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A Royal Review of Soft Skills in the AI Era

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Students entering higher education in 2026 have grown up in an era defined by social media, online learning, and now artificial intelligence (AI)—powerful technologies that have advanced global connections more than in any other time. However, these same advancements may have had certain inadvertent side effects at the personal level, including the erosion of soft skills—the fundamental interpersonal skills that facilitate effective social connections. This paper reports the results of a three-phase futures workshop held at the *Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors* (RICS) in London, UK, in the fall of 2025, in which participants were asked to provide their insights about the lack of soft skills in the current generation of CM students and recommendations on how to correct it. Many of the participants in the workshop were optimistic that AI would be different from previous technologies, believing it could be used to support the development of certain soft skills. Other participants disagreed, expressing skepticism that any technology has ever or can ever substitute for authentic human engagement. Key takeaways for CM teachers include basic guidance on how and when to use AI in the classroom and recommendations to explore alternatives to technology-dependent pedagogies.

Keywords: Construction Management, Construction Education, Soft Skills, Artificial Intelligence, Futures Workshop

Background and Introduction

In this era hallmarked by connectivity with technology, soft skills—the fundamental, universal, and enduring skills focused on human connections—are notably in decline despite their persistent value and relevance in the workplace (Visser & Terblanche, 2025). This "soft skills gap" has now become so wide that most employers prioritize soft, interpersonal and leadership skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, leadership, negotiation, critical thinking, planning, integrity, conflict resolution, resilience, decisiveness, empathy, creativity, reliability, professionalism) over hard, technical skills (e.g., project management, scheduling, cost and material estimating, budgeting, purchasing and procurement, permitting, logistics, quality control,) in their hiring decisions (Horváth-Csikós et al., 2023). Construction employers, in particular, are struggling to find candidates with an adequate balance between their hard skills and soft skills, a situation aggravated by the increasingly complex and fragmented business relationships that are used to deliver modern construction projects (Van Heerden et al., 2023). This is supported by new research showing that CM students have a debilitating lack of self-confidence in their interpersonal and communication skills, often considering themselves to be un- or underprepared for the social demands of the workplace (Barnes, 2025). So, what is to be done

with this current trajectory? As technology and AI continue to advance, can competency in, and symmetry between, hard skills and soft skills be achieved for future generations of CM professionals? If so, by what means? This paper reports the results of a futures workshop held at the *Innovation in Built Environment Education* (IBEE) conference hosted at the *Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors* (RICS) in London, England, in the fall of 2025. At the workshop, construction academics and industry professionals were asked to consider how CM teachers can help their students balance the tension between (a) developing necessary soft, interpersonal and communication skills and (b) the technology-saturated learning environment that can conflict with students engaging with other humans, particularly in the AI era.

Literature Review

Various theories on the causes for the lack of soft skills in CM students have been proposed in recent years. One of the most common is the complexity of the modern construction landscape (Carstens 2016; Mahasneh & Thabet, 2016; Mills et al., 2018; Van Heerden et al., 2023; Zuo et al., 2018). The theory states that the current generation of CM students and young professionals is no different than any other generation; rather, the rapid technological advancements in the construction industry over the past half-century have shifted the focus away from the soft, interpersonal domain to the hard, technical domain. An adjacent theory is that primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools are the source of imbalance in soft skills and hard skills. Universities have prioritized teaching hard skills over soft skills in efforts to meet the demands of the industry (Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2023; Almeida & Morais, 2023; Carstens, 2016), and because soft skills are more difficult to teach and evaluate than more "classroom friendly" hard skills (Mahasneh & Thabet, 2016). Social media ubiquity is another prevailing theory for the lack of soft skills in college-age populations generally (Al-Samarraie et al., 2022). For a generation, young people have been permitted to spend excessive time looking at screens, depriving them of the growth and learning opportunities provided by frequent and direct engagement with other humans.

Regarding solutions to the soft skills gap, a small number of researchers in CM have begun to explore ways to reverse the decline through a variety of approaches. Many of them use more traditional methods of restoring human interactions. For example, Carstens (2016) tested the use of narratives—gathering and telling stories about personal experiences—to highlight the real-world experiences of construction professionals. Mills et al. (2018) consulted with CM students, faculty, and industry professionals to map and validate instructions on professional resilience in CM courses to focus and magnify soft skills training. Ofori-Boadu et al. (2017) used an industry-academia workshop to build and reinforce soft skills in undergraduate CM students. Beyond these traditional methods, a new body of interdisciplinary research from various academic domains promotes the use of technology, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), as a possible solution for the development of certain soft skills (Alvarado-Bravo et al., 2025). This approach assumes that because AI has the adaptive capabilities to tailor individualized experiences for users, it can also provide students with simulated one-on-one interactions necessary for the development of their soft skills.

Methods

Expert elicitation and futuring were the methods used to investigate how construction management (CM) students can develop their soft skills in the AI era. Expert elicitation is a way to gather informed opinions from knowledgeable and competent specialists when data on a particular subject is scarce and limited (Adams, 2007). Futuring is a planning and strategy method in which experts are tasked with imagining a variety of potential outcomes, or futures, on a specific topic depending on actions taken in the present (Jungk & Müllert, 1987). The futures workshop on CM soft skills was held at the

Innovation in Built Environment Education (IBEE) conference hosted at the *Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors* (RICS) in London, UK, early in the fall of 2025. Workshop participants were primarily senior academic leadership, representing 16 major universities in the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland) and the United States. Their titles consisted of eight CM program leaders (e.g., CM department chair), six senior lecturers, two assistant professors, one associate dean, and one associate professor. The remaining participants were industry professionals, including two construction software representatives, a construction education manager, and an executive director. The median number of years of work experience was 25 years. The mean was 24.7 years. The combined total work experience of the group was 544 years. The duration of the workshop was one hour. The workshop began with an IRB-approved statement of consent followed by a review of the latest research on the challenges facing CM students as they strive to develop interpersonal skills in the modern educational landscape. A summary and definitions of hard skills, soft skills, technology, and artificial intelligence (AI) were provided, followed by an overview of the research methods, and objectives.

In the latter half of the workshop, participants were asked ten Likert-style and open-ended questions about how CM teachers can help their students balance the tension between (a) developing necessary soft, interpersonal and communication skills and (b) the technology-saturated learning environment that can conflict with students engaging with other humans, particularly in the AI era. The questions were organized into three phases—critiquing, visioning, and implementation—based on the guidance provided by Jungk and Müllert (1987). Data collection was facilitated by Mentimeter, a popular online platform for creating and delivering interactive presentations that allows presenters to engage directly with their audiences using live polls, quizzes, and open-ended questions. Participants in the workshop were given time during the workshop to answer each Mentimeter question independently before a short round of open discussion. Data analysis was conducted using inductive thematic coding for open-ended questions to identify any meaningful trends in responses from participants. Preliminary thematic grouping of responses was assisted by Mentimeter software to provide a draft codebook that was reviewed and modified in a second round of inductive coding by the author and checked by an external expert. Subsequent rounds of review were conducted to refine the final version of the codebook. Descriptive statistics were used to evaluate responses to the Likert questions. Variations in response totals were expected because participants were permitted to skip questions for which they had no opinions or insights. All research methods were reviewed and approved in writing by the host University's institutional review board (IRB) prior to data collection and analysis.

Results

Phase 1: Critiquing the Present

Phase 1, "Critiquing the Present," consisted of two questions. Question 1 was on a sliding seven-point Likert scale asking participants to rank their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement "AI and other technologies have had little impact on the development of CM students' soft skills." (Figure 1). The average response of the 22 participants who answered the question was 3.2 out of 7, indicating a slight overall disagreement with the statement. Dividing the responses into agree and disagree categories, only six participants (27.3%) strongly agreed, agreed, or mostly agreed with the statement. Nearly two-thirds of the participants (63.6%, n=14) strongly disagreed, disagreed, or mostly disagreed. Comparing the poles of the Likert scale, four participants strongly disagreed with the statement, compared to zero who strongly agreed with the statement.

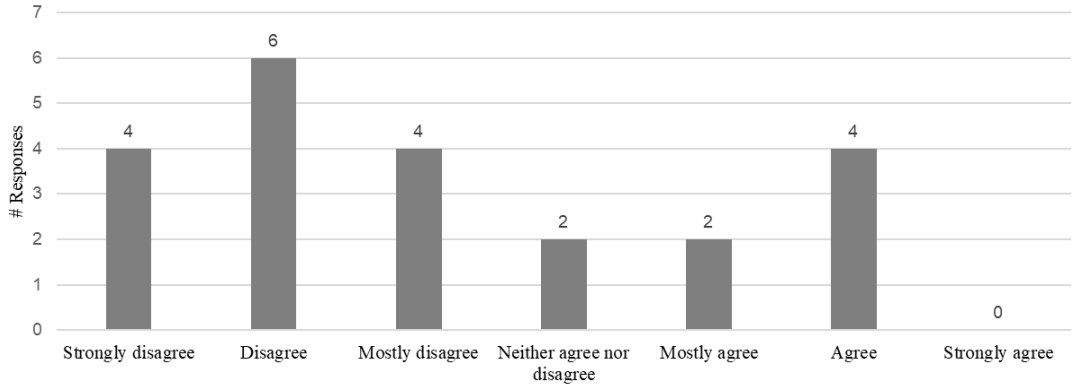

Figure 1. Likert response distribution to Question 1 on the *current* impact of AI on CM students' soft skills.

Question 2 asked participants to explain their answer to Question 1. The most common theme in their responses was *human interactions* (n=9). Many of the participants in this group expressed negative opinions about the impact that technology and AI have had on CM students' soft skills. For example, one participant wrote, "AI is not human! Soft skills development needs interaction, reflective work." Another said, "I think [AI and technology are] stopping [CM students from] communicating with each other…They are…using AI as [a] partner to ask questions.". Another wrote "[CM students] need human interaction.". Other responses seemed more open to technology and AI solutions to help resolve the soft skills gap. For example, one participant said, "AI can be used to mentor and provide feedback to students in their soft [skills] attributes. Students will need to interpret and communicate AI outputs in the future". Others were more reserved in their opinions of AI's impact. One participant wrote, "It's a little early in adoption to see the impact on general soft skills of AI and to disentangle this from other technological developments (i.e., social media)."

Phase 2: Visioning the Future

Phase 2, "Visioning the Future," consisted of Questions 3-7. Question 3 was on a sliding seven-point Likert scale asking participants their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement, "As AI and other technologies advance, what impact do you believe this will have on the development of CM students' soft skills?". The average score across all responses was 5.5, indicating a large majority of the participants believed AI would have an impact on CM students' soft skills in the future (Figure 2). Bisecting the data into agree and disagree categories, 19 of the 21 responses (90.5%) to this question believed AI would have a medium, large, or very large impact. Over half (52.4%) believed it would have either a large or very large impact. Only one person (4.8%) believed it would have a small impact, a very small impact, or no impact.

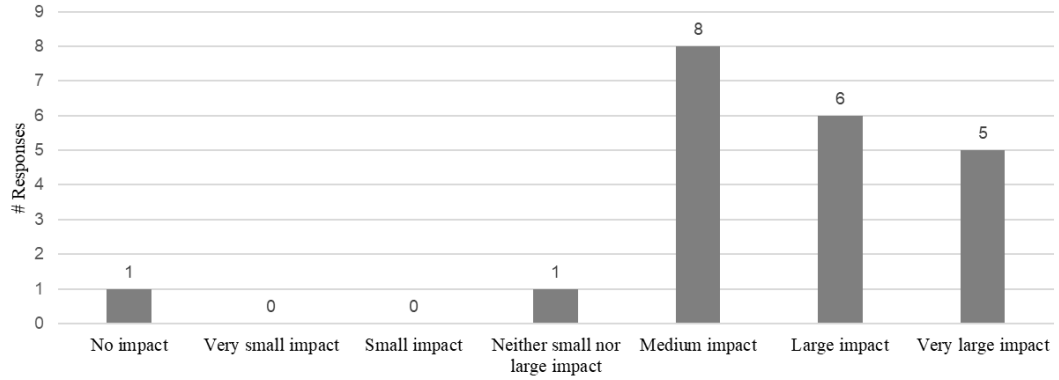

Figure 2. Likert response distribution to Question 3 on the *future* impact of AI on CM students' soft skills.

Question 4 asked participants to explain their answer to Question 3. The responses were nearly equally divided between positive (n=6), neutral/undetermined (n=8), and negative (n=6) perceptions about AI's impact on CM students' soft skills. For example, one positive response said "[AI will have a] positive [impact] if [CM students] know how to use it effectively". A more skeptical respondent said, "AI needs to be filtered using judgment and knowledge. If not, [AI] can be misleading…". An archetypal neutral/undetermined response was "[AI] could either be positive or detrimental to soft skills".

Question 5 asked, "In the era of AI, how will we know if CM students have been successful in developing their soft skills? What signs do you think we should look for?" The most common themes in the responses were *authentic engagement* with other people (n=6), *communication skills* (n=5), and *professional growth* (n=4). Real-world application was a common denominator among these thematic groups. For example, from the *communication* theme, one respondent wrote "Being able to present their work authentically [and] being able to respond to constructive challenges and demonstrate real deep understanding (not surface learning).". Another said, "Situation-based emails and explanation of solutions". And, another said, "They will still engage with people! They will be using different methods of communicating as they will understand there is not just one way.". From the *professional growth* theme, one respondent said plainly, "Employability", and another wrote, "Adding value to society".

Inverting Question 5, Question 6 asked, "In the era of AI, what do you think will happen if CM students fail to adequately develop their soft skills?" By far the most recurrent theme in the responses was *career stagnation and joblessness* (n=17). One of these respondents said, "[CM students will] achieve less, be less effective [in] engaging with and leading people. [They will] have poorer professional and personal outcomes." Another pessimistic response said, "End of the human species as we know it in the longer term. In the short term, their employability will be affected." Expressing a general sentiment throughout the workshop, another respondent said, "Employers want soft skills above tech skills". The final question in Phase 2 of the workshop asked about non-intervention. Question 7 asked, "What do you think will happen if we do nothing to help students develop their soft skills in the AI era?" Most responses to this question reinforced the results of Question 6, with the most pronounced themes centering on *job loss* and *diminished employability* (n=13). However, a less common theme also emerged on the topic of *industry decline* (n=6). One respondent said, "Students will fail and then so will we."

Phase 3: Implementing a Plan of Action

Phase 3, "Implementing a Plan of Action," consisted of Questions 8-10. Question 8 asked "What is/are the first step(s) you believe we should take to help CM students master their soft skills in the AI era?" Responses were diverse, nearly equally divided among five themes, including *success modeling* (n=6), *peer interaction* (n=5), *practical experience* (n=5), *AI integration* (n=4), and *assessment methods* (n=4). While most responses throughout the themes were focused on the coexistence and synergy between soft skills and AI, two responses in the *AI integration* theme were in direct opposition to each other. One said "Encourage [CM students to] use AI a lot.". The other said, "Wean them off AI". Question 9 asked, "As AI and other technologies advance, what is the single most important thing we can do to help CM students develop their soft skills?" Like Question 8, responses were varied; however, most were on the benefits and limitations of AI and the continued importance of developing soft skills. One respondent said "Explain AI. Allow [its] use and [help] develop understanding, but be clear about the drawbacks…and negative impacts. Educate." Another said, "Impress them the importance of [soft skills]." Some applied recommendations for CM teachers included: "Leave phones outside the room…", "Allow them to fail", and "Evaluate their baseline competency of soft skills at start-up and review semesterly".

The final question (Question 10) was on a sliding seven-point Likert scale, asking respondents to rank their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement, "AI and other technologies can be used to develop CM students' soft skills." The average score across all 21 responses was 5.5, indicating a large majority of participants believed AI could be used to help CM students develop their AI skills (Figure 3). Dividing the data into agree and disagree categories, seventeen of the respondents (81%) mostly agreed, agreed, or strongly agreed with the statement, while only one of the respondents (4.8%) disagreed with the statement. The remaining three respondents (14.3%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

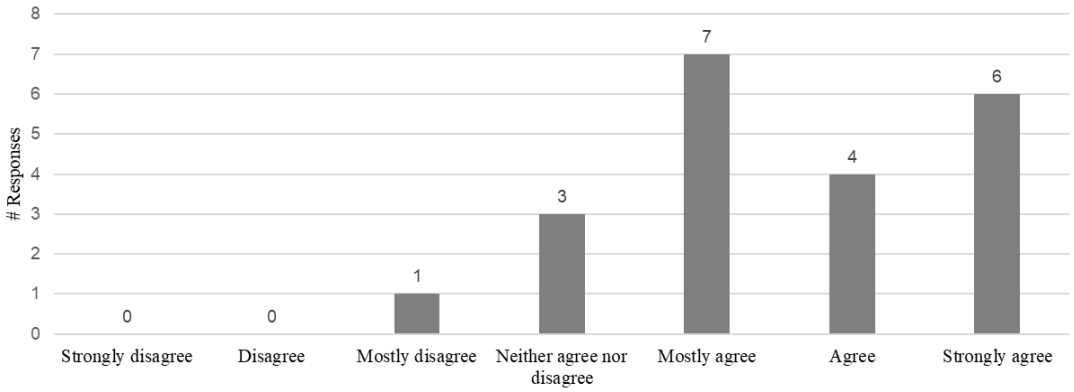

Figure 3. Likert response distribution to Question 10 asking if AI can be used to support the development of CM students' soft skills.

AI Optimism

A recurrent theme throughout nearly all workshop questions was the potential of AI to have a *positive* impact on soft skills. Participants seemed determined to express their optimism in AI's ability to support CM students' development of soft skills, even when the question under discussion was focused on other issues. For example, in response to Question 2, one participant reflected, "AI will be the most important tool a student will have to refer to, so they have to develop their literacy in using,

communicating, and justifying its reasoning." Question 4 had the most AI-optimistic responses (n=7). One respondent said, "You can imagine some soft skills in the future being improved by AI. Imagine a real-time AI agent training a person in public speaking, presentations, as an example." Another said, "AI will be [able to] develop its own emotional intelligence so prompts and engagement with a bot will become as crucial as human-to-human interaction." Another said, "AI might play a role in changing students' habits when communicating or interacting; however, soft skills can be learnt alongside AI." When participants were asked, "What is/are the first step(s) you believe we should take to help CM students master their soft skills in the AI era?" three participants encouraged the use of AI. One of them said, "Use AI as another 'friend'". When asked "...what is the *single most important* thing we can do to help CM students develop their soft skills?" one participant in the workshop said, "Use of AI for development of s[oft] s[kills]."

Key Word Frequencies

Aggregating response data from all ten questions asked in the workshop for keyword frequencies, out of 177 open responses submitted, the words "school" and "college" were never mentioned. The word "university" was only mentioned once in reference to a place where students can learn to use AI. The word "training" was mentioned four times, and "teaching" was mentioned three times. The term "social media" was only mentioned once in a response to Question 2 which said, "It's a little early in adoption to see the impact on general soft skills of AI and to disentangle this from other technological developments (i.e., social media). The word "communication" was mentioned 15 times, at least once in every question. "Leadership" was mentioned four times. "Confidence" was mentioned eight times. "Awareness" was mentioned five times.

Discussion

Over the past decade, several publications have attributed the insufficiency of CM students' soft skills to the technological complexity of the modern construction landscape (Carstens, 2016; Mahasneh & Thabet, 2016; Mills et al., 2018; Van Heerden et al., 2023; Zuo et al., 2018). The results of this study provided some additional support for this theory. While responses to Questions 1 and 2 were mixed, with a slight majority of participants believing that technology and AI had some impact on the soft skills of CM students, at the poles of the Likert scale the sentiment was far more pronounced. Participants who believed that technology and artificial intelligence (AI) had an impact on CM students' soft skills had substantially more confidence in their answers than participants who were skeptical.

The theory that educational institutions bear some responsibility for de-emphasizing or ignoring soft skills in their curricula (Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2023; Almeida & Morais, 2023; Carstens, 2016) was supported by the results from the workshop. In the nearly two hundred responses collected, the words "college", "school", "university", "teaching", and "training" and their variants were only mentioned seven times. This is particularly noteworthy considering that over 80% of the participants in the workshop were senior-level academics in post-secondary, college or university appointments. This also means that schools were not considered a potential solution for the soft skills gap. One possible explanation for this result is that soft skills are sometimes considered complementary and subsequent to hard skills (Almeida & Morais, 2023), leading CM teachers to believe that learning hard, technical skills should precede soft skills, reflective of a typical CM career path in which entry-level jobs emphasizing materials, schedules, and software come first and only later will the responsibilities of managing people be a central part of their scope.

The main point of departure between workshop participants was whether AI is any different from these previous technologies. A large portion of the respondents believed that AI had the potentiality to partner with students in online trainings designed to facilitate the development of certain interpersonal soft skills, a point echoed by recent literature espousing a similar perspective (Alvarado-Bravo et al., 2025). A separate faction of respondents dissented from this view, doubting that AI has, or ever could have, the capacity to nurture skills involving human connections. They believed that only through human connections could soft skills be learned, an opinion shared by a number of previous CM publications (Carstens, 2016; Mills et al., 2018; Ofori-Boadu et al., 2017).

Key Takeaways

- In congruence with classical diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers et al., 2014) this research found that teachers can reasonably expect the velocity of technological change in the school and work environments to accelerate with AI. They should also anticipate that pedagogically relevant advancements in AI to be widely advertised and hyped. In this excitement, teachers should not miss the unique classroom opportunities to teach soft skills when physically gathered with their students.
- One solution endorsed throughout the workshop for the dearth of soft skills in CM students was AI. AI is different from previous technologies due to its capacity for personalization, interactivity, and adaptive learning. Some of these features may be developed into tools and pedagogies that help CM students develop their soft skills. Instructors and researchers should be open to exploring these capabilities, testing new innovations that might benefit their students. They should also remain vigilant for fashionable and vacuous technological products and services that overstate AI's abilities and fail to provide meaningful results for their students.
- Removing certain technologies may be more beneficial to students than adding them. Technologically regressive pedagogies and learning environments (i.e., old-fashioned, discussion-based, student laptop- and phone-free classrooms) may be one of the most accessible and reliable ways for CM students to develop their soft skills with minimal effort and intervention by their teachers.
- Hard skills are sometimes considered precursory to soft skills, causing teachers to delay or avoid teaching them to their students. Soft skills need to be taught concurrently with hard skills in *every* course throughout post-secondary education to provide CM students with all the skills they need to succeed in the workforce.

Limitations

The research presented in this paper is exploratory, sourced from a single sample of construction management (CM) experts based primarily in the United Kingdom and may not represent the views and sentiments of the global population of CM academics and professionals. The research workshop was conducted in a conference setting in which time was a constraint on the participants' ability to fully express their views on the topics that were discussed. Most of the participants were submitting their answers using their own devices, predominantly smartphones. It is likely that, given more time and better equipment (e.g., computers with keyboards), some of their answers or phrasing would have been more thoroughly or carefully expressed. Finally, the workshop began with an overview of the current research on soft skills in CM, referring to a relatively small sample of publications on the subject. It is possible that this introductory information had an outsized influence on some of the participants' responses.

Conclusion and Future Research

This paper reports the results of a futures workshop in which construction experts attending the *Innovation in Built Environment Education* (IBEE) conference hosted by the *Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors* (RICS) in London, England, were invited to consider the impact that technology and AI have on the soft, interpersonal skills of undergraduate construction management (CM) students. Many of the participants believed AI will be able to provide new tools and resources for students to develop their soft skills. Other participants were skeptical that technology could ever have this potential. Future researchers interested in this topic should test these theories experimentally in controlled environments to determine whether AI-based pedagogies can support the development of soft skills better than traditional, technologically regressive teaching methods. Subsequent research should include a more expansive, multi-regional or multi-institutional, examination in which a larger and more diverse sample of CM experts are included (e.g., academics, industry professionals, students). More empirical research is also needed on soft skills generally by examining the most effective methods to teach soft skills in both theory and praxis. It is possible that soft skills are not necessarily harder to teach than hard skills, but they may be less "classroom friendly" than hard skills, requiring more time and more experiential learning in addition to standard didactics.

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