

PERCEIVED SOFT SKILLS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Employers are looking for graduates with good soft skills as these skills are important in today's competitive world. In order to persist in today's industry whether the production of service or good within an economy, any graduate must possess good soft skills. Many university students possess professional knowledge, but they often lack of soft skills. During university years, the students concentrate more on the grades appear on paper than enhancing their soft skills through activities organized inside and outside university. Some students are unaware of the importance of these soft skills and they fail to prepare themselves with the skills needed to face the workplace. Therefore, a study is conducted to investigate the perception of university students towards soft skills. A total of 98 students from two universities (UiTM and UniKL) taking their diploma courses were involved in the study. A set of questionnaire containing questions on demographic information and questions related to soft skills was distributed to the respondents. Data were analysed descriptively. The result shows that these students are aware of the importance of soft skills for career advancement and to get a better job. In addition, the respondents also believe that soft skills are also important besides their professional skills. In conclusion, the findings from different groups of students from different universities may give some ideas on how they perceive soft skills.

Keywords: Soft skills, Hard skills, unemployment, interpersonal and communication skills

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of having and portraying good soft skills at workplace has been long recognised. Many employers have shown great concern over the practice of good soft skills, among others, communication and leadership skills. This is because, these skills may help the employers to ensure positive engagement from the staff that leads to company's success. Apart from that, when soft skills like showing commitment, flexibility, responsibility and disciplines are

practiced, a positive working environment will be created and this eases smooth running of the company. Therefore, university students as prospective employees should realize that it is worth their time and effort in the university to instil in themselves the soft skills while they are studying as it can boost their personal and professional development in their future undertakings. Undoubtedly, work can be done based on knowledge and expertise, but career promotion and personal development depend much more on the ability to practice certain soft skills in various workplace tasks.

Looking at higher institutions scenario, some students do not equip themselves with useful soft skills because they are too busy with their classes, assignments and other academic requirements. These students do not involve much in extra- curricular activities which enable them to develop certain people skills like team work and leadership skills. Some others may think that soft skills are inborn traits, thus they do not think that they should work towards developing the skills. As a result, we have students who are often timid, not confident, cannot express opinions and have negative personal interaction. With the increasing use of social media like Facebook, Tweeter, Instagram and others, these students become more secluded from the real world, and feel shy to meet people face to face. They may become more convenient to interact with others in the cyber world which may not be the kind of thing that they will face in the real working world later on.

Realizing this fact, it is the intention of this paper to explore the opinions of university students from two higher institutions in Malaysia about the importance and level of difficulties in acquiring the soft skills.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on soft skills in ASIA

Soft skills are referred to skills which are not directly taught in classrooms but yet can be instilled through certain programs or activities that require the participants to practice all human skills which are deemed useful or important in order to carry out certain tasks. It is often being contrasted with hard skills which refer to observable, quantified and measurable technical processes or practical tasks (Shakir, 2009). According to Shakir (2009), soft skills or people skills which are important in working life are difficult to be taught. She classified the skills into personal attributes, interpersonal skills and problem solving and decision making skills. Nikita and Furuoka (2011) listed about eight names given to soft skills among others; social skills, generic skills key skills and interpersonal skills.

Studies on soft skills emphasize on lack of the skills among university students and how the skills play important role in employability among the students after graduation. Zaharim, Yusoff,

Omar, Mohamed and Muhamad (n.d.) claimed that unemployment among graduates in Malaysia is due to not having adequate employability skills. The soft skills are important because graduates with good soft skills are highly sought due to the fact that many big companies have been established internationally and involve in trades with many countries, thus requires qualified employees with good leadership and communication skills (Shakir, 2009). In the area of engineering, for example, not only technical knowledge is needed but also soft skills. As Zaharim et al. (n.d.: 199) put it “Labour market conditions for engineering graduates today are particularly tough due to globalization and competition as the number of graduates is continuously increasing”. Nguyen (1998) is also concerned with the role that engineers have in the era of globalization because they have to work in multidisciplinary environment which requires them to practice soft engineering or non-technical skills.

The studies have also been attempted to investigate types of soft skills that are sought by employers. Nguyen (1998) found that the most essential criteria required in the field of engineering are technical knowledge and skills like personal and professional attitudes. In a study on four countries in Asia, Malaysia, Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong, communication skills, problem solving and interpersonal skills are ranked as the most preferred skills by employers (Zaharim et al., n.d.)

In Malaysian context, two studies discuss the Ministry of Education’s (MOHE) seven generic soft skills, the perceptions of university students towards the skills and the types of programs which are carried out to implement them. The skills were proposed to be incorporated in the syllabus and curricula of each faculty in higher institutions starting from year 2006.

Shakir (2009) gives an overview of the MOHE’s list of soft skills namely; communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, team work, lifelong learning and information management skills, entrepreneur skills, ethics and professional moral and leadership skills. In addition, she gives suggestions on how MOHE’s framework on soft skills development can be implemented through various programs in the university like development of soft skills through stand alone subject, existing courses, co-curricular activities, campus life, formal and informal activities at faculty levels, soft finishing school and practical industrial training. Giving all the possible ways to inculcate the soft skills among the students, Shakir, however believes that embedding the elements of soft skills in curriculum design is the most effective way, as it will involve all students in a prolonged duration.

Nikita and Furuoka (2012) reported on a study undertaken among 96 students in Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) to investigate the students’ personal needs, expectations, awareness and effectiveness of the MOHE’s soft skills that are embedded in the their faculty curricula. The

findings of their study revealed that the students are aware with the importance of the soft skills and satisfied with the university's effectiveness in the teaching and learning process but they could not identify some of the MOHE's soft skills that they have to acquire. The participants also suggest a wide range of life skills which are not listed in the MOHE's list for example, how to make money, getting a boyfriend etc. The researchers commented that the MOHE's recommendation of incorporating the soft skills in academic courses may not solve the unemployment issue as there are many other factors that cause it. Moreover, they proposed that the national's set of soft skills should be more holistic so that the students are better prepared for their future life and work.

Studies on soft skills in other parts of the world besides ASIA

Previously, technical skills or also known as hard skills were the only skills necessary for employability. However, in recent days, these skills alone are not enough to make the cut for career employment. In today's workplace, soft skills are considered as one of the main criteria for productive performance. Many employers are looking for specific types of soft skills while recruiting their recent and future employees. Watts and Watts (2008) indicated that 85% of success is due to soft skills, meanwhile, hard skills only contributed 15% to the success of an individual (cited in John, 2009).

In a study by Stevenson and Starkweather (2009), there are 6 characteristics that are valued in the hiring for project managers in the United States. There are leadership, communication skills, verbal and written skills, attitude and the ability to deal with ambiguity and change. All of these are regarded as the important characteristics to a successful project management. The top three most important criteria by IT managers and executives for hiring in this study are multi-level communication (76.6%), the ability to complete projects (74%) and the ability to deal with ambiguity and change (50%). In this study, human skills are viewed as a critical component to project management success. They believe human factors as the core determinants of the system or process.

Cooke-Davies (2002) as cited in the previous study mentioned, "It is people who deliver projects, not processes and systems. It is not as if there are some factors that involve processes, and others that involve people- people perform every process, and it is the people who ultimately determine the adequacy". Human skills in this study defied technical skills, experience and education. A similar finding was found in a study by Klaus (2010) as cited in Robles (2012). He stated that 75% of long-term job success depends on people skills, only 25% is on technical knowledge.

Ninety-two percent of human resources managers felt that technical skills are easier to acquire

than soft skills. Sixty-seven percent of them would hire candidates with strong soft skills with lacking technical abilities. However, only 11% of them would hire someone with strong technical expertise but weak in soft skills (Choudary and Ponnuru, 2015). This shows how soft skills are more sought after by the employers rather than the hard skills.

Villiers (2010) from Faculty of Business and Law in AUT University, New Zealand, mentioned that soft skills are important in Business and Accountancy fields because of the changes in economic landscape. The businesses world has gone global and this creates more competitions and challenges for job applicants. The key role players and stakeholders are also looking for changes. They want employees with a new set of aptitudes knowledge, skills, abilities and attributes.

According to Robles (2012), integrity and communication were the top two soft skills needed in workplace environment in the United States. All 57 of the executives indicated that these two attributes as extremely important. They wanted employees who are honest, could communicate well, get along with others, and work hard. Therefore, in order to keep up with these recent demands, students need to equip themselves with not only sound interpersonal skills but to be able to engage in lifelong learning, to keep themselves up to the standard of the marketplace.

Results from a study by Ramlall and Ramlall (2014) showed that the students are aware that their decisions are important and it would affect the organization that they are working for. These students are also aware of the need to improve themselves and get prepared for workplace. They believe in developing their experience and working in teams as an ability to function effectively in an organisation. However, these students do not regard communication as important because the nature of accounting itself: they do not need to interact with many people. This view may be inaccurate according to the researchers. Even when they think that they are getting ready for developing experience and working with people, there is a significant disparity when it comes to leadership. This is probably because they do not have much working experience as students.

Besides that, in study by Choudary and Ponnuru (2015), 88 % of MBA holders could not be employed because they do not have industry-ready talent. In other words, they do not have enough skills needed by the employers. Unfortunately, in India, soft skills are not included in the MBA and Engineering education system or curricula. Nonetheless, these researchers believe that human capital define and categorise peoples' skills, abilities and knowledge. These skills also make employees more efficient and productive. They added that communication is one of the most deficient soft skills among the MBA students, managers and workmen in the country. Thus, the necessary approaches should be considered to change the situation.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON UiTM AND UniKL

Universiti Teknologi MARA with its acronym UiTM is a public university with its based in Shah Alam, Selangor Malaysia. It has 13 other autonomous state campuses and 21 satellite campuses. UiTM offers about 500 programmes from foundation to postgraduate levels. Its medium of instruction is English. Uitm only accepts bumiputra (Malays and other indigenous groups) students for undergraduate programmes and also accepts international students for its postgraduate programmes. UiTM has its vision which is “to establish UiTM as a premier university of outstanding scholarship and academic excellence capable of providing leadership to Bumiputeras”’s dynamic involvement in all professional fields of world-class standards in order to produce globally competitive graduates of sound ethical standing.”(UiTM website). UiTM graduates are sought after by many industries as many of them can converse very well in English. In addition, UiTM graduates had some forms of jobs (72%) and the remaining have become entrepreneurs. In 2012, only 20% of UiTM graduates from the Faculty of Education, Faculty of Medicine and Faculty of Dentistry joined the government sector (Sahol, n.d.).

On the other hand, Universiti Kuala Lumpur (UniKL) is a leading private university. It focuses on higher technical and vocational education and training (HTVET). The Malaysian government has given UniKL the mandate to upgrade the status of technical education in Malaysia. It has 14 branch institutes that offer foundation, diploma, undergraduate and post graduate programmes. These 14 branch institutes offer variety of programmes with their own niche areas of specialization. It is opened to all races (Malay, Chinese, Indian and others). As for UniKL, MSI (Malaysian Spanish Institute), is has a strong collaboration with the Spanish government. Programmes offered at UniKL, MSI integrate the theoretical training and practical application. Graduates of UniKL have strong technological knowledge and also entrepreneurial skills which are demanded by the industries.

4.0 OBJECTIVE

The study aims to explore and compare these two university students’ perceptions on soft skills. The researchers would like to know what students think of soft skills and which soft skills they perceived more important by using a quantitative research approach.

5.0 METHOD

5.1 Participants

The study involved participants from two universities which are UniKL Msi and UiTM. A total of 98 participants involved in the study from four different diploma programmes. 53 participants

are from UniKL, majoring in Diploma in Mechanical Design and Development and Diploma in Electromechanical Installation and Maintenance. 45 participants are from UiTM, majoring in Diploma in Polymer Science and Diploma in Sport Recreation. Their ages range from 18 to 24 years old. All the participants from Uitm are 18 years old, whereas the participants from UniKL are 19 to 24 years old. The participants from UniKL are much older as some of the have undergone their tertiary level of education at a certificate level at the Industrial training Institute and Institut Kemahiran MARA (both focus on skills) before pursuing their study in UniKL. Convenient sampling was used in the study.

5.2 Instrument, data collection and analysis procedures

A set of questionnaire was distributed to the respondents during their normal class hour. They were given about 10 minutes to respond to questions on Part A and Part B. Part A consists of questions on demographic aspect of the respondents and Part B consists of questions on respondents' general perception of soft skills. The questionnaire used was adapted from Shaheen, Zhang and Siti Raihana (2012). Part B is on the likert scale questions where the responders had to state their preference by choosing either 1=strongly agree to 4=strongly disagree. Descriptive analysis was used in analysing the data whereby the score was calculated using percentages.

6. SOFT SKILLS AND HARD SKILLS

Soft skills are people's skills and they are intangible, less visible and " are generally employed without the use of tools or templates," Marando (2012). Soft skills are very important in everyone's life especially in the workplace. Some examples of soft skills are leadership, communication, team work, expectations management, influencing, risk- taking, problem-solving and decision-making.

On the contrary, hard skills are more on the technical aspects and usually involve tangible output. Hard skills usually require tools or software to achieve the final output. Hard skills can be taught. Anyone can acquire hard skills through any training and professional development. However, soft skills are harder to teacher. According to Hussung (2017), "soft skills require emotional intelligence (EQ), while hard skills are more on assessments such as the intelligence quotient (IQ)." Some examples of EQ include working collaboratively and using initiatives whereas IQ depends on grades and some sort of testing or experiment. Hard skills can be learnt through trainings, but soft skills are usually developed indirectly through one's experience.

7.0 THE EFFECTS OF NOT HAVING GOOD SOFT SKILLS IN THE WORKPLACE

Over the past decades, graduates were highly in demand by companies locally and internationally due to their academic performance as well as their soft skills. Unemployment was not an issue to be debated in those days as everyone in the public was aware of the higher institution role in producing the “work ready” graduates with sufficient soft skills. However, the paradigm shift in the 21st century has led to a great number of graduates who are unemployed. As Surina, Latisha, Nazira and Noorazalia (2015) state that in most cases it was reported the graduates were not able to communicate well, to make decision wisely, to solve problem given and to think critically. Due to these reasons, it is indeed essential for graduates to be aware that the lack of soft skills in applying jobs could affect their future careers.

It is no doubt that for a graduate to be successful in his professional career, soft skills are necessary. Sutton (2002) mentions that “In recent years, soft skills have become the No. 1 differentiator for job applicants in all types of industries”(p.1). In other words, soft skills refer to non-technical intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and traits that are required to apply a job. It is also important to acquire the soft skills if the graduates want to be successful in the workplace. The ability to communicate effectively, creativity, analytical thinking, problem-solving skills, leadership skills, team-building skills, listening skills, diplomacy, flexibility, change- readiness, and self-awareness are the soft skills that graduates need to have (MacLeod, 2000 as cited in Ranjit, 2009, p. 6).

The importance of soft skills are given much attention not only by Malaysian employers but also employers worldwide. It was found that the failure of projects in Information Technology companies was not due to the lack of technical skills but due to the lack of interpersonal and communication skills (Deepa & Manisha, 2013). On the other hand, some who involve in the customer service are not able to interact well and polite when dealing with customers, which in turn, their attitude could affect the company’s name. As Deepa & Manisha (2013) state that in several other works, especially on customer-focused services, have indicated customer-focused soft skills can make a big contribution to profitability even in industries regarded as highly technical. This is supported by Bill (2004) that highlights the three main factors that determine one’s achievement in his/her work are communication skills, self-esteem and work ethics.

When graduate employees do not have good soft skills, it would be quite difficult for them to thrive in their future career. It was discovered that 87% of individuals have lost their jobs or failed to be promoted due to their improper work habits and attitudes, rather than inadequate job skills or knowledge (Hager, Holland & Beckett, 2002 as cited in Ranjit 2009).

In general, Malaysian employers are unhappy with the graduates level of soft skills when they

join the workforce. Based on their observations, Malaysian graduates lack self-confidence, communication skills, a strong work ethic (primarily initiative, conscientiousness, willingness to “walk the extra mile”, critical thinking and problem-solving skills; and are poor team players (Cruetz 2003; Sonia, 2008).

Furthermore, those who want to be accountants also need to master not only the technical skills of their job but also various soft skills. To climb senior management levels, they need the ability to communicate and to develop broader view of the company’s business. Unfortunately, a survey done by 422 public and private CFOs, controllers, chief accountants and senior finance executives found that accounting and financial staffers are poor in both soft skills (Ramlall and Ramlall, 2014). As such, soft skills have become definitely important in all types of professions.

8.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows findings for UniKL students in terms of their perceived importance of soft skills.

Their age is between 19 to 24 years old and they are older than the students from UiTM because some of them have undergone their certificate courses at some technical institutions (IKM and ILP) before they continue their study at UniKL doing their diploma. These UniKL students are from the Electromechanical installation and maintenance (EIM) and Mechanical design and development (MDD) programmes. There are 47 male and 6 female students; with a total of 53 students.

Table 1: General perceptions of soft skills by UniKL students

Statement	SD (strongly disagree)	D (disagree)	N (neutral)	A (agree)	SA (strongly agree)
Soft skills are critical/important for career advancement	0	2	4	17	30
Soft skills are highly sought after by employers	0	2	9	24	18
Soft skills are important for getting a better job	0	1	5	19	28

Soft skills are difficult to learn compared to professional knowledge	0	8	23	16	6
Soft skills cannot be enhanced through practice	10	14	20	7	2
Soft skills are not as important as professional knowledge	13	19	15	3	3

From table 1, it can be said that UniKL students regard soft skills as important skills for their career advancement where majority of them 30/43 strongly agreed to the statement. The respondents also think that soft skills are highly sought after by the employees and the respondents also regard soft skills as important factors to get a better job in the future. However, many respondents (23/53) who are almost half were neutral when they were asked to decide whether soft skills are difficult to learn as compared to professional knowledge. The respondents from UniKL also agreed that soft skills can be enhanced through practices. 20 of them were neutral on this issue. They also regarded that soft skills are as important as professional skills. 15 of them were neutral.

Table 2 is the findings on UiTM students’ general perceptions of soft skills.

The students are from the Diploma in Polymer technology and Diploma in sport recreation programmes. Their age is 18 years old (fresh school leavers). There are 16 male and 29 female with a total of 45 students.

Statement	SD (strongly disagree)	D (disagree)	N (neutral)	A (agree)	SA (strongly agree)
Soft skills are critical/important for career advancement	0	0	1	22	22
Soft skills are highly sought after by employers	0	0	4	25	16
Soft skills are important for getting a better job	0	0	1	22	22

Soft skills are difficult to learn compared to professional knowledge	0	11	20	13	1
Soft skills cannot be enhanced through practice	7	30	4	3	1
Soft skills are not as important as professional knowledge	7	35	1	2	0

From table 2, it can be said that UiTM students regard soft skills as important skills for their career advancement. The respondents also think that soft skills are highly sought after by the employees and the respondents also regard soft skills as important factors to get a better job in the future. However, many respondents (20/45) ; almost half of the total number of respondents were neutral when they were asked to decide whether soft skills are difficult to learn as compared to professional knowledge. 37/45 respondents believe that soft skills can be enhanced through practice. In addition, majority of the respondents from UiTM also regarded soft skills as important as professional knowledge.

Table 3 on the general perceptions of soft skills from the respondents from both universities

Statement	SD (strongly disagree)	D (disagree)	N (neutral)	A (agree)	SA (strongly agree)
Soft skills are critical/important for career advancement	0	2	5	39	52
Soft skills are highly sought after by employers	0	2	13	49	34
Soft skills are important for getting a better job	0	1	6	41	50
Soft skills are difficult to learn compared to professional knowledge	0	19	43	29	7
Soft skills cannot be enhanced through practice	17	44	24	10	3

Soft skills are not as important as professional knowledge	20	54	16	5	3
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Table 3 shows the overall findings from the respondents from both universities. It can be concluded that majority of the students from both universities agreed that soft skills are very important for their career advancement in the future. 52 respondents strongly agreed to the statement and 39 agreed. 5 were neutral and 2 respondents disagreed. “The need for soft skills or professional skills is clear. There is a general consensus that soft skills are necessary for continued economic growth,” (Chukier, Hudson & Aisha; n.d.) According to Pritchard (2013), more than three quarter of businesses surveyed, showed that soft skills were as important as or more than technical skills. These skills are said to be important in securing the entry level employment. In terms of whether soft skills are highly sought after by the employers, 34 respondents strongly agreed to the statement, 49 agreed, 13 were neutral and 2 disagreed. It shows that, majority of the respondents agreed that their potential employers regard soft skills as important factors that they look for in their future employees. Pritchard (2013) further states that carrying out company’s goal, 71% of businesses stated that technical skills as equally important as soft skills.

Undeniably, soft skills are also important to get a better job and 50 respondents strongly agreed to it, 41 agreed, 6 neutral and 1 disagreed. The finding of the study is in line with (Robles, 2012) that “Employers want new employees to have strong soft skills, as well as hard skills.”

Majority of the respondents had a neutral idea on whether soft skills are difficult to learn compared to professional skills. Only 7 of them strongly agreed that soft skills are difficult to learn than professional skills. 19 of them disagreed whereby they think that soft skills are not that so hard to be learnt and 29 agreed that soft skills are hard to learn. In addition, majority of the respondents think that soft skills can be enhanced through practice. However, quite a number of them (13) thought otherwise and 24 of them were neutral. Furthermore, both respondents from both universities had the idea that soft skills are as important as professional knowledge.

16 respondents were neutral and 8 of them thought that soft skills are not as important as professional knowledge.

The respondents from both universities tended to choose neutral as the answers for these questions:

- a) Soft skills are difficult to learn compared to professional knowledge
- b) Soft skills cannot be enhanced through practice

c) Soft skills are not as important as professional knowledge

One possible reason on why they chose „neutral“ as their answer is because the respondents were not familiar with the topic or do not have adequate information on the issue discussed (Ducharme, n.d.).

9.0 CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, soft skills are crucial and they are undeniably important. However, Cimatti (2016) showed that there are frictions in between school-to-work transition. Employers are looking for attributes which are different from what teachers and students regarded as important. The employers think that the students are not skill shortage, but rather they are having needless skills. Communication, teamwork and problem-solving have more relevance in employers' opinion than what the teachers and students believe. Teachers usually think that students are well prepared to work while youth and employers do not agree. She stated a McKinsey report of 2012: 74% of education providers were confident that their students were ready for work, however only 38% of the students and 35% of employers agreed. In Italy for example, employers often claim that university graduates are well prepared, but they lack general competences and practical skills (Cinque, 2015, cited in Cimatti, 2016). Hence, it is essential to update these outlines to meet the gap between providers and employers so that the students are sufficiently prepared to acquire the soft skills needed by the stakeholders. Teachers need to utilize more effective teaching method: to better help the students for their future employment and to be able to service the demands by the employers.

10. RECOMMENDATION

Future research should consider having a semi-structured interview with the students so that more information can be gotten especially when the respondents opted „neutral“ as the answer.

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