

Soft Skill Training in UNIMAS: A Cost Benefit Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Graduate development has been a key area of focus for all public universities in Malaysia since its introduction by the Ministry of Higher Learning in 2006. The concern for graduate employability recently makes the need to prepare fresh graduates with the right and sufficient social skills even pressing. The current research is exploratory in nature and an effort to weight the cost effectiveness of the decade long investment in soft skill training by UNIMAS. To meet this objective, feedbacks from three groups of stakeholders including students, facilitators and employers' were collected via surveys and interviews. Data on costs related to provision of soft skill training to first year students were retrieved from internal database. Findings show that while responses with regards to the benefits are mixed in terms of its effects, there are ways to improve the cost efficiency of the investment. Also the subjective measure of effectiveness of the delivery and assessment of the soft skill course can be enhanced by standardizing certain elements of the modules. However, given the unique nature to social skills amongst students, it requires a delicate approach combined with strong will and commitment of the management. The researcher suggests all universities to treat the offering of the soft skill course as earnestly as any other core courses at their respective faculties.

Keywords: Benefit, Cost, Efficiency, Effectiveness, Soft Skill

INTRODUCTION

Soft skills are nontechnical, intangible, personality specific skills" which determines an individual's strength as "a leader, listener and negotiator, or as a conflict mediator (Hewitt Sean, 2008). Soft skills are expected to incorporate all aspects of generic skills that include the cognitive elements associated with non-academic skills. It is identified to be the most critical set of skills in the current global job market especially in a fast moved era of technology. The importance of soft skill training becomes relevant with the reorientation of the national education system which aims at the graduate employability and quality sustainability.

Employers expect graduates to have technical and discipline competences from their degrees but require graduates to also demonstrate a range of broader skills and attributes that include team-working, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and managerial abilities (Lowden, Hall, Elliot, & Lewin, 2011). Maureen Ellis Kisling; G.Hack Worth (2014) states that employers are giving more importance to the soft skills like, integrity / honesty, listening and serving clients and customers but these soft skills was not covered in the courses offered in the colleges.

The lack of soft skills competence among new university graduates is an issue and also a reason for unsuccessful job applications. University graduates who excel academically

and have appropriate soft skills would stand a better chance of being employed. Students in public universities (PUs) need to be guided to acquire the relevant soft skills and need to have role models to be professionally and socially competent. They can actually learn much from their lecturers or educators as role models (Ruzlan Md-Ali, 2016).

Concerted efforts to sought expert opinions on determining the specific set of soft skills demanded by the various industries, resulted in a thorough research by the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia, in mid-year 2015. Based on the research findings obtained, seven soft skills were decided upon as a must have for all fresh university graduates. It was endorsed as compulsory course to be implemented in all institutions of higher learning effective September of 2016.

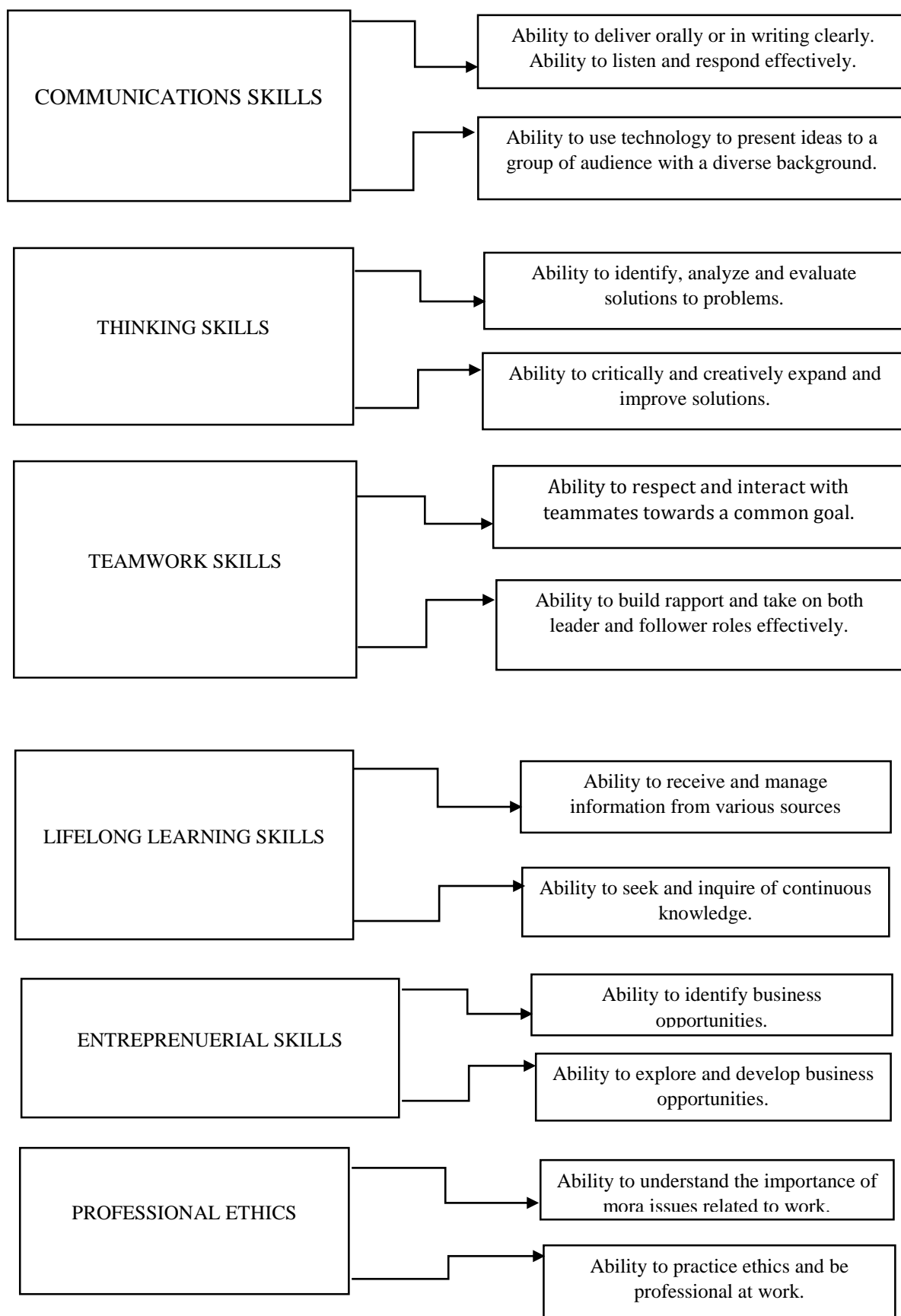
Each of the seven carefully selected and agreed upon soft skills comprise of several sub-skills that are further divided into two categories of implementation. The first category delineates the soft skills that every individual must have and the second category represents soft skills that are good to have. Ideally, all elements of soft skills need to be acquired by each undergraduate student and assessed comprehensively. The diagrams below summarize how each soft skill are viewed as basic and advanced.

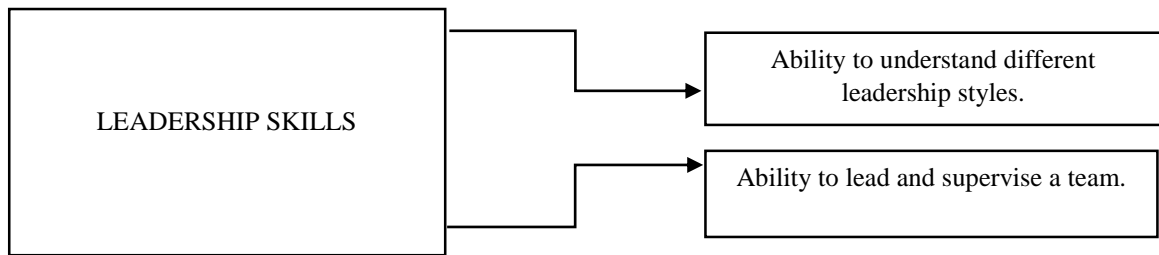
The human capital development among our university students depends heavily on effectiveness of soft skill training provided by the higher learning institutions nationwide. Despite the variation in the delivery methods and flexibility allowed by the education system in terms of the module content, the outcomes are measurable through feedback received from the employers.

This medium scale study intends to explore the progress made by UNIMAS undergraduates in the areas of soft skill as a result of the formal training received during their first semester. While the cost factor is straightforward and justified based on the increasing number of students, the benefits deserve to be analyzed from the stakeholders' perspectives. Facilitators and organizations that consider accepting our students can help highlight the areas requiring quality improvements. Through this research, student beneficiaries are allowed to exercise the rights to express their thoughts on how well the modules meets their needs and eventually help them upon graduation.

The primary objective of this exploratory research is to identify the benefits derived by first year students from the 10-week exercise of soft skills training and weigh it against the total cost incurred by the university. It is critical to conduct a return on investment type analysis given the reduced financial allocation for public universities in the last national budget. Feedbacks from the immediate beneficiaries (students) can provide ways to further improve the effectiveness of the soft skills training, which in turn will increase the chances of our graduates to be employed quickly.

Figure 1: Summary of Soft Skills





SELECTIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

The short article titled, Soft skills at the Malaysian institutes of higher learning by Roselina, S. clearly provides the all the underlying reasons for the introduction of a formal soft skills training targeted at undergraduates. Her writing highlights the need for fresh graduates to complement their academic qualification with all the necessary competencies required to put their expert knowledge into practice.

An interesting study by Nikitina, L. & Furuoka, F. in 2011 focusing on the educational expectations of Malaysian university students' revealed that their expectations varied in terms of soft skills and not all skills introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education were considered important. Despite being small scale with less than 1% sample size, the work explored the need and relevance of soft skill training in tertiary education.

Abdul Malek A. K, Nabilah, A. , Abdul Malek A. R, Sidek M. N, Wan Marzuki W. J, Joharry Othman, Lihanna B, Jamaludin B, Hamdan S. (2012) conducted survey to investigate the differences in soft skills between undergraduates in public and private universities in Malaysia. Using the Malaysian Soft Skills Scale (My3S), which consists of 180 items of soft skills required by the Ministry of Higher Education, their findings suggested that, in general, students of public HEIs scored higher in all seven skills. With respect to gender, male students scored higher than female students in all elements except for teamwork skills and moral and professional ethics. A comparison between fields of study showed that for both types of HEIs, technical students scored the highest in all skills except for moral and professional ethics.

Suhaiza Ismail (2013) concisely summarized the findings of her empirical study on the importance of soft skills for accounting students in Malaysia. Despite the total usable response rate of 50.9%, the study found that the top three reasons for accounting graduates to acquire soft skills are to enable them to provide high quality and professional services', 'to fulfil the expectation of employers' and 'to have better career prospects'.

A comparative research by Shariffah Bahyah, S.A in 2013 suggests that students in general are very reasonably self-assured in terms of their soft skills proficiency with the mean score of most hovering between moderate to high. Nonetheless, perceptions of soft skills proficiency are affected to a certain extent by socio-demographic factors of gender, area of residence as well as types of schools. The study revealed diverse confidence levels of students in general and the importance of helping them to self- identify areas they are weakest in.

Another thought provoking study conducted by Airil Haimi M. A, Sangeeth, R., Nurulhayati, I. and Tahirah, T (2014) revealed that even technical-technological undergraduates completing their tertiary diplomas and preparing to enter the labour market had a mix of preconceptions regarding soft skills. In fact, they differed in levels of preparedness to employ skills such as critical thinking and problem solving.

The study by Nganga, T. K, Chanb, T. C Uma Devi, V. (2015) attempted to identify critical issues of soft skills development through teaching professional training. Qualitative data

collected through in-depth interviews with experienced educators in a Malaysian public university revealed that factors on failure of soft skills development included big class size, academic focused and insufficient period of training. They concluded that embedded model can better ensure integration of soft skills in course designs.

Mohammed, I, Azlinda, W. and Mohamed, W. (2017) concluded that, technical skills alone could not bring about the organizational development there must be a compliment of soft skills for any organizational sustainability. Their document analysis suggests soft skills to be essential as they have affect all aspects of personal development of fresh graduates who lack working experiences.

METHODOLOGY

Instrument

This study used a simplified version of a questionnaire developed aimed at extracting information related to the perceived benefits of soft skills training attained in their first semester. A couple of adjustments were made to the survey after the pilot test in order to clarify this research context and purpose. For instance, original wording of some questions was altered as the word “university” was used instead of the word “college”. Also, the question “What is your class standing?” was removed as it was not applicable in the Malaysian context. The forms distributed to the students were written in English and amongst others contained the following questions:

1. What is your favourite module?
2. Define effectiveness in soft skill training.
3. How did you benefit from the soft skill sessions?
4. Which modules have the highest impact on your social skills?
5. Suggest one way to improve the soft skill training for your program.

Though the original questionnaire did not explicitly aim to seek the students’ opinion about soft skills acquisition, it is nevertheless suitable for the purposes of the current study. This is because the phrasing of the items in the questionnaire in general, is in line with the recent educational research that views soft skills as encompassing various attitudes, values and dispositions (Hager 2006). The open ended wording of the questions allowed the respondents to mention both academic and non-academic pursuits, which helps evaluating the relevance of soft skills in their educational agendas.

Data collection

The study employed a convenience sampling technique. Two hundred and fifty copies of questionnaires were distributed to students at all eight faculties in the university. All forms were returned to the researcher upon completion in situ. An interpretative paradigm introduced by (Bogdan and Biklen,1998; Cohenetal, 2007) was employed to analyze the answers.

Responses related to the students’ educational expectations were combined with other indirect questions as not to intimidate the student respondents. However, the related responses were separated under subcategories based on the level of agreements to statements provided.

Information related to the total expenditure of soft skills training for the last eight years were obtained from the University's Accounts and Claim Unit. As noticeable in Table 1, the annual costs which is mainly token to facilitators almost tripled since the last 4 years due a revision of rate of payment to the volunteering facilitators.

Table 1: Annual Cost

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
RM	55,000	44,800	74,000	57,000	148,200	154,700	159,000	197,600

The hourly rate of RM50 was successfully increased to RM100 effective 2014, given the growth in student numbers per group, a direct affect from the expansion of intake size at the university.

ANALYSIS OF SURVEY

All respondents agreed that the soft skill modules offered were beneficial to them as freshman. However, 2% disagreed that all the modules were equally relevant or useful. Given their feedback on listing those that were found to be important, the researcher noticed that management skills were not mentioned at all. It is suspected that the activities relating to organized study were either combined with modules such as reading and thinking or overlooked completely.

When asked about whether the students or the facilitators are responsible to ensure effectiveness of the soft skills sessions, there was a balanced response. Approximately 50% strongly agreed or agreed that students must be self- motivated and be willing to learn to reap benefits from the training, as it is still a non-graded course. At least 75% suggest that it is maintained as an exam exempted course. The rest insisted that the effectiveness of the sessions depended solely on the ability and personality of the facilitators themselves.

The majority of students, irrespective of their academic programs mentioned modules relating communication skills, including public speaking as the most beneficial of all ten sessions. Most of the respondents described the mock presentations organized as class activities helped them build self-confidence and cope with stage fright.

The next highest score was for teamwork and volunteerism (a component added to soft skill training in 2016). Student respondents declared that projects designed for volunteerism enabled them to enhance their social skills, especially to work with other than their course mates. However, the views as to the role of paid facilitators in making the most out of the community service type activities were mixed. Almost 90% of all students claim that as a whole the training sessions prepared them for the industrial training and eventually the job market.

FINDINGS

A short focus group with the student development management and the facilitators revealed that the returns on the investment of soft skills training in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak is increasing in value.

Evidences from potential employers and firms participating in the talent recruitment events show that by year three, our students are well versed with social skills. Also interviews with supervisors at organizations that accept UNIMAS students for internships support claims relating to critical and creative thinking as well as their ability to take instructions.

On the contrary, some officers in charge shared their concern for the lack of confidence when it comes voicing their point of views or requesting for opportunities to learn during attachments. They were surprised to be informed about the 10-week exposure of soft skills training in their first semester at the university. Perhaps the learning effects failed to sustain in the long run. Suggestions were made for refresher courses, especially for those planning on joining the private sector workforce.

Recommendations from students to further enhance the benefits derived from the investments made on soft skills training can be categorized as follows:

Table 2: Recommendations to Enhance the Benefits Derived from Investments on Soft Skills Training

Environment	Delivery	Activities
Outdoor	Experienced Facilitators	Hands On
Timing & Duration	Fun & Friendly Personality Facilitators	Involving all students
Smaller group size	Include Industry People	Combine with students from other faculties

Given their expressive ideas on how to better conduct the soft skills trainings so that more undergraduates can benefit in the long run, the student development center has taken several measures to incorporate some of the suggestions. Besides selecting the facilitators based on the teaching survey ratings, workshops are also being conducted on a regular basis to equip facilitators with newer techniques to conduct the sessions in a more exciting manner.

As far as the training settings are concerned, faculties are designing innovative programs on campus by collaborating with the community in service oriented activities, such as Awareness & Fund Raising Campaigns. These type of projects provides opportunities for the students to apply the various models related to communication, teamwork and social entrepreneurship.

Lastly, the most challenging task which requires the students themselves to commit and take responsibility for adopting soft skills effectively, the faculties are considering to attach grades for all the assessments. This is expected to motivate the follower type students to carry their weight during sessions and minimize the free-ridership along the 10 weeks.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Evidently, there is a need to be selective about the choice of facilitators who volunteer to conduct the ten week, 2 hourly soft skills sessions as currently being implemented in the university. Although there is a small token of appreciation of RM100 per hour, as incentives are proven to motivate people to put in their best effort to a cause, it is equally important to ensure that these front liners have the proper training themselves. Those with some industry working experience are often found to receive better teaching ratings from the students too. Their ability to relate the modules with the hows and whys in the practice attracts students be more involved during the activities. On the other hand, facilitators who rely heavily on theories and text materials lose their students interests almost instantly.

On a wider scope, all lecturers are expected to demonstrate excellent soft skills to students in and outside classrooms. A qualitative study by Ruzlan, M. A, Fuziah, S, and Fahainis M. Y. in 2016 demonstrates that soft skills facilitators, who are educators by nature carry the responsibility as the role models in embedding interpersonal skills among their students. They designed an Initial Soft Skills Framework for Educators in Malaysia Public Universities after interviewing a group of lecturers at several public universities on the understanding conceptions of soft skills. Their list included communication, creative, reflective, proactive, considerate, resilience, collaboration, optimistic, influence, imaginative, agility, analytic, adaptability, initiative, entrepreneurial, disposition, common-sense and empathy as traits that educators as facilitators ought to possess for students to learn from.

Last but not least, it may be a good idea to emphasize the relevance of the soft skills training during the induction week itself. Some fresh school leavers need the extra push and regular reminders especially when they enter universities and are forced to live far from home. Readyng them mentally before the actual classes begin may enable them to adjust their attitude towards the sessions which is currently does not affect their academic performance. To encourage active participation in the soft skills, merits may be tied with the hostel requirements for the following semester.

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