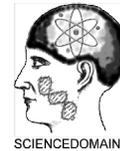




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The Soft Skills Education for the Vocational Graduate: Value as Work Readiness Skills

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Author's contribution

Author MAM formulates the research theme, designed the study and wrote the final draft of the manuscript. The abstract and conclusion was re-structured and the manuscript was improved thoroughly through suggestions of the reviewers and guides for final editing process.

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ABSTRACT

Soft skills are particular abilities that can improve one's employment performance and career prospects. These soft skills help students to develop their employability skills and make them confident to work in a performance oriented work environment as a critical lifelong learner. With regards to this point, it is incumbent upon educators to prepare their graduates to be competitive in the forthcoming economic world. This paper provides an overview of the growing concern among the employers for graduate soft skills in the workplace, thus look into the importance of soft skills, soft skills hunted by employers, soft skills lacking in graduates, mismatch of the soft skills and different aspects of soft skills to teach and assess by the educators. This paper shows that students with soft skills like positive attitude, effective communication, problem solving skill etc. have much more better chances of survival in the critical corporate world compared to the students who are lacking in these skills.

Keywords: *Soft skills; employability; skills gap; lifelong learner.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The challenging situation of today's economy means that it is no longer sufficient for new graduates to have only knowledge of an academic subject, ever more it is required for student to increase the skills which will enhance their prospect of good employment [1]. In addition, the attributes (knowledge, attitudes and abilities) of the graduates seems to be very decisive in the workplace which ultimately empowering the student as a critical life-long learner [2]. These attributes of students, sometimes known as the soft skills, are extremely important that special attention to the development of those soft skills should be given in study plans [3]. Soft skills as defined in scholarly literature are nontechnical skills, abilities and traits required to function in a specific employment environment [4]. Moss and Tilly [5] defined soft skills as 'skills, abilities and traits that pertain to personality, attitude and behavior rather than to formal or technical knowledge'. However, soft skills are more than simply individual traits and dispositions. For example, Hurrell [6] defines soft skills as 'involving interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular contexts'. CEDEFOP [7] explains soft skills are context-dependent and attained from abstract and implied knowledge with actual experience and one's own reflection.

To develop knowledge and skill for graduates, it would require assessable knowledge and continual disciplines. It is also necessary to generate tacit knowledge through sharing processes where meta-cognitive thinking occurs [8]. UNESCO [9] treats technical vocational education in three ways- as part of general education, as a preparation for an occupation, and as part of lifelong learning, where soft skills, generic skills and entrepreneurial skills are given at utmost importance. However, from resource-based viewpoint, an increased focus should be given between hard and soft skills advancement in building a skill policy in vocational education [8]. Therefore it is the demand of the time to give a proper attention to develop the soft skills during the academic period of the graduate. This will be further explored in the workplace and the graduates will be an active part of the lifelong education throughout their life. This paper will investigate the different perspective of soft skills in terms of competency gap, employers demand and it will also delve into teaching and evaluation to the graduate and how it will affect the life of a graduate in the workplace as well as in the society.

2. IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS FOR THE VOCATIONAL GRADUATE

Nowadays the skills that employers demand from the graduates are changing, with soft skills replacing technical ones [10]. Soft skills have strategic roles in determining someone success in his works [11]. It is particularly true for the vocational graduates. People with a solid command of soft skills can think on their feet, solve problems, lead a group through teamwork exercises, give critical feedback, motivate fellow employees and set an example for the rest of the workforce [12]. World Health Organization [13] signifies that soft skills are abilities for adaptive and constructive behavior that allow individuals to deal effectively with the challenges of life. In particular, social skills, one of the soft skills, help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, and build healthy relationships. Moreover, these individual skills are related to the construction of empirical and tacit knowledge in the workplace and guide people to second-order learning (i.e. learning by learning). Due to these characteristics, the soft skills are regarded as generic, transferable, core, or key skills, that can be applied across varied organizational and employment contexts. They are also key capabilities that help to improve competitiveness at the individual, social and national level [8].

The characteristic that distinguishes vocational graduates from other graduates is the genuine workplace experience [14]. In addition, any educator's dream is that graduates should not only be experts in a certain field but matured personalities with a well balanced, rounded off education. However, this characteristic is reflected in soft skills, not in hard skills [15]. However, it is generally recognized by industry that the repertoire of skills that successful employees bring to the workplace has two components: technical skills and soft skills [16]. Soft skills are important to a worker's ability to work smarter, not harder [17]. According to some researchers, one of the reasons of failing to get a job is that the graduate lack soft skills, personality and social adeptness that are distinct from but often as important as specific job skills [4]. In the past, employers trained their employees in the practice of these essential soft skills. Now, employers believe employees are responsible for acquiring them [16]. Nowadays in general, people who are extroverted, who are good in marketing themselves, and who are socializing easily are rated superior to others who lack those attributes. The good old technician, an ace in his field, but being introverted and talking less than ten complete sentences a day is not appreciated any longer [15]. Thus the soft skills become a crucial constituent for the individual in this era to succeed in the workplace.

3. SOFT SKILLS TO TEACH AND ASSESS

Soft skills seem to be difficult to teach and even harder to assess in the classroom [18]. Personal attributes, attitudes to work and individual qualities are extremely difficult to evaluate and, in practice, proxies are used. As Lafer [19] argues: - 'traits such as discipline, loyalty and punctuality are not skills that one either possesses or lacks; they are measures of commitment that one chooses to give or withhold based on the conditions of work offered.' As the soft skills are hard to measure and quantify; many soft skills are not learned in a vocational setting and are developed through relationships long before formal education. Regardless, they are an important part of any job, particularly a vocational job [12]. However, classroom is an ideal learning ground, where one can practice alternative ways of dealing with people, and facilitating learning and transferring knowledge in an interactive rather than prescriptive form [20]. Because of that integration between hard skills and soft skills in preparing employee with various efforts should be done in formal education. However, many of education institutions including vocational high school in the developing countries still did not realize that [11].

Philpot [18] discussed different aspects of providing soft skills to the graduates in the educational setting. He suggests that classroom teachers can promote the highly sought skills by requiring professional behaviors in the classroom/lab/workshop, modeling appropriate interpersonal skills with students and peers, designing lessons that incorporate teamwork and problem-solving activities, and using case studies to examine the impact of ethical behaviors and positive/negative attitudes. He further advised classroom teachers to demonstrate effective classroom leadership skills, communicate professionally with students and parents, provide timely feedback, always bring a positive attitude to classroom, and treat all students with respect and dignity, reward students when they are successful and provide opportunities for them to improve in areas that need work [18]. To identify a list of traits sought by employers, such as punctuality and loyalty, and so on is one important thing. But to deliver these attitudes and dispositions is a vital question as we know little about the transfer of work-related skills across contexts [21]. To achieve these desired standard institutions need to adapt to current student needs and identify new learning models [22]. There must be a review and redevelopment of the curriculum and change delivery methodology to support the development of these skills and attributes' and to look at ways of measuring and recording attainment.

However, Educational institutions seem to find great difficulty in adapting to these different forms of learning and assess them adequately. The Horizon Report [22] goes on to state that:

'A challenge cited as critical now for several years running, academic review and faculty rewards are out of sync with the practice of scholarship. Clear approaches to assessing emerging forms of scholarly practice are needed for tenure and promotion. Students who are living and learning with technologies that generate dynamic forms of content may find the current formalism and structure of scholarship and research to be static and 'dead' as a way of collecting, analyzing and sharing results.' (p.6)

On the other hand, Caruana [23] argues that academics contend that the nature of Education in itself leads to the development a series of skills that may not be explicitly listed in the curriculum yet result acquired by the students through the participation within the different activities making up an academic course. He further continues that the nature of the academic environment itself leads towards the development of self-reflection and evaluation, synthesis and analysis of knowledge. The structure of courses is such that students are often required to work in groups or teams whereby apart from the achievement of the academic tasks, students are also developing team-building skills, scheduling and work distribution amongst the team members.

Moreover, Technology has an enormous opportunity to demonstrate the preferred skills and to allow the student to perform those skills in the classroom setting. Technology could create scenarios or role plays that are similar to the context in which the learner is applying the skill [24]. To present soft skills in a learning environment it is required first to provide a model of the desired skill. In support of several soft skills, a short video is an outstanding method to instruct. Videos are great at presenting body language, facial expressions and for transmitting emotions. Lastly, there should be an opportunity for the student to apply those skills with feedback. ICT based assessments are able to generate rapid reliable data about the progress being done by learners. Moreover, areas where the learners are having difficulties are identified quicker and it would therefore be relatively simpler to take remedial action [25].

Hopefully, at most education institutions teaching methodology has been changed or will be changed towards more student centered learning. Such a shift goes together with embedding soft skills into the teaching of hard skills. Put differently, students involving in a lecture with the aim of learning a hard skill will certainly and automatically practice a range of soft skills. A primary step in developing soft skills of students is to raise their awareness about the significance of soft skills and the consequences of shortcomings in this regard. A formal approach to the problem would be to incorporate soft skills subjects into a program's curriculum. However, a very elegant way of offering soft skills training to students is to embed it into the teaching of hard skills. This way, no changes to a program's curriculum are necessary; instead the change will be reflected in the lecturers' teaching methodology. Correctly applied, such an approach to teaching will automatically increase the attractiveness and effectiveness of a course regarding both, hard skills and soft skills [15].

4. SOFT SKILLS AND EMPLOYABILITY

Skill has always been an indefinable concept. Accounts of skill now include communication, problem solving, team working, an ability to improve personal learning and performance,

motivation, judgment, leadership and initiative [26]. Employers commented that graduates who entered the job market today are lacking in these soft skills [27]. Nowadays employers look for these skills and attributes when recruiting as a way of predicting success in the workplace [18]. In recent years there has been a dramatic shift in the skills required by the employers by privileging soft skills over the technical skills [28]; The shift, as Payne [29] notes, is from technical skill to personal attributes and it is these soft skills that are now, at least rhetorically, most in demand by employers [26, 28].

It has been argued by employers that graduates are not equipped with the right set of soft skills that would enable them to integrate themselves and contribute effectively at the workplace [30]. Employers tend to see most new graduates as somewhat self-centered, unable to integrate within an existing team and expecting to be placed in a senior position without demonstrating the right qualities for leadership etc. [15]. As noted by Khair [31], that lack of competencies lead to a new issue for the graduates becoming unemployed. The failure to fulfill this requirement has been identified as one of the causes of the skills gap amongst graduates, and the problem needs to be addressed seriously [32, 33, 34].

There is some indication that qualifications are only part of the answer, and that soft skills are also an important feature of employability for jobs at both the top and bottom level of the labor market [35, 19]. Certainly soft skills, such as friendliness and team working ability, and traits such as emotional intelligence have been highlighted as the skills that are of greatest importance in the current labor market [19]. Attitude has become a proxy for the soft skills required of emotional labor [36]. Having the right attitude is regarded as a prerequisite of employees appropriately managing their own as well as customers' feelings in order to affect the desired service encounter. To this end, feeling rules prescribe employees being responsive, courteous and understanding with customers for example [37]. For this reason, attitude has come to be conceived as constituent of the soft skills necessary within interactive service work.

Due to the emerging demand from the employers, there has been a growing awareness amongst academics on the need to develop students' knowledge and skills to ensure their employability [2]. When searching for prospective workforce, most employers tend to search for graduates who, in addition to possessing required skills and content knowledge to function at the work place, possess the right attitude, proactive and are willing to learn [38] and more importantly, perhaps, is that the graduates ought to be communicatively proficient, have analytical turn of mind, able to solve problems, competently working with others and flexible [39, 40, 41].

Research carried out by Smith and Comyn [42] drew a particular attention to the fresh and young workers. They argued that the youth had difficulty of adjusting to the work environment such as unwillingness to take a job seriously and a reluctance to ask if they were uncertain about anything. An example from the Malaysia, an imminent rising country in the vocational sector, shows that industrial experience and soft skill acquired by academic staffs have been the biggest challenge faced by polytechnics, especially in the ever-changing needs of the industry, technological advancement and economic growth of the country [43]. It is apparent that the present job market not only demand the technically skilled workforce but also they expect graduates acquainted with proper soft skills.

5. MISMATCH BETWEEN SKILL SUPPLY AND SKILL DEMAND

The focus of vocational education and training, in general instance, is that the acquisition of hard skills by the youth was explicitly focused. The identification and acquisition of those attributes and dispositions regarded as soft skills, discussed above, was presumably incidental and their acquisition was assumed to occur largely by osmosis [21]. Although academic skills clearly were deemed critical, participants need to focus more on the significance of attitude and motivation. Specifically, work ethic was described as a skill that graduate employees tend to lack, but need to be successful. In general, work ethic was described as an understanding of general workplace policies and practices and an ability to focus on workplace tasks during the day [14]. Wagiran [11] shows that gap competencies still exist between what vocational high schools had given and the real needs in the industrial sector. The weaknesses and lacking of vocational graduates as new employee in industry was mostly caused by soft skills aspects rather than hard skills aspects.

In Australia research shows that the fit between qualifications and occupations is quite loose, except for some regulated occupations such as electricians and professionals such as physicians [44]. There have been numerous studies in Australia and other countries which find that some graduates are in jobs that don't need their level of education (education under use), some are in jobs which normally require a higher level or longer education (under education), some workers are in jobs which don't need their particular qualification (qualification under use), some are in jobs for which they are not qualified (under qualification), some workers are in jobs that don't use all their skills (skills under use) and some workers are in jobs for which they are not fully skilled (under skills) [45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53]. The soft skills development in Korean formal education becomes a key issue, since it plays a role in connecting education and work. The issue relates to the mismatch between skill supply from school and skill demand of workplace. The rapid expansion of higher education resulted in high expectations of young graduates to obtain decent jobs and thus has led to a lack of skill supply particularly in SMEs (small and medium enterprises) and micro-businesses [54, 8]. The issue that has received wide coverage in the Malaysian context is the marketability or employability of graduates and many other countries have also acknowledged that higher education has not met the expectations of employers [55, 56, 57]. Studies conducted in Malaysia on the low employability rates highlighted several contributing factors [58, 59, 60] including lack of soft skills as well as changes in employers requirement [61]. Wagiran [11] further says that the competences gap between vocational education and industry sector was that vocational high school graduation is weak in soft skill which could put their employability on stake.

6. SOFT SKILLS IN THE CUSTOMER SERVICE

Research suggests that the development of any skill is best facilitated by giving students practice and not by simply talking about or demonstrating what to do [62, 63]. As part of this process of embodiment, employees are now expected to demonstrate not only soft skills with regard to their attitude but also their appearance to customers. Today's employers are more concerned with the soft skills of applicants, particularly having the right attitude and appearance, than qualifications and technical skills. As such employers are concerned with managing and monitoring employees' body language, dress and speech for example [64]. Indeed, Leslie [65] suggests that style retail is distinct from other forms of retail employment in its strict enforcement of image and presentation rules suggesting that workers have to

conform to specific bodily criteria. Recent research by Walls [66] reveals that this process of styling is imperative for men working in the industry especially in the front desk service.

When there has been an appreciation of the broad range of soft skills required by employers there has been some success in developing appropriate training. For example, Nickson et al. [67], reporting on a short-lived training programme for the long-term unemployed who were seeking work in the retail and hospitality industries, that after the training participants have a better understanding of the performance-related nature of front-line service work and a clear appreciation of the importance of both looking good and sounding right in front-line service work. Thus any account of what potentially comprises employability has to include not just qualifications and technical skills but also the soft skills deemed component of both emotional and aesthetic labor.

7. SOFT SKILLS AND LIFELONG LEARNING

Soft skills are the principle of lifelong learning in nature, because they are related to core competences to deal effectively with the demands and challenges encountered in daily human life [68]. The OECD [69] research concludes that soft skills should be considered supplementary to established educational requirements. Buchanan and colleagues [70] note that cognitive, technical and behavioral skills are embedded in the employment relationship as well as broader social structures. Thus, skills are not merely developed by students in an education system to be subsequently put to work, but are mutually comprised by people, their education and their work.

In the knowledge-based society of the twenty-first century, the term lifelong vocational education has become an important issue emphasizing lifelong learning and vocational skills development as the major strategies for national competitiveness. The term of lifelong vocational education is the combination of two contradicting perspectives- vocational education increases the productiveness of labor while lifelong education emphasizes the improvement of human life quality and equity. These two different viewpoints have converged to harmonize each other in order to improve work quality itself, workers' values on job and promote sustainable development and quality of life [8]. Similarly, evidence is suggesting that this is where the development of not just hard skills to meet the employers' standard, but also where the acquisition or honing of soft employability skills might best be undertaken [42]. Such skills, it is widely acknowledged [42, 71], are learnt throughout life and best judged in context.

8. CONCLUSION

As mentioned above, soft skills are deemed very important by the contemporary employers to recruit the graduates yet in most of the cases they did not get them up to the standard. This is because of the skills gaps between the demand of the employers and supply of the academic institutions. However, education and training systems can supply the soft skills but they must be effectively deployed in the curriculum. After effectively deployed the soft skills in the curriculum, most of the cases it seems very difficult to teach and assess those soft skills. But it is the technology that can makes it possible to teach and evaluate the soft skills of the students to some extent. In order to fill the skills gaps, educational institutions must develop their specific strengths considering the characteristics of the local market and specialize their role to meet the local industry's needs. Moreover, soft skill-based curriculums which are promoting generic, transferable and core competence should be developed. Soft

skills development is not easy to achieve in the short time but it could serve as the main solution to cultivate students who possess employability skills. This is the demand of this time that education and training systems have to focus on producing employees who are self-directed and can engage in flexible learning to carry modern workplaces and can shape their lives as a lifelong learner.

From the discussion it is very clear that today's graduates have a tendency to not succeed because they rarely display or communicate their employability skills, only show their factual qualifications. It is very apparent that education institutions should present a well-formed learning experience with enhancing graduate employability as a core constituent where soft skills are embedded in the curriculum process. These soft skills make possible to assist healthy mindset for young workers to conduct social justices to the society. At the vocational educational level, it is necessary to transform the educational institutes as lifelong education center in order to facilitate this soft skill formation among the graduates. In embedding the soft skills into the curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment processes, steps must be taken to ensure that there is a constructive alignment between them. The desired soft skills should be made explicit through the learning outcomes of modules.

In order to facilitate the soft skills to the graduate Malhi [72] recommended that educational institute should adopt a holistic and integrated approach towards enhancing graduate employability, stand-alone soft skills modules, student involvement in work-related projects and extra-curricular activities, work placements, and guidance on job-getting skills through career services focusing to minimize the skills gap. Another important thing is to introduce learner-centered pedagogy in the classroom. Learner-centered pedagogy in early stages of education seems to be more helpful to soft skills development. It is recommended that the authorities should seek to have more of the soft skills elements of this learner-centered approach. They should incorporate the soft skills elements into curriculum to prepare them for the future world of work. Besides, higher education should be aligned with employer needs by developing skills needed in the workplace.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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