

Soft Skill Levels of Diploma Business Students in Private Higher Educational Institutions Malaysia: A Review and Approach during COVID-19 Pandemic

Tan Cheng Yoke^{1*}, Abdul Jalil Ali² & Abdul Ghani Kanesan Abdullah³

¹ School of Business and Hospitality, DISTED College Sdn Bhd, 340, Macalister Road, 10350 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

^{2,3} School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Minden 11800 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The study aims to examine the soft skill levels of diploma business students in the private higher learning institutions based in the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia. A cross sectional descriptive study was conducted to assess the soft skill development from 429 business students located in three northern states of Peninsular Malaysia. A set of self-administered questionnaires, which comprised of 53 items, was distributed through stratified random sampling method. The results advocated high level of teamwork while moderate levels of achievements only for communication, critical thinking and problem solving, ethic and professional moral. At the moment of COVID-19 pandemic, graduates with all the stated essential soft skills are much needed to succeed in the struggles. Meanwhile, a shift from conventional teaching methods towards digital or virtual learning approaches are getting much more in common. Therefore, educationists are encouraged to pick up new delivery techniques despite some challenges faced in teaching delivery for effective learning outcomes, during and even after COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Soft Skill, Private Higher Educational Institutions, Educational Administration, Embedded Model

INTRODUCTION

The costs, quality of education, skills and knowledge acquired by the graduates differ. At crucial times like recent COVID pandemic, life skills or social skills, such as teamwork, communication, problem solving and critical thinking skills, become the basic in building resilience and sustainability. According to Back, Tulskey & Arnold (2020), clinicians had been receiving training in evidence-based methods to communicate with patients who are frail with illness, facilitating virtual goodbyes with family members and making some hard explanation of lack of treatment due to limited resources. Also, problem solving skills to face with the anxiety and other life issues as per revealed by the healthcare workers (Korkmaz et al., 2020). Certainly, the front liners might have the toughest time and most testing moments, yet somehow everybody on earth was affected and challenged. Amidst the tragedy, we found a silver lining by coming together as a team, hence the people strived on, guided by the basis of moral and professionalism.

Notably in Malaysia, the cost of getting a certificate has been getting higher and higher due to the democratization of education, effects of diploma disease, global franchising of UK, American or Australian programs, mushrooming of private colleges, and social mobility. The average costs of getting a Diploma after Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) in private higher educational institution in Penang for example currently range from RM20,000 to RM30,000 for business studies; while another RM50,000 to RM70,000 for degree courses of the similar field.

* Corresponding author: taryon_tan@yahoo.com

eISSN: 2462-2079 © Universiti Putra Malaysia Press

Despite the high costs of investment in education, it is sad to acknowledge that not all of the graduates are equally successful in getting decent employments after finishing their tertiary education. The situation is made worse due to Covid-19 pandemic. According to “Key” (2021), the unemployment rate in Malaysia reached a decade high of 4.6 percent, despite some very little decline by 0.1 percent only after April 2021. Some fresh graduates waited for months or even more than a year in order to get employed; meanwhile some graduates decided to continue with post-graduate studies after several rounds of unsuccessful interviews (Azina & Ismail, 2011). Azina and Ismail (2011) pointed that male graduates tend to have better chances to be employed than their female counterparts. However, Groh et al. (2014) testified the positive relationship between soft skills and employment regardless of gender differences.

To a certain extent, the attitudes and competencies of graduates themselves serve as the determinants of entrance into the job market (Tomlinson, 2007). The graduate soft skill development and employability issues can be rooted from the students themselves, and also the influence from surrounding environment (Pramudyo, 2010). There were tendency for these fresh graduates to “wait” and “choose” for “decent” vacancies. According to World Bank (2015), the youth (ages 15 to 24 years old) unemployment rate in Malaysia has always been recorded high since 2001. The Malaysian youth unemployment rate rose consistently from 9.88 percent in 2014 to 11.77 percent in 2019 (“Malaysia,” 2021). Although the majority of unemployed fresh graduates were from public universities, which comprised of 51 percent; the percentage of unemployed new graduates from private institutions of higher education (IPTS) also constituted about 34 percentage of the total unemployment (Fresh, 2015). This means that despite half of the public university graduates were unemployed, more than one third of the graduates from private higher educational institutions were also facing the same problem as well.

Therefore, it is vital to equip the young Malaysian graduates with both the required knowledge and essential soft skills in order to be absorbed into the job market successfully. Based on the seven most essential soft skills listed by Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2006), the paper looked for details towards the soft skill development among the tertiary students.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the levels of soft skill development among the diploma business students in the private higher educational institutions in Peninsular Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Effects of Soft Skills Towards Employability and Sustainability in the situation of Covid-19

The benefits and opportunities brought about by honing high levels of essential soft skills are ironically undeniable. According to Hairi et al. (2011), they advocated five critical soft skill criteria needed at the workplace, which are the communication skills, teamwork, decision making and problem solving, creative and critical thinking, and finally program and project management skills. Significant demand for several soft skills, mainly fluent command of English, excellent communication skills, self-management, self-motivation, ability to integrate and teamwork are the common required skills in almost every part of the world (Wahl et al., 2012). Joseph et al. (2010) from Singapore and the United States mentioned that broader managerial and interpersonal skills were much needed too. In Malaysia, Omar et al. (2012) highlighted four major criteria for Malaysian graduates' employability, namely qualification, academic score, experience and specific soft skills. This indicated that other than technical or professional knowledge, real world experience and soft skills play some critical roles in determining future prospects of a graduate. It corresponds with the findings of some researchers that ranked communication skills as the utmost important soft skills in engineering, information science and technology, social or business fields, both orally and in written form (May & Strong, 2011; Zaharim et al., 2012; Pedrazzini, 2012; Karthikeyan, 2013; Voelkening, 2014). In many companies especially bigger corporations or multinational companies (MNC), a matrix structure of organizational design is common and therefore participation in projects has become one of the key performance areas. Stevenson and Starkweather (2010) noted six vital core competencies for successful project management, and they were i) leadership, ii) excellent communication skills at all levels, iii) English proficiency, both oral and written, iv) problem solving even at unclear situation, v) right attitude and vi) change management. In addition, Voelkening (2014) also reported that conceptual ability and conflict management skills are necessary for project manager in Ireland. On the contrary, entrepreneurship skill is found to be insignificant soft skill towards employability of graduates (Rahmat et al., 2012). With reference to Gabrielian and Callahan (1996), entrepreneurial skill is defined as the spirit, flexibility and creativity in responding to change.

In the period of Covid-19 challenge, unfortunately the medical practitioners in certain low-resource country had significant differences in the levels of computer and ICT skills among themselves (Elhadi et al., 2021). For the younger generations, social distancing and restrictions on gatherings had impaired school-age children from

having meaningful in-person interactions with peers whereas “Peer talk” is a crucial component of conversational skills in communication (Charney, Camarata & Chern, 2021). Certainly, this will further widen the soft skill gaps in later years. At the era of IR4.0 and competitive environment, coupled with years of global economic downturn in view of Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, Mok, Xiong and Ye (2021) too mentioned the concern in preparing the students for uncertain futures. Mok et al. (2021) revealed that Chinese students graduated from overseas hold better chances in career development, as well as personal growth; one of the main reasons was higher English language proficiency compared to their peers graduated from mainland China. Meanwhile, Green (2021) reported of the enormous effects of Covid-19 on mental health and the relationship of higher productivity from industries with lower levels of insecure employment. Hence, it shows that by working together and coming handy to each other to solve problems or relieving pain and losses, while hibernating and transforming internal strength into resilient skills, are determinants for the people to move on stronger.

Soft Skill Development and Socio-economy

Since a decade ago, Heckman et al. (2010) had discovered many other social problems such as widening inequality and reducing productivity due to insufficient competencies or skills by the people, of which the social and economic gaps were rooted in cognitive and also non-cognitive skills. Coincided with Heckman's findings, skill shortage was identified as a major constraint to continuous economy growth (Blom & Saeki, 2011). In another occasion, lack of communication and interpersonal skills were found to be the reasons why many Islamic university graduates in Indonesia facing difficulties to build harmonious relationship with the environment (Sabri, 2014). Therefore, Hatta and Ali (2013) advocated for sustainable poverty reduction and improved employability among Malaysian graduates through soft skill development. Hatta and Ali (2013) also highlighted the use of soft skill training, internships and job placement initiatives to combat unemployment issues. Not to forget in the era of globalization, the needs of strong communication and interpersonal skills amongst Malaysian graduates are so vital in the workforce and MNC in order to meet their requirements (Salleh et al., 2010). Besides that, opportunities and exposure given to university students such as interacting with international faculty has proven to improve students' independent learning, critical thinking, communication and cultural competence (Yao & Tuliao, 2019).

Essential Soft Skill Elements

Robles (2012) named ten essential soft skills that cover integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic. Nevertheless, communication skills, both oral and written, had always been at the top list of essential soft skill components in many past researches (Kim et al., 2011; Mai, 2012; Marcial, 2012; Ahmed et al., 2013; Shukla & Kumar, 2017). Balcar (2012) stated it was worth noting the importance of foreign languages, information and communication technology (ICT) skills due to its increasing weighting. This can be even more applicable today as we are heading into digital era and Industrial 4.0.

In the year 2006, Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) already in collaboration with seven universities and teachers' training institutions introduced the Model of Soft Skill Development. There are two categories of main soft skills in the MOHE Soft Skill Development Model, they are core soft skills ("Kemahiran Insaniah Mesti") and additional or "good-to-have" soft skills ("Kemahiran Insaniah Tambahan"). The core soft skills are divided into seven components, i.e. (i) communication skill, (ii) critical thinking and problem solving skills, (iii) teamwork, (iv) life-long learning and information management skills, (v) entrepreneurial skill, (vi) ethics and professional moral and (vii) leadership skill. These seven soft skill components are further divided into 34 soft skills elements.

Singh and Singh (2008) listed eleven general employability skills or soft skills required for Malaysian graduates, and they entailed the communication skills, English language proficiency skills, information, communication and technology (ICT) skills, interpersonal skills, teamwork, leadership skills, problem solving skills, adaptability skills, risk taking ability, creativity, personal organization and time management skills. Consistent with other literatures, most Malaysian students regarded communication skills, teamwork and leadership as most needed soft skills while the least needed for employment was entrepreneurial skill (Ahmad et al., 2010; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2012). Meanwhile, Ahmad et al. (2010) also advocated the different needs of important soft skills depending on their field of studies. For instance, Social Science and Humanities' students agreed to leadership and teamwork as the vital soft skills, Information Technology students chose critical thinking and problem solving whereas Islamic Studies' students were more concern about ethics, moral and professionalism (Ahmad et al., 2010). Pedrazzini (2012) added decision making and adaptability to new situations as needed soft skills for engineers. Several accounting committee groups and commissions came to a conclusion that the essential skills for success in accounting comprise of oral and written communication skills, analytic skills, computer skills, and interpersonal skills (Albin & Crockett, 1991). In comparison, it was noted there was some common

identification of essential soft skills required for these business students, which counted for the communication skills, teamwork, as well as ethics and professional moral from researches.

Ironically, in the era of year 2000s or known as the 21st century, a broader set of “skills” are needed. Thus, other than soft skills, the most recent “21st Century Skills” take into account also the knowledge, work habits, and character traits of the person. The soft skills, or have been termed also as life skills, people skills, social skills or vocational skills in different context and occasions, comprise of all the four identified essential soft skills for tertiary business students proposed in the study, which are the communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, teamwork, and ethics. “21st century skills” cover also the information and technology literacy or ICT skills, and leadership as per stated in MOHE Development Model (2006), plus some other skills that entail interrogative questioning, research skills and practices as the required soft skills of the tertiary students.

Critical Soft Skill Gaps among Malaysian Graduates

Obviously, there are prevailing gaps between the perception of the importance or levels of soft skills acquired by the students and the expectations of their future employers (Abdullah et al., 2012). Table 1 summarizes components of high soft skill gaps in Malaysia.

TABLE 1
Summary of Components of High Soft Skill Gaps in Malaysia

Soft Skill Components	Tick for Gaps
Interpersonal	
Communication	√
ICT*	√
Teamwork	
Managerial	√
Critical thinking*	√
Problem solving	√
Decision making	

(Note: Based on findings from past literatures;

*not highlighted in studies abroad but found in Malaysian studies)

According to Yoke and Ngang (2015) who conducted a case study on soft skill development at a tertiary private college, they found the following deficiencies amongst the students. Table 2 illustrates their findings in accordance to the essential soft skill components and their particular items of deficiencies.

TABLE 2
Summary of Findings in Soft Skill Deficiencies of Diploma Business Studies Students at a Private College

Soft Skill Components	Descriptions of Deficiencies
1. Communication skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rather poor in oral communication in English • nervous and often read from slides during presentation • not so independent in active listening (<i>depends on speaker's tone and style of presentation</i>)
2. Critical thinking and Problem solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inexperience and weak in identifying and solving problems, especially in complex situation • unable to handle problem in unclear situation • seldom think out of box
3. Teamwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>not an issue (some disputes do exist but manageable)</i>
4. Life-long Learning and Information Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rated average only in their quest for knowledge • lack of initiative for continuous learning • below average for passion of study in academic
5. Entrepreneurial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of practical or hands-on practice in entrepreneurship • not ready to be self-employed yet
6. Ethics and Professional Moral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ambiguous definition of ethical standards

(depending on individual's moral standards and they did vary from one to another)

7. Leadership

- some felt frustrated in leading team members, feeling dissatisfied
- punctuality and accountability problem from team members

(Source: Yoke, T. C. & Ngang, T. K. (2015). A study on soft skill development among final year Diploma in Business Studies students. *Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Management*, 3(2), 32-50.)

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Quantitative cross sectional survey research design was used in this study. The variable of soft skill levels comprised of four dimensions, which were i) communication skills, ii) critical thinking and problem solving skills, iii) teamwork, iv) ethics and professional moral. They were taken based on MOHE Soft Skill Development Model (2006) and had been shortlisted as four most common essential soft skill elements from the existing seven components.

Population and Sampling

The population of the study consisted of all the final year diploma business studies' students in the private higher educational institutions of the three northern states in Peninsular Malaysia, namely Kedah, Penang and Perak. The population was chosen as they are going to be the first young graduates into commercial employment from tertiary education. There are four private higher educational institutions in Kedah, twenty in Penang and nine in Perak that offer the diploma business courses (Profil institusi, 2015). Proportionate stratified random sampling method was applied in the data collection. Total completed samples were 429 final year diploma business students from 12 private higher educational institutions of the three states mentioned, with a high response rate of 80.2 percent.

Measurement

A set of self administered questionnaires was used for the research design in the study. The questionnaire was adopted and adapted based on Devadason, Subramaniam, & Daniel (2010). The constructs were guided by Malaysian Model of Soft Skill Development (2006). A measurement of five-point Likert Scale was used and the scales allotted were 1. Strongly disagree, 2. disagree, 3. neutral, 4. agree and 5. strongly agree.

Data Analysis

SPSS version 23 was used for data analysis purpose in this study. The average mean scores of the variable and of each item were computed in descriptive analysis. The competency levels were categorized according to Nunnally (1978) and thus they were divided into three main categories that were divided into low, moderate or high levels. Subsequently, mean scores that fell between 1.00 to 2.33 were ranked as low level, 2.34 to 3.67 as moderate level, and 3.68 to 5.00 as high level (Nunnally, 1978).

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Respondent Profile

A total of 429 respondents from private higher learning institutions participated in the study, and 57.6 percent were from Penang, 28.9 percent from Perak, and another 13.5 percent from Kedah. Majority of them were Chinese and Malay Malaysian students aged between 19 to 20 years old. Female students accounted for 67.4 percent or 289 students of which 97 percent of the participants were Malaysians. The participants' course majors comprised of business management and administration (47 percent), accounting (18.2 percent), general business study (10.5 percent), Muamalat administration (8.6 percent), Islamic banking (6.1 percent), e-secretarial (3.5 percent), finance and logistics management (2.3 percent).

Descriptive Results

Soft Skill Levels

Table 3 depicts the item scores of all the four soft skill components. From the table, it was indicated that all the items in communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills were rated moderately, while most

items in teamwork were rated as highly competent (78.6 percent), and only one item in ethics and professional moral was rated as highly competent (14.3 percent).

With regards to competency in teamwork, most of the students reported that they acquired higher levels of capabilities in building good relations with others, being able to interact well with others, able to work effectively with others to achieve common goals. Besides that, they were able to understand the different roles in a group (either of a group leader or team member), able to recognize the attitudes and behavior of other people, respect the attitudes, behavior and beliefs of other people. They also regarded themselves to have acquired high competency to contribute to the planning of group work and being responsible for a group's decision (mean scores between 3.69 to 3.79). On the other hand, the teamwork capabilities that they considered to have acquired moderately only were the abilities to switch between the different roles in a group (mainly as a group leader or team member), recognize the beliefs of other people and to contribute to the coordination of group work (mean scores between 3.60 to 3.65).

Ethics and professional moral levels ranked the second of all four soft skill components. There was only one out of seven items (14.3 percent) which was rated as high in competency, and that was having a sense of responsibility towards society. The rest of the item scores were rated moderately, ranging from mean scores of 3.53 to 3.59. The items in ethics and professional morals which were rated moderately included the ability to understand well the effects of economic, environmental and socio-cultural factors on professional practices, ability to analyze ethics related issues, making decision in solving ethics related issues and practicing ethical behavior.

In terms of critical thinking and problem solving skills, all the sixteen items were rated moderately. The mean scores ranged between 3.35 to 3.66. The lowest score belonged to the ability to identify and analyze problems in complex or unclear situations (mean scores 3.35 to 3.38). The final year diploma business students also claimed that they were skilled moderate only in making justifiable evaluations, to think out of box, and to persevere (mean scores 3.43 to 3.46). However, they pointed that they were slightly better in their abilities to understand and adapt well to the culture of the community in a new environment, as well as to extend full attention to a given responsibility (mean scores 3.59 to 3.66).

Unfortunately, the lowest rank from the mean scores in the soft skill levels of the diploma business students was the communication skills, though they were all rated as moderate levels as well. However, the spread of the mean scores had a narrower range which fell between 3.40 to 3.66 only. They scored the best in their capabilities of using technology in presentation but have the lowest competency in the abilities to express ideas clearly, confidently and effectively verbally, and use of non verbal communication skills effectively. The students also scored below 3.50 in their written communication skills, ability to put up presentations confidently and according to the level of the audience, as well as the negotiation skills, public speaking, speeches or job interviews. Nevertheless, the diploma business students rated themselves better in their communication skills in terms of practicing good listening skills, putting up presentations clearly and communicate well with people from different cultural backgrounds; the scores on these aspects were above 3.50.

TABLE 3
Summary of Means for Soft Skill Levels

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Competency Levels
I am able to express ideas clearly verbally	3.40	0.77	Moderate
I am able to express ideas clearly in written form	3.49	0.79	Moderate
I am able to express ideas effectively verbally	3.40	0.78	Moderate
I am able to express ideas effectively in written form	3.49	0.82	Moderate
I am able to express ideas confidently verbally	3.40	0.85	Moderate
I am able to express ideas confidently in written form	3.51	0.83	Moderate
I am able to practise good listening skills	3.61	0.85	Moderate
I am able to provide feedback	3.53	0.82	Moderate
I am able to put up presentations clearly	3.50	0.84	Moderate
I am able to put up presentations confidently	3.45	0.88	Moderate
I am able to put up presentations according to the level of the audience	3.41	0.89	Moderate

I am capable of using technology in presentation	3.66	0.80	Moderate
I am able to negotiate and reach a consensus	3.43	0.83	Moderate
I can communicate well with people from different cultural backgrounds	3.55	0.86	Moderate
I am able to expand my own fundamental communication skills for instance in public speaking, speeches, job interviews, etc.	3.44	0.85	Moderate
I can use non-verbal communication skills effectively	3.40	0.80	Moderate
I am able to identify problems even in complex situations	3.38	0.79	Moderate
I am able to identify problems even in unclear situations	3.35	0.84	Moderate
I am able to analyse problems even in complex situations	3.38	0.78	Moderate
I am able to analyse problems even in unclear situations	3.37	0.83	Moderate
I am able to make justifiable evaluations	3.43	0.81	Moderate
I am able to improve thinking skills by giving explanation in a discussion	3.49	0.78	Moderate
I am able to improve thinking skills by analysing a discussion	3.54	0.74	Moderate
I am able to improve thinking skills by evaluating a discussion	3.55	0.75	Moderate
I am able to look for ideas	3.57	0.76	Moderate
I am able to find alternative solutions	3.57	0.75	Moderate
I can think out of the box	3.46	0.84	Moderate
I can make conclusions based on valid proof	3.58	0.84	Moderate
I can persevere	3.46	0.79	Moderate
I can extend full attention to a given responsibility	3.64	0.76	Moderate
I can understand the culture of the community in new working environment	3.66	0.83	Moderate
I can adapt well to the culture of the community in new working environment	3.59	0.79	Moderate
I am able to build good relations with others	3.77	0.82	High
I am able to interact with others	3.76	0.85	High
I am able to work effectively with others to achieve common goal(s)	3.74	0.83	High
I am able to understand the different roles in a group (mainly of a group leader or team member)	3.79	0.76	High
I am able to switch between the different roles in a group (either as a group leader or team member)	3.65	0.82	Moderate
I am able to recognize the attitudes of other people	3.70	0.79	High
I am able to recognize the behaviours of other people	3.69	0.80	High
I am able to recognize the beliefs of other people	3.65	0.79	Moderate
I am able to respect the attitudes of other people	3.76	0.78	High
I am able to respect the behaviours of other people	3.71	0.78	High
I am able to respect the beliefs of other people	3.72	0.82	High
I am able to contribute to the planning of group work	3.79	0.73	High
I am able to contribute to the coordination of group work	3.60	0.87	Moderate
I am responsible for a group's decision	3.70	0.84	High
I am able to understand well the effects of economic factors on professional practices	3.53	0.81	Moderate
I am able to understand well the effects of environmental factors on professional practices	3.56	0.82	Moderate

I am able to understand well the effects of socio-cultural factors on professional practices	3.57	0.79	Moderate
I am able to analyse ethics related issues	3.59	0.80	Moderate
I am able to make decisions in solving ethics related issues	3.53	0.81	Moderate
I am able to practise ethical behaviour	3.58	0.82	Moderate
I am having a sense of responsibility towards society	3.74	0.82	High

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study advocated that the final year diploma business students regarded themselves good at teamwork, respecting other communities and able to work coherently with other group members. They were also high in ICT skill and able to practice active listening. Despite the fact that not all soft skills are valued fairly and equitably in the job market (Calanca et al., 2019), teamwork is undeniably one of the utmost prerequisites to perform well in any workplace. On the other hand, most of them admitted that they were weaker in terms of expressing themselves, communicating ideas, and problem solving. This could be traced back to the training provided in their tertiary years. Hence, the importance of soft skill integration in the curriculum which subsequently determining the quality of academic offered by the higher learning institutions cannot be overlooked (Tan et al., 2021). Providentially, it is also plausible to note that the diploma business students were having a sense of responsibility towards the society. Hopefully, the millennials will carry on to care for their community and society in the future. This attribute towards caring and sharing society is much needed now, especially in times of Covid-19 pandemic.

The study therefore provides better insights and more convincing data to the higher educational ministry, Malaysian Quality Assurance (MQA), the educational providers and policy makers towards the outcomes of the programs. It serves as a base or reference point in the event of program review, delivery methods, learning outcomes, grounded on the basis for sufficient and balanced emphasis on both technical knowledge as well as the required soft skills. Some innovation, upgrades and revamp could or should take place. Antonopoulou et al. (2021) also called for transformational leadership as the most appropriate for application in higher education in order to create an environment embedded in a collaborative culture, open to improvements communication and innovation. In view of the current pandemic, several researches have been conducted and some favorable discoveries were eminent in conducting e-internship or virtual internship (Agrati & Vinci, 2020; Hui-Jie, 2020). Ironically, the future graduates should be encouraged, either through internship or projects, to go out and get exposed to the real-world practices. All these should be fully incorporated and embedded during the course delivery. At the same time, the growth in digital business and e-commerce has created also another opportunity which happens to be the strengths of youths nowadays. According to Daniel (2020), it is the time that schools, colleges and universities to take advantage of asynchronous learning that suits best in digital format.

However, the study is not without limitation. Firstly, the generalizability of the results might be restricted. The survey was conducted in the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia, hence there is contextual limitation in this case. Secondly, there could be respondent bias in the survey which involved only the students. Therefore, future studies are recommended to include either the educators, employers or both so that more comprehensive ratings can be achieved. The study could extend to degree students also in future, either in a form of cross sectional or longitudinal research method.

As a conclusion, the four soft skills entailed, communication, critical thinking and problem solving, teamwork, ethics and professional moral are vital for each and every individual to face with future workplace challenges, what's more during trying period of COVID-19. Through directed honing, programmed and embedded training, dedication and participation, we shall aim to producing more resilient and productive graduates in years to come.

REFERENCES

- Abdullah, A., Keat, S., Ismail, A., Abdullah, M., & Purba, M. (2012). Mismatch between higher education and employment in Malaysian electronic industry: An analysis of the acquired and required competencies. *International Journal of Engineering Education*, 28(5), 1232-1242.
- Agrati, L. S., & Vinci, V. (2020, September). Virtual internship as mediatized experience. The educator's training during COVID19 emergency. In *International Workshop on Higher Education Learning Methodologies and Technologies Online* (pp. 170-183). Springer, Cham.

- Ahmad, S., Ishak, N. M., Ismail, K., & Selamat, J. (2010). Generic competency profile among students in institute of higher learning: A case of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Malaysia. *College Student Journal*, 44(3), 811-820.
- Ahmed, F., Capretz, L. F., Bouktif, S., & Campbell, P. (2013). Soft skills and software development: A reflection from the software industry. *Journal of Information Processing and Management (IJIPM)*, 4(3), 171.
- Albin, M., & Crockett, J. (1991). Integrating necessary skills and concepts into the accounting curriculum. *Journal of Education for Business*, 66(6), 325.
- Antonopoulou, H., Halkiopoulos, C., Barlou, O., & Beligiannis, G. N. (2021). Transformational leadership and digital skills in higher education institutes: during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Emerging Science Journal*, 5(1), 1-15.
- Azina, N., & Ismail, N. A. (2011). Graduate characteristics and unemployment: A study among Malaysian graduate. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 2(16).
- Back, A., Tulsy, J. A., & Arnold, R. M. (2020). Communication skills in the age of COVID-19. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 172(11), 759-760.
- Balcar, J. (2012). The 'Soft Five' in Romania. *The Romanian Economic Journal*, 15(43), 21-41.
- Blom, A., & Saeki, H. (2011). Employability and skill set of newly graduated engineers in India. *Policy Research Working Paper*5640.
- Calanca, F., Sayfullina, L., Minkus, L., Wagner, C., & Malmi, E. (2019). Responsible team players wanted: An analysis of soft skill requirements in job advertisements. *EPJ Data Science*, 8(1), 1-20.
- Charney, S. A., Camarata, S. M., & Chern, A. (2021). Potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communication and language skills in children. *Otolaryngology–Head and Neck Surgery*, 165(1), 1-2.
- Daniel, J. (2020). Education and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Prospects*, 49(1), 91-96.
- Devadason, E. S., Subramaniam, T., & Daniel, E. G. S. (2010). Final year undergraduates' perceptions of the integration of soft skills in the formal curriculum: A survey of Malaysian public universities. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 11(3), 321-348.
- Elhadi, M., Elhadi, A., Bouhuwaish, A., Alshiteewi, F. B., Elmabrouk, A., Alsuyihili, A., ... & Abdulmalik, A. (2021). Telemedicine awareness, knowledge, attitude, and skills of health care workers in a low-resource country during the COVID-19 pandemic: cross-sectional study. *Journal of medical Internet Research*, 23(2), e20812.
- Fresh graduate unemployment in Malaysia. (2015). Retrieved from <https://eduadvisor.my/articles/what-didnt-know-fresh-graduate-unemployment-malaysia-infographic/>
- Gabrielian, V., & Callahan, K. (1996). Flexible performance strategies: Responding to change. *Public Productivity & Management Review*, 20(2), 117-120.
- Green, A. (2021). *The COVID-19 crisis and implications for skills development and the skills system*. In *Productivity and the Pandemic*. UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Groh, M., McKenzie, D., & Vishwanath, T. (2014). Reducing information asymmetries in the youth labor market of Jordan with psychometrics and skill based tests. *World Bank Economic Review Papers & Proceedings*.
- Hairi, F., Toee, A., Nazuir, M., & Razzaly, W. (2011). Employers' perception on soft skills of graduates: A study of Intel elite soft skill training. *International Conference on Teaching & Learning in Higher Education (ICTLHE 2011)*.
- Hatta, Z. A., & Ali, I. (2013). Poverty reduction policies in Malaysia: Trends, strategies and challenges. *Asian Culture and History*, 5(2), 48.
- Heckman, J. J., Humphries, J. E., Mader, N., & Head, W. A. W. (2010). Hard evidence on soft skills: The GED and the problem of soft skills in America. *Santiago, Chile*.
- Hui-Jie, Y. A. N. G. (2020). Research on Internship Reform and Innovation of E-commerce Major. *DEStech Transactions on Social Science, Education and Human Science*, (icesd).
- Joseph, D., Ang, S., Chang, R. H., & Slaughter, S. A. (2010). Practical intelligence in IT: Assessing soft skills of IT professionals. *Communications of the ACM*, 53(2), 149-154.
- Karthikeyan, K. (2013). Soft skill is the key to success. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development*, 2(11).
- Key statistics of labour force in Malaysia. (2021). Department of Statistics Malaysia. https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemByCat&cat=124&bul_id=UXQ2VUpIOVRvT3p6T0NHMHk1TGkxUT09&menu_id=Tm8zcnRjdVRNWWlpWjRlbtlaDk1UT09
- Kim, J., Erdem, M., Byun, J., & Jeong, H. (2011). Training soft skills via e-learning: International chain hotels. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 23(6), 739-763.
- Korkmaz, S., Kazgan, A., Çekiç, S., Tartar, A. S., Balci, H. N., & Atmaca, M. (2020). The anxiety levels, quality of sleep and life and problem-solving skills in healthcare workers employed in COVID-19 services. *Journal of Clinical Neuroscience*, 80, 131-136.
- Mai, R. C. (2012). Developing soft skills in Malaysian polytechnic students: Perspectives of employers and students. *Asian Journal of Management Sciences and Education*, 44-51.
- Marcial, D. (2012). Investigating soft skills among information technology managers in higher education institutions in the Philippines. *Proceedings of the ICERI 2012*.

- May, E., & Strong, D. S. (2011). Is engineering education delivering what industry requires. Proceedings of the Canadian Engineering Education Association.
- Malaysia: Youth unemployment rate from 1999 to 2019. (2021). Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/812222/youth-unemployment-rate-in-malaysia/>
- Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2006). Development of soft skills for institutions of higher learning. Selangor, Malaysia: Universiti Putra Malaysia Press.
- Mok, K. H., Xiong, W., & Ye, H. (2021). COVID-19 crisis and challenges for graduate employment in Taiwan, Mainland China and East Asia: A critical review of skills preparing students for uncertain futures. *Journal of Education and Work*, 34(3), 247-261.
- Nikitina, L., & Furuoka, F. (2012). Sharp focus on soft skills: A case study of Malaysian university students' educational expectations. *Educational Research for Policy & Practice*, 11(3), 207-224.
- Nunally, J. C., & Bernstein, I. H. (1978). *Psychometric theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Omar, N.K., Manaf, A.A., Mohd, R.H., Kassim A.C., & Aziz, K.A. (2012). Graduates' employability skills based on current job demand through electronic advertisement. *Canadian Center of Science and Education*, 8(9), 103-110.
- Pedrazzini, S. (2012). Emphasizing soft skill learning and training as part of an engineering curriculum revision. SEFI 40th Annual Conference.
- Pramudyo, A. (2010). Analisis faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi kinerja dosen negeri pada kopertis wilayah V Yogyakarta. *JurnalBisnis: Teori dan Implementasi*, 1(1).
- Profil institusi pendidikan tinggi swasta (IPTS) Malaysia 2014 (2015). Putrajaya, Malaysia: Jabatan Pendidikan Tinggi, Kementerian Pendidikan Tinggi.
- Rahmat, M., Ahmad, K., Idris, S., & Zainal, N. F. A. (2012). Relationship between employability and graduates' skill. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 59, 591-597.
- Robles, M. M. (2012). Executive perceptions of the top 10 soft skills needed in today's workplace. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 75(4), 453-465.
- Sabri, A. (2014). Soft skill: Its urgency and development at Islamic higher education. *AL-Ta lim*, 21(3).
- Salleh, K.M., Sulaiman, N.L., & Talib, K.N. (2010, November). Globalization's impact on soft skills demand in the Malaysian workforce and organizations: What makes graduates employable? Paper presented at the Proceeding of the 1st UPI International Conference on Technical and Vocational Education and Training. Retrieved from http://fptk.upi.edu/tevt-conference/download/TVET_Conference_Proceedings/Papers_Theme2/06_kahiroh_mohd_salleh.pdf
- Shukla, A., & Kumar, G. (2017). Essential soft skills for employability—A longitudinal study. *Advances in Economics and Business Management*, 4(6), 362-367.
- Singh, G. K. G., & Singh, S. K. G. (2008). Malaysian graduates' employability skills. *UNITAR e-Journal*, 4(1), 15-45.
- Stevenson, D. H., & Starkweather, J. A. (2010). PM critical competency index: IT execs prefer soft skills. *International Journal of Project Management*, 28(7), 663-671.
- Tan, C. Y., Abdullah, A. G. K., & Ali, A. J. (2021). Soft Skill Integration for Inspiring Critical Employability Skills in Private Higher Education. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 92, 23-39.
- Tomlinson, M. (2007). Graduate employability and student attitudes and orientations to the labour market. *Journal of Education and Work*, 20(4), 285-304.
- Voelkening, S. (2014). What is the soft-skill-set required by project managers and do Generation Y students in Ireland possess them? (Doctoral dissertation). Dublin Business School.
- Wahl, H., Kaufmann, C., Eckkrammer, F., Mense, A., Gollner, H., Himmler, C.,...& Slobodian, R. (2012). Soft skills in practice and in education: An evaluation. *American Journal of Business Education (AJBE)*, 5(2), 225-232.
- World Bank. (2015). Youth unemployment in Malaysia. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobaleconomy.com/>
- Yao, C. W., & Tulliao, M. D. (2019). Soft skill development for employability: A case study of stem graduate students at a Vietnamese transnational university. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 9(3), 250-263.
- Ying, Y. H., Siang, W. E. W., & Mohamad, M. (2021). The Challenges of Learning English Skills and the Integration of Social Media and Video Conferencing Tools to Help ESL Learners Coping with the Challenges during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Literature Review. *Creative Education*, 12(7), 1503-1516.
- Yoke, T. C., & Ngang, T. K. (2015). A study on soft skill development among final year Diploma in Business Studies students. *Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Management*, 3(2), 32-50.
- Zaharim, A., Ahmad, I., Yusoff, Y. M., Omar, M. Z., & Basri, H. (2012). Evaluating the soft skills performed by applicants of Malaysian engineers. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 60, 522-528.