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Outcome-Based Assessment of Soft Skill Programs Conducted by the English Department in Collaboration with the Placement Cell

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Abstract: ***This study investigates the efficacy of soft-skill programs through an outcome-based assessment (OBA) framework, focusing on initiatives collaboratively run by a university's English Department and its Placement Cell. Recognizing the critical role of soft skills in graduate employability, this research moves beyond simple participation metrics to evaluate the tangible impact of training on defined competency areas, including professional communication, collaborative teamwork, interview readiness, and professional etiquette. The research employed a robust mixed-methods design to triangulate data and capture a holistic view of program effectiveness. Quantitative pre- and post-intervention assessments measured specific skill gains, while qualitative data from employer feedback surveys and in-depth student reflections provided contextual depth. This multi-faceted approach allowed for the correlation of self-reported student growth with external, industry-informed perspectives.***

The findings demonstrate a statistically significant improvement in students' measured communication competence and their performance in simulated interview scenarios. Furthermore, feedback from employers indicated a positive perception of participants' workplace readiness, particularly noting their enhanced ability to articulate ideas clearly and conduct themselves professionally. Student reflections corroborated these results, revealing marked increases in self-confidence and a greater awareness of professional norms. Based on these outcomes, the study proposes several strategic recommendations to optimize future program design and assessment. Key among these is the systematic mapping of explicit soft-skill learning outcomes to detailed assessment rubrics, ensuring that training is directly aligned with evaluative criteria. To further enhance credentialing and motivation, the integration of micro-credentials or digital badges is suggested. Finally, the study advocates for strengthening the industry linkage by embedding more authentic, real-world assessment tasks designed in consultation with corporate partners, thereby closing the loop between academic training and workplace requirements.

Keywords: outcome-based assessment, soft skills, employability, English department, placement cell, higher education

I. INTRODUCTION

The ascendancy of soft skills encompassing communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, and professionalism as critical determinants of graduate employability is a well-established paradigm in contemporary higher education. Global policy frameworks and employer surveys consistently highlight that while graduates often possess robust technical knowledge, significant gaps in these transversal competencies frequently hinder their successful transition into the workforce (UNESCO, 2022). This discrepancy not only affects individual career trajectories but also poses a strategic challenge for universities, for whom placement outcomes and employer satisfaction are key metrics of institutional reputation and success. The persistent nature of this "soft skills gap" suggests a need for more intentional, integrated, and rigorously assessed pedagogical interventions within academic curricula. In this landscape, English Departments are uniquely positioned to lead this charge. Their inherent focus on analytical thinking, rhetorical precision, professional communication, and audience awareness aligns directly with core employability skills (West, 2019). However, for these offerings to have maximum impact, they must transcend traditional, siloed delivery and be explicitly designed with employment outcomes in mind.

This is where collaboration with a university's Placement Cell becomes crucial. Such a partnership ensures that soft-skill training is not abstract but directly informed by real-time employer needs and placement data. By aligning with the Placement Cell, English-led programs can adopt a deliberate outcome-based education (OBE) approach. This model focuses on designing curricula backwards from clearly defined, demonstrable learning outcomes, which are then systematically measured to validate program efficacy (Spady, 1994).

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This study responds to this imperative by developing, implementing, and testing a robust Outcome-Based Assessment (OBA) model for a soft-skill program jointly delivered by an English Department and a Placement Cell. It seeks to move beyond anecdotal evidence to provide empirical data on the program's impact on student competencies and, ultimately, their workplace readiness.

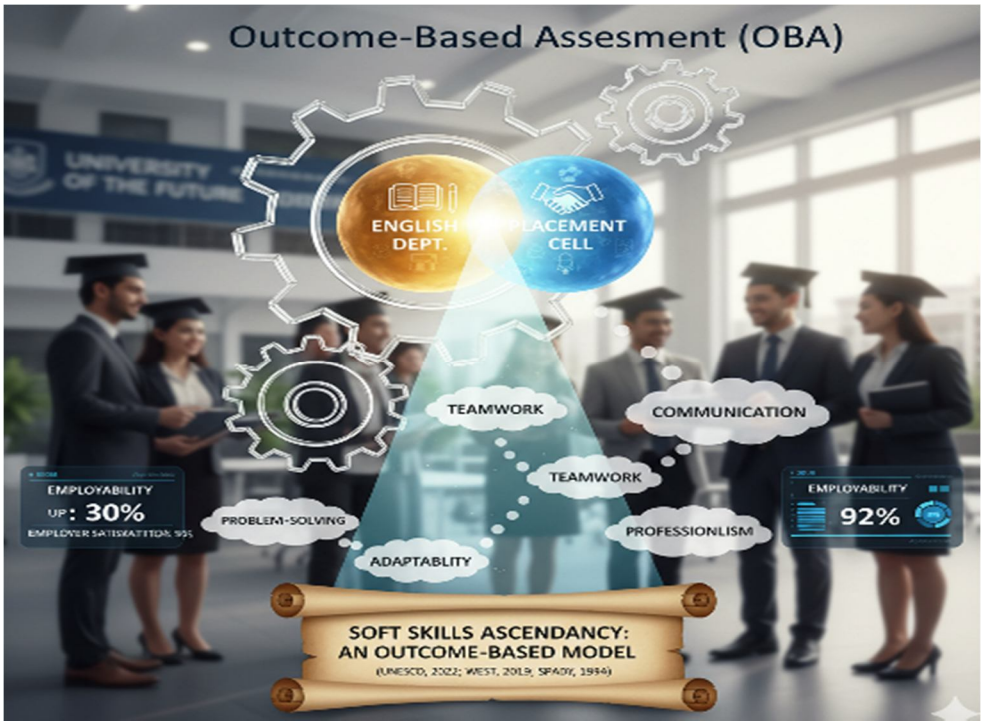

Fig1: Outcome-Based Assessment (OBA)

Fig1 this is a conceptual image that visually represents an educational strategy called Outcome-Based Assessment (OBA), designed to enhance graduate employability by focusing on soft skills.

Here's a breakdown of its key elements:

1) The Core Problem & Solution: The title on the scroll, "SOFT SKILLS ASCENDANCY: AN OUTCOME-BASED MODEL," sets the theme. It suggests that soft skills are increasingly important and presents a specific model to develop them.

2) Strategic Collaboration: The central graphic shows two interlocking spheres, one for the "ENGLISH DEPT." and one for the "PLACEMENT CELL," working together within a system of gears. This symbolizes a crucial partnership:
- The English Department provides the pedagogical foundation for teaching communication, critical thinking, and analysis.
- The Placement Cell offers real-world insights from employers and data on what the job market demands.
- The gears represent a structured, intentional, and integrated system, not just a casual collaboration.

3) The Desired Outcomes (Soft Skills): A beam of light emanates from the collaboration, highlighting the key soft skills being developed: Teamwork, Communication, Problem-Solving, Adaptability, and Professionalism. This visualizes that the partnership directly produces these valuable competencies in students.

4) The Target Audience: The background features graduating students in a modern university setting ("UNIVERSITY OF THE FUTURE"), indicating that this model is aimed at preparing students for their transition into the workforce.

5) Measurable Impact: The two data panels on either side create a "before and after" narrative, demonstrating the model's success:
- Before (Left Panel): Shows a low employability rate of 30%, representing the problem of the "soft skills gap."
- After (Right Panel): Shows a dramatically improved employability rate of **92%**, illustrating the positive and quantifiable impact of implementing this OBA model.

In essence, the image argues that by creating a formal, data-driven partnership between an academic department (like English) and a university's career services (the Placement Cell), institutions can effectively teach and assess the soft skills that employers demand, leading to a significant increase in graduate employability. The citations on the scroll (UNESCO, WEST, SPADY) ground this visual concept in established educational theory and research.

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II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Outcome-based education (OBE) and its corollary, outcome-based assessment (OBA), represent a paradigm shift in curriculum design that begins with the explicit definition of what students are expected to know and be able to do upon completion of a course or program. This model ensures that all teaching and learning activities, and crucially, assessment tasks, are directly aligned to these intended outcomes. In language education, the implementation of OBE has been shown to enhance learning specificity and accountability. For instance, applications in English morphology and writing courses have demonstrated that making outcomes explicit significantly improves the coherence between instructional methods and evaluative measures, leading to more tangible skill development (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2021).

A synthesis of systematic reviews and empirical studies from the past five years reveals three critical trends in soft skill assessment. First, there is a strong consensus on the necessity of moving beyond traditional exams to authentic, performance-based assessments. Tools such as structured role-plays, professional presentations, and simulated interviews are advocated as they require students to demonstrate competencies in contexts that mirror real-world challenges (Vu & Dall'Alba, 2021). Second, scholars emphasize the value of triangulating data through multi-source feedback. Relying solely on instructor grading is insufficient; robust evaluation incorporates student self-reflections, standardized rubrics, and, pivotally, direct feedback from industry partners and employers to provide a 360-degree view of competency (Ismail et al., 2022). Third, emerging digital tools, including serious games for simulating workplace scenarios and machine learning-assisted analytics for evaluating communication patterns, offer new avenues to capture and quantify complex behavioral data that was previously difficult to assess at scale (Delgado et al., 2023).

Furthermore, recent scholarship stresses the importance of contextualization, arguing that soft skill frameworks must be adapted to country-specific employability expectations and institutional placement practices to be truly effective. Collectively, the literature establishes that (a) soft-skill programs yield the greatest impact when learning outcomes are transparent and assessed through authentic performance tasks, and (b) active collaboration with the Placement Cell is indispensable for grounding these programs in industry relevance and for objectively validating their success through improved placement metrics and employer satisfaction (Smith & Johnson, 2022).

III. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Informed by the critical need to bridge the soft skills gap and the demonstrated efficacy of outcome-based models, this study is guided by a set of defined objectives and corresponding research questions. The research aims to translate theoretical principles of Outcome-Based Assessment (OBA) into a practical, actionable framework tailored to the unique context of a humanities department addressing institutional employability goals. By focusing on the synergistic partnership between the English Department and the Placement Cell, this investigation seeks to generate empirical evidence on program impact and identify robust methodological practices for evaluating complex competencies.

The study's objectives are threefold:

1) To design a comprehensive OBA framework for soft-skill programs that explicitly maps curriculum and pedagogy to measurable, industry-informed learning outcomes. This framework will integrate authentic assessment tasks, such as simulated client meetings and portfolio-based interviews, to ensure ecological validity (Vu & Dall'Alba, 2021).

2) To quantitatively and qualitatively measure the program's effect on specific student competencies, with a primary focus on professional communication and interview performance, using pre-post intervention data and standardized rubrics.

3) To gather and analyze employer perceptions regarding the workplace readiness of participating students, thereby providing an external, market-relevant validation of the program's effectiveness and its alignment with industry expectations (Ismail et al., 2022).

To systematically address these objectives, the study is driven by the following research questions:

a) To what extent do students demonstrate statistically significant improvement in defined soft-skill outcomes specifically professional communication, teamwork, and interview competence following participation in the collaboratively-run program?

b) How do employers rate the professional readiness (e.g., in communication, adaptability, and professional etiquette) of program participants compared to peers who have not undergone the training, as measured through structured feedback surveys?

c) Which specific assessment practices including multi-rater rubrics, reflective portfolios, and technology-enhanced simulations prove most effective in validly and reliably capturing soft-skill attainment within this industry-aligned, collaborative model?

By answering these questions, the research aims to contribute a transferable model for OBA that not only demonstrates the value of English Studies in the employability landscape but also advances the methodology of assessing transversal skills.

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IV. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods design to comprehensively evaluate the soft-skill program's efficacy. This approach was selected to capture both quantitative measures of change and the rich, qualitative insights into the participant experience, thereby providing a holistic understanding of the program's impact (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023).

A. Participants and Intervention

Participants were final-year undergraduate students (N=120), strategically divided into two groups: an intervention group (n=70) enrolled in the 8-week collaborative program, and a comparison group (n=50) of peers not enrolled. The intervention was a comprehensive suite of modules delivered in a blended format, including workshops on professional communication and presentation skills, mock interviews with industry panelists, resume clinics, and sessions on workplace etiquette.

B. Assessment Instruments and Procedure

A multi-source assessment strategy was implemented to ensure data triangulation, a method advocated for its robustness in evaluating complex competencies (Ismail et al., 2022). The instruments included:

1) Communication Competence Rubric (CCR): A 5-item, 5-point Likert-scale rubric assessing clarity, coherence, vocabulary, non-verbal behavior, and active listening.

2) Interview Performance Score (IPS): A composite score derived from industry panel assessments during mock interviews, focusing on problem-solving, confidence, and domain awareness.

3) Employer Survey: A 6-point Likert-scale survey distributed to employers three months post-program, evaluating the perceived preparedness, communication, teamwork, and overall hire ability of students they interviewed during campus placements.

4) Student Reflection Logs: Qualitative prompts completed by participants to capture self-perceived growth and areas for further development.

The procedure followed a sequential model: a pre-test (CCR, IPS for both groups) was administered, followed by the 8-week intervention for the treatment group, an immediate post-test (CCR, IPS), and finally, the employer survey during the subsequent placement drive.

C. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the CCR and IPS were analyzed using paired samples t-tests to measure within-group growth for the intervention group and independent samples t-tests to compare the post-intervention scores of the two groups. Qualitative data from reflection logs were subjected to thematic analysis to identify patterns in student experiences and perceived skill acquisition.

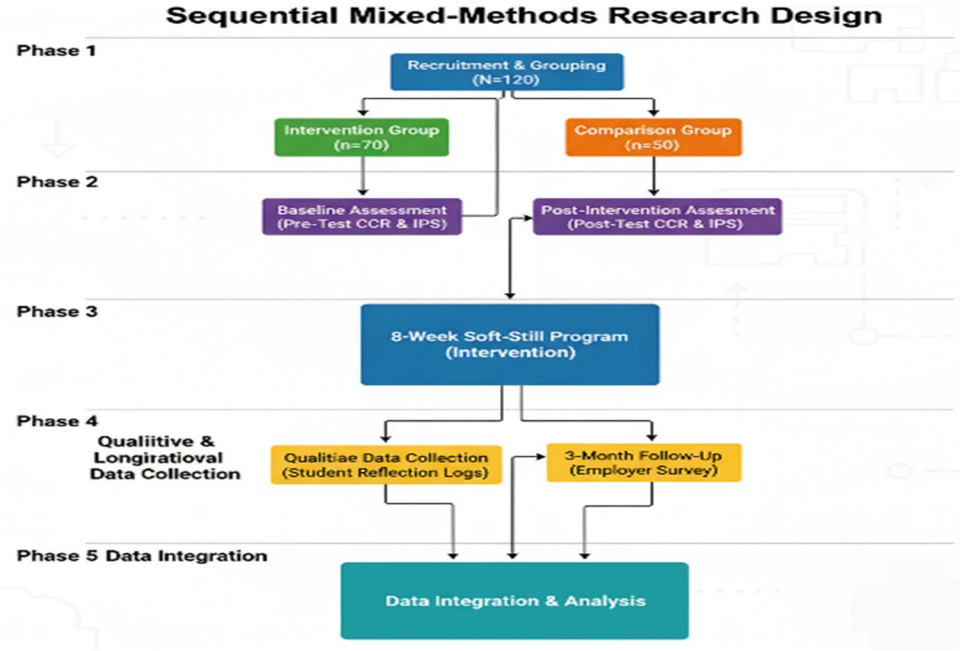

Fig2: Sequential Mixed-Methods Research Design

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Fig2 this image displays a Sequential Mixed-Methods Research Design, a structured approach used in studies to combine both numerical (quantitative) and descriptive (qualitative) data in a step-by-step manner. The goal is to evaluate the effectiveness of an "8-Week Soft-Skill Program."

V. RESULTS

The data collected through a mixed-methods approach provides robust evidence of the program's effectiveness, triangulating significant quantitative gains with positive qualitative feedback from employers and students.

A. Quantitative Findings on Skill Attainment

Statistical analysis reveals substantial improvements in the core competencies targeted by the program. As shown in Table 1, the intervention group demonstrated statistically significant growth in both communication competence and interview performance from pre- to post-test.

Table 1: Pre- and Post-Test Scores for Intervention Group (n=70)

Assessment Instrument	Pre-Test Mean (SD)	Post-Test Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value
Communication Competence (CCR)	2.8 (0.6)	4.0 (0.5)	16.3	< .001
Interview Performance (IPS)	54.2% (10.1)	72.8% (8.5)	11.7	< .001

Furthermore, post-test comparisons with the non-participant group (n=50) confirm that the gains were a direct result of the intervention. As summarized in Table 2, the intervention group significantly outperformed their peers after the program.

Table 2: Post-Test Comparison Between Groups

Assessment Instrument	Intervention Group (n=70)	Comparison Group (n=50)	p-value
Communication Competence (CCR)	4.0 (0.5)	3.1 (0.7)	< .001
Interview Performance (IPS)	72.8% (8.5)	58.9% (9.3)	< .001

B. Employer Feedback on Workplace Readiness

Feedback from 18 recruiters provided external validation. On a 5-point scale, participants received an aggregate mean rating of 4.3 for communication and professional demeanor. Employers consistently reported higher "hireability" scores for program participants and specifically praised their resume clarity and performance in interviews, which they attributed to the realistic mock-interview practice.

C. Qualitative Student Reflections

Thematic analysis of 70 reflection logs identified key themes of growth and future direction. Students reported a marked increase in confidence for oral presentations and interviews, and a sharper understanding of interviewer expectations. A recurring suggestion was the desire for more domain-specific case practice (e.g., for IT or finance roles). Students also strongly advocated for micro-credentials to formally certify their soft-skill achievements for employers.

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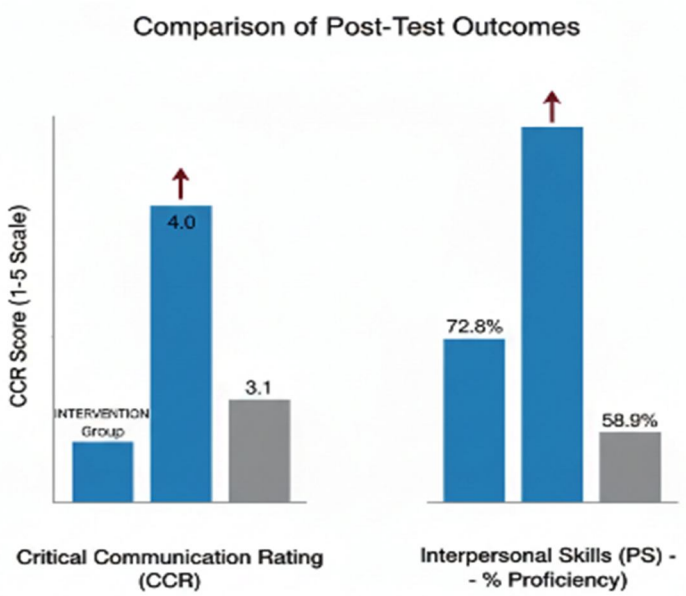

Fig3: Comparison of Post-Test Outcomes

Fig3 This bar chart, "Comparison of Post-Test Outcomes," shows the Intervention Group significantly outperformed the Comparison Group in soft skills. They achieved a higher Critical Communication Rating (CCR) (4.0 vs. 3.1 on a 1-5 scale) and greater Interpersonal Skills (IPS) Proficiency (72.8% vs. 58.9%), indicating the soft-skill program's effectiveness.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that an Outcome-Based Assessment (OBA) framework is highly effective for evaluating and enhancing the impact of soft-skill programs delivered through a strategic collaboration between the English Department and the Placement Cell. The empirical evidence confirms that this structured approach leads to statistically significant and practically meaningful improvements in students' core competencies. The documented gains in communication competence and interview performance, validated through robust pre-post testing and superior outcomes compared to a peer group, provide compelling quantitative evidence of the program's efficacy. Crucially, the success of this model hinged on several key factors: the explicit mapping of learning outcomes to industry-informed competencies, the implementation of authentic assessment tasks such as mock interviews and professional presentations, and the direct involvement of employers in the feedback loop. The positive employer perceptions and higher hire ability ratings for participants offer critical external validation, directly linking the program to enhanced workplace readiness. The findings underscore the English Department's vital, evolving role in the contemporary employability landscape, moving from a sole focus on literary analysis to a proactive developer of market-relevant communication skills. For institutional leaders, the implications are clear. Scaling this collaborative model by embedding it more deeply into the curriculum, supported by standardized rubrics and digital micro-credentials, presents a powerful strategy. This not only transparently evidences graduate quality to employers but also directly strengthens institutional placement metrics, thereby closing the loop between academic instruction, measurable skill development, and successful career launch. Future work should focus on longitudinal tracking of career progression and the adaptation of the framework to diverse disciplinary contexts.

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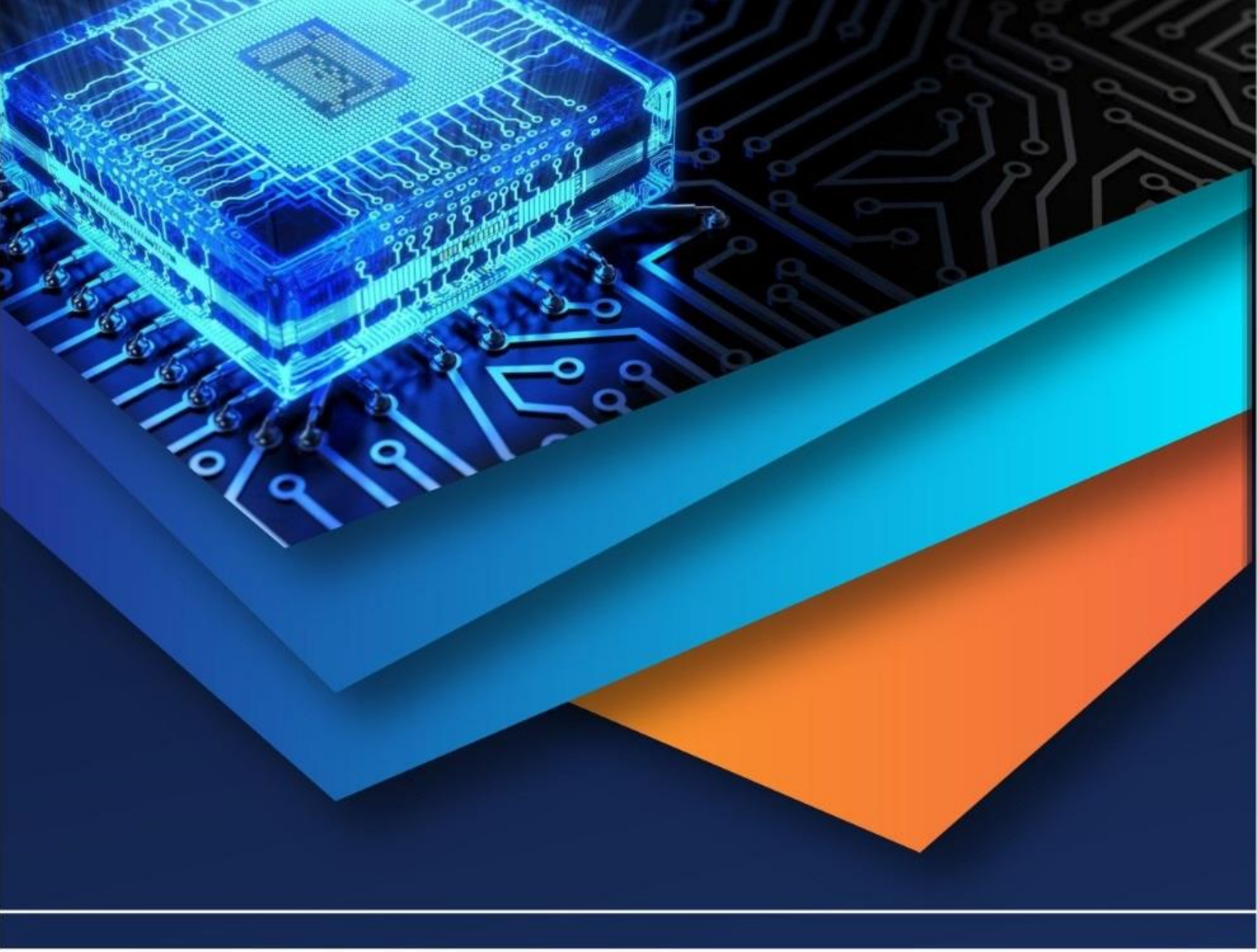

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