Importance of Soft Skills for Industrial Training Program: Employers' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Industrial training is considered to be an effective tool to enhance graduates' employability. This paper attempts to highlight four key soft skills that have been identified by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), Malaysia in its move to enhance employability among students from three faculties. A questionnaire based on the basic employability skills was used to collect data. The study reveals a satisfactory level of students' performance during the training. Teamwork skill and critical thinking were ranked as needing the most improvement by students. In conclusion, the findings illustrate that the employers agreed that industrial training program is one of the vital contributors to the employability skills. As an implication, universities need to equip students not just with intellectual capabilities but also applied practical soft skills which make them more "work ready".

Keywords: Industrial training; employability, employability skills, employers' perception

INTRODUCTION

The most valuable asset for a country would be the people. The development of human capital and paradigm shift and the way people think have constituted the biggest set of challenges. This scenario resulted in the emergence of the dual role of Higher Education Institution (HEI). The first role is to produce graduates with specific areas of specialization and secondly, to develop graduate employability skills that are most demanding in the 21st Century (Lee & Tan, 2003). A report by Hrm ASIA (2012) mentioned that although 150,000 people graduated from Malaysia's universities each year, many of them fail to secure a job. Chiew (2013) supported this notion by pointing out that while Malaysia had very low unemployment rate of 3.3% (434,000 of its 13-million labor force) as of December 2012, the graduate unemployment was still high. The increasing number of graduates from Malaysia's universities needs to be aligned with the number of jobs created in order to reduce serious unemployment problem in the country.

Currently, employability is a rising problem among graduates worldwide. Several factors have been identified as factors towards unemployed graduates. Firstly, the graduates employability skills and abilities competency. Employers complain about the lack of various graduate's skills. According to Kathleen (2005), the employers in America are not satisfied with the job applicants especially from technical graduates. This problem occurred mainly because the applicants do not have enough non-technical skills. Accordingly, similar problem also exist in Malaysia. Rahmah, Ishak, and Wei Sieng (2011) mentioned that graduates are found to be lacking in employability skills, and have low performance in the work place. Furthermore, it has been acknowledged by the general consensus of Malaysian employers

that Malaysian graduates lack the 'soft skills' although are well trained in their areas of specialisation (Nurita, Shaharudin, Ainon, 2004). Furthermore, the National Graduate Employability Blueprint (2012-2017) also pointed out that GSA (Generic Student Attribute) is lacking among fresh graduates with communication skill contributed 55.8% of the problem. This situation accumulated to the extent that more than half of these graduates are still unemployed due to the lacking of employability skills (Husman, 2005).

The second factor contributes to the unemployment of graduates is the supply of graduates from HEIs exceeded the number of job vacancies in the workforce market. This situation created an imbalance in term of the workforce supply and demand. According to Salina, Nurazariah, Noraina Mazuin & Jagatheesan (2011), some graduate employees only managed to get jobs that were below their qualifications while others fail to find work at all. They further mentioned that as many as 30,000 graduates only managed to get casual or temporary work that was below their qualifications, mainly because of their lack of English. However, Aida, Norailis, and Rozaini the (2015) mentioned that the real issue in Malaysia is not whether graduates are better or worse in absolute terms than they were in its previous years. They stressed that the real issue is more towards the integration of new graduates as employees into an organization and their ability to contribute effectively. This is in line with the observation by Pillai (2009) which pointed out that most complaints from industry about graduates not being ready for the workplace is not just unique to Malaysia (as mentioned in Sirat, et al, 2008), but is in fact a global phenomenon (as mentioned in Teichler, 1999).

Practical training has been viewed as an imperative method of providing possible career choices for students. It provides the students with a first look at the realistic working environment and also is the place for them to obtain hands on knowledge and skills necessary in the industry of their choice. The industrial training program in Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor (KUIS) is carried out in duration of between 12 to 20 weeks. Education in KUIS has long been considered as a process of refining characters and skills for employment in the workplace. With the tremendous changing in the employment system, KUIS must take more responsibility in developing their students' personal qualities in terms of employability, and implement appropriate programs to meet the changing needs in industry.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Human capital theory assists us in understanding how investment in employee training and education would lead to higher internal mobility and reduce external mobility (Groot & Maasen, van de Brink, 2000). According to Swanson (2001), human capital is an investment in people, meanwhile van Loo and Rocco (2004, p.99) defined human capital as an investment in skills and knowledge. Higher education systems can increase human capital by improving the skills of its graduates (Knight & Yorke, 2003). In addition, van Loo and Rocco concluded by emphasizing that early human capital literature mentioned educational background as one of the most important determinants of human capital. Practically, KUIS is introducing soft skills programs as early as in semester one until the final semester. This is in line with the framework (see Figure 1) suggested by the Malaysian Institute of Higher Learning. All Institutes of Higher Learning (IHL) in Malaysia must adopt the proposed approach; however the implementation which is done at faculty level can varies with each faculty dependent on the type of courses offered. The following paragraph describes the development of soft skills in the context of KUIS.

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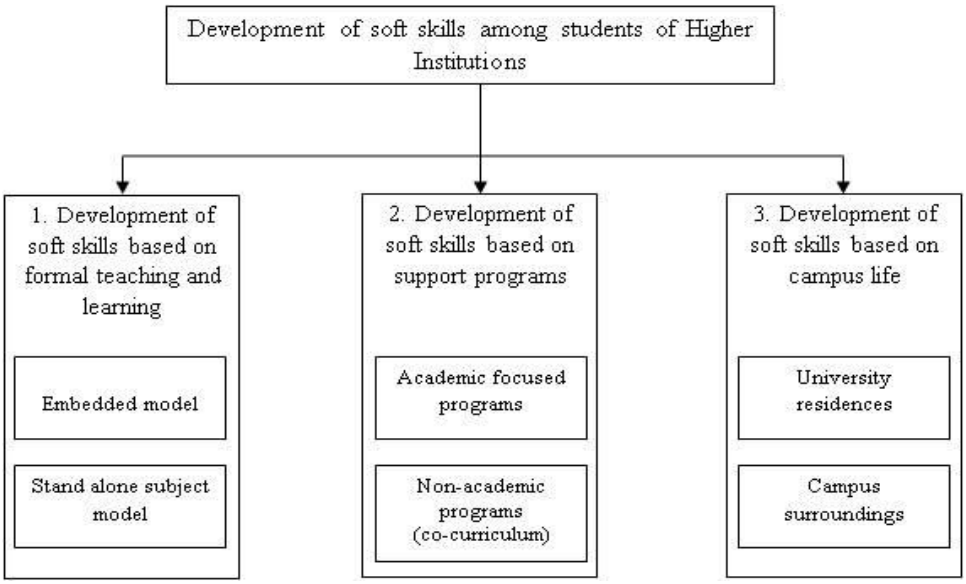

Figure 1. Model of implementation of soft skills in Institute of Higher Learning
Source: Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2006)

Development of soft skills in through stand-alone subject is done through stand-alone subjects offered at faculties. These stand-alone subjects will provide students with the opportunity to develop soft skills on a formal basis. These courses such as English language, entrepreneurship, and others were offered as stand-alone subjects and can be taken up by the students according to their curriculum structure. The majority of development of soft skills in KUIS is implemented by embedding it in existing courses. This is probably the most practical way in inculcating soft skills to students, as minimal or almost no changes need to be made to the current course structure. In this model, students develop soft skills throughout the full duration of their course, as some if not all of the skills are incorporated in the subjects taught. It is, however, the task of the faculty to identify which subjects can be embedded with the most and the least soft skill elements. As such, lecturers should be heavily involved in the implementation aspect, while students need to be told how it is embedded and in what aspect they will be assessed.

Soft skills could also be developed indirectly through on support programs such as co-curriculum activities. These non-academic activities can assist students to explore their interest while encouraging teamwork and commitment. In KUIS, a majority of students resides in the colleges' campus or mahallah. These students could participate in activities organized by the committee of these mahallah. Their participation will then increase their social interaction, teamwork and entrepreneurship capabilities. Finally, soft skills could also be developed with the introduction of industrial training program at the end of the final year of their studies. Apart from gaining practical experience and hands on application of the real world application of their technical skills, these students or trainees will realize the importance of possessing a certain level of soft skills as they will have a preview of what is expected out of them. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to evaluate the industrial trainees' employability skills from the employers' perspective in order to evaluate the implementation of these soft skills programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Skill is an ability to perform a specific task (DEST, 2006). While, soft skills refer to a cluster of personal qualities, habits, attitudes and social graces that make someone a good employee

and a compatible co-worker (Yunos, Mohd, Ahmad, Kaprawi, & Razzaly, 2006). The Ministry of Higher Education defines soft skills that complement academic achievement such as positive values, leadership qualities, team working, communication skills and life-long learning (MOHE, 2006). Soft skills are imperative for effective performance in a broad range of jobs and are transferable across workplaces. This means that soft skills benefit everyone in the organization (Che An Abdul Ghani et al., 2007). Soft skills are complemented by hard skills which are usually related to professional knowledge, tools, or techniques that allow us to work within profession. It is technical or administrative procedures related to an organization's core business. According to a study by Archer and Davison in 2008, 'soft skills' (such as communication skills and team-working) were perceived to have more weight than technical or 'hard skills' (such as a good degree qualification and IT skills). As such, Glass et al (2008) found that only a minority of employers in their case studies recruit individuals from universities specifically for the technical skills that they hope graduates will bring to the organization.

In identifying and developing the skills that are required by the competitive job market, it would be useful to start by defining employability. Employability skills are referred to as basic skills that are essential for getting, keeping, and doing well on a job (Robinson, 2000). Employability skills are also described as teachable skills (Lorraine & Sewell, 2007) that could be transferred (Yorke, 2006). Thus it can be observed that the definition of employability skills relates to the skills that are not job specific, but are skills which cut horizontally across all industries and vertically across all jobs from entry level to chief executive officer. This research adapt the employability definition by SCANS (1999) in which defines employability skills as transferable core skill groups that represent essential functional and enabling knowledge, skills, and attitudes required by the 21st century workplace. Furthermore, according to DEST (2006), the main propose of these employability skills is to be practised effectively in workplace.

Prior literatures have shown that employability skills generated much significant confusion. According to Rosenbaum (2002), students that do not learn basic employability skills before they are hired, may not have the opportunity to learn them on the job since employers may be reluctant to invest in the resources needed to provide remedial training for these skills. Misconception among academicians and the organisation on the objective behind the industrial training has been seen as a vital contributor towards this problem. Accordingly, Bok (2006) reported that college professors and administrators felt they were teaching students what they need to know, although only 35% of a sample of industry executives thought that colleges taught students what was important to succeed at work. In addition, Robst (2007) stated that college students believed that a college education provided them with all the skills necessary to obtain employment upon graduation. Accordingly, Jones (2009) identified four reasons as to why soft skills are still implicit in the teaching environment: a) The tension between content and skill with the priority being given to technical competence, b) The availability of practical difficulties such as large classes and time constraints, c) The availability of academic-wised resistance to practice the generic skills that are often perceived as not being an integral part to the discipline, and d) The students' resistance due to uncertainty and ambiguity. Eventually, an observation by Plastrik et al. (2003) pointed out that if nothing is done to improve educational performance, the gap between the skill needs of industry and the skills received by graduates will continue to grow.

In the labour market, employers look for graduates with communication skills, empathy, motivation, decision making abilities, planning abilities and improvisation abilities (Bagshaw, 1996). Zehrer & Mossenlechner (2009) also added that graduates are expected to

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be proactive and able to solve problems in a creative way. The skills required from students vary according to the program studied. However, Yorke and Knight (2006) proposed three main attributes for graduate employability which is personal qualities, core skills and process skills. Personal qualities consist of self-awareness, self-confidence, willingness to learn, emotional intelligence, independence and adaptability. Core skills include self-management, written and oral communication, and critical analysis. Process skills refer to problem solving, team working, computer literacy, integrity, work ethics, planning and prioritising and coping with uncertainty. However, many skills overlap with one another which are also known as context per se.

In developing these skills there is a part to be played by students, higher education, employers and policymakers. As one of key player in enhancing employability, the institutions of higher learning need to identify how they can enhance skills of their students. The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in Malaysia has aggressively embarked on a mission to take in students and enhance their soft skills development in order to produce high quality human capital, knowledgeable, competitive, has the creative and innovative features and move in line with industry requirements and social needs of the country. These soft skills such as human relations skills, communication skills, ethical behaviour skills and cognitive skills are the attributes that being considered by employers when reviewing job applicants (Hamid, 2009).

A survey undertaken in 2013 covering final year students who have successfully completed their Industrial Training program was taken to evaluate the employer perspective on the four elements of employment skills based on the generic student attributes (GSA) established by MOHE such as communication skills, teamwork skills, critical thinking and long life learning. Evaluation on the performance output generally categorized on the generic skills, give an indication on the feedback and perception on industrial training by the host organizations and students.

This study used a descriptive research design with quantitative approach. Its aim is to identify the employer perspective on employability skills of industrial training student. The questionnaire is distributed to all employers who have students from who undergo industrial training in their company in the year of 2013/2014. The questionnaire consists of two phases. The first section is the demographic of the employers followed by the second section that describes the adaptability of students to their working environment, work quality, time management, initiative, innovation and creativity, work dedication and responsibility, work ethics and appearance, communication, self-involvement and teamwork. As shown in Table 1, all the items in the questionnaire answered by the employers will be grouped according to four elements of generic student attributes (GSA) established by MOHE such as communication skills, teamwork skills, critical thinking and long life learning.

Table 1. Item in Generic Student Attributes (GSA) Elements

Communication Skills	Verbal & written communication
	Quality of self-involvement
Critical Thinking	Problem solving
	Self-learning
Long Life Learning	Punctuality
	Information management
Teamwork Skills	Idea contribution
	Work commitment

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

At the end of the survey, 115 employers responded to the questionnaires from a selection of 200 prospective employers. This gives a response rate 57.5%. The distribution of industry type is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of industry type

Industry Type	*Frequency*	*Percentage*
Legal	80	51.6%
Communication	11	7.1%
Banking	2	1.3%
Technology	40	25.8%
Publishing	5	3.2%
Government	13	8.4%
Management	4	2.6%

The analysis part begins with reliability analysis to check whether the selected items are reliable to the element in GSA being discussed. The Cronbach's alpha value of reliability for this instrument is 0.892 which reflects the high reliability of the instrument. The value of Cronbach's alpha of 0.70 or higher is considered as acceptable and the items studied in each element are correlated to another (Muijs, 2011). By examining Cronbach's alpha in Table 3, the Cronbach's alpha for items belong to communication skills, critical thinking, lifelong learning and teamwork skills element is 0.821, 0.789, 0.769 and 0.727 respectively. The value of Cronbach's alpha are considered high which suggested that the items have relatively high internal consistency. Therefore, the selected items are reliable to be used throughout this research. The overall mean score was 4.45 indicating that the trainees' performance was satisfactory. This implies that that in general the students performed well during the industrial training. Two skills, namely teamwork skill and critical thinking respectively, need to be polished among the trainees.

Table 3. Reliability Analysis

Element of GSA	*Cronbach Alpha*	*Mean*	*Standard Deviation*	*Rate of Performance*
Communication Skill	0.761	4.74	0.69	Excellent
Critical Thinking	0.745	4.22	0.94	Satisfactory
Long Life Learning	0.765	4.65	0.61	Excellent
Teamwork Skill	0.714	4.32	0.83	Satisfactory

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IMPROVEMENT FOR EMPLOYABILITY

Although the overall performance of students was satisfactory, improvements need to be done in term of both teamwork skill and critical thinking skill to help the students perform well when they enter the real working environment.

IMPROVEMENT OF INDUSTRIAL TRAINING

Employers were asked for their opinions about industrial training in order to evaluate whether industrial training should be continued. Most employers mentioned that the industrial training exposes the student to the real working environment with more practical issues rather than theory. These finding is in resonance with those of Ayarkwa, Adinyira, and Osei-Asibey (2012), who indicated the highest percentage benefit of industrial training lay in exposure to the work environment. Accordingly Ayarkwa et al. (2012) also noted that employers considered that industrial training benefitted students when applying theory to practice because students can better understand what they learn when they experience the job themselves.

CONCLUSION

The paper found that the company's perception on the employability skills of industrial training students is relatively positive and this is shown in the results and analysis of the questionnaires obtained from the employers. Industrial training does not only provide the students with a hands-on 'feel' of the actual background of expertise needed by graduates under each programs such as from management, business studies, human resource, information technology in all those related profession, but also contribute in developing GRA which eventually will increase students' job marketability. As a conclusion, industrial training is an important phase in students' academic life and play vital role in preparing those students with their knowledge and skills for their future career.

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