

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

ABSTRACT

Nowadays the skills that employers demand from the graduates are changing, with soft skills replacing technical ones (Grugulis & Vincent, 2009). 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

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 (Wilson, 2011). 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 (Harvey, et al, 2002). 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 (Redoli, Mompo, Mata, and Doctor, 2011). Soft skills as defined in scholarly literature are nontechnical skills, abilities, and traits required to function in a specific employment environment (Conrad & Leigh 1999). Moss and Tilly (1996) 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 (2009) defines soft skills as 'involving interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular contexts'. CEDEFOP (2006) 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 which meta-cognitive thinking occurs during the educational process (Seok-young, 2012). UNESCO (2001) 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 (Seok-young, 2012). 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 further explore 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, 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

Soft skills have strategic roles in determining someone success in his works (Wagiran, 2008). 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 (Barski, 2012). World Health Organization (2003) 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 (World Health Organization, 2003). Moreover, these individual skills are related to the construction of exploratory and tacit knowledge in the workplace and guide to second-order learning (i.e. learning by learning) that can help people and organizations they are affiliated to achieve novelty. 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 (Seok-young, 2012).

The characteristic that distinguishes vocational graduates from other graduates is the genuine workplace experience (MBAE, 2006). 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 (Schulz, 2008). 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 (Hisey 2002). Soft skills are important to a worker's ability to work smarter, not harder (Alpern 1997). 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 (Conrad & Leigh 1999). In the past, employers trained their employees in the practice of these essential soft skills. Now, employers believe employees are responsible for acquiring them (Hisey 2002). 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 (Schulz, 2008). 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 (Philpot, 2010). Personal attributes, attitudes to work and individual qualities are extremely difficult to evaluate and, in practice, proxies are used. As Lafer (2004) 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 (Barski, 2012). However, classroom is an ideal learning ground, where one can practice

87 alternative ways of dealing with people, and facilitating learning and transferring knowledge
88 in an interactive rather than prescriptive form (Hagmann and Almekinders, 2003). Because
89 of that integration between hard skills and soft skills in preparing employee with various
90 efforts should be done in formal education. However, many of education institutions
91 including vocational high school in the developing countries still did not realize that (Wagiran,
92 2008).

93 Philpot (2010) discussed different aspects of providing soft skills to the graduates in the
94 educational setting. He suggests-

95 'It is important that classrooms provide multiple opportunities for students to learn
96 and practice these "soft skills". Classroom teachers can promote these highly
97 sought skills by requiring professional behaviors in the classroom/lab/workshop,
98 modeling appropriate interpersonal skills with students and peers, designing
99 lessons that incorporate teamwork and problem-solving activities, and using case
100 studies to examine the impact of ethical behaviors and positive/negative attitudes.
101 Provide opportunities for students to complete an inventory of their skills and
102 attitudes early in the semester and repeat the measure at the end of the course.
103 Invite professionals to share with students what they expect of their employees
104 and how to improve their competitive advantage when applying for jobs. Talk
105 about and be a shining example of life-long learning and discuss why it is
106 important to embrace continuous learning for lifetime success. Demonstrate
107 effective classroom leadership skills, communicate professionally with students
108 and parents, provide timely feedback, always bring a positive attitude to
109 classroom, and treat all students with respect and dignity. Reward students when
110 they are successful and provide opportunities for them to improve in areas that
111 need work. Keep commitments and encourage students to practice time
112 management skills outside the classroom. Prepare students for the world of work
113 by teaching important soft skills through role modeling and practice.'

114 One thing to identify a list of traits, such as punctuality and loyalty, and so on, that might be
115 sought by employers, but it is another to deliver these attitudes and dispositions, and we
116 know little about the transfer of work-related skills across contexts and not a great deal on
117 mentoring and modeling of work-specific attributes (Taylor, 2005). To achieve the desired
118 standard institutions need to adapt to current student needs and identify new learning
119 models (Horizon Report, 2009). There must be a review and redevelop the curriculum and
120 change delivery methodology to support the development of these skills and attributes' and
121 to look at ways of measuring and recording attainment.

122 However, Educational institutions seem to find great difficulty in adapting to these different
123 forms of learning and assess them adequately. The Horizon Report (2009) goes on to state
124 that:

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

132 On the other hand, Caruana (2011) argues that academics contend that the nature of
133 Education in itself leads to the development a series of skills that may not be explicitly listed
134 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 (Caruana, 2011).

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 (Kapp, 2007). 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 (JISC, 2007).

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 (Schulz, 2008).

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 (DfEE, 2000). Employers commented that graduates who entered the job market today are lacking in these soft skills (Woo, 2006). Nowadays employers look for these skills and attributes when recruiting as a way of predicting success in the workplace (Philpot, 2010). In recent years there has been a dramatic shift in the skills required by the employers by privileging soft skills over the technical skills (Hillage et al., 2002); The shift, as Payne (2000) 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 (DfEE, 2000; Hillage et al., 2002).

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 (Constable and Touloumakos, 2009). 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. (Schultz, 2008). As noted by Khair (2006), that lack of competencies lead to a new issue for the graduates becoming unemployed. The failure to fulfill this requirement has been

183 identified as one of the causes of the skills gap amongst graduates, and the problem needs
184 to be addressed seriously (Bradshaw, 1989; Keep & Mayhew, 1999; Nathan & Taylor, 2003).
185 There is some indication that qualifications are only part of the answer, and that soft skills
186 are also an important feature of employability for jobs at both the top and bottom level of the
187 labor market (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Lafer, 2004). Certainly soft skills, such as
188 friendliness and team working ability, and traits such as emotional intelligence have been
189 highlighted as the skills that are of greatest importance in the current labor market (Lafer,
190 2004). Attitude has become a proxy for the soft skills required of emotional labor (Callaghan
191 and Thompson, 2002). Having the right attitude is regarded as a prerequisite of employees
192 appropriately managing their own as well as customers' feelings in order to affect the desired
193 service encounter. To this end, feeling rules prescribe employees being responsive,
194 courteous and understanding with customers for example (Korczynski, 2002). For this
195 reason, attitude has come to be conceived as constituent of the soft skills necessary within
196 interactive service work.

197 Due to the emerging demand from the employers, there has been a growing awareness
198 amongst academics on the need to develop students' knowledge and skills to ensure their
199 employability (Harvey, et al, 2002). When searching for prospective workforce, most
200 employers tend to search for graduates who, in addition to possessing required skills and
201 content knowledge to function at the work place, possess the right attitude, proactive and are
202 willing to learn (Karim, et al, 2012) and more importantly, perhaps, is that the graduates
203 ought to be communicatively proficient, have analytical turn of mind, able to solve problems,
204 competent working with others and flexible (Kruss 2004; Knight and Yorke 2003; Yorke and
205 Harvey 2005).

206 Research carried out by Smith and Comyn (2004) drew a particular attention to the fresh and
207 young workers. They argues that the youth had difficulty adjusting to the work environment;
208 an unwillingness to take a job seriously; and a reluctance to ask if they were uncertain, and
209 employers reported that youth seemed to have a lack of understanding of the impressions
210 they created (Smith & Comyn, 2004). An example from the Malaysia, an imminent rising
211 country in the vocational sector, shows that industrial experience and soft skill acquired by
212 academic staffs have been the biggest challenge faced by polytechnics, especially in the
213 ever-changing needs of the industry, technological advancement and economic growth of
214 the country (Yee and Lim, 2011). It is apparent that the present job market not only demand
215 the technically skilled workforce but also they expect graduates acquainted with proper soft
216 skills.

217 **5. MISMATCH BETWEEN SKILL SUPPLY AND SKILL DEMAND**

218 The focus of vocational education and training, in general instance, is that the acquisition of
219 hard skills by the youth was explicitly focused. The identification and acquisition of those
220 attributes and dispositions regarded as soft skills, discussed above, was presumably
221 incidental and their acquisition was assumed to occur largely by osmosis (Taylor, 2005).
222 Although academic skills clearly were deemed critical, participants need to focus more on
223 the significance of attitude and motivation. Specifically, work ethic was described as a skill
224 that graduates employees tends to lack, but need to be successful. In general, work ethic
225 was described as an understanding of general workplace policies and practices and an
226 ability to focus on workplace tasks during the day (MBAE, 2006). Wagiran (2008) shows that
227 gaps competencies still exist between what are vocational high schools already given and
228 real needs in industrial sector. The weaknesses and lacking of vocational graduates as new
229 employee in industry was mostly caused by soft skills aspects rather than hard skills
230 aspects.

231 In Australia research shows that the fit between qualifications and occupations is quite loose,
232 except for some regulated trades such as electricians and professions such as physicians
233 (Karmel, Mlotkowski and Awodeyi 2008). There have been numerous studies in Australia
234 and other countries which find that some graduates are in jobs that don't need their level of
235 education (education under use), some are in jobs which normally require a higher level or
236 longer education (under education), some workers are in jobs which don't need their
237 particular qualification (qualification under use), some are in jobs for which they are not
238 qualified (under qualification), some workers are in jobs that don't use all their skills (skills
239 under use) and some workers are in jobs for which they are not fully skilled (under skills)
240 (CEDEFOP 2010; Galasi 2008; Linsley 2005; Mavromaras et al. 2010; Messinist and
241 Olekalns 2007; Miller 2007; O'Connell 2010; Richardson et al., 2006; Ryan and Sinning
242 2011).

243 The soft skills development in Korean formal education becomes a key issue, since it plays a
244 role in connecting education and work. The issue relates to the mismatch between skill
245 supply from school and skill demand of workplace. The rapid expansion of higher education
246 resulted in high expectations of young graduates to obtain decent jobs and thus has led to a
247 lack of skill supply particularly in SMEs (small and medium enterprises) and micro-
248 businesses (Ministry of Employment and Labour, 2010; Seok-young, 2012).

249 The issue that has received wide coverage in the Malaysian context is the marketability or
250 employability of graduates and many other countries have also acknowledged that higher
251 education has not met the expectations of employers (Leckey and McGuigan 1997; Bennett
252 et al. 1999; Kember et al. 2006). Studies conducted in Malaysia on the low employability
253 rates highlighted several contributing factors (Mohammad et al. 2007; Gurvinder and Sharan
254 2008; Wan Irham et al. 2006) including lack of soft skills as well as changes in employers
255 requirement (Nurita et al. 2010). Wagiran (2008) further says that the competences gap
256 between vocational education and industry sector was that vocational high school graduation
257 is weak in soft skill which could put their employability on stake.

258 **6. SOFT SKILLS IN THE CUSTOMER SERVICE**

259 Research suggests that the development of any skill is best facilitated by giving students
260 practice and not by simply talking about or demonstrating what to do (Woods, 1993;
261 Bandura, 1982). As part of this process of embodiment, employees are now expected to
262 demonstrate not only soft skills with regard to their attitude but also their appearance to
263 customers (Nickson et al., 2001). Today's employers are more concerned with the soft skills
264 of applicants, particularly having the right attitude and appearance, than qualifications and
265 technical skills (Nickson, et al, 2011). As such employers are concerned with managing and
266 monitoring employees' body language, dress and speech for example (Nickson et al., 2001).
267 Indeed, Leslie (2002) suggests that style retail is distinct from other forms of retail
268 employment in its strict enforcement of image and presentation rules suggesting that
269 workers have to conform to specific bodily criteria. Recent research by Walls (2008) reveals
270 that this process of styling is imperative for men working in the industry especially in the front
271 desk service.

272 When there has been an appreciation of the broad range of soft skills required by employers
273 there has been some success in developing appropriate training. For example, Nickson et al.
274 (2003), reporting on a short-lived training programme for the long-term unemployed who
275 were seeking work in the retail and hospitality industries, that after the training participants
276 have a better understanding of the performance-related nature of front-line service work and
277 a clear appreciation of the importance of both looking good and sounding right in front-line
278 service work. Thus any account of what potentially comprises employability has to include

279 not just qualifications and technical skills but also the soft skills deemed component of both
280 emotional and aesthetic labor.

281 **7. SOFT SKILLS AND LIFELONG LEARNING**

282 Soft skills are the principle of lifelong learning in nature, because they are related to core
283 competences to deal effectively with the demands and challenges encountered in daily
284 human life (Wheelahan and Moodie 2011). The OECD (2001) research concludes that soft
285 skills should be considered supplementary to established educational requirements.
286 Buchanan and colleagues (2001) note that cognitive, technical and behavioral skills are
287 embedded in the employment relationship as well as broader social structures. Thus, skills
288 are not merely developed by students in an education system to be subsequently put to
289 work, but are mutually comprised by people, their education and their work.

290 In the knowledge-based society of the twenty-first century, the term lifelong vocational
291 education has become an important issue emphasizing lifelong learning and vocational skills
292 development as the major strategies for national competitiveness. Even though the term of
293 lifelong vocational education is the combination of contradicting perspectives as vocational
294 education stresses increasing the productiveness of labor while lifelong education
295 emphasizes the improvement of human life quality and equity. These two different
296 viewpoints have converged to harmonize each other in order to improve work quality itself,
297 workers' values on job, and promote sustainable development and quality of life (Seok-
298 young, 2012). Similarly, evidence is suggesting that this is where the development of not just
299 hard skills to meet the employers' standard, but also where the acquisition or honing of soft
300 employability skills might best be undertaken (Smith & Comyn, 2004, p. 103). Such skills, it
301 is widely acknowledged (Smith & Comyn, 2004; Virgona & Waterhouse, 2004), are learnt
302 throughout life and best judged in context.

303 **8. CONCLUSION**

304 As mentioned above, soft skills are deemed very important by the contemporary employers
305 to recruit the graduates yet in most of the cases they did not get them up to the standard.
306 This is because of the skills gaps between the demand of the employers and supply of the
307 academic institutions. However, Education and training systems can supply the soft skills but
308 they must be effectively deployed in the curriculum. After effectively deployed the soft skills
309 in the curriculum, most of the cases it seems very difficult to teach and assess those soft
310 skills. But it is the technology that can makes it possible to teach and evaluate the soft skills
311 of the students to some extent. In order to fill the skills gaps, educational institutions must
312 develop their specific strengths considering the characteristics of the local market and
313 specialize their role to meet the local industry's needs. Moreover, soft skill-based curriculums
314 which are promoting generic, transferable and core competence should be developed. Soft
315 skills development is not easy to achieve in the short time but it could serve as the main
316 solution to cultivate students who possess employability skills. This is the demand of this
317 time that education and training systems have to focus on producing employees who are
318 self-directed and can engage in flexible learning to carry modern workplaces and can shape
319 their lives as a lifelong learner.

320 From the discussion it is very clear that today's graduates have a tendency to not succeed
321 because they rarely display or communicate their employability skills, only show their factual
322 qualifications. It is very apparent that education institutions should present a well-formed
323 learning experience with enhancing graduate employability as a core constituent where soft
324 skills are embedded in the curriculum process. These soft skills make possible to assist
325 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 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 (Malhi, 2010). The employability and soft skills concept should be viewed positively as “supporting good learning, enhancing students’ chances of obtaining appropriate employment, and helping students to develop proficiencies that will be useful in life generally” (Yorke, 2003).

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