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The Impact of Capstone Project on Students' Soft Skills: A Case Study at ACLEDA University of Business

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of capstone project participation on the development of key soft skills among students at ACLEDA University of Business. Grounded in project-based learning and experiential learning theory, the research is motivated by the pressing need to understand how practical, collaborative tasks foster essential professional competencies. Specifically, this study investigates the influence of capstone projects on communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills. Employing a quantitative research design, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to assess the relationships between capstone project participation and the four aforementioned skill domains. The results indicate statistically significant positive effect of capstone project participation on communication skills, teamwork, and interpersonal skills. However, a significant negative association was observed with problem-solving skills. These findings affirm the value of capstone projects in fostering critical soft skills within higher education curriculum, while also revealing an unexpected result in relation to problem-solving which warrants further investigation.

Keywords: Communication skills, Teamwork, Problem-solving, Interpersonal skills, Capstone Project Participation, Project-based learning

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1. Introduction

Background of the study

Project-based learning (PBL) has emerged as a prominent pedagogical approach in the twenty-first century education as it enables students to acquire knowledge and skills through engagement with authentic, real-world problems (Crespí et al., 2022). As the learner-based approach, PBL promotes active participation, collaboration, and reflective inquiry – the key processes that foster competencies required for success in the contemporary workplace. The approach is particularly effective in cultivating soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and interpersonal skills, necessary for professional success in the dynamic global work environments (Awan et al., 2015; Bell, 2010). In response to the changing demands, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are expected to embed experiential learning and real-world engagement into their curricula (Crespí et al., 2022). This ensures that graduates are not only knowledgeable but also professionally competent.

Yorke (2006) asserts that graduates need to acquire a defined set of achievements for their employability. Succi and Canovi (2020) emphasize that graduates are increasingly expected to possess a broad range of employability soft skills, including communication, analytical thinking, collaboration, innovation, and entrepreneurial capabilities, to effectively perform in dynamic work environments without requiring extensive on-the-job training. Bridgstock (2011) further underscores that thriving in creative and knowledge-based industries depends heavily on graduates' ability to integrate analytical and innovative thinking with collaborative practices. Furthermore, Andrews and Higson (2008) argue that employers often prioritize soft skills over technical knowledge, highlighting the imperative for universities to integrate these abilities into their academic programs.

The final project assignment, often structured as a group task and assessed at the end of the academic term, serves as a capstone experience in higher education, allowing students to consolidate and apply the competencies acquired throughout their educational journey. Group-based assessments and case projects are designed to simulate real-world professional challenges, fostering collaboration, critical thinking, independent learning, and team work (Kumar et al., 2007). Capstone projects provide a valuable framework for evaluating both individual and collective learning outcomes while preparing students to meet the demands of the workplace (Onal et al., 2017). The approach fosters critical thinking, problem-solving, and research skills while preparing students for professional

environments. Furthermore, an international, multidisciplinary study into capstone experiences concluded that such projects play an essential role in consolidating diverse learning, demonstrating student competence, and preparing students for professional careers or advanced academic paths. Vale et al. (2024) have highlighted, "capstone experiences provide students with opportunities to integrate learning, demonstrate competence, and transition to professional life or graduate study" (p. 100).

Research problem

Despite growing consensus on the importance of soft skills for academic and professional success, their direct impact on the outcomes of project capstone has remained underexplored, requiring further investigation (Kumari et al., 2025). While existing literature consistently emphasizes the importance of soft skill development in higher education, particularly in relation to employability and workplace readiness, a notable gap remains in empirical evidence linking specific soft skill to measurable outcomes in final project performance (Hamzah et al., 2025). Much of the current discourse is conceptual, with limited empirical analysis of how specific soft skills—such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and interpersonal abilities—directly influence project success indicators like timely completion, output quality, team cohesion, and presentation effectiveness. This gap underscores the need for research that moves beyond general assertions to systematically examine the causal relationships between soft skill development and capstone project outcomes. Prior studies in organizational contexts have demonstrated that soft leadership skills significantly impact project success. Awan et al. (2015) suggest that comparable dynamics may exist within academic capstone contexts, warranting further empirical exploration.

The objective of the study

This study aims to find out the impact of capstone final project participation on soft skills at the ACLEDA University of Business, namely communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills.

Research questions

- What is the impact of capstone project participation on the development of soft skills among students at ACLEDA University of Business?
- To what extent does participation in capstone projects enhance specific soft skills—namely communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and interpersonal competence—within the ACLEDA University of Business context?

Significance of the study

This study holds significant importance for educators, curriculum designers, and institutional leaders at ACLEDA University of Business. By examining how capstone project participation influencing key soft skills – communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills at ACLEDA University of Business – it illustrates how these skills contribute to academic engagement and student readiness. The findings can inform curriculum enhancement, guide the development of targeted support strategies, and refine pedagogical approaches to better prepare students for successful capstone experiences and future professional challenges.

2. Literature Review

Defining the Capstone Project

Final project assignments in higher education serve as culminating, integrative experiences that allow students to synthesize and apply the knowledge, theories, and skills they have acquired throughout their academic program. Saviz et al. (2001) refers to capstone projects as involve a substantial, independent body of work where students research a specific problem, develop a solution, or create a significant output that demonstrates their mastery of the subject matter. According to Passmore and Pfannkuch (2024), these assignments frequently require students to engage in critical thinking, problem-solving, extensive research, and effective communication, often culminating in a written report, presentation, or tangible product. Capstone experience purposes articulate that such experiences are crucial for enabling students to integrate diverse learning, showcase their competence, and prepare for either professional careers or advanced scholarly pursuits (Vale et al., 2021).

Project-Based Learning (PBL)

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a pedagogical approach that focuses on engaging students in authentic, real-world projects to acquire a deeper understanding of key concepts and skills. Instead of passively receiving information, students actively investigate a challenging question or problem over an extended period (Awan et al., 2015). This process requires them to apply academic knowledge, critical thinking, collaboration, and various soft skills to create a tangible product or solution. The theory posits that this active, hands-on engagement fosters a more meaningful and lasting learning experience than traditional instructional methods (Awan et al., 2015). PBL is particularly effective in developing the very skills employers seek, such as

communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, as these are inherently required for a project's successful completion (Bell, 2010).

Experiential Learning Theory

Kolb and Kolb (2005) defined Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) as the process through which individuals learn from direct experience. The theory is often represented as a four-stage cyclical model, beginning with a Concrete Experience where the learner engages in an activity. This is followed by Reflective Observation, a stage where the learner reflects on the experience from various perspectives. The third stage, abstract conceptualization involves synthesizing these reflections to form new ideas or refine existing ones. Finally, in active experimentation, learners apply these new concepts in a new situation or context, generating fresh concrete experiences and thereby perpetuating the experiential learning cycle. This framework emphasizes that learning is a continuous process driven by hands-on involvement and critical reflection, making it a powerful model for understanding how skills, including soft skills, are developed and internalized in practical settings like a capstone project (Kolb, 2014).

Hypothesis development

Capstone project and communication skills

Participation in capstone projects significantly enhances written and oral communication skills through teamwork and engagement with real-world problems. The projects inherently require students to engage themselves in a wide range of communicative activities in that they must work together to define the project scope, negotiate roles and responsibilities, and resolve conflicts, all of which hone their interpersonal and active listening skills (Awan et al., 2015). Furthermore, the culminating experience of a capstone project often requires students to formally present their findings to an audience, such as faculty or industry stakeholders (Pembridge & Paretti, 2019). This practice is crucial for developing public speaking abilities, including verbal and non-verbal communication, and the capacity to articulate complex technical information clearly and compellingly (Zekeri & Baba, 2014). Therefore, the study proposes the following hypothesis.

H1. Capstone project participation has a positive impact on communication skills.

Capstone project and teamwork skills

A capstone project is a highly effective method for cultivating essential teamwork skills. The collaborative nature of these projects requires students to work together for an extended period, moving beyond individual contributions to a shared goal. In this process, students must learn to delegate tasks based on individuals' strengths, manage conflicts, and negotiate a unified approach to complex problems (Moradi & Klakegg, 2024). Research shows that structured, project-based capstone experiences provide an ideal platform for students to learn and practice these employability skills, which are highly valued in modern industry (Gafni et al., 2023). Therefore, the study proposes the following hypothesis.

H2. Capstone project participation has a positive impact on teamwork skills.

Capstone project and problem-solving skills

Capstone projects are highly effective in developing and refining problem-solving skills by immersing students in complex, real-world challenges (Sulaiman & Husaini, 2023). Unlike theoretical exercises, these projects often present ill-defined problems that require students to go through a systematic process of identifying the core issue, conducting in-depth research, and applying their acquired knowledge to devise a practical solution (Sulaiman & Husaini, 2023). This iterative process of critical thinking, analysis, and creative application of knowledge is a cornerstone of project-based learning, which cultivates students' ability to not only address technical obstacles but also to adapt their strategies as new problems arise (Aubakirova et al., 2024). This hands-on experience strengthens their capacity to handle ambiguity and provides them with a tangible framework for approaching future challenges in their professional careers (Roiha & Polso, 2021). Therefore, the study proposes the following hypothesis.

H3. Participating in a capstone project has a positive impact on problem-solving skills.

Capstone project and interpersonal skills

Participating in a capstone project is instrumental in developing interpersonal skills, which are crucial for success in professional environments. As students work in teams, often with diverse backgrounds and perspectives, they are compelled to practice and refine communication, negotiation, and conflict-resolution skills (McClellan, 2016). The project-based learning model provides a real-world context for students to improve their communication abilities by having to express ideas clearly, listen empathetically, and

provide constructive feedback (Crespí et al., 2022) Furthermore, these projects foster the ability to build authentic relationships and navigate personality differences, which are essential for effective collaboration and for enhancing overall team performance (Kitchen et al., 2019). This hands-on experience prepares students to be more self-aware and to work productively with others, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Therefore, the study proposes the following hypothesis.

H4. Capstone project participation has a positive impact on interpersonal skills.

Conceptual Framework

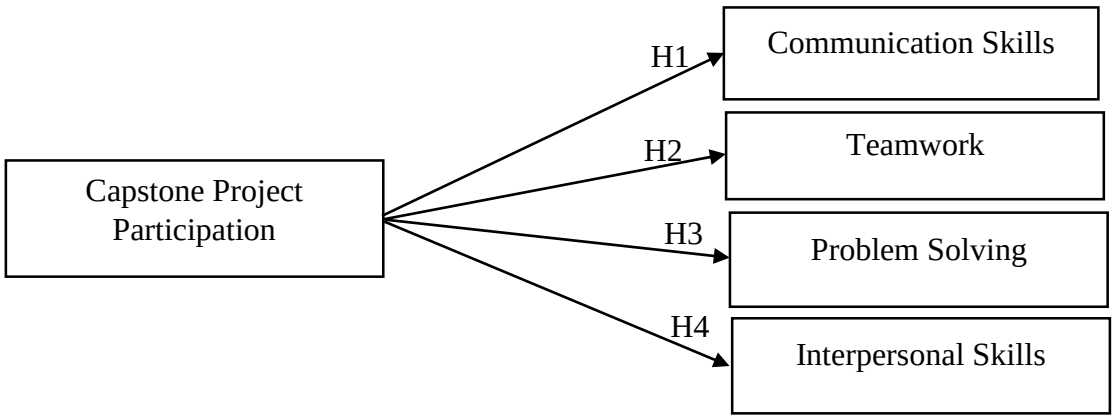

Figure 1. Results of the Conceptual Model Framework

3. Methodology

Research design

This study adopted a quantitative research design to systematically examine how soft skills influence student participation in capstone projects (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Data were collected via a self-administered survey, which was distributed to the selected undergraduate students at ACLEDA University of Business

Research participants

The study utilized purposive sampling to select participants based on specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives (Cooper et al., 2018). The participants are students who are currently enrolled in an academic program from Year 1 to Year 4 at ACLEDA University of Business. Regarding sample size selection, the study used 106 by following the rule of thumb of Green (1991). For multiple regression, Green (1991) suggests a minimum of N≥50+8m for the overall model and N≥104+m for individual predictors, where m is the number of independent variables.

Research tool

The study employed a structured questionnaire comprising three sections. Section one collected demographic information, including gender, education level, and academic major. Section two assessed soft skills and capstone project participation through validated items: five questions on communication and five on interpersonal skills adapted from Meisenhelder (1989); four questions on teamwork from Valentine et al. (2015); five questions on problem-solving from Clevry (n.d.); and four questions on capstone project participation from Martonosi and Williams (2016). All items were rated using a seven-point Likert scale. Section three invited open-ended suggestions and comments regarding students' experiences with capstone project participation.

Data analysis

The data analysis for this study was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 26. The initial stage of the analysis involved generating descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, to summarize the central tendencies and inferential statistics.

To test the central hypothesis regarding the impact of capstone project participation on soft skills, inferential statistics were employed. Specifically, a multivariate multiple regression was performed to examine the effect of the independent variable, capstone project participation, on the four dependent variables simultaneously (Hartung & Knapp, 2005), namely communication skills, teamwork skills, problem-solving skills, and interpersonal skills.

4. Results and Discussion

Demographic information

Among 106 participants, the majority were female accounting for 79.20%, and most them held a Bachelor's Degree around 94.30%. The largest group of respondents majored in Accounting approximately 43.40%, followed by Financial and Banking 34.00%.

Table 1. Demographic Respondents

Demographic	Categories (N=106)	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	84	79.20%
	Male	22	20.80%
Education level	Associate's Degree	6	5.70%
	Bachelor's Degree	100	94.30%
Major	Accounting	46	43.40%
	Financial and Banking	36	34.00%
	Other	24	22.60%

Level of agreement

The table shows the level of agreement for each variable is positive. For Communication Skills, the mean of 5.773 indicated an "Agree" level of agreement. Similarly, Teamwork, with a mean of 6.068, also fell within the "Agree" range. The mean for Solving Problem was 4.907, which corresponds to "Somewhat Agree". For both Interpersonal Skills and Capstone Project Participation, the means of 5.747 and 5.863, respectively, also show an "Agree" level of agreement. These results suggest that respondents generally had a positive experience.

Table 2. Level of Agreement

No	Variables	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Level of Agreement
1	Communication skills (CS)	1.80	7.00	5.773	.938	Agree
2	Teamwork (TW)	4.00	7.00	6.068	.594	Agree
3	Solving Problem (SP)	1.00	6.00	4.907	1.214	Somewhat Agree
4	Interpersonal skills (IS)	3.80	7.00	5.747	.675	Agree
5	Capstone project participation (CP)	4.00	7.00	5.863	.596	Agree

Reliability test

The following table shows that each variable has high Cronbach's alpha meeting the criteria of internal consistency as suggested by Phou et al. (2024). Based on Table 3, all variables had high Cronbach's alpha values, which indicates good internal consistency.

The values are 0.836 for Communication skills, 0.0763 for Teamwork, 0.667 for Problem solving, 0.729 for Interpersonal skills, and 0.775 for Capstone project participation.

Table 3: Cronbach's Alpha and Construct Reliabilities

Variables	Items	Cronbach's alpha
Communication skills (CS)	5	0.836
Teamwork (TW)	4	0.763
Solving Problem (PS)	5	0.667
Interpersonal skills (IS)	5	0.729
Capstone project participation (CP)	4	0.775

Pearson Correlation Matrix

According to the following Pearson Correlation Matrix Table, Communication Skills (CS) had a moderate positive correlation with Teamwork (TW) at 0.497. CS, TW, and Interpersonal Skills (IS) had strong positive correlation with Capstone Project Participation (CP) at 0.603, 0.720, and 0.654, respectively. However, Solving Problem (SP) had negative relationship with CS, TW, IS and CP.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Matrix

	CS	TW	SP	IS	CP
CS	1				
TW	.497**	1			
SP	-0.021	-.223*	1		
IS	.467**	.572**	-.232*	1	
CP	.603**	.720**	-.231*	.654**	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Based on the Tests of Between-Subjects Effects Table, the multivariate multiple regression model was statistically significant for all four dependent variables, as indicated by the p-values of 0.000 for communication skills, teamwork, and interpersonal skills, and 0.044 for problem-solving skills. The F-values were also high, suggesting that the

independent variable, capstone project participation, significantly explains the variance in the dependent variables.

The R-squared values show the proportion of variance explained by the model for each skill; for example, the proposed model explained around 36.4% for Communication skills, 52% for Teamwork, 5.9% for Problem-Solving Skills, and 42.8% for Interpersonal Skills. These results indicate that capstone projects had the strongest explanation for teamwork.

Table 5: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source		R Squared	Adjusted R Squared	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	CS	0.364	0.352	33.663	2	16.831	29.512	0.000
	TW	0.52	0.511	19.282	2	9.641	55.836	0.000
	SP	0.059	0.04	9.091	2	4.546	3.213	0.044
	IS	0.428	0.417	20.513	2	10.257	38.513	0.000
Intercept	CS			0.052	1	0.052	0.092	0.762
	TW			3.668	1	3.668	21.244	0.000
	SP			61.960	1	61.960	43.795	0.000
	IS			2.144	1	2.144	8.051	0.005
Error	CS			58.743	103	0.570		
	TW			17.785	103	0.173		
	SP			145.722	103	1.415		
	IS			27.431	103	0.266		
Total	CS			3625.840	106			
	TW			3940.563	106			
	SP			2707.720	106			
	IS			3549.120	106			
Corrected Total	CS			92.406	105			
	TW			37.067	105			
	SP			154.814	105			
	IS			47.944	105			

Multivariate multiple regression

Based on Table 6, the multivariate multiple regression results showed the impact of capstone project participation (CP) on each of the four soft skills. Capstone project participation had a statistically significant positive impact on communication skills (B = 0.949, p = 0.000). The results also indicated a strong, statistically significant positive effect of capstone project participation on teamwork skills (B = 0.716, p = 0.000). The analysis revealed a statistically significant negative impact of capstone project participation on problem-solving skills (B = -0.471, p = 0.017). The table showed a significant positive effect of capstone project participation on interpersonal skills (B = 0.741, p = 0.000).

Table 6: multivariate multiple regression

IV		DV	B	Std. Error	t	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval		Partial Eta Squared
							Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
CP	→	CS	0.949	0.124	7.682	0.000	0.704	1.194	0.364
CP	→	TW	0.716	0.068	10.543	0.000	0.582	0.851	0.519
CP	→	SP	-0.471	0.195	-2.419	0.017	-0.856	-0.085	0.054
CP	→	IS	0.741	0.084	8.775	0.000	0.573	0.908	0.428

Discussion

The multivariate multiple regression analysis reveals that capstone project participation significantly and positively impacts communication, teamwork, and interpersonal skills but not problem solving.

The study found capstone project participation had a statistically significant positive effect on communication skills in hypothesis one which aligned (Pembridge & Paretti, 2019) and (Zekeri & Baba, 2014). Collaborating project-based courses inherently provide students with opportunities for verbal and written communication. The need to coordinate with team members, present findings to stakeholders, and write a final report strengthens communication skills.

Moreover, the strong positive effect of capstone project on teamwork found in hypothesis two was also consistent with (Moradi & Klakegg, 2024; Gafni et al., 2023). This highlights that capstone projects are designed to simulate real-world team dynamics,

requiring students to engage in collaborative problem-solving, role delegation, and conflict resolution.

The finding for hypothesis three presents a notable and unexpected contrast with (Sulaiman & Husaini, 2023) and (Aubakirova et al., 2024). The analysis indicates a significant negative relationship between capstone project and problem-solving skill. This result challenges the assumption that all project-based learning contexts automatically improve this skill. It suggests that factors such as project complexity, lack of instructor support, or student-perceived ambiguity may hinder, rather than help, the development of problem-solving skills.

The finding for hypothesis four showed a significant positive relationship between capstone projects and interpersonal skills. This result was supported by (Crespí et al., 2022) and (Kitchen et al., 2019). Capstone experiences require students to interact closely with peers and faculty, leading to improved skills in empathy, negotiation, and building rapport.

5. Conclusion

This study sought to determine the impact of capstone project participation on the development of students' soft skills. The results purposefully address the research questions by providing a clear summary of the relationships between the variables.

The results mainly demonstrate that capstone projects are an effective tool for enhancing several crucial soft skills. A statistically significant positive relationship has been found among capstone project participation and communication skills, teamwork, and interpersonal skills. These results confirm that collaborative, real-world projects provide a valuable platform for students to hone the skills highly valued by employers.

However, the research also yields an unexpected finding. The analysis has revealed a significant negative relationship between capstone project participation and problem-solving skills. This suggests that while these projects are beneficial for certain skills, their effect on problem-solving may be more complex than previously assumed. This outcome underscores the need for a more nuanced capstone project design to ensure alignment with intended learning objectives, while also inviting further research into the specific factors underlying this result.

Implications

This study offers both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the unexpected finding regarding problem-solving skills challenges the assumption that capstone projects foster this competency, suggesting a need for more theoretical models of experiential learning. Practically, the results provide valuable feedback for educational institutions. They confirm the value of capstone projects for developing teamwork, communication, and interpersonal skills, encouraging their continued use. Simultaneously, the negative finding on problem-solving highlights the necessity for educators to critically evaluate and restructure these projects, perhaps by incorporating dedicated problem-solving workshops or scaffolding, to ensure that all desired learning outcomes are effectively achieved.

Limitations and further study

The study has a certain limitation because it includes a sample from a single institution, ACLEDA University of Business, which may limit the generalizability of the results to a broader population of university students. The quantitative research design, while effective for identifying relationships between variables, does not provide a deep understanding of the reason behind the unexpected negative finding on problem-solving skills. Future research should therefore employ a mixed-methods approach, including qualitative interviews or focus groups with ACLEDA University of Business students, to explore the specific challenges and experiences that may have led to this result. Additionally, expanding the sample to include students from different Cambodian universities and disciplines would enhance the external validity of the findings and provide a more comprehensive picture of the impact of capstone projects in the region.

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