristics (Highhouse et al., 2007). Guest et al. (2020), used the signalling theory to examine the strength of HRM practices in collaboration with the attribution theory – recruitment and selection being relevant HRM practices to this study. The authors focused on the overall signalling strength and attribution of HRM practices which is valuable but did not separate the areas of graduate recruitment and selection.

3.7.3 Signaller

Signallers are insiders or senders who benefit from privileged information about persons, products or entities that outsiders do not have access to (Connelly et al., 2011). In the

recruitment and selection literature, both employers and applicants have been identified as signallers who will only engage in signalling if there is some strategic effect or benefit for the signaller. This privileged information advantage guides perceptions on unobservable and underlying qualities (Connelly et al., 2011). Spence (1973) purports that signal cost is a key factor in ensuring signal honesty, i.e., where production costs of a signal are negatively correlated with quality such that the cost associated with cheating significantly outweighs the benefits. Bangerter et al. (2012) express similar sentiments and state that signals should be hard to fake, or they impose such significant cost that only fit individuals or organisations can bear the cost. The process of equilibrium and escalation provides a counter argument to this position where participants in the process consider it a positional game where time is spent preparing to send the right signals (Bangerter et al., 2012) or employers' beliefs are modified with repeated cycles around the signalling loop (Spence, 1974). This can cause the development of dishonest signals especially where the signaller believes that the benefits outweigh the costs of signalling (Connelly et al., 2011). Higher education is usually considered an honest signal but, in a context, where the cost of gaining higher education is easy to access and afford, due to government intervention and subsidy, then the qualification received may not be a reliable differentiator of high and low quality applicants. Thus, higher education becomes an unreliable signal. This study will focus on employers in the signalling process differently from the way Spence portrayed labour market signals as being costly and hard to fake since these characteristics do not apply in the same way as Spence explicated to the graduate qualification in Guyana's context.

Because signallers and those they are signalling typically have competing interests, inferior signallers can be motivated to cheat or utilize false signals. There are two types of signals that are honest signals – costly signals and hard to fake signals. Signals are costly when the cost they impose on the sender can only be borne by 'fit' or high-quality senders (Bangerter et al., 2012). The literature provides examples of both employers and applicants sending dishonest signals. Higher education is considered to be

expensive in most contexts but there have been instances where job applicants have made the necessary investment to fraudulently acquire certificates attesting to higher education completion. Employers on the other hand also produce false signals, especially while waging the 'War for Talent', for example, announcing formal commitments to employee well-being or corporate social responsibility, signalling desirable attributes to employees (Bangerter et al., 2012), while implementing different actions. The discrepancy between announced plans and actual actions of signallers is referred to as decoupling in the literature. Signals are also considered to be honest if they are 'hard to fake'. These signals are usually beyond conscious control and have predictive validity which refers to the strength of the signal at the given point in time (Bangerter et al., 2012). Examples of hard to fake signals are cognitive ability tests and structured interview tests on past behaviour. It is acknowledged that soft skills are not as familiar to measure as hard skills. Devadus & Dharmapala (2021), agree with writers like Bangerter et al (2012) and Cook (2016) cited in (Devadus & Dharmapala, 2021) that they can be evaluated, and they propose the use of situational judgement tests, structured interviews, group interactions, role plays and presentations.

Despite honest signals being costly and hard to fake, signallers are still tempted to cheat thus requiring some form of 'punishment' linked to cheating (Bangerter et al., 2012). False signals are also identified in the literature by terms such as genuineness, suspiciousness and signal veracity – all of which refer to the integrity of the signal (Cohen & Dean, 2005 and Busenitz et al., 2005, as cited in Connelly et al., 2011). Signal fit is described as the extent to which the signal matches the unobserved quality of the signaller, which when combined with signal honesty is termed signal reliability (Connelly et al., 2011). It should be noted that "researchers frequently confuse signal fit, honesty, reliability and related terms" (Connelly et al., 2011, p. 52). Employees as signallers in the signalling process also have a role to play where high-quality applicants can signal their worth to employers (Spence, 1973) but caution is recommended since it has been determined that applicants are not particularly motivated to provide the employer with accurate information unless it is to their advantage (Spence, 1978).

The literature did not show any discussions of the vulnerability of signal fit to the ability of the signaller to signal effectively. While there were studies of signals that have been used successfully, no literature provided guidance of how employers can learn to signal. Guest et al. (2020) references a challenge of unclear messaging during HR implementation which was pinpointed as a characteristic of the signal but could also be as a result of signaler incompetence which was not mentioned. The authors do highlight that research has shown that research has shown that line managers as signalers tend to be associated with negative HR information versus information coming from HR managers which raises several questions of competence of non-HR hiring managers. Signaler competence therefore, is an area that should concern entities in recruitment and selection and could be a concern in this study due to the relatively immature Human Resource Development sector in Guyana as mentioned in the context chapter.

3.7.4 Signals, Signalling Systems and the Signalling Environment

Organizations aim to provide signals to receivers in order to receive legitimacy, gain positive reputation or other aspects as signs of unobservable underlying qualities thus making themselves attractive to applicants (Connelly et al., 2011) while applicants aim to provide signals of their inherent human capital and employability. Signals may be "strong" or "weak" thus impacting their detection by receivers (Connelly et al., 2011). Gulati and Higgins (2003) agree that signal strength and fit may be considered synonyms. Ramaswami et al., (2010) posit that signal strength is "how important, or salient, the signal is for a given signaller", while Connelly et al. (2011) contend this is more aligned to their definition of signal fit. The perspective of Connelly et al. (2011) is that fit references the signal while honesty references the signaller. Detection of signals is closely aligned to its visibility which Ramaswami et al., (2010) define as consistent with observability (Connelly et al., 2011) to mean "signal strength, not accounting for distortions and deceptions" (p. 52). It should be mentioned that other related terms to describe observability are signal clarity, intensity and quality (Gao et al., 2008; Kao & Wu, 1994; Warner et al., 2006).

While signalling theory focuses on sending out positive signals, research has shown that there are instances when negative information has been communicated either knowingly or unknowingly through signalling (Myers & Majluf, 1984, as cited in Connelly et al., 2011). Although literature reviewed has outlined examples of how negative signals affect organizations in the financial, legal and marketing realms they have stopped short of identifying how negative organization signals affect the signalling process during recruitment except to confirm that there is an impact on the organization (Connelly et al., 2011; Taj, 2016). Associated with the concept of negative signals would be dishonest, unreliable and non-credible signals. During recruitment and selection, promises of continuous training and development by employers can signal caring for employees However, on the job, being selected for training and development may signal weakness or incompetence and cause feelings of low self-esteem (Suazo et al., 2009). It is therefore important for organizations to be clear of the expected outcome that the signals sent can realise, taking into account the varying mediating factors.

The literature has pointed to the signalling environment having an impact on the effectiveness of the signals sent (Rynes et al., 1991). Environmental distortions are the major source of concern here where the observability of the signal or a misinterpretation of the signal results can be a consequence (Connelly et al., 2011). Unfortunately, the signalling environment appears to be an area overlooked in the research despite the fact that organizations and their associated environments ("institutional environment, the task environment and the industry competitive environment" Sanders & Boivie, 2004, as cited in Connelly et al., 2011, p. 62) can be a differentiator to the effect of signals. The concept of noise in the environment can impact the observability of signals specifically as it relates to environmental dynamism, complexity and munificence The presence of other signallers in the environment and their honesty or lack of it tends to affect the reliability of signals – more honest signallers improve reliability and vice versa (Connelly et al., 2011).

Over time, dynamics between organizations and applicants influence the evolution of signalling systems resulting either in equilibrium or escalation. Equilibrium being the state where the behaviour of senders and receivers is "mutually reinforcing" such as when employers believe that the education qualification is a signal of a high-quality applicant as in Spence's (1973) example and applicants also believe their degree is a differentiator. Escalation (or the arms races in some literature), on the other hand, occurs when the stability of the signalling systems are undermined, leading to one or more cycles of adaptations (Bangerter et al., 2012). An example of escalation cited in Bangerter et al. (2012) refers to the use of books to prepare for interviews and the subsequent adaptation of interview questions and techniques by recruiters (Poundstone, 2003; Janz, 1982). "In sum, both recruiters and applicants try to find ways to take control of the interview (Palmer et al., 1999), constantly adapting and counter-adapting, and the interview becomes a game in which both applicants and interviewers are trying to trick and outguess the other (Kirkwood & Ralston, 1999)" (Bangerter et al., 2012, p. 727).

The prior section of this review of literature has highlighted the characteristics of signals, the impact of environmental factors on signals, and the response of signallers and receivers when the stability of signalling systems are undermined.

3.7.5 Receivers

Receivers are outsiders who do not have information or are experiencing information asymmetry with respect to signallers. Receivers stand to gain from making decisions based on information received via signals (Connelly et al., 2011). As receivers, applicants benefit from information on organizations based on interactions with various sources, for example, their websites or recruiters. Organizations on the other hand benefit in the role of receivers when applicants signal their 'ability' through higher education qualifications, certifications, participation in activities or 'cliché' resume statements such as 'excellent time management skills'.

Researchers have found that signalling effectiveness and its success depends on the characteristics of the receiver, such as if there is no receiver attention, if the receiver does not know what to look for or if the signal is weak (Bangerter et al., 2012; Taj, 2016). While receiver attention is important, if a receiver is unsure how to interpret a signal, they may use imitation as a way of deciding what the signal means, which can lead to the bandwagon effect resulting in an inaccurate conclusion (Sliwka, 2007; McNamara et al., 2008, as cited in Connelly et al., 2011). While receiver interpretation is one way that authors agree signal effectiveness can be increased, (Janney & Folta, 2003, as cited in Connelly et al., 2011) posit that this can be achieved by increasing the signal's frequency especially if different signals are used to communicate the same message (Balboa & Marti, 2007).   However, use of different signals brings to the forefront an area of concern with signal consistency since conflicting signals will confuse the receiver. This can be problematic in recruitment and selection if applicants and organizations have challenges with receiver attention or are confused by conflicting signals of the soft skills desired by employers.

Another consideration of receiver interpretation is where different receivers interpret signals differently based on their perceived meaning (Suazo et al., 2009). This is quite understandable since persons' interpretation of information tends to be tied to their socialisation. Recruitment and selection are targeted at diverse audiences which means that an unintended interpretation can pose challenges for the HRM practices employed. In a survey done by Taj (2016), receiver interpretation was found to play a key role in supporting the effectiveness of the employer branding signal. This was credited to feedback seeking behaviour and a strong counter-signalling mechanism of the firm which served the purpose of filtering out or redesigning any unintended signals – the importance of counter-signalling is supported by scholars (Gupta et al, 1999 cited in Connelly et al., 2011). Receiver interpretation can also be negatively impacted by the dilution of positive signals when the receiver's attention is diverted to negative unintended signals that go along with the intended positive signal (Taj, 2016). Further to the effect of several signallers, a large number of dishonest signallers decreases signal

reliability and vice versa (Connelly et al., 2011). Receiver interpretation is also influenced by signal precedence and strength. In a study of employees (Taj, 2016), it was found that a negative signal that preceded a positive one diverted the attention of employees away from the positive signal and takes priority in the message received by the receiver so that the negative signal is the one received. He further posited that a reverse of the signal order would have the opposite impact. This factor is further complicated by the importance of the signal to the relevant employees where in the case of the study, non-monetary benefits were considered more important than increased training budgets. According to Taj (2016), the characteristics of receivers is of significant importance in determining receiver interpretation as these characteristics play a role in what is important to the receivers especially since signallers and receivers have partially competing interests.

According to Spence (1974), the job market reaches a form of equilibrium where each cycle of new applicants, modified employers' beliefs, adjusted wage schedules and applicant behaviour with respect to signal changes, generates the next cycle with repeated cycles around the loop of signalling. This is an illustration of information asymmetry working in two directions which is an underlying assumption of signalling theory (Spence, 1974). Connelly et al. (2011) in their review, agree by stating that as much as receivers need information about signallers, signallers also need information about receivers which helps to determine which signals are successful. In support of this point, Srivastava (2001), has highlighted that signaller attention to countersignals can result in more effective signalling especially in cases of negotiations and iterations as is found in the recruitment and selection process of HRM.

In his paper on signalling theory, Taj (2016), found evidence that feedback seeking behaviour had considerable impact on signalling effectiveness causing the company being exemplified to achieve high employee motivation and satisfaction levels as a result of constantly addressing the counter signals received. In other words, attention to countersignals can support the adaptation of future signals which can support signal

reliability. Stewart et al., (2016) in their study explored how employers and job candidates signal the need for and presence of soft skills. The authors utilise a signalling theory approach and acknowledge that students "are either failing to convey to employers that they possess the skills, or the employers are failing to signal to students that the skills are valued" (p279). This speaks to missing feedback and counter signalling processes; however, their findings do not discuss either of these two aspects of signalling to provide support or refute the theory. Similarly, Suazo et al. (2009) utilized a signalling theory perspective to discuss legal and psychological contracts in human resource practices. They highlighted the implications of a number of human resource practices such as recruitment, training, performance appraisals and compensation systems and their role in creating legal and psychological contracts. The concepts of feedback and counter signalling were not mentioned, not even as an existing contributor to the success of the signalling process.

To sum up, several authors argue that an underlying assumption of the signalling process is that "receivers desire information from signallers and that signallers also expect information back from receivers in order to confirm that their signals have been interpreted in the desired way" (Taj, 2016, p. 340). This area has been highlighted in the literature as a gap of insufficient HRM research.

Feedback and counter-signalling form a part of the communication that results in actions of adaptation by senders and receivers. Bangerter et al. (2012), in their paper, examine three types of adaptive relationships among job market actors that occur as a result of information passing back and forth between signallers and receivers. Firstly, in relationships between applicants and organizations, applicants try to detect the criteria that organizations are interested in and send the right signals while organizations in turn may adapt their selection criteria which may lead to cycles of reciprocal adaptation. Secondly, organizational selection strategies continuously adapt in the search for honest signals through increasing cheating costs and keeping them high. Thirdly, applicant adaptation strategies where applicants try to detect selection criteria and adapt to fulfil

these criteria. Here the focus is likely to be on the costly signals over the hard to fake signals since access to costly signals can change with changing variables such as technology, motivation and higher education.

3.7.6 Conclusion

The review of literature indicates that while there is evidence of the practice of signalling in recruitment and selection, there is very little that makes a direct connection to the practice of signalling for soft skills specifically. There is reference to activities that suggest the presence of soft skills in applicants as well as selection techniques such as behavioural and competency interviewing that show some success in identifying soft skills in graduates. However, it is also evident from the literature that while employers are emphatic that soft skills are missing in graduates, there may be some clarity required on what exactly are those skills – based on the various conceptualizations, and how they can be recognised during the recruitment and selection process.

The connection between human and social capital with graduate soft skills was explored in the literature thus posing an opportunity to examine whether these areas of capital are explored during the practice of recruitment and selection as a proxy for graduate soft skills. This understanding can provide support for initiatives to improve employers' perceptions of soft skill deficiencies in graduates.

Further, the literature points to the necessity of intentional processes to support feedback, recognise counter-signalling, manage environmental noise and implement adaptation strategies to ensure an optimal signalling process to identifying high-quality applicants and selecting graduates with the desired soft skills to support organizational objectives (Bangerter et al., 2012). Surprisingly, Celani & Singh (2011) in the development of their model on the association between market signals and applicant attraction outcomes, did not consider the contributions of feedback or counter-signaling.

Another gap in the literature is the lack of a connection that presents strong ties of HR strategy directly to the recruitment and selection of graduates with desirable soft skills. This is critical as more line managers are involved in graduate recruitment and selection. Research has identified that many functional managers receive little or no training for the roles of graduate recruitment and selection and this is exacerbated when soft skills are expected as a part of the graduates' human and social capital.

The review of Guyana's context and the literature have highlighted many environmental challenges and institutional challenges that can impact employers' perspectives of the soft skills that graduates possess (example, Succi & Canovi, 2020; Crowley & Jeske, 2021; Gebreiter, 2019). This has generated the second research question:

RQ2: How do employers experience recruitment and selection of graduates with desirable soft skills?

The findings from the literature review on the inconsistent conceptualization of soft skills by employers (example, Mattheson et al., 2016; Grugulis & Vincent, 2009), as a contributor to employers' perceptions of graduates' soft skill deficiencies, have generated the third research question:

RQ3: How do employers conceptualize desirable graduate soft skills?

The following chapter (Chapter 4) will detail the philosophical approach and methodology used in this study.

CHAPTER 4: PHILOSOPHY AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Chapter Introduction and Overview

The problem addressed in this study is that employers in the private, service sector in Guyana, continue to have difficulty recruiting and selecting graduates who have the soft

skills that they desire to support individual and organizational success. The study provides an exploration into the perceived graduate soft skill deficiencies that employers identify and addresses the problem based on the elements of communication as described in the signaling theory with an emphasis on recruitment and selection practices of employers.

This chapter outlines the strategy used to conduct the research in terms of the philosophical perspective and theoretical underpinning for the research design and methods and the associated ethical issues. The chapter explains the rationale for the selection of the research strategy by connecting the research design to the philosophical approach.

The first section conveys the aim and objectives of the study which provides a guiding light for this study. The chapter then introduces the philosophical considerations of the study by discussing ontology, epistemology, axiology, and the theoretical perspective utilized. The philosophical approach utilized is interpretivism, a discussion of which includes the justification of social constructionism as the relevant research philosophy for this study. This leads to answers to the questions of which methodological choices are appropriate for the achievement of the research aims of this study. These choices are explained (and contrasted with the other research paradigms) and their associated methods illustrating the achievement of methodological coherence using semi-structured interviews in the framework of a phenomenological qualitative study.

The chapter continues with insights of steps taken in the piloting of the study, followed by details of the data collection inclusive of the sampling strategy and the process by which the data was collected. All changes to the main study as a result of the pilot study are detailed. Data collection encountered several challenges which are explained along with the steps taken to address those challenges. A data analysis section follows with a description of how the data was analyzed using Thematic Analysis and a justification for this choice of method.

The chapter comes to an end by discussing the ethical considerations aligned with the study and the ways in which this qualitative research endeavor was evaluated to improve rigor, credibility and other characteristics associated with good, rich qualitative research.

A summary concludes the chapter and sets the stage for the findings which are outlined in the next chapter (Chapter 5).

4.2 Aim of the Study

The overall aim of the study is to explore the soft skill deficits of university graduates from the perspective of employers in the service sector in Guyana by reviewing their recruitment and selection practices.

This aim addresses the problem of unacceptable amounts of time, people and financial resources being expended by organizations to employ graduates with the desired soft skills and improve the soft skills of employed graduates.

4.2.1 Research Questions

The research questions arising out of the literature and the context of this study, which will support the achievement of the aim are as follows:

1. How may employers' perceptions of graduate soft skills be influenced by the business, socio-economic and labour market context as well as the historical and political influences of Guyana?
2. How do employers experience recruitment and selection of graduates with desirable soft skills?
3. How do employers conceptualize desirable graduate soft skills?

4.3 Research Philosophy

To answer the research questions of a study, a process or approach needs to be identified which should be tied to the research philosophy that undergirds the study (Crotty, 1998). Pring (2000) posits that, 'without the explicit formulation of philosophical background – with implications for verification, explanation, knowledge of reality – researchers may remain innocently unaware of the deeper meaning and commitments of what they say or how they conduct research'. A researcher's philosophy determines what constitutes acceptable knowledge and the associated process used for the development and conduct of research (Saunders & Tosey, 2013). Philosophical assumptions serve as a base for the research strategy used at each stage of the research process (Dudovskiy, 2016).

Two of the core constituents of philosophy are ontology and epistemology. Many authors have identified various constituents, frameworks, and strings for additional elements of the philosophical stance of research, some of which are - ontology-epistemology-methodology and research techniques (Fleetwood, 2005), ontology-epistemology-methodology-methods-source (Grix, 2010) and the philosophy-approach to theory development-methodological choice-strategy-time horizon-techniques and procedures (Saunders et al., 2019). These frameworks provide a guide for outlining and connecting various aspects of the research process. They link the chosen philosophy with the methodology and ultimately with the chosen methods.

The guide provided by Saunders et al. (2019) is illustrated in the visual of the 'research onion' where the researcher's actions are likened to the peeling back of layers of an onion, where each layer contributes to the final product – the achievement of the research aim(s). The research onion framework will be utilized to guide this report.
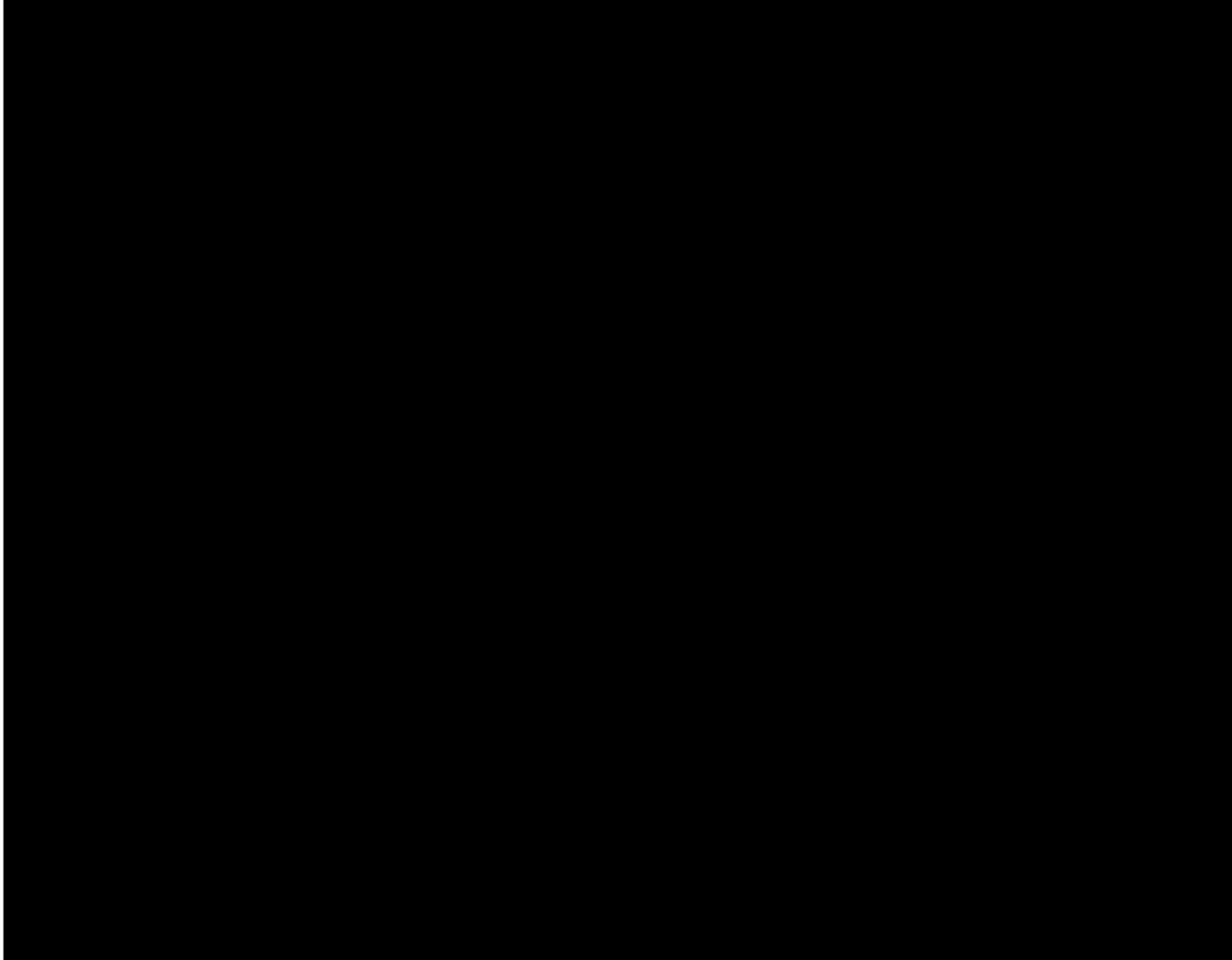
Figure 3: Research Onion
Source: Adapted from Saunders et al. (2019)

The term research philosophy refers to a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge (Saunders et al., 2019). This research is focused on developing knowledge in business and management in the service sector of Guyana with

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particular reference to graduate recruitment and selection. Each stage of research requires the researcher to make several assumptions about reality, acceptable knowledge, and the way her values influence the research process (Saunders et al., 2019). The sections below discuss this study's ontological, epistemological and axiological stance.

4.3.1 Ontology

Ontology "refers to assumptions about the nature of reality" (Saunders et al., 2019, p.133.). It is the starting point of all research, after which one's epistemological and methodological positions logically follow (Grix, 2010. p.73). Ontology represents the way the researcher thinks the world is, the researcher's view of reality, the study of being, how things are and how things work (Fleetwood, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Within this reality there is a central question that needs to be answered, the question of whether the objective entities have a reality external to social actors or was this reality built up from the perceptions and actions of social actors (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Saunders et al., 2003). This central question is borne out of the ontological continuum which ranges from objectivism (social phenomena are an external reality) to subjectivism (social phenomena are a result of perceptions and actions of social actors). While a binary presentation of the objectivist/subjectivist debate is popular in the literature, it can be seen as philosophically naïve when one considers the continued evolution of the ontology spectrum as theorists and researchers grapple with various hybrids of the two antithetical ontological considerations. An example of this evolution is the framework presented by Moon and Blackman (2014), where the spectrum is divided between realism (one reality exists) and relativism (multiple realities exist) with five ontologies represented on the continuum.

Bryman and Bell (2015) define objectivism as "an ontological position that implies that social phenomena confront us as external facts beyond our reach or influence." p 32. They further posit that in application, organizations have a reality that is external to the individuals who inhabit it which translates to a constraining force that acts on and

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inhabits all its members (Bryman & Bell, 2015). A completely objectivist standpoint posits that there is only one way of understanding the process and phenomena. Contenders of this objectivist perspective state that social entities exist in a single reality external to social actors (Saunders et al., 2012). This stance was deemed inappropriate for this study since it suggests that there is an objective reality for recruitment and selection of soft skills that exists external to the mind, particularly the minds of employers and their recruiters and therefore the phenomena can be researched without researcher bias or time and context influence. The research questions of this study have been premised on the lived experience of employers which goes against the assumption that there is a single reality that employers will experience when recruiting and selecting graduates based on their soft skills. This study is seen as embodying 'an experienced, constructed reality based on social or individual human conception' rather than 'an external independent reality' (Jackson, 2013). Therefore, the objectivist ontological position would not align well with the nature and objectives of this study as defined by the aim and objectives and was hence rejected.

At the other end of the continuum, subjectivism/constructivism as an ontological stance posits that social phenomena and meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This standpoint presents a social world where individuals construct reality and agreements and social order are "continually being established, renewed, reviewed, revoked and revised" (Saunders et al., 2015, p33).

Subjectivism/constructivism is often associated with the term constructionism and is sometimes referred to as social constructionism highlighting the role of the social actors, highlighting the generation of meaning in the process of social exchange (Schwandt, 1994). A faint line of demarcation has been posited that in constructivism realities are created individualistically while in social constructionism these realities are collectively generated in the process of social exchange which acknowledges the individual's experience while also recognizing the influence of culture and context (Crotty, 1998;

Schwandt, 1994). Further, in social constructionism social actors create individual and partially shared meanings and realities (Saunders et al., 2019).

The stance of social constructionism aligns well with the aim and research questions of this study which posits that the employer's perspective of soft skills through the recruitment and selection process is an evolving phenomenon, which is associated with organizational needs, objectives, and strategies as well as the organizational and country's context. Soft skills, their presence in graduates and employers' success in identifying them can also be impacted by the evolution of social variables within the wider environment. In other words, soft skills can be seen as being in a constant state of construction and re-construction (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Further, it should be noted that soft skills are not a static or inert entity but rather are built up during interaction. Therefore, the research philosophy of social constructionism will contribute best to the concerns of the study within the defined context.

4.3.2 Epistemology and Axiology

Epistemology is another assumption in the philosophical process which deals with what is "acceptable, valid and legitimate" knowledge in a discipline and how this knowledge is created (Saunders et al., 2019, p.133). Epistemology deals with the grounds and foundation upon which we believe something to be true (Oliver, 2010) and therefore what counts as educational knowledge and how such knowledge is obtained (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Epistemological considerations can be represented on a spectrum ranging from positivism to interpretivism with several paradigms in between - positivism representing a natural science epistemology of investigating facts and explaining behavior while interpretivism represents a researcher's slant of understanding people and their institutions (Saunders et al., 2019).

"Interpretive researchers assume that access to reality (given or socially constructed) is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, and instruments" (Myers, 2008). According to the interpretivist approach, it is important for the researcher as a social actor to appreciate differences between people (Saunders et al., 2012) and be open to potential differences between what individual employers view as soft skills or their degree of absence in graduates. Dudovskiy (2016) posits that the interpretivist approach is based on meanings and understandings on social and experiential levels as well as the premise that people cannot be separated from their knowledge; therefore, there is a clear link between the researcher and research subject thus reflecting alignment with the circumstances of this study. Bryman and Bell (2015) posit that interpretivism focuses on what is specific, unique and different as well as finding meaning through understanding. Saunders et al. (2009) in Dudovskiy (2016) go on to suggest that findings are relative to time, context and culture and are value-bound. This study is therefore aligned with the epistemological stance of interpretivism even though there is the limitation of results being context specific and time bound. Since this is perceived as a widespread problem in Guyana, it will be valuable to readers who can identify similarities to the context of this study and hence transfer the findings to their situation (Merriam & Greiner, 2019). To support readers in their search to determine the transferability of the findings of this study, an entire chapter has been dedicated to the context of this study.

As an alternative to positivism and interpretivism, and as a middle of the road perspective, a critical realist epistemology allows for our beliefs to be provisional and fallible and also allows for some integration of the natural sciences and the human element. Critical realism posits that there exists an independent reality but the perspective we have of that reality is colored by our choices. In other words, our active reaction with the world is how we access reality and if large enough numbers of actors change then the reality can change. According to Saunders et al. (2012), the critical realist's position that the social world is constantly changing is much more in line with the purpose of business and management research which is usually to understand the

reason for phenomena as a precursor to recommending change. From the perspective of this study, the work environment has evolved, there have been changes in the education sector and so have many of the social and other macro variables that impact on graduates and employers. This change is continuous and could render research conducted with a critical realist epistemology obsolete in a short time. Critical realism also proposes multi-level study as a means of getting influences and interrelationships between the individual, the group, and the organization which would require a significant timeframe to complete (Dudovskiy, 2015). Another major challenge with a critical realist epistemology for this study would be the focus on causal mechanisms which would be outside the scope of this research since these processes require information to determine a causal relationship which is largely unavailable in Guyana. This research has adopted an exploratory approach as a starting point to filling the void of business research in Guyana.

Because of the need to explore and understand the phenomena of soft skills and the absence of work in this area in Guyana, an interpretivist approach will be the epistemological stance of this study. It is felt that the findings from this study would provide a good starting point for future research to be done, especially from a critical realist or pragmatist epistemology.

4.3.2.1 Axiology

Axiology is a branch of philosophy that studies judgments about values and ethics of both the researcher and the researched (Saunders et al., 2012, 2019). Heron (1996) argues that researchers demonstrate axiological skill by being able to articulate their values as a basis for making judgments about what research they are conducting and how they go about doing it. This choice of research is tied to the researcher's life experiences and represents a significant area of interest both from a developmental perspective for Guyana as a country as well as from an organizational perspective of

goal achievement. The researcher's values and axiology are somewhat emancipatory, wanting to fix what seems to be broken in the society. What has changed from the 60s, 70s, and 80s and where is it that we have failed to adapt as structures and the actors in our society have evolved? There is also a concern that while there are many complaints and a lot of dissatisfaction, there does not seem to be a concerted effort to investigate this hurdle with the intention of understanding in the first instance and fixing in the second instance.

The researcher identifies with the challenges of recruiting and selecting graduates with the desired soft skills and how this study can potentially change the outcomes of these processes and associated organizational objectives. The researcher is therefore offering emancipatory opportunities to the participants through the sharing of their experiences on the subject of the study without boundaries or judgement. Emancipation will also be provided to participants who would typically see themselves as the cause for the success or failure of graduate recruitment and selection but are now giving their accounts in anticipation of a better understanding of the process and the phenomena of graduate soft skills.

The researcher's values also identify with a managerialist axiology where the research is influenced by the "imposition of managerial techniques which are associated with the private business sector" (Lee, 2017, p.202.) The researcher has been a manager in business for more than twenty-five years. The perceived problem upon which this study is based has plagued management in various organizations over many years. Aligned with the RBV theory of differentiation and the people perspective of the Balanced Scorecard utilized by the researcher as a manager, which both stress the importance of high performing and productive human resources, this study has significant potential to add value to employers.

4.3.3 Research Approach

"Research data become significant and contribute to knowledge when they are viewed in relation to theoretical concerns." (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p20). This highlights that the relationship between research and theory is important and relevant to the intended research approach for this study. The three types of research approaches are the deductive, inductive, and abductive approaches.

In the deductive approach, data collection is used to test a hypothesis that is related to an existing theory. This leads to either verification or a rejection of the theory. The deductive approach allows for a generalization of the findings from the general to the specific. The deductive approach therefore follows the path of Theory – Hypothesis – Data collection – Findings – Hypothesis Confirmation/Rejection – Revision of theory (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This approach was deemed inappropriate for the aim and objectives of this study since the focus is to allow the themes from the data to emerge from the experiences shared by the participants. The exploration of the central phenomena, therefore, does not entail the testing of hypothesis which would emanate from the theory.

Alternatively, the inductive approach allows the researcher to begin the process with research aims, objectives, and questions. The path used for the inductive approach is Generalizations/Theories - Observations/Tests – Patterns/Themes – Generation of Theory/Reaching Conclusions (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Cresswell, 2014). In this approach, the focus is on the search for patterns from the observations and the development of explanations. In this approach, the researcher is also free to alter the direction of the study after the research process has started. While this approach does not begin with a theory like the deductive approach, it does not prevent the researcher from utilizing existing theory to formulate research questions to be explored. Outcomes of this approach provide an illustration of the phenomena being studied.

The abductive approach provides an alternative for researchers to address the weaknesses associated with the deductive and inductive approaches (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This approach utilizes available observations to make the best explanation possible. The process starts with surprising facts or puzzles and then uses the research process to explain theory, choosing the best explanation from the alternatives available (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013, as cited in Bryman & Bell, 2015). The outcome of this stage of the process leads to a utilization of the decided explanation to test observations in a back-and-forth process (Saunders et al., 2019). This approach requires significant time to collect data, identify themes, patterns or develop a conceptual framework and test, especially in an environment that is not research oriented.

The approach employed for this study is largely but not wholly inductive with the establishment of research aims, objectives and questions and a search for patterns from data collected and the development of some explanations. Signaling theory was the lens utilized in the formulation of research questions with the achievement of objectives providing a clearer illustration and understanding of employers' perspectives of graduate soft skills.

4.4 Methodology and Methods

The researcher's methodological choice when designing their research is aligned with what constitutes acceptable knowledge and the process involved in accessing this knowledge (Saunders & Tosey, 2013). In discussing methodological issues as a part of the research design to be employed, it is helpful to distinguish between the three main options available for the conduct of business research – quantitative, qualitative and a mixture of the two methods (Creswell, 2014).

4.4.1 Research Design

Qualitative research, broadly defined, means "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 17). Qualitative researchers seek illumination, understanding, and extrapolation while quantitative research seeks to provide causal determination, prediction, and generalization of findings (Hoepfl, 1997). Qualitative research is associated with the view that reality is constantly shifting and is socially constructed by actors and is therefore associated with a constructionist ontological orientation (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures. Data is typically collected in the participant's setting with data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. Those who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honors an inductive approach, a focus on individual meaning and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation (Creswell 2007, 2009).

In a qualitative study, researchers are more focused on the humans' experiences and thoughts, as opposed to obtaining information which can be generalized to a larger group. Therefore, the researcher seeks to listen to participants and build an understanding based on what is heard. Whereas quantitative research focuses on collecting and converting data into numerical forms that statistical calculation can be made, and conclusions drawn (Creswell, 2009). With the mixed method, the steps involved include data transformation, instrument development, that is, obtaining themes and specific statement from participants in an initial qualitative data collection and lastly, examining multiple levels, that is, conducting a survey at one level to gather quantitative results about a sample at the same time, collecting qualitative interviews to explore a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2009).

This research project was conducted using qualitative methodology.

4.4.2 Qualitative Research Strategies

Bryman and Bell (2015) describe qualitative research as a research strategy based on small samples that emphasizes words, sees social reality as constantly shifting and provides insights and understanding of the problem setting.

This strategy was selected since it helps to provide understanding of the subject area of graduate soft skills, thus helping to answer the research questions that support the objectives of this project. The aim of the project is to understand the lived experiences of employers and consider what can be done to resolve and possibly reduce the challenges associated with identifying and attracting graduates with the desired soft skills. The focus will be on collecting rich insights into subjective meanings of the phenomena – soft skills, and the associated research amongst employers and their representatives, to understand their social world from their point of view (Saunders & Tosey, 2013).

Closely aligned with the interpretivist epistemological stance and a qualitative design are five of the more popular strategies associated with qualitative research, namely Case Study research, Ethnography, Grounded Theory, Narrative Enquiry and Phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 2009; Saunders et al., 2019).

Phenomenology focuses on understanding and describing the essence of a lived experience of a phenomenon through a well-defined process as described by participants (Creswell, 2014). This enquiry happens in stages that are identifiable which allows the researcher to ask questions about the experience in the different stages of the process.

4.4.3 Phenomenology

The decision for a phenomenological design resulted from an alignment with the aim of the study which is to explore employers' perceptions of graduate soft skills as they make sense of their lived experiences during recruitment and selection of graduates. Further,

phenomenology was considered the appropriate approach for understanding common experiences of a phenomenon which can contribute to developing policies, practices and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Cresswell, 2013). This aligns well with the objectives of this research undertaking where the focus is on obtaining a deeper understanding of employers' perspectives of graduate soft skills displayed during recruitment and selection and a potential contribution to human resources practices and policies in the service sector in Guyana.

Most types of phenomenology have their beginnings in the work of Edmund Husserl or Martin Heidegger (Gill, 2014). Husserl's work has informed the descriptive methodologies which are characterized by reduction, bracketing, the search for shared essence and a focus on intentionality (Gill, 2014). These methodologies focus on finding and describing the shared essence of a phenomenon by reducing the data until just the essence and the commonalities remain (McCarthy, 2015). This type of phenomenology was rejected for this study since the researcher does not agree that the processes of graduate recruitment and selection exist and are practiced outside of the constructed beliefs of employers.

Heidegger outlined his divergence from Husserl's methodology, highlighting that individuals exist in an environment that contextualizes everything, also rejecting the concept of full detachment proposed by bracketing because humans are connected to their environment and the socialization they experience (Gill, 2014; Conroy, 2003 cited in McCarthy, 2015). Heidegger thus posits the necessity of interpretation in the study of human beings to ensure the meanings generated reflect the realities of the participants (McCarthy, 2015). This interpretive thrust of phenomenology was deemed appropriate for the exploration of employers' graduate recruitment and selection experiences as they endeavour to manage the perceived soft skill deficiencies of graduates. The interpretive phenomenological methodology accepts that the focus is not to identify one true meaning but rather unearth and expose examples of the phenomenon being

experienced by employers which is aligned to the aim and objectives of this study (McCarthy, 2015).

4.4.4 Qualitative Data Collection

Some of the more common qualitative data collection tools include observations, interviews, focus groups, documents, and audio-visual materials (Creswell, 2009, 2014). Qualitative observations usually involve the researcher taking unstructured or semi-structured notes on the behaviour and activities of participants at the research site (Dudovskiy, 2015). The observer can take on the role of participant (concealed or known) or complete observer. Observations, however, were not considered appropriate for this study because they require long timeframes for collecting data and there is the potential for ethical challenges of observing information that cannot be reported (Creswell, 2014; Dudovskiy, 2015). Additionally, the researcher would have no control over the availability of a recruitment and selection process so that it could be observed for data collection since this process may only be initiated when there are vacancies to be filled.

Interviews have been identified as one of the most flexible and popular methods used by qualitative researchers to collect data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Interviews can be structured, unstructured or semi-structured and can be done individually or in groups, through face-to-face contact, use of the telephone or utilization of platforms supported by the internet (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Creswell, 2014). Semi-structured, face to face individual interviews were identified as the main method of data collection using a prepared list of questions. The prepared questions, focused on the phenomena of the study, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility of the flow and content of the questioning, while allowing the participants freedom to provide their perspective and experience in their responses (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Employers are forced to compete in the job market for graduates with the soft and hard skills desired by the organization. As a result, recruitment and selection practices are seen as a source of competition and differentiation. Because of this competition, focus groups as a data collection method was rejected. Focus groups are characterized by interactive and collective discussion between participants (Cohen et al., 2013) which would not support the necessity of confidentiality and privacy when discussing issues of recruitment and selection in the presence of participants from various organizations.

Being aware that organizational documents can add a dimension to uncovering employers' perspectives of graduate soft skills during the recruitment and selection processes, evaluation documents, historical vacancy notices and articles associated with employer branding and applicant attraction will be collected. These documents allow the researcher to obtain some of the language and words that employers utilize during recruitment and selection (Creswell, 2014). These documents also represent data to which the participants have given their attention thus enriching the data available for analysis in this study.

Gill (2014) advances that phenomenological studies typically use interviews as an opportunity to capture rich accounts of information from the experience of participants. The employers' narratives on the phenomena of soft skills of graduates interviewed would provide the researcher with a meaningful and historical perspective of the experience in words and language that would facilitate providing a faithful account of the shared experience (Creswell, 2014; Gill, 2014). Therefore, individual, semi-structured interviews are the main data collection method employed in this study with support from data collected from company documents.

Questions for the interviews were designed based on a review of the literature relative to other studies conducted globally and aligned to ensure responses would provide answers to the research questions of the study. These questions formed the basis of the pilot study. The results of the pilot study were used to inform the researcher on

decisions of the clarity, ordering, design and relevance of the questions and the overall style of the data gathering process for the main study.

4.4.5 Time Horizon

When designing research, it is important to be aware of whether you want your research to represent a snapshot in time (cross-section) or a representation of a longer period which may be made up of a series of snapshots like a diary (longitudinal) (Saunders et al., 2019). This study is a partial requirement for completion of a terminal degree which has a time constraint. As such, this research was cross-sectional.

4.4.6 Pilot Study

Only one participant organization was chosen for the pilot study with due consideration for the limited number of participants who meet the selected criteria for the study. An Interview Protocol was developed using the guidelines recommended by Castillo-Montoya (2016) in the framework the Interview Protocol Refinement. This framework is made up of four phases with each bringing the researcher closer to a final instrument as seen in Appendix 1.

After the initial piloting of the interview protocol and review of the findings of the pilot done in 2018, the following adjustments were made to the study:

i) The focus of the study was narrowed to employers' perspectives of graduate soft skills during recruitment and selection processes.

ii) Graduates were removed as participants as it became clearer that this perspective needed to be explored in depth and would require more time than was available to explore the perspectives of both employers and graduates. Independent recruiters were added as another category of respondents that could provide a different perspective and richness to the data.

iii) The theoretical lens of the study changed from human and social capital to signaling.

iv) The scope of demographic data collected was increased to add dimensions to the lived experience and social construction of the participants' perspectives.

v) Changes were made to the Interview Protocol to reflect the Recruitment and Selection processes and Signaling Theory.

vi) The targeted number of participants per organization was increased from two to three to allow for diversity in participants potentially coming from three different functional areas – executive management (C-suite), human resources and functional department heads.

vii) Arrangements were made for a re-pilot to test the new protocol in terms of the flow and clarity of questions, the narrowing and deepening of the topic and the new lens of Signaling Theory.

Based on the six sub-sectors identified for sampling within the service sector, initially thirty organizations appeared to meet the inclusion criteria. However, upon closer examination and information gathering, that number was reduced to sixteen. Organizations were excluded for the following reasons:

- Managers were not graduates despite their level within the organization
- Graduates were not employed after graduation but were rather employees within the organization at the time of graduation so there was no graduate recruitment and selection
- Employed tertiary graduates were not University graduates but rather held professional, technical qualifications
- Graduates were family members and therefore their employment was guaranteed.

These reasons resulted in the organizations having limited or no experience with graduate recruitment and selection, where graduate refers to University graduate.

4.4.6.1 Re-Pilot

The same organization that was used for the initial pilot was utilized for the re-pilot. This made it simpler to identify those questions that were not asked in the initial pilot and obtain answers to same. Building rapport was easy because of the previous interview and this led to an easy flow of information. Despite building on the initial pilot, the interview flowed smoothly and lasted for forty-five minutes. Unlike the initial pilot, which was physically face to face, the re-pilot was conducted virtually utilizing the Microsoft Teams software to comply with the University's protocols for conducting interviews during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Human-Resources contact for the organization chosen was asked to provide two participants – one from HR and one departmental head with recruitment experience. Despite repeated requests, only one participant was received – the HR representative.

During the interview, it was noticed that there was a constant co-mingling of the concepts/processes of recruitment and selection. Additionally, the process of graduate attraction/recruitment was continuously overlooked. Both were considered to be possible characteristics of the local landscape and note was taken for more time to be spent on defining/explaining these concepts/processes to participants at the appropriate times during the interviews for the main study. Thematic Analysis was completed manually for the pilot.

The re-pilot was used as a testing and practice opportunity for using the Teams meeting software and its recording feature. At the time of the re-pilot, the transcription feature of the Teams software was not available so paid transcription software (Otter.ai) was used as the starting point for transcribing recorded interviews. The researcher listened to the recording after completion of the interview. Once the initial transcription was received from the software, the researcher then played the recording and corrected the system generated transcription. Corrections were made for errors made due to the accent and pronunciation of words by participants, some aspects of Guyanese dialect that the software would not know and proper names.

The objectives of the pilot study were met, requiring only minor adjustments for the final study. It was determined that the process would require more time than initially scheduled for the completion of the main study interviews.

The data collection and sampling methods for the final study are now discussed in the following sections.

4.4.7 Sampling Method

The target population for the main study is those employers of the service sector in Guyana, who are members of the main local Chamber of Commerce -The Georgetown Chamber of Commerce and Industry (GCCI), who employ at least five graduates and are engaged in for-profit activities in one of six named sub-sectors. The GCCI annual report (2018) was used to identify those organizations that met the inclusion criteria. The sample of employers for the study was selected to provide a cross section of organizations to allow for any potential differences across industries to be included. Some sub-sectors were excluded for the reasons cited in Table 3 below.

SUB-SECTORS within the SERVICE SECTOR	AVERAGE % CONTRIBUTION TO GDP	COMMENTS ABOUT REPRESENTATION IN THE SAMPLE
Construction	7.8	Excluded due to the lack of representation at GCCI
Wholesale and retail trade and repairs	8.1	Included
Transport and storage	3.5	Excluded due to family oriented graduate hiring practices
Accommodation and food services	0.5	Included
Information and communication	2.4	Included
Financial and insurance activities	4.4	Included
Financial intermediation and other services	3.8	Excluded due to the lack of representation at GCCI
Insurance services and agents	0.6	Excluded due to the number of graduates employed
Real estate activities	8.7	Excluded due to the lack of representation at GCCI
Professional, scientific and technical services	0.5	Excluded due to ech lack of representation at GCCI
Administrative and support services	6.5	Excluded due to the number of graduates employed
Public administration	4.9	Excluded due to the lack of representation at GCCI
Education	2.9	Included
Human health and social work	1.4	Included
Arts, entertainment and recreation	0.4	Excluded due to the lack of representation at GCCI
Other service activities	0.4	Excluded due to the amorphous nature of the sub-sector

Table 3. Guyana Services Sector - . Average contribution to GDP by key industries.
 Source: Adapted from the Bureau of Statistics, Guyana. (2019)

The six industries (sub-sectors) chosen are the main contributors within the service sector to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Guyana who were members of GCCI (2018) and met the inclusion criteria. These sub-sectors are Health Services, Wholesale and Retail Distribution, Education Services, Financial Services, Information and Communication Technology, and Accommodation and Food.

Additional participants will be independent recruiters who have experience with graduate recruitment and selection for the service sector in Guyana. There is no database that can be used for obtaining a list of such recruiters in Guyana. Independent recruiters were identified as a source that could add richness to the data collected based on their perspective from working with several organizations as well as being independent from the organizations that they have supported. The sample targeted was three independent recruiters, however, only one was identified and interviewed.

Due to the focus of this study on the in-depth experience of a few participants, and the qualitative emphasis of the stance of this project, non-probability sampling was deemed the appropriate approach (Saunders et al., 2015). The non-probability sampling technique of Purposive sampling, which is framed around selection units (in this study, recruiters) and guided by the research questions to be answered, will be utilized for this study (Bryman, 2012). Since the aim of the study is to explore employers' perspectives of the phenomenon through their lived experiences, organizations who have not been in operation in Guyana before 2014 or do not have experience with the phenomenon of graduate recruitment and selection were excluded. Specifically, criterion sampling will be used to ensure that the participants of the study have experienced the phenomenon of graduate soft skill deficits, and these participants can be identified and reached quickly and easily (Bryman, 2012). In order to ensure the interviewees from the chosen organizations have experienced the phenomenon, there were pre-screening questions directed at the Human Resources or Executive contact: Does your staff include at least five graduates with at least one being employed in the last three years? Has your organization had challenges with soft skills deficiencies in new graduates? The question,

"Do you have managers/representatives who have at least three years of experience recruiting graduates?" was also asked to recruit participants who would have enough experience to provide rich responses to the questions. In the Guyanese graduate recruitment environment, three years' experience is considered the minimum adequate work experience – less is considered 'inexperienced'.

The Snowballing sampling technique was used to identify independent recruiters for participation in the study. Each organizational participant was asked to identify an independent recruiter that would have experience with graduate recruitment and selection – two were identified but only one accepted the invitation and was interviewed.

Creswell (2013) recommends collecting extensive details about a few individuals and provided a recommendation for phenomenology of between three (3) and ten (10) interviewees. Saunders et al., (2019) distinguished between the needs for a homogenous sample versus a heterogenous sample with the former needing between four (4) and twelve (12) participants and the latter between twelve (12) and thirty (30) participants. Heterogenous sampling allows the researcher to identify patterns of interest and uniqueness in data collected through choosing participants with diverse characteristics (Saunders et al., 2019). In order to gain some diversity from the organizational participants, three sub-groups of participants were identified – Executive level, HR representative and Functional Manager.

Based on given recommendations and with due consideration for the time allotted for this study, between twelve (12) and eighteen (18) participants were targeted from the six organizations identified for participation in the study. With the addition of three independent recruiters, the targeted sample size was between fifteen (15) and twenty-one (21) participants. While there are no firm, consistent rules for sample size in non-probability sampling, sample size should be aligned to what will support credibility of the researcher's findings and what can be done with available resources (Patton, 2015).

With this in mind, the researcher felt that a sample of twelve (12) or greater would provide rich and detailed data that could be analysed to answer the research questions and achieve the aim of the study within the give time and within the constraints of collecting data from busy and sometimes unavailable business representatives within Guyana.

The list of organizations was grouped by sub-sector/industry and each company was assigned a unique code. These codes were entered into an Excel sheet to allow for the generation of random selections. The RANDARRAY, SEQUENCE and RANK functions were used to choose the first organization in each group which was pre-screened to verify their experience with the phenomenon. In cases of any non-qualifying organization, non-response or non-agreement from the selected participants, the remaining pre-qualified list will be used to select replacement participant (s) by going to the next ranked organization within that group. An invitation of participation will be sent by email to the Human Resources practitioner or Executive contact of the chosen organizations. See Appendix A.

Each organization was asked to identify three persons who have at least three years' experience with the recruitment and selection of graduates for the organization. All persons who met these criteria were invited to participate in individual online interviews. The request indicated a preference for one executive level manager, one HR practitioner and one department head/Functional Manager. The first three persons to accept the invitation were to be interviewed.

In addition, each organization was asked to recommend/refer the researcher to an independent recruiter that they have used in the past or are familiar with. These independent recruiters were invited to participate in the study through individual online interviews. All participants were emailed the Consent form for their signature and the details were explained. See Appendix B.

4.4.8 Interview Questions

In order to provide a structure which would support each participant providing information pertinent to the research questions of the study, an interview protocol was utilized. One protocol was developed for employer representatives with small oral adjustments made for independent recruiters. The interview protocol was developed and tested during the initial pilot and re-pilot using the guidelines recommended by Castillo-Montoya (2016) in the framework The Interview Protocol Refinement. This framework is made up of four phases with each bringing the researcher closer to a final instrument:

Phase I: Ensuring interview questions align with research questions in order to create an interview protocol matrix to map the interview questions against the research questions. Each question will be examined for clarity, simplicity, and answerability (Maxwell, 2013).

Phase 2: Constructing an inquiry-based conversation in order to construct an interview protocol that balances inquiry with conversation.

Phase 3: Receiving feedback on interview protocol in order to make adjustments (possible feedback activities include close reading and think-aloud activities).

Phase 4: Piloting the interview protocol with small sample. (The results of the pilot study will inform the researcher on decisions of the clarity, ordering, design and relevance of the questions and the overall style of the data gathering process.).

While the interview protocols were used as guidance, participants were allowed the opportunity to provide a free flow of information thus requiring the researcher in some cases to provide prompts in an order that is different to what is recorded on the Protocol based on information provided by the participants. The content of the Interview Protocol was designed based on a series of themes derived from the literature review and the context of the study.

The interview questions were broken down into three categories, namely, main questions, probes, and follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Open-ended

questions were developed to allow participants to respond based on their lived experiences and perspectives and to facilitate conversations on the topic (Cousin, 2009). The main questions were asked according to the flow of the conversation, while probes and follow up questions were used when required to elicit further responses to facilitate a deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions of their lived experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Interview questions were divided into three main categories as follows with a constant focus on soft skills:

Stage 1 – The process as experienced by participants when recruiting graduates with soft skills.

Stage 2 – The approach and process of selecting graduates with the desired soft skills.

Stage 3 – Signaling soft skills requirements within graduate recruitment and selection.

Two interview protocols were designed – one for employer participants and independent recruiters, and a second one that was adjusted for the representative from higher. See Appendices C and D. All interviews were recorded in the Microsoft Teams software that was used for conducting the virtual interviews and transcribed in conjunction with notes that will be made by the researcher on responses, demographic data, and other communication cues.

4.5 Validity and Reliability

It is important to convey the steps taken in research to ensure the quality of the research process and the associated findings. Validity and reliability are two criteria used for assessing the quality of research (Cresswell, 2014).

Validity, which is defined as the integrity of conclusions generated, has as one of its main facets, measurement (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This concept is most commonly associated

with quantitative research. Reliability is concerned with whether the study is repeatable, which is a specific concern of quantitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Some writers propose that alternative criteria be utilized to assess the quality of qualitative research, such as trustworthiness and authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 cited in Merriam & Greiner, 2019). Other writers have proposed adaptations to validity and reliability that are aligned towards the nature of qualitative research. Gibbs (2007) cited in (Creswell 2013) posits the adaptations of qualitative validity which requires that the researcher checks for accuracy of the findings and qualitative reliability that refers to the consistency of the researcher's approach to the study.

Creswell (2014) offers eight validity strategies that researchers can choose from to assess the accuracy of their findings – 'triangulation', 'member checking', 'rich, thick description', 'clarifying researcher bias', presenting negative or discrepant information', 'prolonged time in the field', 'peer debriefing', and 'using external auditors'. This study utilized four of the strategies identified above. As a student researcher, this study benefited from peer review from the supervisory team of experienced researchers, providing feedback and asking difficult and probing questions about the research. Some triangulation was utilized through the analysis of recruitment and selection documents to gain insight of what content related to graduate soft skills attraction and evaluation. Vacancy advertisements that were publicly available were analyzed. Additionally, a request was made to each participant for a copy of their evaluation form used during graduate selection – some participants declined. Member checking was conducted with some participants, especially in cases where there was need for follow-up questions. To further strengthen the validity of the study findings, rich, thick description was used in the form of participant quotations, even in the creolese dialect to ensure the accuracy of the findings (Gibbs, 2018).

For qualitative reliability, Gibbs (2018), provided several ways to achieve reliability of research findings – Check transcripts for transcription mistakes, check for drifts in the definition of codes by constantly comparing data with codes, co-ordinate among

researchers for team researchers, and cross-check codes derived by different researchers for team researchers, identify another person to cross-check codes for the individual researcher, or utilize qualitative computer software packages that have a reliability sub-program.

Transcripts were checked and rechecked several times. This was particularly necessary since the transcription software did not correctly transcribe all of the pronunciations and inflections associated with the Guyanese accent and dialect. This required the researcher to listen to each recording several times and make corrections. Coding was done in several iterations which required continuous checking of data with codes. The supervisory team also served as a quality check for code drift by questioning the suitability of codes to quotes. To further strengthen the reliability of the findings, the analytical method recommended by Gioia et al., (2013), of moving from text to first order codes to second order codes and then to themes was utilized to document the process, allowing for clear sight of what was done during analysis.

4.6 Data Collection

Methods are the tools, techniques and procedures that are used in the collection and analysis of data. Like the decision regarding choice of overall methodological strategy, 'we should use the methods that are best suited to answering our questions about a phenomenon' (Kincheloe & and Berry, 2004). The following sections detail the methods employed in this study.

Data collection for this qualitative pilot study utilized the phenomenological approach. This approach involved the collection of qualitative data. Semi-structured, individual, oral, face to face (virtual) interviews using open-ended questions were conducted to obtain a representation of the interviewee's experiences through the expression of their thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and their lived experiences to provide a deeper

understanding that can inform practices and policies (Creswell, 2007). The interviews allowed both the interviewer and interviewee to seek clarification immediately when it was needed. The features for face to face, semi-structured interviews were particularly useful for a subjective concept such as 'soft skills', and the interactive functions of recruitment and selection. Hanna (2012) in Saunders et al. (2019) indicates several advantages of using Skype for research interviewing such as access to participants, visual interaction, and participation from comfortable and familiar locations by both participants and the researcher. These advantages were experienced for the Microsoft Teams software that was used for interviews in this study.

Interview data was gathered online at a time mutually agreed by researcher and participant. The online format was utilised to align with the University's COVID 19 mitigation protocols for reducing the spread of the Corona virus. This format provided an additional advantage of increasing the availability and convenience options for the interviewees. Data collection was done through the interviewing of fourteen participants – twelve employer representatives, one independent recruiter and one representative from higher education.

After the selection of the six sample employer organizations, contact was made with the Human Resources representative, or the head of the organizations (titles varied between the organizations) and the purpose of the study was discussed. All six organizations indicated their interest in participating. A similar process was conducted for the independent recruiter and the representative from the university. The process was outlined for their understanding, in particular the need to interview participants with at least three years' experience of recruitment and selection of graduates with soft skills. One organization indicated their unique graduate hiring practice of only employing family members, which meant that the recruitment and selection processes would not apply since these family members are guaranteed employment without competing. Of the remaining five organizations, a request was made for the names and contact information for persons recommended for participation. Four organizations

responded and initial contact was made with persons identified. Two independent recruiters were identified who met the inclusion criteria and contact was made successfully, however, only one answered repeated requests for an interview appointment. Based on the agreement of all persons to participate, a date and time was agreed for the interview using the software Microsoft Teams. This was followed by an emailed Letter of Invitation for Participation (Appendix A) providing details of the study and the process surrounding their participation. Before the interviews began, interviewees were given the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification prior to signing the Informed Consent Form (Appendix B). Participants were reminded that their participation was completely voluntary, and they were free to leave the interview at any point during the process. In addition to the interview questions as outlined in the Interview Protocol (Appendix C), each participant was asked demographic information to add context and richness to the analysis of data.

Eleven interviews were initially conducted but after initial reading and re-reading of the transcripts, it was noted that none of the organizations already interviewed utilized a graduate trainee program (which was a feature of the pilot organization). Thus, the researcher did not feel that data saturation had been achieved since there was no way of knowing whether the experiences of those participants would reveal different data. Two additional organizations were purposefully identified that executed a version of a graduate trainee program and one participant from each organization was contacted and interviewed along the guidelines mentioned above. One organization was from one of the six sectors originally identified and the other was from an additional sector. No new data was unearthed. A discussion with the study's supervisory team determined that the perspective of higher education could add value to the narratives from employer participants. Two senior persons from the University were contacted but only one responded. Based on the information collected, it was determined that no new information would be obtained from the additional interview since processes under consideration were agreed and standardized for implementation across the administration. A modified Interview Protocol was designed for the higher education

interview (Appendix D). In addition to the interview questions as outlined in the Interview Protocol (Appendices C and D), each participant was asked demographic information to add context and richness to the analysis of data.

The fourteen interviews were conducted with each one lasting between twenty-six and sixty-two minutes. The average length of the interviews was forty-two minutes. Six interviews were short in length (between twenty-six and thirty-four minutes) and a review of these interviews provides the following highlights: Three of the six short interviews belonged to interviewees whose first language was not English. Therefore, their responses tended to be very direct to the question asked. Of the remaining three short interviews, one was from the independent recruiter who felt the need to be cautious about protecting his occupational turf, while the remaining two were engaged but tended to be very direct in their responses which seemed linked to their personalities based on their responses to introductory and rapport building questions. The interviews were recorded with the Microsoft Teams software and transcribed fully. During the transcription process, participants' data was anonymized using a coding process to ensure that data could not be linked to the participants and their organizations. The literature posed an interesting question on the possibility of job applicants' use of recruiters' social network profiles to reduce information asymmetry. This resulted in the collection of data on the presence of social media profiles of participants in the study and their organizations. Additionally, field notes as a secondary data collection method were obtained to complement the recorded interviews. These field notes included the researcher's comments on various observations during the interviews as well as copies of documents utilized by the organizations during the recruitment and selection of graduates.

Activities for graduate recruitment and selection tend to utilize a cross-section of managers depending on the organization structure and what practices are deemed successful in the organization. Participants were therefore chosen to reflect that diversity. All participants' data were transcribed using a coding process to ensure that

participants would be anonymous while ensuring the data integrity was maintained at all times. Each organization was given a number and each participant was given a code. This allowed for individuality but also grouping participants based on the organization that they belonged to. Information on participants functional category was recorded, the size of the graduate staff in the organization, the years that the participant was involved in graduate recruitment and the reach of the organization were also collected as information that could add richness to the findings.

Table 4. Overview of the participants of the study.

Organization Pseudonym & staff size	Participant Pseudonym	Respondent category	Graduate Intake	Years in recruitment	Organizational operational reach
CO8 - N/A	HE8	HE	N/A	>20	Local/ International
CO1 - 371	HR1	HR	16	>9	Local
CO1 - 371	FN1	FN	16	>15	Local
CO1 - 371	CS1	CS	16	>16	Local
CO2 - 35	CS2	CS	12	>15	Regional
CO2 - 35	FN2	FN	12	>14	Regional
CO3 - 640	CS3	CS	35	>8	Local/International parent
CO3 - 640	FN3	FN	35	>4	Local/International parent
CO4 - 150	FN4	FN	30	undisclosed	International
CO4- 150	HR4	HR	30	>8	International
CO4 - 150	CS4	CS	30	>4	International
CO5 - 390	CS5		50	>25	Local
CO6 - 25	CS6		5	>17	Local
CO7 N/A	IR1	HR/IR	N/A	>15	International

Table 5: Descriptions of the Sectors represented by the Organizations involved in the study.

ORGANIZATION	SECTOR	DESCRIPTION
ORGANIZATION 1 – CO1	FAST FOOD	This organization focuses on the production and delivery of fast-food targeting individuals and businesses. The firm employs both full-time and part-time staff. The organization has a social media presence where advertisements for graduates are placed occasionally. This organization has a website, but it is used for customer transactions and not recruitment.
ORGANIZATION 2 – CO2	FINANCIAL SERVICES	This organization caters to the movement of money to, from and within Guyana. The firm has a service model that utilizes contracted agents to provide their services. The focus of the organization is the local environment, but it has a regional and international reach through sister and parent companies and license arrangements. There is a social media presence where advertisements for graduates are placed when vacancies arise. The organization does not have a website but there is a link on the parent's website, but it is not used for recruitment.
ORGANIZATION 3 - CO3	INFORMATION & COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY	This organization provides a range of services to the local environment and is a large employer in Guyana. They have a vibrant social media presence and a website, both of which are used for recruitment. The ownership is international, but this is a relatively new status.
ORGANIZATION 4 – CO4	EDUCATION SERVICES	This organization provides a wide range of education services targeting both local and international students. They have both a website and social media presence which are used for marketing their services but neither for recruitment of graduates.
ORGANIZATION 5 – CO5	MARKETING & DISTRIBUTION	This organization is a large employer and markets and distributes local and imported products. They also export products. They have both local and international reach and experience. There is a presence on social media and a corporate website, neither of which support graduate recruitment.
ORGANIZATION 6 – CO6	MEDICAL SERVICES	This organization is a niche provider of medical services to the local environment. This local firm is a subsidiary of a larger organization with a broad portfolio. They have both local and international experience. There is only a head office social media presence which supports recruitment. There is no subsidiary or head office website.
ORGANIZATION 7 – CO7	RECRUITMENT SERVICES	This organization is small and provides independent recruitment services. There is local and international experience and reach. There is both a social media presence and a website that support graduate recruitment.
ORGANIZATION 8 – CO8	HIGHER EDUCATION	This organization is responsible for the large majority of graduates in Guyana. Despite the absence of statistics, based on graduating cohorts of the main providers of higher education, it is estimated that this organization produces more than 80% of the graduates in Guyana.

4.7 Data Analysis

There are different types of phenomenological analysis: Thematic analysis (describing and analysing themes), Narrative analysis (participants' chronology), Reflexive analysis (self-awareness of influences on findings), and Creative analysis (visual and performing arts & literature) (Finlay, 2011). However, Gill (2014) opined that all the types of phenomenology (descriptive & interpretive) that he discussed apply some form of

thematic analysis to unravel the experiences of participants by highlighting Giorgio's statement of thematizing a phenomenon of consciousness to Smith's call for the analysis of structural or thematic aspects of experience Giorgi, 1997 cited in Gill, 2014; Smith, 2009 cited in Gill, 2014). As a result of this study not focusing on participants' story of events or experiences, their examination of how the context and the relationship between researcher and participants have influenced the data, nor the use of poetry, prose, drama, visual arts and dance to express or represent the voice of researcher and illustrate the lived experience, the three types of associated analysis were rejected in favour of thematic analysis (Findlay, 2011). Thematic analysis was identified as the method aligned to the philosophy and methodology of this research and was used for data analysis.

Thematic analysis (TA) is a method used to identify, analyze, interpret, and report patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis has been identified as a suitable method for qualitative data analysis that is not tied to a specific philosophy or theoretical perspective and even has methodological flexibility in terms of small or large data sets (Clarke et al., 2015). Braun and Clarke (2016) have highlighted that TA is frequently misunderstood as a singular method which belies the variations that exist with significant characteristic divergences (Braun and Clarke, (2021). With this caution in mind, this study will utilize the six steps of TA proposed by Braun & Clark (2006) and Braun, Clarke & Weate, (2016).

Table 6. Steps taken in Thematic Analysis of data.

STEPS OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS	DESCRIPTION OF PROCESS & ACTIVITIES EXECUTED
Step 1 – Familiarizing yourself with the data	Transcribing the data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
Step 2 – Generating initial codes	Coding line by line of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
Step 3 – Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.

Step 4 – Reviewing themes	Check if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set.
Step 5 – Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
Step 6 – Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis, selecting vivid, compelling, extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

In line with the steps outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006), the first step taken was to become familiar with the data. The recorded interviews were uploaded to the Otter.ai software and transcriptions were provided. From the initial reading it was clear that the transcripts need to be corrected as the software did not transcribe several words correctly – possibly due to the Guyanese accent and creolese (Guyanese dialect) interjections. All recordings were re-played, and interview transcripts were reviewed and corrected twice. Additionally, all of the participants' names and references to their organizations were anonymized with the codes that were developed. This reading and correcting provided quite a bit of familiarization with the data collected. Some initial ideas were noted for future reference. Each interview transcript was then given a code on the front page that was designed to protect the identity of participants. Demographic data that was collected on each participant was written up on paper and attached to the individual transcripts. Recruitment and selection documents that were requested came by email and those were stored electronically.

In the second stage, line by line coding was utilized. Each transcript was re-formatted to widen the right-side margin by two inches to allow for hand-written comments close to the text being coded. This line-by-line coding improved the familiarity with the data and started to raise awareness of patterns across participants. Codes from the first two interviews were collated resulting in 181 codes. This suggested the need for a method that was a bit more efficient in terms of time. The use of the NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software (NVivo) was initiated. All of the interview transcripts were imported

into NVivo to restart the coding process. I now had the benefit of coded hard copy transcripts and coded transcripts in NVivo. This was a necessary safeguard for this researcher since there was only a small amount of familiarity with the software. However, NVivo helped with the collating of data from the various transcripts for each code as shown in Figure   below. Eight categories were initially created from the coded sections of the interview transcripts.

The search for themes at Step 3 was messy. This search for themes began in line with the guidance from Ryan & Bernard (2003) cited in Bryman and Bell, 2015 – looking for repetitions, indigenous typologies, metaphors and analogies, transitions, similarities and differences, linguistic connectors, missing data, and theory related material. This search required re-reading the coded data in line with the research questions. It resulted in the collapse of some of the initial categories and the formation of new ones. This process of reviewing and revisiting the data resulted in thirteen categories.

Step 4 represented the evaluation of whether the provisional themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set. Here there was the process of peer review built into the research process through review and feedback from the supervisory team who probed and challenged whether the various extracts worked for the themes identified. This process resulted in further refining of the categories and themes for the data extracts. This refinement resulted in seven themes and twenty-one sub-themes.

Figure showing a sample of the lists generated in NVivo of initial codes.

Step 5 commenced with the defining and naming of themes and the work of creating a data structure adapted from Corley & Gioia (2004) cited in Gioia et al., (2013). (Figure 2)

FIRST ORDER CONCEPTS	SECOND ORDER THEMES	AGGREGATE DIMENSIONS
	SUBORDINATE THEMES	SUPER-ORDINATE THEMES
Communication equals confidence		
The articulation of technical skills		
The presentation of self		
Ability to speak english		
Shows current or futuristic thinking	Conceptualizing Communication	
Ability to show empathy		
Is impacted by nervousness		
Ability to build rapport with stakeholders		
Simply communication without context		
Empathy, caring, encouragement		
Ability to handle stress		Employers' inconsistent conceptualization of graduate soft skills
Enthusiasm, individual mannerisms, punctuality		
Organizational Fit		
Ability to understand scenarios and the articulation and application of technical skills		
Mental toughness, acknowledging ignorance, asking relevant questions		
Adaptability and willingness to learn		
Work experience and exposure	Conceptualizing soft skill priorities	
Presentation of self, answering politely and in an inspiring way		
Empathy, leadership and support		
Work experience and support		
Critical thinking and problem solving		
Teamwork, encourage and motivate		
Application of technical skills		
Basic comprehension		
Ambition and perseverence		

Figure 4. RQ3 Data Structure. Excerpt of data structure created during Data Analysis.

This data structure allows for the identification of first order concepts that are participant centric terms and codes, grouped to identify second order themes that are generated by the researcher acting as an 'intelligent agent' in the theoretical realm, followed by another stage of analysis to investigate whether it is possible to further distill the second order themes to identify further thematic outcomes of aggregate or overarching dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013). Hence the data structure reflects the perspective of participants (employers) which may or may not coincide with the literature, e.g., employers' identification of critical thinking and problem solving as 'soft skills'. While the data structure helps to provide a visual representation of the progression of the analysis of the data from the interviews, it also helps to demonstrate rigour which is important in the conduct of qualitative research (Pratt, 2008; Tracy, 2010 cited as Gioia et al., 2013).

Additionally, an alignment spreadsheet was produced to ensure that the required alignment between the themes, the research aim, research objectives, and the research questions as shown by the excerpt of headings.

Figure 5. Excerpt of spreadsheet showing alignment categories used during analysis.

RESEARCH AIM	RESEARCH OBJECTIVES	RESEARCH QUESTIONS	SUPERORDINATE THEMES	SUBORDINATE THEMES

The final stage of the analysis process involves the writing up of the report. This involved several drafts and supervisory peer review. During the write up which focuses on illustrating how the themes answer the research questions, a number of diagrams were produced. This section also required statements on whether the research objectives were met.

4.8 Summary of Philosophy and Methodology

In conclusion, it should be highlighted that the chosen philosophy of subjectivism/ interpretivism provides an approach that will result in an investigation of the challenges with soft skills. This will yield results of understanding the phenomena. Conclusions to be drawn from the data collected are the soft skills that employers perceive are

important and are missing in new graduates and how they are conceptualized, revelations of how employers feel during the processes of recruitment and selection, and recommendations for improvement of signaling of soft skills by employers and opportunities for improved selection amongst new graduates. Results and conclusions will be time and organization bound. Results and conclusions drawn are also likely to be subjective based on the nature of data collected. Nevertheless, they will provide valuable insight to begin the awareness drive as well as a general direction that stakeholders can use for deeper research and construction of corrective action.

Chapter 5: FINDINGS

5.1 Chapter Introduction and Overview

The collected data reveals several insights about the recruitment and selection of graduates with desirable soft skills from the perceptions of interviewed employers. The chapter summarizes employers' responses and the emergent themes across and within the interviews and documentation collected. This provides the structure for the presentation of findings.

Table 7. Descriptive and Demographic Findings

Participant Pseudonym	Education	HR qualifications	Public Social profile	Employer Branding	LinkedIn profile
HE8	Doctorate	Nil	Yes	Yes	Yes
HR1	MBA	Nil	Nil	No	No
FN1	MBA	Nil	Yes	No	Yes
CS1	DBA	Nil	Yes	No	Yes
CS2	MBA	Nil	Nil	No	Nil
FN2	MBA	Nil	Yes	No	Yes
CS3	MBA	Nil	Yes	No	Yes
FN3	MBA	Nil	Yes	No	Yes
FN4	Not disclosed	Not disclosed	Nil	No	Nil
HR4	BSc	Nil	Yes	No	Yes
CS4	MSc	Nil	Yes	Yes	Yes
CS5	BA	Nil	Yes	No	Yes
CS6	MSc	Nil	Yes	No	Yes
IR1	BA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

A review of participants profiles and demographic information provided by participants revealed that only the independent recruiter possessed training or qualifications relevant to graduate recruitment and selection. Further, the majority of the participants' profiles did not support their employer's brand or graduate recruitment and selection in any way and only showed personal information. This is not unusual since they are personal profiles but were examined from the perspective that they could be reviewed

by job seekers in their quest for information about recruiters and some insight to the organization in light of the supposed trust in the LinkedIn platform.

Table 8. Descriptive findings of soft skill requirements of most recent graduate vacancy notices by organization

ORGANIZATION	Requirements listed in advertisements
CO1	Degree; Work experience
CO2	Degree; experience; able to research & analyze; high confidentiality; willing to travel
CO3	Degree; experience
CO4	Degree; work experience
CO5	N/A
CO6	Degree; work experience; age; customer friendly; willing to shift work
CO7	Degree; work experience; people oriented; results driven; leadership skills; listening; negotiation & presentation skills; interpersonal skills
CO8	Degree; work experience; core competencies- relationship management; communication skills; leadership; ethical practices

Findings from data collected show a predominance of qualifications and work experience in employers advertisements targeted at graduates, despite their desire for soft skills.

Table 9. Link between Study Objectives and Themes

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes	RO's
Employers' inconsistent conceptualization of graduate soft skills	• Conceptualizing Communication • Conceptualizing soft skill priorities	Objective 1 Objective 1
Communication and signaling deficiencies	• No feedback giving behaviour • Limited employer branding/image management • Limited signal evaluation competence and learning	Objective 2 Objective 2 Objective 2
Employer/Institutional issues affect recruitment and selection processes	• Lack of strategic activities and focus • Unsupportive Employer Attitudes and perspectives • Perceived lack of competence due to under-exposure/inexperience	Objective 2 Objective 2 Objective 2 Objective 2

	• Inadequate Resources	
External environmental considerations	• Economic factors • Other factors	Objective 2 Objective 2
Objective 1: To examine employers' perceptions and conceptualizations of the soft skills that graduates need and the deficits encountered Objective 2: To explore the recruitment and selection practices which employers utilize to identify desirable soft skills in graduates.		

5.2 Superordinate Theme 1: Employers' inconsistent conceptualization of graduate soft skills

The following section discusses how employers conceptualize the desired graduate soft skills and the deficiencies being experienced as contributors to the challenges employers face in employing graduates with desirable soft skills. Two subordinate themes are identified for discussion within this theme, and these are: 1. Conceptualizing communication; 2. Conceptualizing soft skill priorities.

The analysis of the findings is structured around these two subordinate themes, which are relevant to the main theme of Employers' inconsistent conceptualization of graduate soft skills and will contribute to answering the following research question: *How do employers perceive the conceptualization of desirable graduate soft skills?*

5.2.1 Theme 1: Subordinate Theme1: Conceptualizing Communication

Each of the fourteen participants in the study indicated that graduate soft skills were important and went on to identify soft skills which were perceived as desirable for graduates to possess for the world of work. Further, all fourteen participants identified Communication as a desirable soft skill. Respondents were not asked to rank their desired soft skills, so this result does not mean that it is the highest ranked soft skill for participants, but it was the soft skill cited by the most participants. A review of the feedback shared by participants highlighted similarities and differences in employers' conceptualizations of the soft skill 'communication'.

Four of the fourteen participants listed communication as one of the desirable graduate soft skills without context or explanation (Participants HR1, FN2, FN3 and IR8).

Participants listed soft skills that were desirable for graduates to possess and in some cases were perceived as deficits in graduates during recruitment and selection. In this case there was nothing to suggest how these participants conceptualized the soft skill of communication.

Two participants aligned poor communication with a lack of confidence and hesitations when responding to questions asked (CS6, FN4). For example, Participant CS6 stated,

"and I want to stress like confidence as a subset of oral communication…Candidates are not confident in their responses……their answers…..their whole body communication….their whole body language."

However, one participant countered this perspective with an explanation of nervousness on the part of participants which may distort the true representation of the graduates' communication ability. Participant CS2 stated,

"But the thing about communication, I think sometimes its nerves. You walk into a room, and you see all these people………and it can be overpowering."

On the issue of nervousness affecting candidates' communication ability, one participant highlighted a caution that is issued by their organization to ensure that graduates are put at ease so that their true abilities could be revealed by giving them a time slot and sticking with it to reduce anxiety. Participant HR5 declared that

"Waiting always agitates a human brain……..so you give them a time slot and stick to the time slot and the output from the employees will be 100% better than we expect."

Three participants associated communication with the ability of graduates to articulate their technical skills, apply them to scenarios given during interviews and make a point when asked a specific question (CS2, CS4, CS3). This highlights the scope and potential confusion of what are "soft skills" as employers assess some amount of technical competence for soft skills as stated by participants below:

Participant CS2 who focused on articulation stated that:

"It's not just having the technical knowledge……but really being able to articulate it".

While Participant CS3 indicated satisfaction with graduates when,

"They could make a point…in a logical manner, and they didn't have to cuss down and the typical approach".

Another conceptualization of the soft skill Communication was perceived as synonymous with how graduates presented themselves. This included speaking with politeness and proper sentences and speaking English Language (HE5, HR4).

The conceptualization of communication with speaking English was identified when Participant HR5 shared that communication was not a challenge since the graduates spoke English as shown below:

"Communication is perfect. There is no wrong communication as we are the only Caribbean country who talks in English, communication is not a barrier."

Further perspectives of graduates' communication skills were garnered from the candidates' enthusiasm about the prospective job as well as how the interviewed graduates think, whether current or futuristic, their ability to build rapport with clients and team members and their ability to show empathy (FN1, CS7).

Participant FN1 agreed by stating that:

"I look for two main things, their communication and how enthusiastic they are in terms of how they respond to the areas that I would ask them….it allows me to get an idea how they're thinking, whether they're forward thinking….whether they're thinking in the present or in the future"

While participant CS7 wanted his graduates to:

"be able to really understand and bring themselves down to the level and communicate with the patient in a way that gives the patient comfort in sharing more information….and their interactions with other members of the care team"

All participants acknowledged that Communication is an important soft skill for graduates to possess. The diversity in the associations with communication that employers shared illustrates some of the challenges inherent in the process of conceptualizing the soft skills in question and ensuring that all stakeholders have a consistent understanding of the desired skills, especially for the processes of recruitment and selection.

5.2.2 Theme 1: Subordinate Theme 2: Conceptualizing soft skill priorities

The data was analyzed by organization to check whether any differences or similarities existed between the different organizations and potentially between different sub-sectors of the service sector in Guyana. Eight organizations participated in this study, seven employer organizations (including an independent recruiter) and one higher education institution. The interviews from the managers of the seven employer organizations were analyzed to produce the following findings.

A review of the experiences shared from the three participants of Organization 1 suggests a focus on the environmental context in which graduate recruitment and selection is conducted, highlighting the toughness of the environment. Participants from this organization stressed soft skills of empathy, caring, encouragement and motivation of staff to deal with a tough environment, "a heavy dose of empathy… work with them (staff) to encourage them, motivate them" (CS1), the ability to handle stress associated with a tough environment and a lack of exposure due to the local operating environment, " One of the most important things we look for their ability to handle stress……….their ability to make decisions…..but I don't think they handle stress very well" (HR1). Notwithstanding the above suggestion, the third interviewee suggested a focus on enthusiasm, individual mannerisms, punctuality, and other such personal attributes as

desirable soft skills, "I would look for how enthusiastic they are…….their mannerisms in terms of when they get to there (to the interview), how they act" (FN1).

Organization 2 was represented by two managers participating in the study and their experiences suggest an organizational focus on work experience. Participant CS2 focused on work experience and the ability to understand scenarios, articulation, and the application of technical skills "working experience is big……the ability to move away from the text….it's knowing the hard skill….being able to articulate it and bring that to a particular situation………apply that hard skill, that knowledge, that technical stuff that you have to different scenarios" while Participant FN2 expressed an interest in work ethic and the desire to see candidates' interaction with peers and subordinates if possible "you need some sort of role playing…..I would like to see that person operating in real life".

Organization 3 was represented by two participants whose shared experiences suggest individual outlooks and focus. Participant CS3 stressed empathy and caring to deal with a tough environment as well as a lack of exposure which negatively impacts decision making skills and the ability to think, "the biggest, most important thing is empathy,…the ability to think….and that's just a function of exposure, like learning from just osmosis". FN3 highlighted a preference for displays of mental toughness and the comfort of graduates admitting they do not know the answer to interview questions but also asking the relevant questions to process a solution, "I look for mental toughness,……the ability to take a step back and say I don't know….if you don't have the ability to do that it's a big red flag for me".

Three participants shared their experiences from Organization 4. These experiences did not reflect a trend in the focus of desired soft skills and deficiencies, though two participants highlighted the adaptability of graduates and their wiliness to learn. Participant CS4 focused on the work experience and exposure of graduates "Soft skills is not a criteria we can set here, so mostly technical and work experience". This

participant also showed an interest in the organizational fit of the candidates and their adaptability, and willingness to learn which was shared by Participant FN4 "I would like to see the attitude in the sense of the willingness to learn. Will the person be adaptable and make good of the learning that we will be training them for". Participant HR4 focused on the personal attributes of presentation of self, answering politely and in an inspiring way, "the way you present yourself plays almost 60% of getting the job….I feel like your own interpersonal skills and your soft skills play 60% while only 40% plays on your CV".

Organization 5 was represented by one participant whose focus was teamwork, basic comprehension and the 'inseparable' combination of problem-solving and critical thinking, "I would say problem solving and oral communication where confidence is a subset of oral communication and basic comprehension, …..the ability to work as a team, I like to put problem solving and critical thinking together because I believe they belong in the same box" CS5. The soft skills priority showing the need to understand, think and problem solve. Organization 6 was also represented by one participant whose focus was more skewed to attitudes – attitude of willingness and humility, ambition, and perseverance "attitude is probably the biggest….attitude of willingness, of humility and have an ambition". Organization 7 was represented by the lone independent recruiter who indicated the widest range of soft skill priorities – interpersonal skills, business acumen, ambition, customer service, professionalism, business ethics and work experience.

A review of the findings by organization from the seven organizations recruiting graduates suggests that there is no clear organizational focus or conceptualization of graduate soft skills for recruitment and selection. Functionally, there were six C-Suite respondents, four functional/departmental managers and three human resources managers.

Three of the six C-Suite managers showed an interest in graduate soft skills such as empathy, leadership, and support from graduates (CS1, CS2, CS3). Work experience and exposure was deemed a valuable soft skill by Participants CS2, CS3, and CS4. Three C-Suite managers felt that the graduate soft skills of problem solving, and critical thinking should be found together and indicated that this pair of soft skills was a valuable duo for graduates to possess. While Participant CS2 highlighted the desire for problem solving in graduates, no mention was made of critical thinking. Teamwork was highlighted by Participants CS2 and CS6 as desirable graduate soft skills. It should be highlighted that the analysis of these findings shows that all except one C-Suite manager indicated at least one unique desirable soft skill: Encourage and motivate staff (CS1); application of technical skills (CS2); decision making (CS4); Basic comprehension (CS6); ambition and perseverance (CS7). This representation of what these managers are evaluating from graduates during recruitment and selection suggests a lack of consistency in what managers view as desirable graduate soft skills.

Functionally, there were four managers representing the functions of Operations and Finance. Two functional managers highlighted the soft skill of problem solving as desirable (FN2, FN3). All other soft skills indicated were uniquely conceptualized and articulated: Enthusiasm and a good thought process (FN1); work ethic (FN2); interpersonal skills, mental toughness, and situational awareness (FN3); organizational fit, adaptable, ability to learn (FN4). These findings illustrate a lack of consistency in the soft skills perceived as desirable at the departmental level.

The three participants that are directly responsible for HR activities in their organization followed a similar trend to the other subsets analyzed above. Only one soft skill was identified by two participants, namely, interpersonal skills (HR4, IR8). All other soft skills identified as desirable were unique to each participant: Problem solving, critical thinking, decision making, managing stress (HR1); politeness, presenting self (HR4); business acumen, customer service, professionalism, business ethics, work experience (IR8).

Conceptually, there was little consistency within the various levels and recruitment roles. At each level, only half or less of the participants shared a common conceptualization of what was desired from graduates.

5.2.3 Summary: Theme 1: Employers' inconsistent conceptualization of graduate soft skills

Data collected from participants showed that there are several interpretations of the concept of soft skills, and the way participants express which ones are desirable, which suggests that there is a lack of agreement on what to look for and how to identify it. The processes of graduate recruitment and selection usually utilize a cross-section of individuals with various roles and perspectives in the organization. The absence of a consistent conceptualization of soft skills could result in challenges during both recruitment and selection. This inconsistency is illustrated in the terms used for various skills and what are the desirable ones from the participants' accounts. The findings show that there is agreement on the soft skill (Communication) that is desired and perceived missing in graduates, however, participants' perspectives and conceptualizations are varied. The analysis of participants' views was done by organization and by functional contribution to the organization and the inconsistencies were also evident there. This dispersion could add to the challenges that employers face when engaged in graduate recruitment and selection. Adding to this challenge of conceptualization is the occurrence of soft skills identified by employers that are not strictly skills, such as, a lack of experience or insufficient exposure. This inconsistency in conceptualization not only affects what the employer is looking for and what they identify as a gap but has the potential to affect what graduates demonstrate during recruitment and selection.

5.3 Superordinate Theme 2: Communication and Signalling Deficiencies

The following section discusses the ability and practice of employers signalling their desired soft skills to graduates. All fourteen participants shared experiences that mentioned challenges of communication. The findings reveal that employers indicated are challenged in the articulation of desired graduate soft skills and the associated

evaluation required for recruitment and selection. They also acknowledged that in line with their desired graduate soft skills, they need to make changes to their recruitment and selection processes. Three subordinate themes are identified for discussion within this theme, and these are: 1. Limited employer branding/image management; 2. No feedback giving behaviour; 3. Limited signal evaluation competence and learning.

The analysis of the findings is structured around these three subordinate themes, which are relevant to the main theme of Communication and Signaling deficiencies and will contribute to answering the following research questions: *How do employers in the service sector in Guyana describe their recruitment and selection activities in relation to graduates with desirable soft skills? How may employers' perceptions of graduates' soft skills be influenced by the business, socio-economic, and labour-market context of Guyana?*

5.3.1 Theme 2: Subordinate Theme 1: Limited employer branding/image management

An element of signalling in recruitment and selection is branding and image management for organizations. An aspect of SHRM is deciding what message is to be communicated to external stakeholders, in this case, graduates. This is considered a valuable aspect of graduate recruitment which supports the attraction of the 'right' applicants. There was evidence of the lack of certain activities that focused on the image of the organization or broader graduate applicant attraction as explained by Participant CS2, also suggesting a lack of strategic focus. This deficiency was acknowledged by the interviewee in the statement that posits the need to work on the company's image:

"I think we still need to work a little on our image and what potential employees may see (of) organization CO2 ….. but I think, over the years, I don't think we've deliberately done anything."

An organization's image has physical and/or reputational elements. Interviewees related experiences that affected individual organizations as well as it was perceived to

stigmatize an entire industry (sector) thus affecting the ability of the organization to attract suitable graduates as outlined by the following participants and agreed by others:

"when they find out where they're going to go and work ……….the location of the office, that becomes a turn off." Participant CS7

"I think part of it lies in our sector, It's just not sexy……I believe that our sector is somewhat stigmatized." Participant CS1

"I think, to some extent, the gap that I see is the perception that persons have with the industry." Participant FN1

Branding and image management are communication tools which the organization can use to signal to potential applicants which soft skills they value such that they can self-identify with the organization and available job (Celani & Singh, 2011).

5.3.2 Theme 2: Subordinate Theme 2: No feedback giving behaviour

Employers perceive that graduates are in general lacking the soft skill of communication but there is also feedback received that posits alternative and additional explanations for some of what is perceived as deficiencies in graduates. It is accepted by employers that the recruitment and selection processes can be nerve wracking for candidates and this can influence graduates ability to perform acceptably.

"the thing about communication, I think sometimes it's nerve, you walk into a room and you see all these people or whatever the case, and it can be overpowering at times. But certainly that is a soft skills that as a graduate you'll need because if you know it, you can't articulate it, you are in trouble." Participant CS2

In addition, graduates have shown by their activities that they will prepare for recruitment and selection activities in ways that will match employers' desires. Therefore, it can be suggested that graduates display what they anticipate employers

would appreciate and what would help them progress in the recruitment and selection process as related by Participant CS7 below:

"Some people will give answers that they think are the answers that should be given as opposed to…….the answers they genuinely believe." Participant CS7

This perceived graduate deficiency of knowing which soft skills employers desire can be attributed in part to the lack of feedback from employers to graduates. Unfortunately, because most employers do not provide feedback to applicants, there may not be the requisite learning taking place in future cycles of recruitment and selection. When asked about the organization's feedback to applicants, the response dealt with applicants contact with the organization where feedback seems to be equated with queries as shared by Participant HR1.

"From time to time, persons may call it's not it doesn't happen frequently, but persons may call if they need any kind of, clear, if they need any clear guidance and what exactly is required, but this rarely happens." Participant HR1

While other organizations have a written or unwritten policy of not providing feedback based on unfavorable situations in the past as explained below:

"No, it is not company policy to do so (give feedback). From time to time I have in the actual interview and you realize someone is really hopelessly going, I have from time to time said, Listen, if you were to be, I usually delicate to say if you are to be called back for a second interview, I would like to give you some feedback, if you don't mind give them but that is not our policy. And it is actually frowned upon because people can react in different ways." Participant CS6

There were two individual managers (CS6 and FN1) who each gave feedback based on their own objectives for the process and the interaction.

"For me, for me, I enjoy it. Whether or not we have a, an employee at the end of that interview, I enjoy it because I tend to use the opportunity that I have. At one time I'm meeting the persons to try to impart something on them." Participant FN1

The findings show that employers' responses to graduates' perceived deficiency in soft skills could also have a negative impact on graduates. A lack of feedback to graduate applicants supports their continued ignorance of what they are lacking or what they need to demonstrate during recruitment and selection.

5.3.3 Theme 2: Subordinate Theme 3: Limited signal evaluation competence and learning

Eleven participants indicated there are some challenges with their articulation and evaluation of graduate soft skills. Participant CS2 stressed the need to be clear about what soft skills are required while Participant FN2 shared the experience of opting for on the job training as an alternative to articulation and evaluation of soft skills during recruitment and selection.

"you need to be clear about the soft skills that you need, because sometimes that's another thing as an organization, (is) not necessarily clear, and (be) sure about what you're looking for, in the ideal candidate. So first and foremost, as an organization, you need to be clear about the skills that you're looking for outside of the technical, what will match, what fits your culture, etc, you need to be absolutely clear about that." Participant CS2

"I don't know that you communicate it. But you will need to do I would say intense training, once they come on, kind of roll them into that party want them to soft skills." Participant FN2

One participant specifically indicated that they had trouble communicating exactly what was the soft skill they needed even as it is perceived that graduates also struggle to communicate their soft skills.

"But you have to go by answers given. And, and you have to give them enough opportunities to, to, to see that to try to get to the real there. And as much as a short interview, to get the broad problems, how they approach people, dealing with people and treating people or treating with others and teams and things like that. I'm struggling to find examples right now, specific examples, but or to really describe it in a way that what they look for and attitude in an interview. It's, it is a soft skill that I can't quite articulate." Participant CS7

They also acknowledge that it is possible they do not communicate fully to graduates what soft skills they need from them, and they may need to make some changes at recruitment.

"We do mention issues related to soft skills. But I don't know that it's, it may not be an abundance, you know, it may not be a lot of signaling. In terms of terms of soft skills, it may not be enough signaling of soft skills, and pragmatically I believe that those who want to apply will apply regardless of whether I signal heavily or not and, again, this might be, I may just be jaundiced by my own sector experience." Participant CS1

"Presenting ourselves communicating our capacities and presenting our capacities to the to the employee is very much needed there." Participant FN4

There is also mention that their selection processes are also not geared towards identifying soft skills, partly because it is not felt that the process can unearth the necessary soft skills information but also their documents have not been updated from an organization perspective.

"I don't think that we put it (soft skills)…….Even though we want to imply it and we know this is what we're looking for………We need to do some changes to our job ad." Participant HR1

"I don't think a superficial question on the issue of, So tell me, how do you how you communicate with………I think there's a lot more depth that's necessary in terms of

either more of a deep dive into in the interview process with our applicants to see how they communicate and the broader issues of soft skills, but most important communication." Participant CS1

Some employers indicated that they have no experience with soft skills evaluation and selection tools, or they have trouble evaluating soft skills from resumes in the Guyanese environment. While this could be a competency issue from lack of experience, there is also a challenge emanating from the local environment and culture that affects managers' interpretation of signals sent by graduates as shared below:

"it's very hard to understand the soft skills, you will agree that even though they mentioned that they are good at this and that. You know, if you would have worked with recruitments in the US, mostly the search for it's called soft skills in the resume itself. Yeah, but still it is that is not a criteria we can set here." Participant CS4

Further, there is specific mention of employers not modeling their desired soft skills themselves. This is important when put in the context of modeling as a form of communication and employer signaling as outlined by Participant CS3 when relating a scenario of a graduate waiting to be interviewed.

"Why are you here? Oh, waiting on HR. How long you been waiting? 45 minutes. It's unacceptable. Okay, right. Like, is this unacceptable. Like, you can't want me to work with you and you got me sitting down, in an, if you remember the lobby, sit downstairs in the lobby, it is absolutely hot, right, for 45 minutes. So again, that goes back to, a lot of empathy on the employers part. Right. And if you don't show empathy, how are you, how are you going to get your current and prospective employees to wanna show empathy." Participant CS3

This modeling of soft skills was identified by another participant as the reason why soft skills need to be dealt with on the job and not evaluated during recruitment and selection.

"they have to see those things in action from my perspective, we have to see somebody with a proper work ethic and see them advancing and you will copy it." Participant FN2

The articulation and communication of soft skills by participants was identified as a challenge. Ineffective communication of the organization's needs from graduates can impact the responses and eventual outcomes from recruitment and selection. The challenge of communication extended to evaluation of graduates' soft skills which some participants confessed an inability to do.

5.3.4 Summary: Theme 2: Communication and Signaling deficiencies

The findings show that communication and signaling hurdles have impacted the process by which employers are able to communicate clearly what their needs are, and graduates are able to receive and decode that information in a way that provides guidance to their future actions. The findings also illustrate that many of these hurdles are influenced by the political, socio-economic and labour market context in which the participants in the study operate.

5.4 Superordinate Theme 3: Employer/Institutional issues affect recruitment and selection processes

This section presents the employer and institutional challenges that were described when participants related their experiences with graduate recruitment and selection activities. From the accounts of participants' experiences, several challenges existed which were internal to the organization. These challenges extended from the perspective of inadequate resources to one of perceived lack of strategy. Four subordinate themes are identified for discussion within this theme, and these are: 1. Lack of strategic activities and focus; 2. Unsupportive Employer attitudes and perspectives; 3. Perceived Lack of competence due to under-exposure/inexperience and 4. Inadequate resources.

The analysis of the findings is structured around these four subordinate themes, which are relevant to the main theme of Employer/Institutional challenges and will contribute to answering the following research questions: *How do employers in the service sector in Guyana describe their recruitment and selection activities in relation to graduates with desirable soft skills? How may employers' perceptions of graduates' soft skills be influenced by the business, socio-economic, and labour-market context of Guyana?*

5.4.1 Theme 3: Subordinate Theme 1: Lack of strategic activities and focus

The HRM literature has evolved to include a strategic element where HRM is a necessary part of the organization's strategy, sometimes referred to as SHRM as outlined in the Literature Review. Having a strategic direction for the organization's human resources includes assessing and responding to the external environment and planning, monitoring, and evaluating the human resource needs to support the achievement of organizational objectives (Mekonnen & Azaj, 2020). In several organizations in the study, participants described the HR function/processes with characteristics suggesting a lack of strategic focus. Eight participants described experiences that were suggestive of a lack of strategic HR activities. These experiences included traditional processes for graduate recruitment and selection which have not evolved over time in response to environmental changes including the incorporation of activities geared towards graduate soft skills attraction and identification, a lack of activities focused on the image of their organization or broader applicant attraction activities and an absence of tracking and measuring graduate recruitment and selection activities.

According to seven participants, both recruitment and selection processes are applied the same way they have been for some time in the past, except for greater use of the internet in recruitment. This traditional approach does not give participants confidence or enthusiasm about the process and does not show evidence of evolving to meet the changes being experienced in the external environment – an element of a strategic focus. Examples of these experiences are shared by:

Participant FN3 who felt that while this approach worked in the past where the focus was on personnel management, it is not suitable in the current environment which requires a more strategic intent of using organizational strengths to mitigate threats in the environment:

"HR traditionally……has been, you have somebody sitting there who's looking at people's leave and pension and that kind of stuff. And then they just happen to do recruitment. And so, they just send out applications and post it in the newspapers, people apply, and you're probably the only game in town, so you got everybody applying to your organization."

And by Participant CS7 who expressed his lack of confidence and connection with the process by stating that:

"HR will look for what HR looks for and I'm not sure I can tell what that is."

Thus, suggesting that there is no alignment between HR and other functions of the organization which is suggestive of a lack of strategic direction for HR, while Participant FN3 concurs by emphasizing the changes in the environment that the HR organization has not responded to:

"The market just outgrew the HR organization and you have an HR organization that is just staffed with people that are there forever and not necessarily people who understand the dynamics of the job market today."

Within the traditional processes of some organizations, there was mention of inconsistent processes being implemented as individual participants like Participant FN3 referred to personal adjustments made which are different to the HR processes and would suggest the absence of a strategy for hiring graduate human resources:

"I would say the process as a whole is a little little cluegy, right. Because some jobs are posted in certain places, some are not. The way to apply is different. Sometimes, you

know, you miss jobs that are not generated by marketing, for example, some people (managers) would want to say, hand deliver your resume to head office…….I will say, deliver, or mail to head office in town…….so it's not streamlined. It's not consistent. And then HR handles the scheduling of the interviews, and sometimes it's just the hiring manager, another inconsistency."

Strategy requires measuring and monitoring so that adjustments can be made where necessary to ensure that objectives are achieved. It is therefore expected that tracking initiatives would be implemented as a part of the strategy for human resources. There was no major evidence of measuring and tracking elements of recruitment and selection practiced by employers. This lack of tracking extends to social media profiles of graduates as stated by Participant CS7 when asked about measuring and tracking of graduates and their social media accounts during recruitment and selection. This is noteworthy as recruiters increase their use of social media during recruitment and selection:

"I think it's hard to answer that question because… I'd say, your social media accounts, when it influences the recruiting more or less it's a disqualification. So we really don't know if we were wrong or right in disqualifying somebody because of their activities that they have on social media."

Tracking and measuring elements of recruitment and selection is expected to result in greater understanding of trends and commonalities surrounding these activities which facilitate better decision making especially in situations of information asymmetry – an example proposed by Campion et al., (2019) spoke of practice tests that would signal to applicants the organization's procedures and also provide an opportunity for better quality applicants in the future. Further, as mentioned before, monitoring and measuring performance is an important element of strategy implementation and achievement of objectives. Three participants indicated their intuitive perspective on commonalities which it was perceived would signal the presence of desirable soft skills

even though there was no formal organizational tracking or monitoring of these graduate recruitment and selection variables. Participant CS5 highlighted this perspective by stressing (in creolese) that graduates emanating from areas outside of the urban center of Guyana had fewer opportunities, showed more passion, traveled far, took their time doing their work, they are not fast paced and performed better:

"I found like, some of the regions, they're very passionate, they've not been having more opportunities, they perform well……they are not the fast world. West Coast and Georgetown is not too far (apart) ……but west coast (over the river) people are very cool and take their time. They even spent more time in the road (travelling) to come to office, but still they show more patience than the rest."

Participant CS3 had a slightly different perspective on what commonality signaled a graduate with the desired soft skills. This perspective highlighted a background of schooling, life experiences, and family socialization:

"as terrible as it sounds, make sure you know, the high school that they went to……if they talk about their experiences, in terms of family, you know……..who paid for their studies, if they had to work early, that type of thing, it's big, big, big."

Another diverse perspective on what signals desirable graduate soft skills was shared by Participant FN4 who felt that straightforward responses during selection activities was reliable:

"all the candidates they have been open in their statements….their response has been very straightforward, and they do not limit them (hold back information)." Participant FN4

One participant shared that while he did not feel there were any commonalities that could be identified, a good sign of a candidate with good soft skills would be their tenure in past jobs as stated below:

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"A candidate who's sustaining in an organization for more than two years, not having frequent job changes, this can, definitely going to be beneficial, which I personally look into when I interview candidates." Participant HR4

It is worth noting that the experiences shared above were all anecdotal, different and were not the result of a reliable process that could support good decision making in recruitment and selection.

Four participants indicated that they had not given thought to commonalities among successful soft skill hires, thus suggesting that there was no strategy for recruiting graduates with desirable soft skills. While Participant CS2 noted that he had good and bad experiences from certain identified characteristics and therefore does not feel that there is a reliable and deterministic way to identify a graduate with desirable soft skills, suggesting that a strategy then would be superfluous. He believes it is an individual thing as stated:

"I have never given any thought to it so that I'm actually trying to think about it (commonalities). I don't know. My short answer would be I don't know, the truth is though I think at the end of the day, what I've come to realize it really comes down to individuals."

Unlike the other participants' experiences that suggested a lack of strategic focus in their human resource management of graduate recruitment and selection, one participant related experiences that suggested some strategic focus through utilization of a Balanced Scorecard approach and the Net Promoter Score survey for a people focused strategy and feedback from graduates respectively.

"We do a survey for the people, we do something called as a net promoter score. So an NPS survey that's been rolled out for people who attended the interview, and people who who also got selected as well, to know our strengths and weaknesses, we did we do work on a very high majority of that. So we are able to correct for every interview

that we take..........As a company we have completed job descriptions for each positions, we have our key performance indicators. And we have a balanced scorecard for the organization. So our vision and mission is to achieve the balanced scorecard activities towards the end of the year. So for us to achieve that we definitely need to have a qualified and capable employees in order for this to drive and achieve that towards the end of the year." Participant HR4

The experiences of participants are characterized by a continued traditional approach to graduate recruitment and selection despite environmental changes, a lack of focus on branding and managing the organization's image as a part of its attraction strategy, a lack of measurement and tracking on graduate recruitment and selection and adjustments to processes to account for the presence of desirable soft skills. Based on the experiences of participants, there is evidence to suggest a lack of strategic focus for graduate recruitment and selection which could positively impact the attraction, identification, and selection of graduates with desirable soft skills.

5.4.2 Theme 3: Subordinate Theme 2: Unsupportive Employer Attitudes and perspectives

The attitudes of participants and their colleagues is another theme that was identified from the data analysis that characterized graduate recruitment and selection. Ten participants in the study, described the HR function/processes through lenses that implied attitudes of gut instinct of personnel involved with graduate recruitment and selection, especially those with significant tenure, expediency in approach to recruitment and selection, mistrust of and frustration with existing processes leading to the use of hunches, and individual adaptations to processes.

Participants outlined their use of gut instinct as a default for graduate selection processes. The accounts of three participants are shared below:

"I think outside of whatever you're doing you will have to use ….your gut as well." Participant CS2

"If the department head is convinced with a person, then we feel that (differently) yet we have to go through with it." Participant FN4

"I don't know if it's because I have been doing it over 30 years, but you do get that gut feeling." Participant IR8

Participant FN1 mentioned her emotional side being used in the selection process:

"I just, I just focus on the person themselves. I cling more to my emotional side. So I tend to use that part of me to determine what I need to pick up."

Expediency is another characteristic that the participants referenced where the focus was on task completion in the shortest possible time. Managers need vacancies filled as quickly as possible and HR wants to finish those tasks and move on to the next. Participant CS3 summed it up as follows:

"The department makes the requisition they want, they want staff, they want them now. They write HR, and you want to do it as quickly as possible……… On to the next one. We've found that that approach is quite expedient, right, upfront, but it's absolutely stupid because you pay for it in spades on the back end."

Participants related several experiences of a mistrust and ambivalence of the value of existing HRM processes and whether they could be trusted for recruiting and selecting graduates with the desired soft skills.

"They've been interviews where we, based on the interview based on the panel assessment of a candidate, we have a particular impression, and you hire the person. And it turns out totally, well, not necessarily totally the opposite. But it's not quite what you had in mind, or what you envision based on what was being what happened during the course of the interview." Participant CS2

"We've seen persons actually get high scores with those kinds of tests and asking them to apply what they have learned, even based on the questions they would have answered, and you will find that there is this a discord between the two, there isn't a connection in terms of your what you saw on paper". Participant FN1

"I don't think it has been very effective. There have been times when we would have placed the ad and we didn't find any person that was suitable for the role which would cause us to re advertise again. I will say that the process is, I think it needs some work." Participant HR1

"Yeah, in the competency, it's very hard to understand the soft skills, you will agree that even though they mentioned that they are good at this and that. You know, if you would have worked with recruitments in the US, ……… it's called soft skills in the resume itself. Yeah, but ……… that is not a criteria we can set here." Participant CS4

Employers indicated that their experiences have resulted in them not finding suitable candidates, resorting to their hunches and being ambivalent about what processes would be successful.

"I'm looking for somebody right now in my 'other' operations and can't find anybody. I put out an ad and not a single application. I don't know what's going on. So I don't think we have the luxury of really exploring all of the gaps and weaknesses or strengths of candidates in terms of soft skills." Participant CS1

"We discuss our expectations in terms of qualification experience and general know how because I have a policy ……….. sometimes you find you have a candidate that may not have All the qualification and experience, but they may have the ability." Participant FN1

"I'm not certain putting that (soft skills requirements) in an ad, the person will see it and react exactly how I want them to react it." Participant FN2. This response adds to the previously mentioned perspective that soft skills cannot really be measured in tests and

interviews are problematic because "persons are very good at being able to bluff….say exactly what they think you want to hear." Participant FN2.

While one participant expressed serious frustration at the way the process continues to be managed:

"You go through this selection process, and it happens all the time. You go through this selection process, and then you say, Well, you know, I got a feeling or here is a hunch and your biases override the processes. Absolutely stupid. Then why not just save yourself the agony of this selection process and just go with your hunches?" Participant CS3

"We've tried a number of different things to try to improve that process………not much has really worked." Participant CS1

Participants have indicated their own implementation of different initiatives to support them in graduate recruitment and selection which can cause confusion and inconsistency across the organization and certainly among applicants.

"You're trying to determine or trying to figure out where you need to go with this conversation, you tend to I don't know how to exactly explain it, I just, I just focus on the person themselves." Participant FN1

"I tell HR, which is what is what I will who I want to move forward with, and I make sure that my team and the person, the stakeholders that that person is going to be working with, cross functional stakeholders, get in on the interview, because again, those are the people that are going to be working together just a little bit of a longer process from a selection perspective." Participant FN3

Five participants shared experiences with a wide range of perspectives and biases associated with selecting graduates with desirable soft skills. This could be considered an attitude of dismissal and closure with respect to graduate selection with desired soft

skills. The participants did not show an interest in the possibility but rather shunned the idea. Some employers shared that soft skills would be a problem to test for even though one participant felt that a psychometric test may be able to give some relevant information:

"How do I test soft skills in an interview? Okay. How do I measure a soft skill in a test? that's the first hurdle…… I don't think there is anything other than the psychometric test, which tested to some extent, but not 100%. I don't think there are any other tests that are administered that you can test soft skills (that) you can get a gauge of soft skills from." Participant FN2

"The problem is, how do you assess, I graduated with…….for soft skills? Because as I said to you, there's a standard test for each position in the company. And that was a written test. I don't know how you assess soft skills from a written test. I mean, other than the person being able to communicate effectively, but how do you test work ethic? How do you test teamwork? How do you test leadership skills? On a written test, a written exam? I don't know that you can test soft skills." Participant FN2

"We don't, I don't think that we spend enough time on it. So identifying the gaps would be would be difficult. Some people may come across to you as being a natural leader or something or you get a sense." Participant CS1

Further, Participant CS6 felt that soft skills cannot be taught as expressed below:

"Some believe that it can be taught, I don't believe it can be taught, I think you need to show some basic, critical thinking ability."

Participants expressed attitudes towards elements of graduate recruitment and selection processes as well as towards graduates. These attitudes can have an impact on how processes are implemented as well as can manifest in biases of personnel involved in the recruitment and selection processes. Mistrust and frustration of old and traditional processes are seen to affect the attitude of participants either to inaction and

acceptance or towards implementing their own processes. Biases and perspectives have also had an impact on the way that participants and employers deal with the desired graduate soft skills that are desired since it is felt that they are difficult to evaluate before employment.

5.4.3 Theme 3: Subordinate Theme 3: Perceived lack of competence due to under-exposure/inexperience

The findings suggest that there is a lack of competence with recruitment and selection of graduates with the desired soft skills.

Graduate recruitment and selection activities tend to be infrequent in organizations that have small numbers of graduates on staff which was indicated by most of the organizations in the study. Of the six employer organizations interviewed, the highest number of graduates employed was thirty, in two organizations. Only in two cases was there an annual graduate trainee program with intakes of twelve and two graduates, where both organizations indicated that all participants of the program are not typically retained.   This small number of graduate positions results in irregular graduate recruitment and selection activities thus resulting in a lack of practice and experience by managers.   This lack of experience seems to negatively impact outcomes as shared below:

"When you only have a few on board, it's hard….. So a number of things are tried over the years, but not with much success." Participant –CS1

"we were really struggling with the selection process." Participant CS2

This lack of practice and experience is exacerbated when competing with regional and international organizations who have lots of experience in addition to resources. Participant CS7 shared his frustration in dealing with such competition:

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"They seem extremely skilled at picking off very good people from organizations, so that has made the recruiting environment a lot more challenging. It's not only that you, you're challenged in recruiting, but you have to select candidates and in selecting candidate strive to determine how much stability you have with them."

Findings suggest that a lack of competence exists in the area of post interview feedback. None of the participants indicated a process within the organization to invite or encourage post interview feedback from graduates. One participant indicated that while feedback is not invited, there are times when applicants will make contact to resolve a query as shown below:

"it doesn't happen frequently, but persons may call if they need any kind of, clear, if they need any clear guidance and what exactly is required, but this rarely happens." Participant HR1

But one participant from an individual perspective, used the interview to give and gain feedback.

"And every time you speak to somebody, there is something there that you can impart on them and they can impart on you so I think that part of the process is the what I enjoyed the most, because I knew I will use that opportunity to say some positive thing. And I'm hoping that when they say something to me too, it spark that energy in me." Participant FN1

A lack of competence is further evident in participants' disbelief that soft skills could be tested from resumes and applications. Further, some participants did not feel that soft skills could be assessed in an interview especially using the tools provided or time available as seen below:

"you're given two things that analysis sheet, which you score the candidate on, and you're given the bank of questions that you could ask, or you choose from there to

ask…….it's a case of the person bluffing very good being able to bluff very good. Saying exactly what they think you would like to hear." Participant FN2

"I don't think a superficial question on the issue of so. So tell me, how do you how you communicate with, am, I think some I think there's a lot more depth that's necessary in terms of either more of a deep dive into in the interview process with our Applicants to see how they communicate and the broader issues of soft skills." Participant CS1

Participants further confessed that they do not know how to do such testing. Soft skills assessments were perceived as complicated by candidates who send open applications that were not specific to an existing vacancy thus causing the organization process of mapping competencies to become ineffectual.

"Yeah, in the competency, it's very hard to understand the soft skills, you will agree that even though they mentioned that they are good at this and that." Participant CS4

The lack of experience with newer techniques like structural behavioral interviewing and technological techniques like psychometric testing was shared.

"I think I'm the only person that does structural behavioral interviewing here in Guyana. Okay. I've tried to teach it to others, here that I've worked with….(but) they lead the candidate, or they let the candidate ramble and in structural behavioral interviewing you don't lead the candidate, you just sit and listen." Participant IR8

"I know there are a lot of companies that will do all kinds of psychological tests and so on, and scenarios. We don't we have not done that." Participant CS1

Notwithstanding there were some participants who had some knowledge of newer techniques and implemented changes based on experience and feedback.

"they are standard procedures for us, where we will have to evaluate by set criteria. So, we will have to give our feedback. So, that feedback will influence even the next level of

people who will interview and a small deviation might be there in terms of whether to have a group discussion or a board interview, those deviations are based upon the levels of the interview." Participant CS4

"I interview the person first, I get a sense of Okay, is this something we want to we want to move ahead with. And if the person, you know, passes that, then they start an interview with other stakeholders, including my team, who they're going to be working with." Participant FN3

A lack of competence can be as a result of a lack of continuous development within an organization, especially organizations that have performed credibly in the past but have not changed with the external environment. Organizations that are small are continuously challenged with characteristics which make it difficult to compete in the same way large organizations would. There is usually a challenge to determine the priorities for the use of scarce resources and some decisions look different with hindsight.

5.4.4 Theme 3: Subordinate Theme 4: Inadequate Resources

Participants referred to a lack of resources which included people and time. In addition to small graduate pools for recruitment and selection, employers also experienced inadequate numbers of staff that were needed in the activities of recruitment and selection which affected the activities executed as shared by participant CS7:

"We're understaffed right now just, you know, just haven't been able to get up to delivering in the ways we want to." Participant CS7

Another participant (FN3) referred to the resources required as 'bandwidth' and indicated that the Human Resources function did not have what they needed.

"Our HR just doesn't have the bandwidth to really sit down and think about, okay, what exactly is this hiring manager looking for." Participant FN3

One participant (IR8) that provided recruitment and selection support for employers referenced the resources challenge by proposing that his service is a solution that could be utilized but this alternative has been received with suspicion.

"The HR managers in Guyana look at professional managers as a threat, not as a tool (but) ....I am an extension of you, I am a tool, use me.... You don't have time to screen resumes, you got employee relations and payroll and benefits and all that other stuff to do." Participant IR8

The time required and allowed to complete recruitment and selection tasks is also a challenge. Employers experienced demands for expedient filling of vacancies which tended to be characterized by rushed processes and insufficient time allotted to identifying graduate soft skills.

"But in reality, we don't, you don't get enough of that in......the amount of time to do all that." Participant FN1

Participants acknowledged that more time is required to do a good job in recruitment and selection, especially when looking for soft skills. Two participants shared their perspectives on the issue of time:

"don't rush the recruitment process. Don't rush the selection process. And look in unusual places......15 - 20 minutes you say all the right things. And then stuff shows up when it's time to actually get stuff done." Participant CS3

"I don't think that we spend enough time on it. So identifying the gaps would be difficult. At times, some people may come across to you as being a natural leader or something or you get a sense. But no, we don't spend enough time on those gaps in the interview to identify those gaps in the interview process." Participant CS1

Further, because of the flatness of their organization, one participant noted that it was necessary to fill vacancies quickly to avoid pressuring persons who were performing tasks for vacant roles.

"Time does put a burden for filling vacancies because vacancies add a burden to those performing the functions of the vacant role." Participant HR1

One participant who did not directly highlight time as a challenge did state that there is a need for employers to spend more time in the graduate recruitment and selection process.

"Don't rush the recruitment process, don't rush the selection process." Participant CS3

The participant from the university shared the higher education perspective of time as a resource affecting the presence of desirable soft skills in graduates. He indicated that the presence of soft skills in graduates requires a reversal of their behaviors, and this takes time, usually beyond their tertiary education. This participant went on to opine that employers expect faster results which is not realistic:

"I think that some of the things that appear to not have worked are things that will take more time to work…..we must also recognize that what we are attempting to do is turn around behaviours that have been embedded in our students for many years and it's not a switch that you turn on and off, it is something that takes time" Participant HE5

In achieving objectives, resources are important and human resource management is no different. The inadequacy of human resources to support graduate recruitment and selection will have an impact on the activities employed and their outcomes. Time is also a challenge, especially with the shape of many organizations being relatively flat. The findings suggest that the challenge that organizations face in recruiting and selecting graduates with desirable soft skills is impacted by the availability of resources within organizations.

5.4.5 Summary: Theme 3: Employer/Institutional issues affect recruitment and selection processes

The findings show that there are four main areas of challenges that employers face within their organizations that negatively impact their perception of graduates' soft skill deficiencies during recruitment and selection.

The first identified theme is a lack of strategic focus by organizations where recruitment and selection activities have not evolved to align with external changes nor do organizations appear to have a strategic plan for graduate human resources.

The second theme identified dealt with employers' perspectives and biases on recruitment and selection activities and graduates. These perspectives were ingrained over time and were noticed in the use of hunches and gut instinct, mistrust for new processes and objectives and a belief that graduates belong to a new choosy generation of privilege.

Participants' experiences revealed a lack of competence in personnel involved with graduate recruitment and selection. Participants shared experiences of struggling with selection, discomfort and ignorance of recruiting and selecting for desired soft skills and a general lack of experience and exposure to newer, scientific tools in the field of recruitment and selection. The prevalence of inexperience was the third theme generated.

Inadequate resources was the fourth theme generated where it was determined that employers are challenged to manage graduate recruitment and selection with insufficient staff and inadequate timeframes to do meaningful processes that would support finding graduates with desirable soft skills

5.5 Superordinate Theme 4: External Environmental Considerations

This section presents how various environmental challenges impact employers' ability to recruit and select graduates with their desired soft skills. Two subordinate themes

are identified for discussion within this theme, and these are: 1. Social environmental challenges; 2. Economic environmental challenges.

The analysis of the findings is structured around these two subordinate themes, which are relevant to the main theme of External Environmental Considerations and will contribute to answering the following research question: *How may employers' perceptions of graduates' soft skills be influenced by the business, socio-economic, and labour-market context of Guyana?*

5.5.1 Theme 4: Subordinate Theme 1: Economic factors

Seven respondents pinpointed economic challenges that they perceived had an impact on the recruitment and selection of graduates with desired soft skills. The economics of surviving in low-income Guyana has been identified (in Chapter 2) as an area impacting the recruitment and selection of graduates where the cost of operations, the cost of living and single parent families are challenges which employers encounter. It was determined that because of the prevailing concerns around economics, employers need to use salary information as a motivator and attraction for applicants.

"it's because of the challenge of attracting people to the sector, I think we may have actually had to put in what the salary, a range for the salary figure." Participant CS1

In addition to the already challenged environment, the discovery and production of crude oil in Guyana has introduced an influx of new companies and a growing oil and gas sector which has created a new portfolio of economic pressures for employers in the non-oil and gas service sector. Employers are challenged with increased competition for staff and their affordable but uncompetitive salaries.

"We're not in a position at the moment to compete with oil and gas." Participant CS7

This has led employers to treat salary information as necessary during recruitment and selection, over and above soft skills requirements emphasizing the impact of the environment on employers' activities.

"Like everyone keeps complaining about not finding a job. But all the young people that I meet that complain when I ask them, where have you applied, they're only applying to specific segments, like oil and gas, ………..to position themselves in a very attractive way." Participant CS6

"But I think at the end of the day, people want to work (and) get a decent salary. So I think salary is very big in terms of that attraction that you're talking about the more recruitment from that perspective, and so I think it's important that you look at your compensation package". Participant CS2

Economic challenges are important for both employers and graduates and will continue to have an impact on organizational activities especially in small organizations. It is therefore no surprise that economics impacts organizations' ability to recruit and select graduates with desirable soft skills in an increasingly competitive economic environment given Guyana's new economic realities.

5.5.2 Theme 4: Subordinate Theme 2: Other factors

Eleven out of fourteen respondents indicated that there were social environmental factors which contributed to the perceived lack of soft skills in graduates in the service sector. There were thirty instances of social factors being cited as influencing the perceived soft skill deficiencies of graduates. Factors in the social environment were by far the most cited, ranging from organizational and national challenges with the labor force to broader societal ills. These challenges impact recruiters' ability to attract and choose graduates with the desired soft skills due to the diversity and dynamism of influences outside of recruiters' direct control.

Employers felt that the environment was characterized by a lack of care, support, and empathy. This it was felt manifested itself in a lot of "nonsense and negativity" and "chest thumping" and just a "really tough society" which added a layer of complexity to the recruitment and selection process that may not be present in other geographical contexts.

"Guyana is really, really tough country, and people come in to come into interviews or come into jobs with baggage that I daresay, they just don't need to carry in other societies……Whereas here, there's just a plethora of this nonsense and negativity and nepotism." Participant CS3

Other social characteristics of the environment were identified as lots of personal baggage, stigmatized jobs, single parent and helicopter families, rough clientele, crime, an unfettered use of technology and a breakdown of discipline.

Participant CS1 gave an account of experiences of the baggage that employees carry which it is perceived impacts their ability to demonstrate the desired soft skills, thus complicating the recruitment and selection process where their current and backstories are unknown:

"you're talking about employees who are coming to work with their own problems, whose problems are gonna be with them throughout the work-day, and who are going to go home to address those problems, and then come back the next day, again, with those problems on their mind, they're perpetually bothered by these work life conflicts"

While Participant HE5 spoke of the impact of technology posing challenges for employers as graduates are influenced by changing elements in society resulting in new behaviours to be managed and mitigated to support the development of desired soft skills:

"you have that intermingling of societal breakdown, from a disciplinary perspective, and an assumption that anything goes propagated by access to technology………the

unfettered utilization of technology (thus) soft skills are becoming extremely important (and) we not only have to reverse prior years of challenges in developing those soft skills but now we have to help people understand the importance of soft skills"

And continued interference of family members (Participant HE5):

"we cannot continue to kind of coddle them so to speak. We must help them at some point in time they've got to leave the nest."

Yet further, employers felt that the social environment was somewhat unsophisticated and underdeveloped showing a lack of development in the labour force's skills, their exposure and a disconnect with employers impacted by a small available labour force.

"there is a gap between what the expectations of this generation and employers expectations, there is a gap. This new generation wants you to sell them the job, and we expect people to come and sell us themselves. And I believe there is a gap there." Participant CS6

"oftentimes, we don't have the luxury of choice, and we just have a very small pool from which to select." Participant CS7

These social factors which are beyond the direct control of organizations in the service sector are perceived by employers as having an impact on their ability and success in recruiting and selecting graduates with their desired soft skills.

5.5.3 Summary: Theme 4: External Environmental Considerations

The analysis of the data generated a theme of environmental considerations which impact employers' graduate recruitment and selection efforts. The first subordinate theme highlighted economic challenges which complicates employers' actions and their achievement of organizational objectives through graduates. Because environmental

challenges will impact the general pool of graduates, this will heighten the competition for graduates with the desired soft skills. Another subordinate theme was the presence of environmental challenges that affect employers' recruitment and selection of graduates based on the social environment where there is a perceived absence of caring and empathy, stigmatized jobs and rough customers, interfering families, and a general breakdown in discipline, complicated by the changing use of technology especially social media that is unregulated with easy access. These social challenges impact graduates and make the information asymmetry experienced during recruitment and selection more complex. Challenges that impact graduates also require adjustments to employers' approach to the hiring process which could require a greater investment of resources.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

6.1 Chapter Introduction

In the previous chapter, the findings from the interviews conducted as part of this research have been outlined. This chapter aims to develop the research findings and emergent themes and their components to explore the key issues associated with graduate soft skills during recruitment and selection. This chapter will put them into context and discuss their implications for literature and practice. The chapter is presented in three sections, firstly outlining the purpose of the research; secondly, moving forward to consider the findings of the study understood from the analysis of the interviews and supported by the detailed consideration of extant literature. This chapter concludes with a summary before presenting the conclusions and recommendations in the next chapter.

To facilitate a purposeful discussion, it is opportune to restate the research aim which is *, "To explore the soft skill deficits of university graduates by reviewing the recruitment*

and selection practices from the perspective of employers in the service sector in Guyana." Additionally, the study aims to help employers to better manage the perceived soft skill deficits of graduates which employers have indicated are a challenge for their organizational performance.

The discussion answers the research questions and aims to increase the understanding of perceived graduate soft skill deficits and how employers can improve their recruitment and selection towards the benefit of the organization. The central research question is "What are the key considerations for employers within the graduate recruitment and selection process as they attempt to mitigate perceived graduate soft skill deficits?" which is supported by three research questions that were generated by the context and literature review.

The research questions to be answered in this study are:

1. RQ1: How may employers' perceptions of graduates' soft skills be influenced by the political, business, socio-economic and labour market context of Guyana?
2. RQ2: How do employers experience recruitment and selection of graduates with desirable soft skills?
3. RQ3: How do employers conceptualize desirable graduate soft skills?

The discussion is guided by the theoretical framework of Signaling Theory, enriched with findings from the context of the service sector in Guyana and the literature review.

6.2 Main Themes

The over-arching theme that the analysis of the data reveals is that the recruitment and selection of graduates with desirable soft skills is problematic for employers in the service sector in Guyana. Hurdles and barriers exist within the organizations and challenges are present in the external environment. Additionally, there may need to be

a paradigm shift to a more strategic view and use of graduate skills within employers' organizations.

As a result of the analysis of the primary data and linkage to the aim and research questions for this study, the following four key themes were identified:

1. Employers' inconsistent conceptualizations of graduate soft skills.

2. Communication and signaling deficiencies as a competence

3. Employer/Institutional issues that affect recruitment and selection processes.

4. External Environmental Considerations

These themes and corresponding sub-themes, as well as findings from the literature review and the Guyanese national and sectoral context, form the basis of this Chapter.

The discussion serves as a summary of the findings in relation to the research aim in order to show how the findings add to the theoretical and practical understanding of graduate soft skills during recruitment and selection from employers' perceptions in the service sector of Guyana. The discussion then turns to the findings' relevance in practice and addresses why employers should care about the findings.

First an outline will be provided showing how signaling supports graduate recruitment and selection, the nature of the signaling environment, followed by the characteristics of signals and signalers. Signaling theory indicates that certain characteristics of signals need to be present to contribute to signal effectiveness. These characteristics include clarity, frequency, intensity, and salience (Connelly et al., 2011). Guest et al. (2020) point out that one of the challenges associated with implementing elements of HR would be unclear messages that can be misread. The lack of a consistent conceptualization of graduate soft skills across employers' and recruiters contributes to unclear signals that impacts employers' recruitment and selection processes in search of desirable soft skills. Secondly, the signaling and communication hurdles identified from the data will be discussed as they affect employers' ability to signal their graduate soft skill needs. Next,

the discussion will provide an understanding of the short term, transactional practices, unhelpful attitudes, and perspectives, the impact of inadequate resources on the desired outcomes by employers in graduate recruitment and selection. These issues are evaluated for what they communicate about signalers' competence and credibility in graduate recruitment and selection, which are contributors to signal effectiveness (Guest et al., 2020). An additional contributor to perceived graduate soft skill deficiencies is the lack of experience, exposure and competence with recruiting and selecting for graduate soft skills which has an impact on the ability of employers to signal. The discussion will then provide a review of exogenous factors which mitigate against the recruitment and selection of graduates with the desired soft skills. These factors which are external to employers' organizations, make up the signaling environment through which messages tied to recruitment and selection must navigate successfully to achieve signal effectiveness. The signaler, the signal, the receiver and the signaling environment are all elements that contribute to the signal effectiveness and an impact on attitudes, behaviour, and feedback (Guest et al., 2020; Connelly et al., 2011). This study provides some insight on the existing conditions and considerations of the employers (signaler), successful graduate recruitment and selection of desired soft skills (signal) and the macro (signaling) environment within which recruitment and selection objectives need to be achieved to support organizational success.

The following section will discuss the research questions generated by this study. Each question will first be connected to its origins in the context and/or literature and this will be followed by a discussion of the analysed findings and the themes which emerged by comparing and contrasting these themes with the extant literature. Each section ends with a discussion of the significance of the findings for each research question.

6.2.1 Theme 1: Employers' inconsistent conceptualization of graduate soft skills

The literature highlighted the challenge of conflated and diverse conceptualizations which will challenge employers in their graduate recruitment and selection if there is no agreed definition and conceptualization of desirable graduate soft skills (Matteson et al., 2016). This review of the literature and an analysis of the study's findings provide the discussion for the research question as shown below.

How do employers conceptualize desirable graduate soft skills?

A key finding of this study is the level of diversity in employers' conceptualization of desirable graduate soft skills. This is in line with prior research that has elucidated the complexities of operationalizing soft skills (Matteson et al., 2016; Marin-Zapata et al., 2021). The literature, however, has not expanded this conceptualization challenge to individual soft skills which is evidenced in this study and highlighted for the soft skill of Communication. The literature further shows that conceptualization can vary with contexts such as the organization, the functional role, sector, and company size, or even the geographic location (Cinque, 2016; Caballero & Walker, 2010; Succi & Canovi, 2020). This study examined the organizational and functional contexts and unearthed conceptual inconsistencies there as well. Matteson et al. (2016) in their review of the literature, concluded that the conceptualization of soft skills has become diluted with items that are not skills, but rather should be classified as traits, dispositions, behaviours and knowledge sets, while Marin-Zapata et al. (2020) found in their systematic review that different conceptualizations characterized soft skills studies. A further extension of the findings of this study and the literature is the evolution of the conceptualization of soft skills that continues to change over time as organizations operate in a dynamic environment and the information available to signalers and receivers is constantly changing (Connelly et al., 2011).

6.2.1.1 Theme 1: Subordinate Theme 1: Conceptualizing Communication

Graduate recruitment and selection can be viewed as a 'sender' – receiver communication interaction, where signals are sent, and feedback is received. Employers as senders (insiders), communicate signals to graduate receivers (outsiders)during recruitment and selection to indicate their soft skill needs (Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005; Spence, 1973). Inconsistent signals are synonymous with mixed messages which can cause confusion with receivers as this inconsistency can reduce the intended effect of the signal (Connelly et al., 2011). Inconsistent signaling also affects the perceived honesty of a signal which will reduce the effectiveness of signals sent (Lins & Sunyaev, 2017).

This challenge of understanding what employers want from graduates would be further exacerbated since while they have confirmed the value and the desire for soft skills, a review of their vacancy advertisements does not illustrate this priority, creating a disconnect between signals sent and the desired graduate soft skills. This means that the main understanding of employers' soft skill needs would be communicated verbally during interviews, if at all. Additionally, with employers' varying conceptualizations associated with communication, signal effectiveness related to organizational needs will be impacted. This analysis of employers' shared experiences from the study indicates the inconsistencies that would be signaled to graduates. Further, the literature identifies that while multiple signals have the potential to positively impact signal effectiveness, when these signals are not complementary and do not reinforce each other some impact on signal effectiveness can be expected (Lins & Sunyaev, 2017). This can explain employers' shared experiences of frustration at not finding graduates with their desired soft skills, which could be as a result of ineffective signaling due to inconsistencies of what communication means to each employer and recruiter.

Communication was the only desirable graduate soft skill that was identified by all respondents. This importance of communication to employers is aligned with the results of several studies and literature reviewed (Agarwal, 2018; Hart Research Associates,

2015; Pazil & Razak, 2019; Robles, 2012). Notwithstanding this importance, the diversity of employers' conceptualizations as outlined in the findings would have an impact on how this is signaled to potential applicants during recruitment and selection, and how the processes are executed with applicants.

6.2.1.2 Theme 1: Subordinate Theme 2: Conceptualizing soft skill priorities

The analysis of the data by organization and by functional responsibility showed that there was a lack of consensus on which soft skills were conceptualized as the employers' desirable priorities. This result is in contrast with the literature, where studies show a tendency towards a top ten list when synthesized by this researcher. The list includes communication in all its forms, teamwork, problem solving, interpersonal skills, leadership…. as desirable by organizations (e.g., Agarwal, 2018; Grugulis & Vincent, 2009; Gruzdev, 2018; Hart Research Associates, 2015; Pazil & Razak, 2019; Robles, 2012). Succi and Canovi (2020), in their research found among other things that differences in employers' perceptions of soft skills, varied based on nationality, age, sector and company size – the latter three (while not directly interrogated in this study) having possible similarity to this study, where the ages of participants varied, different sectors were represented, and the sizes of companies were different. This diversity of desirable soft skills is likely to be manifested in inconsistencies in employers' signals causing challenges of interpretation for graduates. The varying priorities of individual recruiters represent multiple signals which are uncoordinated and, in some cases, even unintentional. Research on Signaling Theory posits that multiple signals can have a negative impact on outcomes when there is ambiguity in the information conveyed so that these signals do not reinforce each other (Nguyen, 2009 cited in Lins & Sunyaev, 2017) as is the case above with the soft skill 'communication'. This multiplicity of signals that are not aligned is likely to create confusion and have an altered effect on graduates' interpretations of and responses to employers' recruitment and selection signals.

In identifying desirable graduate soft skills, several participants identified areas such as "work experience" and "exposure" which strictly are not categorized as soft skills in

most of the literature. However, Crawford et al. (2011), in their review of literature on employability skills for new graduates in the USA, UK and Canada, identified a list of seven soft skills, of which one was 'experience'. Further, Wesley et al. (2016) utilized the list from the Crawford et al. (2011) study and found that employers ranked 'experience' sixth in the list of seven soft skills, suggesting that there is some acceptance of 'experience' or 'work experience' as a soft skill However, Grugulis and Vincent (2009), in their critique of the ever expanding meaning of soft skills, have argued that this is a likely outcome where persons can now claim to have an expanding number of skills which can include personal attributes and behaviours and Matteson et al. (2016) agree. This perspective suggests that we can expect new and evolving types of soft skills over time. This further suggests that the overarching conceptualization of soft skills, is anything that is not categorized as technical skills, which would align with participants in this study identifying concepts such as, "common-sense", "politeness" and "enthusiasm" as soft skills which is not in line with the current literature. Matteson et al. (2016) have discussed this problem of soft skill conceptualization where there is a mixing of values, beliefs, traits, and behaviours with soft skills which challenges senders and receivers due to a lack of clear definitions and taxonomies for discrete soft skills. While the results show a lot of diversity in employers' graduate soft skill priorities, this aligns with the literature reviewed which posits that soft skills priorities can vary based on the context as well as the specific job market (Caballero & Walker, 2010; Cinque, 2016; Succi & Canovi, 2020). Guyana is a job market that has a mixture of contextual business, socio-economic, and labour market variables which would require employers to define and determine the soft skill priorities that are relevant to their organization/industry and possibly sector.

6.2.1.3 Summary: Theme 1: Employers' inconsistent conceptualization of graduate soft skills

The importance of this section is that it highlights for employers the need to ensure there is an agreed conceptualization of soft skills as well as defined organizational priorities. The findings and literature point to inconsistent conceptualization of soft skills

and their associated signals contributing to the reduction in the effectiveness of any graduate recruitment signals sent by employers to potential and actual applicants that could result in desirable responses, including signalling the desired soft skills (Connelly et al., 2011; Lins & Sunyaev, 2017). Further, these findings are important since they highlight the need for a consistent conceptualization as a basis for signal design as well as a structure for improving the performance of organizational signallers as a part of a bigger plan for graduates and their contribution to the organization.

6.2.2 Theme 2: Communication and Signaling deficiencies

It has been established that graduate recruitment and selection is characterized by information asymmetry. Potential applicants' search for information leads them to proxies for organizational characteristics which help them to make decisions about their employment. The signals communicated by organizations can contribute to the level of attraction that advertisements receive and therefore influence the quantity and quality of the graduates responding. In addition to the organization communicating its values and desired soft skills, recruiters should be able to evaluate the soft skills of applicants through a variety of mechanisms such as their social media profiles, applications, and other selection activities. This is necessary as we recall that the recruitment and selection process is characterized by information asymmetry, thus recruiters need to be able to identify proxies that would help them evaluate the presence or otherwise of their desired soft skills in applicants. Additionally, there is value in feedback seeking behaviour on the part of employers which positively impacts the learning of applicants in future recruitment cycles. The literature highlights that a functioning signaling system and effective signals sent by employers for the recruitment and selection of graduates with soft skills can contribute to graduates responding as they seek to meet employers' needs. The review of the literature and an analysis of the study's findings inform the discussion (along with the discussion for Themes 3 and 4) for the research question as shown below.

How do employers experience recruitment and selection of graduates with desirable soft skills?

The findings establish several communication and signaling deficiencies which employers exhibit that impact their ability to identify and employ graduates with desirable soft skills.

These deficiencies affect the signaling system and the effectiveness of any signals sent by employers for the recruitment and selection of graduates with soft skills. These specialized deficiencies that are internal to employers' organizations contribute (along with Themes 3 and 4) to answering the research question identified above.

6.2.2.1: Theme 2: Subordinate Theme 1: Limited employer branding/image management

Chapman et al. (2005) identified job and organization characteristics and recruiter characteristics among other factors as predictors of applicant attraction. This speaks to the impact of the organizations and the recruiters' image based on signals sent consciously and unconsciously. Employers in this study have revealed their neglect of the organization's image and its impact on recruitment. Further, research in recruitment has found that applicants infer information about the organization from characteristics of recruiters, employer/workplace branding and corporate reputation (Celani & Singh, 2011; Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005; Ryan et al., 2000; Rynes, 1989; Rynes et al., 1991; Vinayak et al., 2017). A review of the LinkedIn and Facebook public profiles of the recruiters interviewed (where those existed), did not reveal any attempt at employer branding or applicant attraction, especially as it relates to graduate soft skills. While these are personal sites, a search of employers' public profiles is the reciprocal action of employers' search on applicants' personal profiles as they consider the information available there as more honest signals of the applicants' characteristics (Bangerter et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2020). It is possible that in the Guyanese environment, employers still believe there is a separation between personal and professional lives, even when

their information is publicly available even as we acknowledge the potential ethical and other challenges. This represents a lost opportunity to intentionally signal what is desired and valued to potential applicants since with social media there is a blurring of the personal and professional lines and applicants will search for any information on anyone connected to the organization they are interested in and like employers, they are likely to consider and interpret what they see as a signal that is more honest than advertisements and other employer communications. It is established in the literature that employer branding utilizes publicity, word of mouth, employee referrals, recruitment advertising, the organization's website, contracted agencies, job boards, social media sites and other online portals, and sponsored campus events (Abbas et al., 2021; Breaugh, 2009; Collins & Stevens, 2002; Donald & Pychtin, 2022; Zhang et al., 2020). Realistic job previews have also been identified as a potential signal of organizational honesty which can enhance the employer's brand as the organization provides details of both positive and negative aspects of the job (Capitano et al., 2022). It is further established that an employer branding strategy helps organizations to reduce information asymmetry experienced by job seekers (Wilden, R., Gudergan, S., & Lings, I., 2010). In the absence of intentional, positive signals from the organization and its recruiters to support graduates' search, the credibility and honesty (consistency) in the signals sent through advertisements could be questioned.

6.2.2.2: Theme 2: Subordinate Theme 2: No feedback giving behaviour

The Communication and Signaling deficiencies of the employers interviewed, were also evident in their lack of feedback interaction with applicants. Signaling Theory has established that activities and responses to the elements of the signaling system (e.g., modified employers' beliefs), generate the next cycle around the signaling loop (Spence, 1974). It has also been established that signalers can benefit from paying attention to countersignals which can result in increased signal effectiveness (Connelly et al., 2011; Srivastava, 2001). Taj (2016) also found that seeking feedback had a positive effect on signal effectiveness. In the Guyanese context, it is not a practice for applicants to seek

feedback, but employers' feedback to graduates can act as a countersignal and communicate the soft skills that employers desire. Signaling theory proposes that applicants, both successful and unsuccessful, will benefit from receiving feedback from employers, who are likely to adapt their behaviours in the next cycle of recruitment and selection (Spence, 1973). Unfortunately, this is not a practice of employers and in at least one case, it is actually discouraged by management. Rozario et al., (2019) in their study also found that no detailed feedback was provided to all applicants which is a challenge. This type of adaptation strategy has also been examined by Bangerter et al., (2012) who found that applicants try to detect selection criteria and adapt to fulfil those criteria. In the absence of feedback, applicants continue as before without the understanding of where their deficiencies are or where they may be lacking in their display of the desired soft skills.

6.2.2.3: Theme 2: Subordinate Theme 3: Limited signal evaluation competence and learning

Another element of the Communication and Signaling deficiencies of employers is their limited ability to evaluate signals and the absence of learning and development in this area. It has already been established that graduate recruitment and selection is characterized by information asymmetry, and this is exacerbated when evaluating soft skills. The literature provides examples of how recruiters infer unobservable information about applicants on the basis that honest signals are costly and hard to fake (Connelly et al, 2011; Bangerter et al., 2012; Spence, 1974). Bangerter et al. (2012) further points to the fact that signallers still attempt to cheat by utilizing fake signals. Employers therefore require processes and practices for the evaluation of signals to determine their veracity and integrity since applicants are not motivated to provide employers with accurate information unless it is to their advantage (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1978). The study findings indicate that employers do not have such processes or practices in place, and some acknowledge that they do not know how to identify the presence of soft skills. Other recruiters adopt their own evaluation processes which are not institutionalized within the organization. Further, there is no plan for such learning and

development. This limited ability to evaluate soft skill signals and the absence of plans to develop this competence within managers has contributed to an ad hoc assessment of which graduates do exhibit specific soft skills.

6.2.2.4 Summary: Theme 2: Communication and Signaling deficiencies

Employers have indicated that they want graduates with a number of soft skills, however, their shared experiences have identified deficiencies of their communication of these needs. Further, in an environment of information asymmetry, graduates need to depend on signals which are proxies for the unobservable qualities of the organization, some of which include the way the organization is presented. The limited presence of employer branding and feedback interactions with graduates represents an absence of signals available for graduates to gain information about the organizations' needs. An additional deficiency that emerged was the inability of employers to evaluate signals from graduates during the recruitment and selection process to learn about their soft skills. Employers at this stage need information about applicants and therefore need to be able to make their own evaluations since according to Johnstone & Grafen, 1993, as cited in Connelly et al, 2011, employers and applicants (receivers) have competing interests, which provides an incentive for inferior applicants to cheat by sending dishonest signals.

The employer deficiencies highlighted above will affect the ability of organizations to indicate to applicants what they value in the form of soft skills and their ability to effectively determine whether applicants possess the soft skills they desire. This can result in the inability to hire graduates with desirable soft skills.

6.2.3 Theme 3: Employer/Institutional issues affect recruitment and selection processes.

As theories in management and HRM continue to evolve, there is an increased focus on the value that human resources add to the organization. As the debate continues over the soft skill deficiencies of graduates, employers have received their share of the blame for not focusing on the soft skills in graduates. Additionally, critics have identified that many recruitment and selection methods utilized by employers are at odds with their desired outcomes, which requires a different assessment approach (Caballero & Walker, 2010; Keenan, 1995). It was previously established in the context and findings chapters that employers' activities did not reflect a strategic focus and their biodata and interview' comments suggest a lack of exposure and experience. Additionally, employers had established attitudes and perspectives which impacted recruitment and selection of graduates that was exacerbated by a lack of resources. These challenges meant that employers perceived their desirable soft skills were either 'a luxury' or something they had to deal with on the job. The literature identifies the role of graduate recruitment and selection activities which integrate soft skills as a signaling mechanism to support the achievement of organizational objectives (Hurrell, 2016; Succi & Wieandt, 2019). This combination of context, theory and literature provided the foundation for the continued discussion of the research question shown below.

How do employers experience recruitment and selection of graduates with desirable soft skills?

6.2.3.1 Theme 3: Subordinate Theme 1: Lack of Strategic activities and focus

As human resources are seen to be more critical to organizational success, HR strategy is implemented to ensure their efficient and effective use (Boxall et al., 2007; Succi & Canovi,2020). Strategies are developed in line with an assessment of the external environment and internal audits which makes strategic use of graduates with desirable soft skills for competitive advantage and organizational success (Gurbuz & Mert, 2011). Recruitment and selection using sophisticated strategies and a reliable and valid regime

to provide a high 'quality' pool of applicants can contribute significantly to the identification of graduates with soft skills (CIPD Knowledge hub, 2015; Huselid, 1995; Koch & Mc Grath, 1996). Further, the literature has shown that through increasing formalization and procedural rigour, recruitment and selection are getting better at finding the right candidate (CIPD Knowledge hub, 2015). In the context of this study, the right candidate would be graduates with the desired soft skills. The proactive agreement of the graduate soft skills needed, the communication and training of managers in recruitment and the development and use of relevant assessment techniques, all of which are absent based on participant accounts, would contribute to signal consistency and effectiveness in communicating with graduates. These represent barriers to an effective signaling process to alert graduates of employers' needs.

Traditional processes

A review of the literature highlights the importance of the relationship between sophisticated recruitment and selection policies and processes that can provide a good quality pool of the right applicants with the desirable soft skills (Huselid, 1995; Koch & McGrath, 1996; Velasco, 2012). The literature also suggests that certain assumptions on graduate recruitment and selection need to be re-examined such as the characteristics of the graduate labour market which have changed over time, occupational specificities, and the heterogeneity of the graduate labour market. (Tholen, 2017).

Contrary to the view of updated and sophisticated policies and processes, employers in this study described processes that have not been significantly revamped in many years. While some use is made of Facebook and LinkedIn for recruitment, it is not consistent across the organization, nor is it used as a part of a broader strategy. Recruitment is still viewed as an HR activity and as such non-HR recruiters who are unhappy with the old processes and practices, tend to devise what works best for them. This is problematic for the consistency of signals sent by employers to graduates. Further, neither of the recruitment strategies mentioned by Pollard et al. (2015) – 'spreading the net wide';

'restricting the flow' or any other strategy was indicated by any of the employers, once again suggesting the lack of HR strategy for graduate recruitment or selection. In addition to the lack of a strategy to support consistency of signals sent to graduates, the use of old assessment methods could signal to graduates a lack of progression in recruitment and selection and act as a proxy for the perceived currency and success of the organizations.

<u>Limited or no tracking and measurement</u>

In addition to the almost exclusive traditional processes in use, there was limited, or no tracking and measurement of activities and variables associated with the recruitment and selection process for graduates with soft skills. Breaugh (2009) has noted that recruiters tend to be focused on pre-recruitment activities and neglect post-recruitment and the evaluation of recruitment efforts and further, there was a lack of tracking and monitoring which is difficult without technology (Rozario et al. (2019). This was the experience shared by employers in the study. This was noted in the lack of monitoring and measurement initiatives post recruitment and selection even in cases where some technology was used in the form of psychometric tests, there was no post recruitment tracking or measurement. The HR literature highlighted that stakeholders learn from past methods and can improve their methods in the future. This perspective is also posited in the Signaling Theory literature where the concepts of escalation and equilibrium illustrate the evolution of signaling systems in each successive iteration of hiring, leading to the signals that can be trusted (Spence, 1973; Bangerter et al., 2012). The lack of a formalized learning process can undermine the signaling systems in the environment and mitigate against signaler competence, leading to a negative impact on signal effectiveness in recruitment and selection processes and practices.

6.2.3.2 Theme 3: Subordinate Theme 2: Unsupportive Employer attitudes and perspectives

The analysis of the interview data highlighted some perspectives that seem 'settled' in the minds of the interviewees, where they felt that their 'gut instinct' was a better judge for selection activities. There was also a clear lack of trust of the recruitment and selection processes to provide graduates with the soft skills desired by the organizations. This also resulted in some employers' recruiters defaulting to their 'gut instinct' to make decisions even after they executed the organization's processes, while others made their own adjustments to the processes which were neither institutionalized nor standardized across the organization. Tholen (2017) in his work on the recruitment and selection process in four graduate occupations, found that the process is unscientific with personal feelings, biases and intuitions interfering. These reactions to the processes create inconsistencies in the signals sent to graduates which could impact the reactions of graduates and the outcomes of the recruitment and selection process.

<u>Defaulting to gut instinct</u>

The first element of unsupportive employer attitudes was the prevalence of 'defaulting to gut instinct' which employers revealed as a symbol of their competence or an innate skill. Tholen (2017) indicated based on his study findings, that because selection criteria for graduate jobs are difficult to define in detail, many employers are not sure what they are looking for and thus allow personal feelings, biases, and intuitions to intervene, while in other cases the employer may know what they need but not how to recruit and select to get it. This can create quite a challenge for employers to signal to applicants what are the soft skills they desire. This is a serious barrier when we consider the issue of conceptualization and inconsistencies discussed earlier. Further, this challenge is exacerbated when, as in a study by Modestino et al. (2015), it was found that employee skill requirements rose when there is a larger supply of relevant applicants and was lowered when the supply is low, we see signals changing as recruiters communicate different requirements. Employers interviewed shared experiences of just trying to get

a match for qualifications and experience because applicant pools were so sparse and hence, they left 'soft skills' for some time later.

While the literature references the defaulting of recruiters to 'gut instinct' in cases where there is an insufficient pool of applicants to choose from as mentioned above, and the study's findings did reference insufficient pools of applicants, participants referenced their tenure as a basis for their 'gut instinct'. This defaulting to 'gut instinct' results in confusion among recruiters and the absence of a consistent process for identifying the skills, abilities, and personality traits desired as soft skills. This will form inconsistent signals as applicants try to interpret the signals, they receive from the selection process in uncontrolled and possibly unexpected ways.

Frustration with/Mistrust of existing processes

In addition to 'Defaulting to gut instinct', another reflection of Unsupportive employer attitudes was manifested through employers' frustration with and mistrust of the existing recruitment and selection processes to identify the graduates with the desired soft skills. The literature identified the lack of specific constructs for measuring work readiness in graduates (Caballero & Walker, 2010). While this study did not focus specifically on work readiness, the literature establishes that 'soft' skills and work readiness are closely aligned concepts with overlaps in the skills and attributes (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Stewart & Knowles, 2000). Further, the literature also established that there is no universal measurement construct for graduate soft skills as established earlier. Participants related the lack of a specific instrument for measuring graduate soft skills and the absence of updates to measurement instruments that were several years old. In response to their frustration, participants confessed to making their own adjustments, including using, as one participant puts it, my "emotional self". This further adds to the inconsistency of recruitment and selection signals sent to graduates.

<u>Biases and individual tweaking</u>

A third element of the Unsupportive employer attitudes was revealed in biased perspectives of employers and their individual actions of tweaking the organizations' recruitment and selection processes as and when they decided. Participants gave accounts of their experience of recruiters who showed bias in their graduate selection decisions. There was evidence of recruiters selecting applicants that exhibited characteristics similar to theirs or that fit into a mould that they have determined that they are comfortable with. Brown (2000) explained this behaviour to judge applicants' person-organization fit as a result of recruiters having better interactions and increased attraction to applicants with similar personalities. Further, the literature identified instances of recruiters using subjective judgements for soft skills such as interpersonal skills and future goal orientation while assessing personal appearance as a signal of person-organization fit (Rynes & Gerhart, 1990). This represents another instance of inconsistent evaluation of graduate soft skills and inconsistent signaling to graduates of what is desirable.

6.2.3.3 Theme 3: Subordinate Theme 3: Perceived lack of competence due to under-exposure/inexperience.

A review of the literature has identified a positive relationship between the characteristics of recruiters and the attractiveness of organizations during the recruitment and selection process Carless & Imber, 2007; Chapman et al., 2005; Uggerslev et al., 2012). In particular, recruiter competence and personableness have been singled out as characteristics that standout as being related to applicants' attraction to organizations, where competence includes the willingness to answer questions and asking relevant questions and personableness including being thoughtful, likable and showing respect for applicants (Harris & Fink, 1998; Harris & Fink, 1987; Liden & Parsons, 1986).

Political skill is defined as "the ability to effectively understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhances one's personal and organizational objectives." (Ferris et al., 2005. p.127). Recruiters high in personal political skill understand the recruitment needs of their organization, have high levels of interpersonal influence with the ability to adapt their behaviour and use appropriate strategies towards more effective recruitment (Lawong et al., 2019). This type of skill would be a positive employer signal of confidence and competence which would have positive effects on applicant attraction to the organization. This political skill would be signalled in recruiters' behaviours during recruitment in the form of time spent recruiting and during selection in the form of personableness, informativeness and trustworthiness (Harris & Fink, 1987 as cited in Uggerslev et al, 2012).

A further consideration of organizations' applicant attraction is the concept of organization-person fit where the focus is placed on the organization sending signals of potential fit to applicants (Breland et al., 2017). Recruiters as representatives of the organization have the task of sending signals to convince potential applicants that the organization fits well with them so that they will continue to pursue employment (Swider et al, 2015; Lawong et al., 2019). Rozario et al., (2019) found that insufficient professional interview training and preparation for managers was a challenge. This was evidenced in the findings where there were no discussions or training provided to recruiting staff.

Irregular practice/experience

The first reflection of Perceived lack of competence due to under-exposure/inexperience emerged from participants' accounts of irregular graduate recruitment and selection in their organizations. Participants in this study confessed to not hiring graduates regularly which is a function of the relatively small size of the graduate complement in the organizations. This irregular practice with graduates caused them to feel incapable of citing trends associated with graduate recruitment and

selection. This lack of confidence could be unintentionally signaled to graduates during recruitment and selection which could have a negative effect on applicants' evaluation of the job and interview and their likelihood of joining the firm (Liden & Parsons, 1986; Harris & Fink, 1987).

Lack of experience/competence with graduate soft skills

Another illustration of Perceived lack of competence due to under-exposure/inexperience emerged from shared experiences of a lack of focus on soft skills due to the small pool of applicants discussed earlier. Despite acknowledging that soft skills were important to their organization and that they wanted graduates with these skills, participants revealed that assessment instruments and selection techniques were not modified to include evaluations for soft skills. This combination of factors has translated to a lack of experience with graduate soft skills. This lack of experience and competence would impact employers' ability to identify reliable signals of graduate soft skills. Cai (2013) identified that employers' perceptions are enhanced through a process of public and private learning where recruiters accumulate experience on a candidate's true value through a process of successive learning. While Cai (2013) focused his work on the value of graduates' qualifications, this type of learning about the signals of graduates' soft skills can be developed with more market experience.

Lack of experience with newer recruitment and selection techniques

The third factor that contributed to employers' Perceived lack of competence due to under-exposure/inexperience was their lack of experience with newer recruitment and selection techniques, including, psychometric testing and other technologically driven solutions. Literature on graduate recruitment has determined that graduates, many of whom would belong to Generation Y, need to be understood and targeted based on their differences (Luscombe et al., 2013, as cited in McCracken et al., 2016). While some

recruiters do believe that graduates with desirable soft skills cannot be truly attracted through recruitment there are others who feel they cannot be assessed outside of the job environment. This suggests a lack of exposure to the techniques and practices of graduate recruitment and selection, which is in contradiction to employers' belief of the value of graduate soft skills but is aligned with the lack of strategic focus and activities identified as a theme in the findings.

6.2.3.4 Theme 3: Subordinate Theme 4: Inadequate resources

In their critical review of the current practices of recruitment and selection, Abbas et al. (2021) identify the increasing use of electronic and social media platforms. One of the advantages of online platforms is the reduced use of time and people resources. E-recruitment, which can include e-application forms, can support more effective and timely recruitment and selection procedures which can positively impact organizational effectiveness (D'Silva, 2020). The graduate selection process is recognized as a social process containing subjective notions of worth and value (Tholen, 2017). A tool to mitigate the subjectivity of this process was the focus of Zhao et al. (2015), when they propose the use of analytics in the form of skills tagging to recognize relevant skills in input text from recruitment documents such as applications and resumes.

Anderson and Tomlinson (2021), in their study to identify the employers' perspective of what signals' standout graduate employability, found that in addition to qualifications and other credentials, the following signals were identified as important – personal and psychological qualities, personal and brand expectations, work related experience, person-organization fit and an extended back story. In line with the non-technical characteristics of soft skills, which can be considered important signals for identifying graduates with desirable soft skills. The process of identifying these signals utilizes organizational resources.

<u>Time</u>

The first resource that participants identified that was in short supply was time. Graduate recruitment and selection require resources and a focus on soft skills requires even more. The findings illustrate that employers are unable to devote enough time to recruitment and selection of soft skills which require a deeper dive. Employers indicate that they are under pressure to achieve objectives and therefore are pressed to fill vacancies as quickly as possible since the relative flatness of many organization structures means existing employees will have to double up on duties until vacancies are filled. This does not allow for a proper analysis of graduates' soft skills especially in an environment of perceived dishonest signals. The opportunity to spend time identifying the relevant signals as proposed by Anderson and Tomlinson (2021) is not afforded recruiters.

<u>Choice constraints</u>

In addition to limited time, participants revealed that constraints of choice negatively affect their ability to identify suitable graduates with the desirable soft skills. The pressure to fill vacancies as quickly as possible is impacted by the limited choice and associated cost of applicants. Many non-oil sectors are experiencing small pools of applicants during recruitment. This has caused recruiters to make adjustments to their processes in order to fill vacancies. In this environment, soft skills are seen as an unaffordable 'luxury' and employers focus their recruitment communication on hard skills, work experience and salary. In an environment of economic hardships, persons seek higher education as an opportunity to improve their economic standing and this will likely be their priority as posited by the human capital theory (Schultz, 1971; Becker, 1975). Employers use graduate educational attainment as a baseline signal for an applicant's potential productivity and expect that they should be able to use the presence of desirable soft skills as a differentiator, however, choices are limited, and soft skills are de-prioritised.

Cost

Finance is another resource that is constrained and negatively impacts employers during graduate recruitment and selection. Competitive pressures locally and globally have caused companies to implement strategies to minimize cost. Salaries and benefits are a cost of organizations which caused many organizations to be constrained in what they can offer as graduate compensation. Further, with the high levels of graduates in the environment and the associated remuneration competition, employers will have increased costs of signalling their needs as it becomes more difficult to interpret the potential productivity of graduates and gain their attention, even as their signalling costs increase as they attempt to stand out from the competition with competitive salaries (Rospigliosi et al., 2014).

Lack of supportive technology

A fourth resource that was inadequate to support employers' graduate recruitment and selection processes was insufficient and relevant technology. Such resources would improve the objectiveness of the process, however, there are financial and infrastructural constraints that impact their use in Guyana. Guyana has a low but growing internet penetration and a small population which does not make the use of certain products feasible. The use of Social Media networks and other internet-based platforms support the screening of applicants with information that would otherwise be difficult to access with traditional processes and limited resources (Slavic et al., 2017). Despite the advantages of social media, practitioners need to be mindful of challenges of graduates' negative perception of recruiters use of social media in the selection process and potential ethical implications of using personal data unrelated to job seekers applications, the transparency of employers' actions and the use of de-contextualized information ((Clark and Roberts, 2010 & Roth et al, 2016) as cited in Hurrell et al, 2017; Hurrell et al, 2017).

6.2.3.5 Summary: Theme 3: Employer/Institutional issues affect recruitment and selection processes.

Graduate recruitment and selection processes are needed to support the employment of suitable graduate talent with the soft skills to achieve organizational objectives. The study identified that the processes that employers experience were not a component in a larger strategy to support the organization. The lack of a strategic posture towards graduate recruitment and selection was exacerbated by attitudes and perspectives which were steeped in legacy, maintaining the status quo, biases, and individual adjustments to processes. These unsupportive attitudes extended to the way that soft skills were de-prioritised in the recruitment and selection processes. Recruiters also signaled a lack of experience and exposure with soft skill identification and evaluation which was compounded by inadequate resources. These challenges impact the abilities of the employers' recruiters as signalers as well as the agreement and design of signals for desirable graduate soft skills. As the literature identified, recruiters and their characteristics act as proxies to resolve the information asymmetry that applicants feel (Spence, 1973; Tholen, 2017). These signals not only affect the way that recruiters are able to successfully evaluate applicants but also impact the attraction of good quality applicants as well as play a role in their decision to continue with the recruitment and selection process.

6.2.4 Theme 4: External Environmental Considerations

Employers formally and informally analyze the external environment in which they operate to develop their strategy for achieving organizational objectives. By definition, elements of the external environment are experienced by all competitors and individual organizations have little ability to influence it. These environmental conditions are exogenous factors which the literature argues can impact employers' perceptions. Many respondents gave passionate accounts of elements in the environment which they felt impacted their ability to attract and select graduates with their desired soft skills. The literature further identified that environmental factors affect graduates' development,

their ability to present themselves, their exposure to discipline, their independence, their expectations and motivations and willingness to apply for certain jobs (Mullen et al., 2019) which sheds a different light on additional factors that could mediate the outcomes that employers experience. These factors represent noise in the signaling environment that impacts the effectiveness of signals that employers send during recruitment and selection. Graduate recruitment and selection as a communication process is vulnerable to 'noise' and distortions that affect the delivery of the intended message. As graduates become shaped by the various environmental factors, recruiters experience difficulty in achieving their hiring objectives.

The literature highlights that distortions in the signaling environment tend to be correlated with a decrease in signal effectiveness (Connelly et al., 2011). This study posits that the 'noises' in the environment have changed the signaling game causing the effectiveness of signals that were effective in the past to not have the same effect in the current environment. Burns and Flam (1987) cited in Cai (2013) also argue that employers' behaviour and beliefs are conditioned by exogenous factors. The combination of context, theory and literature informs the discussion of the research question below.

How may employers' perceptions of graduates' soft skills be influenced by the political, business, socio-economic and labour market context of Guyana?

6.2.4.1 Theme 4: Subordinate Theme 1: Economic Factors

Clarke (2018), in their review and analysis of literature, highlight that macroeconomic factors affect aspects of the labour market. Specifically, in periods of reduced labour demand and economic uncertainty, persons who are employable may struggle to find work or may be underemployed as employers make changes to their employment plans (McQuaid, 2006). While Guyana's economic outlook has changed in general, this positive change is driven mainly by the oil-sector. As a result of economic changes in Guyana, the non-oil service sector has lost some of its economic appeal to graduates.

The University degree is a mechanism for increasing the standard of living for a population where many live near or below the poverty line. As such, any employer that promises higher wages is likely to be most attractive to graduates. Employers in the service sector are challenged to compete with the oil sector wages and remain profitable. This economic reality provides a form of distortion to the recruitment and selection signals that employers send to graduates.

6.2.4.2 Theme 4: Subordinate Theme 2: Other Factors

Employers responded by prioritizing salary information and dismissing the desirable soft skills from their communications with potential applicants. It was articulated that this would increase the challenge to get a pool of graduate applicants. This creates another distortion to the signaling environment for employers who feel that they cannot signal what they want.

The findings further highlighted tensions in the environment that contributed to the 'negativity', 'nepotism' and 'nonsense' which alludes to challenges emanating from the political tensions discussed in Chapter 2. Roth et al. (2020) provide an explanation where their study findings suggest that political affiliation related variables affect hiring-related decision processes over and above job-related information. They go on to point out that their study has particular relevance in politically polarized environments which describes Guyana. This politically related 'noise' adds another distortion to the already challenged signaling environment for graduate recruitment and selection.

The challenge for organizations would be a strategy to mitigate such distortions since external environmental factors are not wholly within the control of employers. Additionally, the findings point to employers' distrust of graduates' soft skill signals since in the existing environment cheating and dishonest signals do not have a significant enough penalty. This aligns with the literature where Roth et al. (2020) found that environments with strong socio-political government agendas tend not to have significant penalties for dishonest signaling.

6.2.4.3 Summary: Theme 4: External Environmental Considerations

The external environment in Guyana within which employers recruit and select graduates, provides several challenges and constraints that distort employers' signals thus influencing employers' perceptions of graduates' soft skills. This is an important finding for employers who need to assess the best strategy for mitigating this noise that is outside of their control. One such strategy identified in the literature is the sending of multiple, reinforcing signals to increase signal effectiveness.

6.3 Summary

This study has as its aim, "To explore the soft skill deficiencies of university graduates by reviewing the recruitment and selection practices from the perspective of employers in the service sector in Guyana.". In order to provide clarity, a number of research questions, with origins in the context and literature, were generated. This section will present each research question then review the evidence from the literature and this study in order to provide summarised answers to these questions. The issues identified during the study will be the basis of the recommendations of the study which will be addressed in Chapter 7.

6.3.1 *Research Question 1: How may employers' perceptions of graduates' soft skills be influenced by the political, business, socio-economic and labour market context of Guyana?*

The analysis of the Guyanese context, the literature review, and the analysis of the findings in this study reveal that the experiences of employers, their practices, attitudes, and competencies are influenced and affected by a challenging political, socio-economic, and labour market environment (MOE, 2020a; CEIC Data, n.d.; UNDP, 2019; Bureau of Statistics, 2021a; Kaieteur News, 2016). Perceived political alignment could influence recruiters' perception of candidates' hireability,

employers and their recruiters are underexposed and inexperienced in many aspects of graduate recruitment and selection which influences their practices for desirable applicant attraction and its outcomes due to the under-resourced and tough socio-economic environment. This context has influenced employers' perceptions of graduates' soft skills whether knowingly or unknowingly, through the way that signals during recruitment and selection are sent and received by graduates.

6.3.2 *Research Question 2: How do employers experience recruitment and selection of graduates with desirable soft skills?*

The literature has established that employers are challenged to recruit and select graduates with desired soft skills. The literature has provided evidence of the responsibility for this challenge belonging to one or more of the stakeholders – higher education, employers, graduates, and policy makers. The literature has also debated whether this challenge is a skills mismatch, a skills deficit, or the lack of communication of which soft skills are desired. The findings of this study reveal that the experiences of employers show that many of their practices, attitudes, and competences within a challenging internal and external environment, represent signalling barriers to achieving their recruitment and selection objectives (Bangerter et al., 2012; Connelly et al., 2011; Taj, 2016).

6.3.3 *Research Question 3: How do employers conceptualize desirable graduate soft skills?*

The literature has established a significant diversity in the graduate soft skills that are determined as desirable by employers as well the definitions ascribed to those soft skills (Cinque, 2016; Caballero & Walker, 2010; Succi & Canovi, 2020). The narratives from the

interviews highlight that employers do not have a consistent conceptualization of graduate soft skills across organizations, within organization or across functional roles. This reinforces the literature which establishes that soft skills are extremely contextual. The literature and evidence support the finding of the need for an agreed menu of desirable graduate soft skills for the organization, based on the organizational context and a consistent conceptualization for those soft skills to ensure there is a basis for consistent signals to be sent to graduates during recruitment and selection by employers and their recruiters. The context of this study indicates the involvement in graduate recruitment by non-HR managers and their lack of HR training or development. It is therefore important that all roles involved in graduate recruitment and selection are agreed and aware of the soft skill priorities of the organization and of specific functions where necessary and there is a consistent understanding of what those skills refer to in the operational context. This supports the element in Signalling Theory that identifies that reliability, observability, consistency are all characteristics that contribute to the effectiveness of signals.

A conceptual model (Figure 6) was prepared to illustrate the findings and analysis of the study using the signalling theory. This conceptual model (Figure 6) illustrates, a lack of signaler honesty and consistency which may be unintended, due to ignorance and inexperience of signalling, multiple inconsistent signaling resulting from attitudes and individual adaptions of employers, a signaling environment that is characterized by macro-environmental distortions and an absence of significant penalties for cheating, signal costs that do not filter out low quality applicants, poor observability of employers' needs due to their lack of signaling, and inconsistencies associated with their diverse conceptualizations of soft skill needs, all contribute to signal ineffectiveness – an unclear communication of employers' graduate soft skill needs. This can impact the perception that employers have of graduates' soft skills.
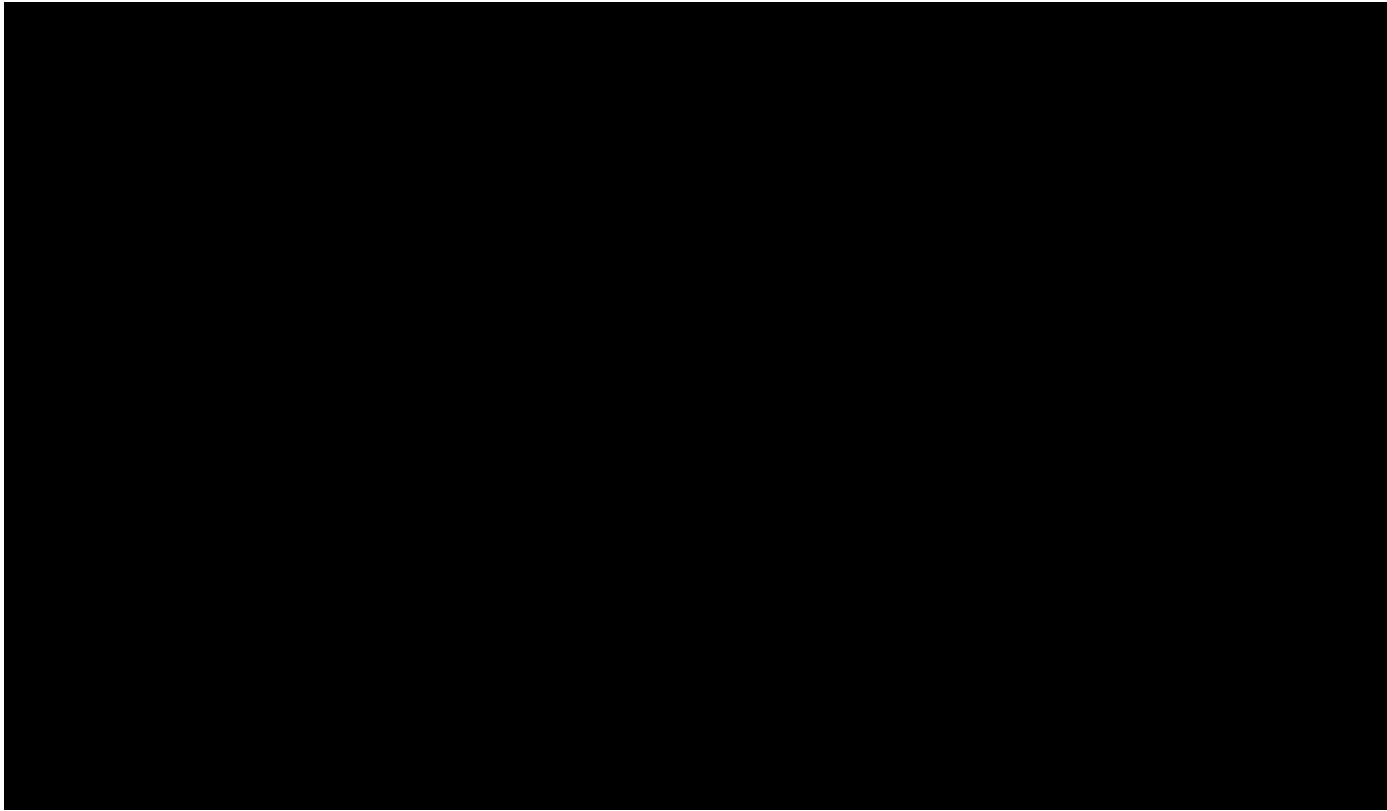
Figure 6. Conceptual Model based on Signalling Theory illustrating the aggregation of key signaling constructs and adapted to illustrate the findings of the study. * (+) indicates a positive relationship; (-) indicates a negative relationship; (?) questionable relationship.

Source: Adapted from "Unblackboxing IT certifications: A theoretical model explaining IT certification effectiveness", by Sebastian Lins & Ali Sunayaev. 2017. *In* ICIS.

The inconsistent conceptualization of soft skill priorities and definitions results in multiple, inconsistent signals, both intentional and unintentional. The lack of competence and experience with soft skills and newer recruitment and selection techniques implies the lack of competence with creating honest signals that fit the desired soft skills. The lack of a graduate recruitment strategy and any strategic employer branding or applicant attraction plans results in a lack of a framework to support the soft skills desired from graduates. To compound the challenges with employer signalling and the signals sent, the signaling environment does not have the assumed market disciplinary mechanisms – with the absence of significant penalties for cheating, the ability to fake signals, and the cost of signals being inexpensive. As a reminder, the four main elements of the signaling process are the sender (recruiter), the

receiver (applicant), the signal (recruitment and selection communication and proxies), and the signaling environment (the medium through which messages are sent and received).

This study is focused on the employers' perspective and therefore does not make any conclusions about the receivers. This compromised state of the remaining three features of the signaling mechanism cost employers the effectiveness of any signals sent through the recruitment and selection processes they utilise. The findings of this study therefore align with the antecedents, assumptions, and outcomes of the Signaling Theory discussed.

This section has demonstrated how the study has explored the soft skill deficiencies of university graduates by reviewing the recruitment and selection practices from the perspective of employers in the service sector in Guyana. Their activities were probed via research questions which have been answered. The next Chapter will detail how the study has achieved its aims and objectives; provide its contributions to theory and practice; identify limitations and suggest areas for future research.

Anecdotally and supported by the literature, employers have placed the blame for graduates' soft skill deficiencies amongst the responsibilities of graduates and higher education. This model illustrates that there is a role for employers to positively influence the effectiveness of their signals and through cycles of learning, escalation and adaptation, improve their recruitment and selection of graduates with desirable soft skills.

Signalling Theory provides an explanation for the challenges that employers face with graduate soft skills and a potential solution. From the perspective of employers, effective signals to indicate to graduates which soft skills are desirable can be supported by competent signalers who send multiple, consistent, frequent, honest signals that are able to withstand distortions in the environment. Employers seek and give feedback to improve their signals thus contributing to the effectiveness of signals, while guiding receivers to their needs.

This illustration provides the backdrop and framework for recommendations and the development of a Soft Skills Toolkit as a contribution to practice.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

7.1 Chapter Overview

The purpose of the chapter is to critically summarize all of the chapters in relation to the Research Aim and Objectives and objectively conclude by stating the possible implications of the research.

The chapter is set out in six sections. The achievement of the Research Aim and Objectives is revealed followed by the Contribution to Knowledge and Practice. Then the Limitations of the study are discussed, followed by Recommendations for future research. The chapter ends with a Summary that provides an overview of the conclusion.

7.2 Achievement of the Research Aim and Objectives

The Aim of the research was to explore the soft skill deficiencies of university graduates from the perspective of employers in the service sector in Guyana by reviewing their recruitment and selection practices. The Research Aim addresses two key questions in the area of graduate soft skills: what are employers looking for in graduates and how are they attempting to find these soft skills during recruitment and selection? These questions are addressed based on the actors and processes described in Signaling Theory with an emphasis on employers in the service sector in Guyana within the scope of their graduate recruitment and selection processes.

Subsequently, the study aims to help employers to manage the perceived soft skill deficiencies of graduates in the service sector by offering a checklist of key

considerations and a toolkit of actions to support the recruitment and selection of graduates with desirable soft skills. The checklist and associated toolkit are based on the literature review and study findings, building on and extending graduate soft skills and graduate recruitment and selection research as a new way of thinking about soft skills and recruitment and selection in the Guyanese context.

To support the achievement of the Research Aim, three Research Objectives were identified. The following is a summary of how these Research Objectives were achieved.

7.2.1 Research Objective 1: To examine employers' perceptions of the soft skills that graduates need and the deficiencies encountered.

The first objective was achieved, and a diverse list of graduate soft skills was identified by employers.

Communication was overwhelmingly identified as the graduate soft skill that was most needed and also showed the most deficiencies. While this may not be surprising on its own when considered in the context of Guyana's primary and secondary education challenges, what was surprising was the diversity of conceptualizations of what was categorized as 'Communication' by participants.

The majority of graduate soft skills identified as necessary and/or missing was aligned with those established in the literature. However, there were a few unexpected areas identified as desirable such as 'work experience'. While not popular, this surprising finding was also evident in the literature, which illustrates the concept of the evolving and dynamic nature of desirable graduate soft skills.

Within the examination of employers' perceptions, the study identified that the conceptualization of soft skills is challenging which is well established in the literature. A key but surprising finding was that the inconsistency of conceptualizing soft skills also existed within organizations among managers with graduate recruitment and selection duties. This necessitates an organization wide agreement of the concepts which will be

adopted to ensure that there is consistent signaling of their desired soft skills to graduates. Further, there should be development of the soft skill priorities by function since it has been established in the literature review that there could be function specific soft skill priorities to be considered. It was also evident that the social, economic, business and labour context of Guyana has some influence on employers' perceptions of graduates' soft skills.

Thus, the examination of employers' perceptions of desired and missing graduate soft skills was completed. The anticipated result of a working list was not obtained; however, the richness of the findings has provided contributions for future practice and research.

7.2.2 Research Objective 2: To explore recruitment and selection practices which employers utilize to identify desirable soft skills in graduates.

The analysis of participant responses highlighted many deficiencies and challenges associated with the recruitment and selection practices used to identify graduates with desirable soft skills.

Inadequate communication and signaling of what soft skills were desired by employers was common across all participants. Recruitment and selection practices prioritized qualifications, hard skills, work experience and salaries. Employers also did not reveal a connection between their employer brand and graduate recruitment and selection, thus not signaling the organizations' desired values and soft skills. The lack of signaling and communication extended to a lack of feedback to applicants on their strengths and shortcomings. Participants also revealed that they did not know how to evaluate graduate soft skills during recruitment and selection and in some cases, participants indicated that they did not believe that such an evaluation could be done.

Graduate recruitment and selection were not experienced as a strategic tool contributing to the organizations' performance but rather was implemented as a short-

term operational process that needed to be completed as quickly as possible. Participants described the use of old processes and practices which were not adopted for graduate recruitment and selection nor for assessing the presence of soft skills. Employers revealed very few practices of tracking and measuring their performance from recruitment and selection activities.

Recruitment and selection practices were influenced by some attitudes and perspectives that could be contributing to their perceptions of graduate soft skill deficiencies. Recruiters felt that due to their tenure and experience their 'gut instinct' was more dependable at evaluating good applicants even as they indicated that the existing processes were not suitable to achieve the desired results of graduates with soft skills. Participants further revealed individual adjustments to recruitment and selection processes which were neither documented nor institutionalized.

Despite the reliance on 'gut instinct' and individual tweaking of processes, the majority of participants revealed their lack of experience with graduate soft skills, updated tools and techniques and irregular practice with graduate recruitment and selection. Additionally, the inadequacy of resources was a challenge for employers. Participants revealed inadequate time to implement more than superficial practices, constraints of small applicant pools, insufficient and relevant technology and finance to support the attraction and deterministic selection of graduates with desirable soft skills.

Recruitment and selection practices which employers utilized to identify graduates with desirable soft skills were affected by factors that were external to the organization. The changing economic landscape with oil discoveries and production have created economic pressures that affect employers' usual practices, further de-prioritizing soft skills as they struggle to attract graduates and offer competitive salaries. The socio-political environment also challenges employers' practices as a consequence of the polarized nature of Guyana. This is particularly challenging where biases and prejudices

can impact employers' ability to attract suitable applicants and make perceived fair selection decisions in the absence of deterministic techniques.

The second objective was met and raised several challenges and barriers to employers' ability to recruit and select graduates with the soft skills they desire. This exploration reveals that employers and the environment they operate in are significant hurdles.

7.2.3 Research Objective 3: To make recommendations for improving the recruitment and selection of graduates with the soft skills desired by employers in the service sector in Guyana.

The study identified the internal employer, institutional, and external environmental challenges and used these findings to develop a Soft Skills Toolkit, which is illustrated in the section Contribution to Practice, is designed to create a paradigm shift in the perspective of all managers involved in the recruitment and selection of graduates. In line with corporate strategic planning, there needs to be human resource strategic planning which is aligned with corporate statements and objectives and follows a structured strategic planning approach. The third research objective was achieved with the development of the Soft Skills Toolkit and some secondary recommendations for improving employers' ability to attract and recruit graduates with desirable soft skills.

7.3 Contributions to Knowledge

The review of literature suggests that there is a lack of graduate soft skills research in the Guyanese context. Therefore, this study contributes to the knowledge base on graduate soft skills by geographically extending the previously accepted Signaling Theory to Guyana.

Previous research has asked the question of whether employers are clearly stating their needs and using the appropriate practices to recruit and select graduates with the desired soft skills. This study has confirmed that employers' practices and the environment in

which they operate are contributors to perceived graduate soft skill deficiencies in the service sector in Guyana.

This study utilized the work of Spence (1973), Connely et al. (2011), and Lins & Sunayaev (2017) among others, to explore how employers recruit and select graduates with desirable soft skills. While Lins & Sunayaev (2017) in their review of literature have established the positive impact of signalers on signal effectiveness, Connelly et al. (2011) did pose the questions of when and how often signalers should signal. Both these works and that of Spence (1973) have presumed that signalers would know how to signal. This is based on the underlying tenet of information asymmetry where the signaler has information that the receiver does not have access to. Guest et al. (2020) identified the importance of the quality (credibility) of signalers, including top management, HR managers and line managers and highlight that the source of a signal can shape perceptions of its salience and credibility. None of these studies address the competence of signalers which this study has found to have the potential to influence signal effectiveness.

The operating context of Guyana poses significant demand side graduate labour challenges for the service sector. The literature established that where there are market disciplinary mechanisms that reveal and penalize dishonest signalers in the signaling environment, there is a positive effect on signal effectiveness, the corollary of which was upheld by this research. This study extends the scope of distortion in the signaling environment to include factors in the macro-environment. This area is under-researched in the literature but appears to have a stronger impact on signal effectiveness in the Guyanese context than what is portrayed in previous research.

The findings of this study have been used to develop a conceptual model which illustrates from employers' perspectives, the various factors within the signaling system that impact signal effectiveness and therefore could shed some light on why employers are not successful in attracting and selecting graduates with desirable soft skills – they have not communicated what they want, they do not evaluate for those skills, and the environmental disruptions create noise that distort any signals sent intentionally or

unintentionally. This study posits that there is need to rethink and possibly extend Spence's Signaling Theory model for the modern graduate labour market.

7.4 Contributions to Practice

This study has made four contributions to practice. First, the study has developed a framework for supporting recruitment and selection of graduates with desirable soft skills, The Soft Skills Toolkit, which was curated from the findings of this study, the literature review and the information presented on the context of Guyana. In the information presented on the context of Guyana, it was highlighted that most of the employers involved in graduate recruitment and selection have not received any human resources training, including those in HR roles. The findings of this study have indicated that attitudes, experience and other factors internal to the organization are negatively impacting recruitment and selection activities to the point of ignoring soft skills during these processes. The literature highlights that graduate human resources and associated soft skills can positively contribute to organizational excellence but the identification of graduates with these desirable soft skills should be an element of the organization's broader strategic direction. These insights have been aggregated to form the basis of the Soft Skills Toolkit.

The metaphor of a toolkit is used to represent the various tools that are available as solutions to different contexts and problems. Different tools are also valuable in the hands of users based on their capabilities and competencies. Therefore, this toolkit does not propose a one size fits all solution but rather an assessment of the organization's gaps and the solution to mitigate said gaps.

Table 10. Soft Skills Toolkit to support recruitment and selection of graduates with desirable soft skills.

Source: Researcher

HR processes and practices	Key considerations
Job descriptions review	Brainstorm with department managers to gain insight on what soft skill competencies are needed for success in each graduate job. Tools that can be used are focus groups, inventories, questionnaires, interviews, diaries, work logs, observation, repertory grids and testing.
	Develop with team members a taxonomy of soft skills for the organization. What does each soft skill mean within the organization.
	Update job descriptions to include desired soft skills.
	Communicate and train all managers involved in graduate recruitment and selection.
Employer Brand	In association with the Marketing function, develop an employer brand which should be aligned with the corporate vision, mission, values and soft skill priorities.
	Develop and communicate the employer brand communication plan. Ensure the plan is continuous. Some activities can include university talks and competitions, providing work placements and internships, career fairs. Implement internal marketing so that employees can be consistent ambassadors of the brand.
Graduate recruitment and selection procedures	Review all the processes of graduate recruitment and selection, to include signalling of the soft skills desired by the organization and design appropriate assessments for soft skills.
	Identify the intentional signals of desirable soft skills that management wants to

	communicate and train all managers involved in graduate recruitment and selection.
Measuring, Monitoring and Control	Implement a regime of performance management and continuous improvement. Activities of recruitment and selection need to be measured. Set SMART objectives and assign key performance metrics. Measure performance and implement corrective action where necessary. Utilise patterns and trends for future decision making. This will provide learning of what works and what doesn't and under which conditions. Some examples are turnover rates, performance of staff on the job, speed of promotion after employment. This is critical with soft skills because of their dynamic nature.
Recruitment methods	Implement and cement the paradigm shift that recruitment is a continuous process. Another shift for employers is to recognise that they are not in an employers' market and therefore they need to present themselves as the organization to work with. They have to sell their product. A wide range of recruitment methods is also the best way to communicate as long as their messages are consistent. Some examples are University guest lectures, blogs of topical subjects, employee testimonials, internships and realistic job previews, student research projects and online pre-tests that allow potential applicants to get a preview of the organization and self-select.
Selection Methods and techniques	Like recruitment methods, a range of selection methods will yield the best results. The focus should be including newer, more deterministic methods. Some methods to consider are past behavioural questioning, assessment centers, realistic

	job previews, online application forms, structured interviews assessing soft skills, references with a proforma.
Collaboration and strategic partnership	The human resources function has to create and sustain strategic partnerships with all business functions. In addition to the services they perform for HR, most if not all of these business functions need graduates thus involving departmental managers in graduate recruitment and selection. Their exposure, development and synergy with HR functions will result in better graduate hires.

The second contribution to practice comes from the insights into soft skills and graduate recruitment and selection that can help other organizations in the service sector. Many organizations do not have unique recruitment and selection processes for graduates and this needs to change since the challenge of attracting and selecting good quality graduates is not the same as for lower-level employees. The findings of this study have highlighted that there is a difference that should factor into employers' activities. Future studies, using the findings of this study as a base, should target employers in the wider service sector of Guyana with the possibility of including the non-profit and governmental service sector. This is of special significance as Guyana develops plans to ensure that its non-oil sectors develop and grow to remove the risk associated with being dependant on oil revenues.

Thirdly, the evolution of the practice of HR has shown there is significant value to employer branding which is not just a marketing function. HR and Marketing need to form synergies for the benefit of the organization on a long-term basis. HR also needs to collaborate with Operations/Information Technology. HR needs to be a strategic business partner for the benefit of the entire organization.

This study will also be valuable to the University of Guyana where there is a focus on providing value for graduates in their transition to work. This value proposition can help

the University differentiate itself from the other higher education institutions that are entering the local landscape. Collaboration has already begun to ensure that employers' needs are being met by higher education. There is also an opportunity for human resource training to be developed for the benefit of employers. Further, this study will serve as a baseline contribution for a series of sensitisation workshops for university students to improve their awareness of soft skills and encourage them to get assessed so that they can be proactive in filling any gaps they may uncover.

A framework for practice which acknowledges the soft skills desired by employers, as well as guidance on initiatives for recruitment and selection have been identified. The Framework of Practice (Table 11) consists of a list of common and job-related soft skills that employers find desirable. The challenges experienced by employers are also acknowledged and some recommendations for mitigation have been provided. While the Soft Skills Toolkit (Table 10) provides a more strategic and managerial set of considerations for HRM, focusing on graduate recruitment and selection, the Framework of Practice (Table 11) provides a list of common tools, activities, and mitigations of common challenges of evaluation to facilitate the identification of desirable soft skills in graduates. The Framework of Practice is provided in response to hurdles identified by the study participants in obtaining graduates with desirable soft skills – identification, evaluation, and mitigation of associated challenges. The Framework is not considered to be exhaustive but can support employers in improving their evaluation methods and managing potential issues with these methods.

Column 1 of The Framework of Practice (Table 11) consists of a list of forty-one (41) common and job-related soft skills that employers find desirable based on research and feedback from participants. Forty-one 'soft skills' are included that could be identified during recruitment and selection. Column 2 of the Framework of Practice identifies a list of nineteen (19) common methods used to evaluate soft skills during recruitment and selection. The Framework acknowledges that the evaluation of some soft skills has

associated challenges. Column 3 highlights six (6) common challenges and recommendations of how to mitigate these challenges.

Table 11. A Framework of practice.

Adapted from "Soft skills evaluation in the IT and BPM industry in Sri Lanka: Skills, Methods and problems." By Devadus & Dharmapala. International Journal of Economics Business & Human Behaviour. 2021. Vol 2. No. 3

COMMON & JOB FOCUSED SOFT SKILLS	EVALUATION DURING RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION	POTENTIAL EVALUATION CHALLENGES & SUGGESTED MITIGATION
1. Communication Skills 2. Listening Skills 3. Ethical Conduct 4. Teamwork 5. Emotional Intelligence 6. Leadership 7. Analytical Skills 8. Hardworking 9. Organization Skills 10. Managing Skills 11. Passion 12. Desire to learn. 13. Accuracy 14. Motivation 15. Confidence 16. Selflessness 17. Empathy 18. Unlearning Skills 19. Positive Attitude 20. Responsible 21. Integrity 22. Negotiation Skills 23. Public Relations 24. Interpersonal Relationships 25. Accountable 26. Agile Mindset 27. Analytical Skills 28. Visualization 29. Training ability 30. Getting people involved 31. Ability to understand and adapt to the market. 32. Logical Thinking 33. Punctuality 34. Patience 35. Independence 36. Initiative skills 37. Explorative mindset 38. Deal with peers. 39. Humour 40. Sharing responsibility 41. Friendliness	1. Provide feedback. 2. Observation during internship 3. Social media profile 4. Observe responses to phone calls & emails. 5. Refer to recommendations and referrals. 6. Question based evaluations. 7. Structured interviewing 8. Project based evaluations. 9. Behavioural interviewing 10. Past experience evaluations 11. Psychometric testing 12. Self-selecting, pre-training & testing 13. Realistic job previews 14. Relationship building with students & higher education. 15. Involvement with students early in their academic lives 16. Model desired behaviour 17. Funding of academic institutions & activities that align with careers and desired soft skills. 18. Fund scholarship that signals valued soft skills along with hard skills 19. Communicate, communicate, communicate	1. Challenge of the subjectivity of the evaluation process – Mitigate with the introduction of research-based frameworks and enhanced communication 2. Challenge of time-consuming procedures requiring significant effort - Mitigate by restructuring human resources and evaluation methods and introduce technology. 3. Challenge by the variable nature of human behaviours – Mitigate with the introduction of research based human behaviour indicators. 4. Difficulty in assessing history, behaviour patterns and fairness to all applicants – Mitigate by utilizing technology, train and communicate with all hiring managers. 5. Challenged to implement an HR strategy that aligns with the organization strategy – Mitigate by strategically treating human resources similar to financial resources. 6. Challenged to signal pre-recruitment soft skill priorities - develop a successful, continuous & visible employer brand

7.5 Limitations of the Research

In this section, limitations of the research are identified. Firstly, this study adopted an interpretivist, phenomenological approach to investigate the perceptions of employers of their lived experiences of recruitment and selection of graduates with desirable soft skills. This study is subjective in nature and depends on accounts shared by participants which may not be accurate. Further, due to its qualitative nature, this study may not demonstrate the level of rigour associated with a quantitative methodology. This study has provided some insight into the perceived soft skill deficiencies of graduates, but it cannot be seen as a universal understanding. Additionally, due to the area of the study, it is possible that the shared experiences were managed since they could be perceived as an assessment of self.

Also, due to the nature of the research, a limitation of the sample is that data was collected from specific organizations within the service sector in Guyana. It is possible that if different employers were interviewed, the findings may have been different. Additionally, because the service sector covers a diverse range of businesses, there is also a possibility that the findings may not be applicable to organizations in other industry sub-sectors that were not represented in the sample of this study.

Qualitative research is characterised by findings that cannot be viewed as generalisable. However, it is proposed that the findings of this study are valuable in a country where there is very little research done especially in the realm of human resources. Additionally, the findings could act as a catalyst for other organizations to audit their practices to determine their level of signaling their needs.

While Georgetown, the capital of Guyana is the most densely populated town in Guyana, this study is geographically limited. The different regions in Guyana have different sub-cultures, different levels of experience and different employment

practices. It is therefore possible that different findings may have been generated if the research had been conducted in other regions of Guyana.

7.6 Recommendations for Future Research

It was noted that participants expressed frustrations with the old processes used and even made individual tweaks to improve the process from their perspective. This raises a question about whether it is an issue of strategic and political will, lack of competence or a lack of resources to make the holistic changes that are necessary to improve the processes. This is an area for future research since an understanding of what prevents the change from being implemented can provide information for a solution.

This study will also be valuable to the University of Guyana where there is a focus on strengthening the research activities of Faculty and the Business School is particularly interested in the area of graduates' transition to work. It is therefore recommended that future research focus on the perceptions of graduates and students. This will provide information on the missing element of the signalling process in this study – the receiver of employer signals.

While the literature provides examples of the use of signaling theory in graduate recruitment and selection, there is a lack of research on employer signaling of desirable graduate soft skills. This is important since there is a focus on soft skills as a source of competitive advantage for employers. Also, based on the evolution of soft skills conceptualizations, research needs to keep pace with these changes, therefore, it is recommended that a longitudinal study on the subject of soft skills be considered.

Literature has also identified that the formation of soft skills starts much earlier than higher education, therefore, there is an opportunity to research soft skills of secondary, vocational and even primary stuBhadents in the context of Guyana.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: LETTER OF INVITATION FOR PARTICIPATION (ORGANIZATION)

Title and Address of Contact and participant Organization

Dear Sir/Madam

My name is Coleen Patterson, and I am a Post Graduate research student at the Edinburgh Napier University. As a part of my studies, I am undertaking a research study as shown by the title below.

TITLE OF THE STUDY: Exploring the perceptions of employers on the 'soft skills' deficienciess of University graduates: Evidence from the service sector in Guyana.

This study will explore how employers perceive the 'soft skills' in new University graduates in the service sector and review the recruitment and selection practices used to identify 'soft skills' in order to positively impact organizational objectives.

The findings of this study will be valuable to all participant organizations by providing a better understanding of the soft skills phenomenon thus enabling human resources practitioners to implement initiatives that could result in the optimal contribution of all staff particularly those at the level of graduates. This is underscored by the position that the optimal contribution of graduates is critical to the organization achieving its objectives.

I am inviting your organization to participate in my study which is completely voluntary and will benefit from your contribution. I am seeking your permission to conduct three semi-structured interviews with members of your team. All interviewees will need to be team members within your organization who are intimately familiar with the recruitment and selection of graduates and have been involved in this process for more than three years. Because the study is exploring 'soft skills' in new graduates, there is a requirement for the organization to have a minimum of five (5) graduates in your

employ and where at least one of these graduates was employed within the last three years.

This study is exploring whether there is another explanation for the graduate 'soft skills' deficiencies that are impacting organizations negatively. There is considerable evidence to show that employers have been implementing various initiatives to improve the outcome of their recruitment and selection processes, yet it is not optimal. This study also takes in to account that recruitment and selection is a costly process involving time, money, and people resources. Therefore, the outcome of this research is seen as having a significantly positive impact on participating organizations in providing a better understanding of what the hurdles are in the process and potentially offering a way forward to improvement.

The process will require your signed consent after reviewing the INFORMED CONSENT FORM which sets out the process that will be undertaken for the interviews and the safeguards for your organization as well as your employees. You will then be asked to agree to a date and time for an interview which will involve questions on the subject. All interviewees will be free to withdraw from the study at any time and will not have to give a reason for doing so.

If you have read and understood this letter of invitation and have had all your questions answered and are comfortable participating in this study, please see now the INFORMED CONSENT FORM.

Thank you again in advance for your commitment to this study which could provide a platform for enhancing the 'soft skills' of the graduate labour force in the service sector in Guyana.

Sincerely

COLEEN PATTERSON
DOCTORAL CANDIDATE
EDINBURGH NAPIER UNIVERSITY

Title and Address of Contact

Dear Sir/Madam

My name is Coleen Patterson, and I am a Post Graduate research student at the Edinburgh Napier University. As a part of my studies, I am undertaking a research study as shown by the title below.

TITLE OF THE STUDY: Exploring the perceptions of employers on the 'soft skills' deficiencies of University graduates: Evidence from the service sector in Guyana.

This study will explore how employers perceive the 'soft skills' in new University graduates in the service sector and review the recruitment and selection practices used to identify 'soft skills' in order to positively impact organizational objectives.

The findings of this study will be valuable to all participant organizations by providing a better understanding of the soft skills phenomenon thus enabling human resources practitioners to implement initiatives that could result in the optimal contribution of all staff particularly those at the level of graduates. This is underscored by the position that the optimal contribution of graduates is critical to the organization achieving its objectives.

I am inviting you to participate in my study which is completely voluntary and will benefit from your contribution. I am seeking your permission to conduct a semi-structured interview with you as a professional who is intimately familiar with the recruitment and selection of graduates and has been involved in this process for more than three years.

This study is exploring whether there is another explanation for the graduate 'soft skills' deficiencies that are impacting organizations negatively. There is considerable evidence to show that employers and recruitment professionals have been implementing various

initiatives to improve the outcome of their recruitment and selection processes, yet it is not optimal. This study also takes in to account that recruitment and selection is a costly process involving time, money, and people resources. Therefore, the outcome of this research is seen as having a significantly positive impact on participating organizations in providing a better understanding of what the hurdles are in the process and potentially offering a way forward to improvement.

The process will require your signed consent after reviewing the INFORMED CONSENT FORM which sets out the process that will be undertaken for the interview and the safeguards for your protection. You will then be asked to agree to a date and time for an interview which will involve questions on the subject. All interviewees are free to withdraw from the study at any time and will not have to give a reason for doing so.

If you have read and understood this letter of invitation and have had all your questions answered and are comfortable participating in this study, please see now the INFORMED CONSENT FORM.

Thank you again in advance for your commitment to this study which could provide a platform for enhancing the 'soft skills' of the graduate labour force in the service sector in Guyana.

Sincerely

COLEEN PATTERSON
DOCTORAL CANDIDATE
EDINBURGH NAPIER UNIVERSITY

APPENDIX B - INFORMED CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF THE STUDY: Exploring the perceptions of employers on the 'soft skills' deficiencies of University graduates: Evidence from the service sector in Guyana.

Edinburgh Napier University requires that all persons who participate in research studies give their written consent to do so. Please read the following and sign it if you agree with what it says.

1. I freely and voluntarily consent to be a participant in the research project on the topic of 'soft skills' in new University graduates in the service sector, to be conducted by Coleen Patterson who is a Post Graduate student at Edinburgh Napier University.

2. The broad goal of this research study is to explore employers' perceptions of the 'soft skills' of new graduates by looking at the recruitment and selection of these skills based on lived experiences within the organization or field. Specifically, I have been asked to participate in an interview that will take approximately one and a half hours of my time. This interview will be audio recorded. I will need to attend the interview online at a time that is mutually agreed with the researcher. During this interview I will be asked a series of questions which are designed to allow me to share my experience with the subject of the study – 'soft skills' in University graduates.

3. I have been told that my responses will be anonymized and kept confidential. My name will not be linked with the research materials and I will not be identified or identifiable in any of the study reports subsequently produced by the researcher. My organization's name will also be anonymized and not be recognizable from the research material. All information will be stored in a safe place.

4. I understand that if at any time during the interview I feel unable or unwilling to continue, I am free to leave. My participation in this study is completely voluntary and I can withdraw without any negative consequences. However, after data has been anonymized or after publication of results it will not be possible for my data to be removed as it would be untraceable at this point.

5. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.

6. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the semi-structured interview and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

7. I have read the above and consent to participate in this study. My signature is not a waiver of any legal rights. Further I understand I will be able to keep a copy of the Informed Consent form for my personal and/or organizational records.

PARTICIPANT'S
SIGNATURE……………………………………………………………………………………………..………

I have explained and defined in detail the research procedure in which the respondent has consented to participate. Furthermore, I will retain one copy of the informed consent for my records.

RESEARCHER'S
SIGNATURE……………………………………………………………………………………..………………

RESEARCHER'S CONTACT INFORMATION: MOBILE – ███████████

EMAIL – █████████████████████

- ███████████████████████

PARTICIPANT CODE.................................

DATE:………………………..…………..

<u>**DEMOGRAPHICS**</u>

Age of Organization:………………………   Size of graduate
intake/Needs:…………………………

Tenure of participant:…………………………   Size of Organization staff:…………………………

Organizational reach:……………………………   Recruitment
Category:…………………………………

The interview prompts are driven by the objectives of the research questions to achieve an in-depth understanding of the employers' perspectives through the participant.

PHASE 1 – THE PROCESS AS EXPERIENCED BY PARTICIPANTS RECRUITING GRADUATES WITH SOFT SKILLS

This study deals with SOFT SKILLS and therefore I would like to share the definition and some examples of SOFT SKILLS being utilized in this study.

Soft Skills are defined as nontechnical, involving interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular contexts such as organizations (Hurrell, Scholarios and Thompson, 2012). They include clear communication and meaningful feedback, problem-solving, teamwork, motivation, judgement, leadership, and ingenuity, coupled with the ability to improve personal learning and job performance, resolving and/or managing conflicts and understanding human behavior in group settings (Grugulis and Vincent, 2009; Parente, Stephan and Brown, 2012). NB: this list is not a complete/final since soft skills also evolve continuously.

The first two questions are on graduate soft skills. Please do not hesitate to speak openly.

1. What are the main/top soft skills that you perceive as necessary for graduates to have during the recruitment and selection processes?
    a. Prompts – between the top five to ten
2. What are the soft skills deficiencies that you have seen in graduates during the recruitment and selection processes?
    a. Prompts – what is lacking?

The next few questions deal with recruitment and therefore I would like to share the definition of recruitment being utilized in this study.

Recruitment is defined as a series of activities implemented by an organization, designed to present the best image of the company to potential candidates while attracting the most qualified applicants (Suazo et al, 2009). These practices and decisions can affect either the number or types of individuals applying for a vacancy (Rynes et al, 1991) and further, their decision to accept a job. The term 'applicant attraction' is a synonym for recruitment where the purpose of recruitment activities is to attract high-quality applicants (Suleman and Laranjeiro, 2018). The focus of recruitment is therefore attraction.

3. Describe the process of graduate recruitment in your organization?
    a. Prompts -what is the overall process? What is the timing of recruitment in the organization – annual, need based?
4. What practices are used to attract graduates with the desired soft skills?
    a. Prompts - What are the instruments/ activities used for recruitment? How does the organization indicate to graduates the soft skills desired? What do you think of the communication process? Which medium and methods are used for communicating with potential applicants?
5. What do you think of the recruitment experience?
    a. Prompts – How did the experience make you feel? Do you receive feedback from potential applicants? Do you think it is an effective process? Why?

PHASE 2 – THE APPROACH AND PROCESS AS EXPERIENCED BY PARTICIPANTS SELECTING GRADUATES WITH SOFT SKILLS

The next few questions deal with SELECTION and therefore I would like to share the definition of selection being utilized in this study.

SELECTION is defined as the exchange of information between organizations and applicants while searching for alignment of goals (Bangerter et al, 2012). The focus of selection is choosing

6. Tell me about the selection process used by your organization (you) to choose graduates?
    a. Prompts – probe whether the three selection stages are used – pre-selection, intermediate, final selection? How do you prepare for the process? Training, guidance? Do you feel the process is objective? Effective?
    b. What practices/activities/instruments do you use to choose graduates with the desired soft skills? Any practices found to be unreliable? Distorted? Any dishonesty in the process/interaction?
7. Tell me about when you were able to identify applicants with some or all of the soft skills your organization required?
    a. Prompts – what common characteristics if any have you noticed in these applicants? Education? Economics? Family background? Networking? Social activities?
8. Talk to me about the last two graduate selection processes that you participated in?
    a. Prompts – Can we have a look at the vacancy notice? Can we talk about the areas on the evaluation sheets used for the selection? What about the weighting on certain areas? Knowledge, skills, abilities?

PHASE 3 – SIGNALING WITHIN GRADUATE RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION

9. Tell me how the words and requirements for vacancy ads and selection documents are chosen?
    a. Prompts – what is included in the communication? Any soft skills? Networking social activities? Self-development? Any other outcomes that influence the ads or other documents?
10. Tell me about the process for choosing and using a selection panel/team for graduate selection.
    a. Prompts - Any pre-meetings? Roles discussed? Agreement of criteria? Training? Deficiencies discussed? Areas for probing or further information identified?

11. Tell me about any changes to the processes of recruitment and selection of graduates that you have experienced over time.
    a. Prompts – why do you believe those changes were implemented? Do you perceive that the processes are now more effective in identifying soft skills?
12. What would be your recommendation to help employers improve their success in identifying and selecting graduates with the desired soft skills?
    a. Prompts – what tips/strategies would you suggest? What would you change in their recruitment and selection processes? What do you believe would be effective?

WRAP UP QUESTION: Do you have any additional closing thoughts on how to communicate and signal to graduates the desired soft skills during recruitment and selection or how to identify the presence of the desired soft skills in graduates during selection?

APPENDIX D – PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (HIGHER EDUCATION)

PARTICIPANT CODE……………………………
      DATE:………………………..……………..

DEMOGRAPHICS

Level of participant:………………………   Size of annual graduate
output:………………..

The interview prompts are driven by the objectives of the research questions to achieve an in-depth understanding of the employers' perspectives through the participant.

THE PROCESS AND RATIONALE AS EXPERIENCED BY PARTICIPANTS DEVELOPING GRADUATES WITH SOFT SKILLS

This study deals with SOFT SKILLS and therefore I would like to share the definition and some examples of SOFT SKILLS prevalent in the literature and being utilized in this study.

Soft Skills are defined as nontechnical, involving interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular contexts such as organizations (Hurrell, Scholarios and Thompson, 2012). They include clear communication and meaningful feedback, problem-solving, teamwork, motivation, judgement, leadership,

and ingenuity, coupled with the ability to improve personal learning and job performance, resolving and/or managing conflicts and understanding human behavior in group settings (Grugulis and Vincent, 2009; Parente, Stephan and Brown, 2012). NB: this list is not a complete/final since soft skills also evolve continuously.

1. Please share with me your experience of the interaction between the University and employers in Guyana about their graduate soft skills needs.
   a. Prompts – what are they unhappy about? Asking for in graduates?
2. Tell me about the University's initiatives/activities geared towards the development of soft skills in undergraduates (and mitigating employers' feedback/complaints).
   a. Prompts – what is in their curriculum? Any other areas where these skills are expected to be developed?
3. Tell me about your experience in understanding the effectiveness of the University's initiatives/activities geared towards the development of soft skills in undergraduates (and mitigating employers' feedback/complaints).
   a. Prompts – what do you perceive has worked? Have there been any changes over time?
4. Please share what activities (formal or informal) are used or engaged in to stay current on employers' needs for graduates' soft skills?
5. WRAP UP QUESTION: Do you have any additional closing thoughts on employers' perception of graduates' soft skills deficiencies?