

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

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ABSTRACT

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

Keywords: Soft skills, Employability, Skills gap, Lifelong learner

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.

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To develop knowledge and skill for graduates, it would require assessable knowledge and continual disciplines. It is also necessary to generate tacit knowledge through sharing processes where meta-cognitive thinking occurs (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 be further explored in the workplace and the graduates will be an active part of the lifelong education throughout their life. This paper will investigate the different perspective of soft skills in terms of competency gap, employers demand and it will also delve into teaching and evaluation to the graduate and how it will affect the life of a graduate in the workplace as well as in the society.

2. IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS FOR THE VOCATIONAL GRADUATE

Nowadays the skills that employers demand from the graduates are changing, with soft skills replacing technical ones (Grugulis & Vincent, 2009). 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 empirical and tacit knowledge in the workplace and guide people to second-order learning (i.e. learning by learning). Due to these characteristics, the soft skills are regarded as generic, transferable, core, or key skills, that can be applied across varied organizational and employment contexts. They are also key capabilities that help to improve competitiveness at the individual, social and national level (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.

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3. SOFT SKILLS TO TEACH AND ASSESS

89 Soft skills seem to be difficult to teach and even harder to assess in the classroom (Philpot,
90 2010). Personal attributes, attitudes to work and individual qualities are extremely difficult to
91 evaluate and, in practice, proxies are used. As Lafer (2004) argues: - 'traits such as
92 discipline, loyalty and punctuality are not skills that one either possesses or lacks; they are
93 measures of commitment that one chooses to give or withhold based on the conditions of
94 work offered.' As the soft skills are hard to measure and quantify; many soft skills are not
95 learned in a vocational setting and are developed through relationships long before formal
96 education. Regardless, they are an important part of any job, particularly a vocational job
97 (Barski, 2012). However, classroom is an ideal learning ground, where one can practice
98 alternative ways of dealing with people, and facilitating learning and transferring knowledge
99 in an interactive rather than prescriptive form (Hagmann and Almekinders, 2003). Because
100 of that integration between hard skills and soft skills in preparing employee with various
101 efforts should be done in formal education. However, many of education institutions
102 including vocational high school in the developing countries still did not realize that (Wagiran,
103 2008).

104 Philpot (2010) discussed different aspects of providing soft skills to the graduates in the
105 educational setting. He suggests that classroom teachers can promote the highly sought
106 skills by requiring professional behaviors in the classroom/lab/workshop, modeling
107 appropriate interpersonal skills with students and peers, designing lessons that incorporate
108 teamwork and problem-solving activities, and using case studies to examine the impact of
109 ethical behaviors and positive/negative attitudes. He further advised classroom teachers to
110 demonstrate effective classroom leadership skills, communicate professionally with students
111 and parents, provide timely feedback, always bring a positive attitude to classroom, and treat
112 all students with respect and dignity, reward students when they are successful and provide
113 opportunities for them to improve in areas that need work (Philpot, 2010). To identify a list of
114 traits sought by employers, such as punctuality and loyalty, and so on is one important thing.
115 But to deliver these attitudes and dispositions is a vital question as we know little about the
116 transfer of work-related skills across contexts (Taylor, 2005). To achieve these desired
117 standard institutions need to adapt to current student needs and identify new learning
118 models (Horizon Report, 2009). There must be a review and redevelopment of the
119 curriculum and change delivery methodology to support the development of these skills and
120 attributes' and to look at ways of measuring and recording attainment.

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

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

131 On the other hand, Caruana (2011) argues that academics contend that the nature of
132 Education in itself leads to the development a series of skills that may not be explicitly listed
133 in the curriculum yet result acquired by the students through the participation within the
134 different activities making up an academic course. He further continues that the nature of the

135 academic environment itself leads towards the development of self-reflection and evaluation,
136 synthesis and analysis of knowledge. The structure of courses is such that students are
137 often required to work in groups or teams whereby apart from the achievement of the
138 academic tasks, students are also developing team-building skills, scheduling and work
139 distribution amongst the team members (Caruana, 2011).

140 Moreover, Technology has an enormous opportunity to demonstrate the preferred skills and
141 to allow the student to perform those skills in the classroom setting. Technology could create
142 scenarios or role plays that are similar to the context in which the learner is applying the skill
143 (Kapp, 2007). To present soft skills in a learning environment it is required first to provide a
144 model of the desired skill. In support of several soft skills, a short video is an outstanding
145 method to instruct. Videos are great at presenting body language, facial expressions and for
146 transmitting emotions. Lastly, there should be an opportunity for the student to apply those
147 skills with feedback. ICT based assessments are able to generate rapid reliable data about
148 the progress being done by learners. Moreover, areas where the learners are having
149 difficulties are identified quicker and it would therefore be relatively simpler to take remedial
150 action (JISC, 2007).

151 Hopefully, at most education institutions teaching methodology has been changed or will be
152 changed towards more student centered learning. Such a shift goes together with
153 embedding soft skills into the teaching of hard skills. Put differently, students involving in a
154 lecture with the aim of learning a hard skill will certainly and automatically practice a range of
155 soft skills. A primary step in developing soft skills of students is to raise their awareness
156 about the significance of soft skills and the consequences of shortcomings in this regard. A
157 formal approach to the problem would be to incorporate soft skills subjects into a program's
158 curriculum. However, a very elegant way of offering soft skills training to students is to
159 embed it into the teaching of hard skills. This way, no changes to a program's curriculum are
160 necessary; instead the change will be reflected in the lecturers' teaching methodology.
161 Correctly applied, such an approach to teaching will automatically increase the
162 attractiveness and effectiveness of a course regarding both, hard skills and soft skills
163 (Schulz, 2008).

164 **4. SOFT SKILLS AND EMPLOYABILITY**

165 Skill has always been an indefinable concept. Accounts of skill now include communication,
166 problem solving, team working, an ability to improve personal learning and performance,
167 motivation, judgment, leadership and initiative (DfEE, 2000). Employers commented that
168 graduates who entered the job market today are lacking in these soft skills (Woo, 2006).
169 Nowadays employers look for these skills and attributes when recruiting as a way of
170 predicting success in the workplace (Philpot, 2010). In recent years there has been a
171 dramatic shift in the skills required by the employers by privileging soft skills over the
172 technical skills (Hillage et al., 2002); The shift, as Payne (2000) notes, is from technical skill
173 to personal attributes and it is these soft skills that are now, at least rhetorically, most in
174 demand by employers (DfEE, 2000; Hillage et al., 2002).

175 It has been argued by employers that graduates are not equipped with the right set of soft
176 skills that would enable them to integrate themselves and contribute effectively at the
177 workplace (Constable and Touloumakos, 2009). Employers tend to see most new graduates
178 as somewhat self-centered, unable to integrate within an existing team and expecting to be
179 placed in a senior position without demonstrating the right qualities for leadership etc.
180 (Schultz, 2008). As noted by Khair (2006), that lack of competencies lead to a new issue for
181 the graduates becoming unemployed. The failure to fulfill this requirement has been
182 identified as one of the causes of the skills gap amongst graduates, and the problem needs
183 to be addressed seriously (Bradshaw, 1989; Keep & Mayhew, 1999; Nathan & Taylor, 2003).

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

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

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

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

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

229 In Australia research shows that the fit between qualifications and occupations is quite loose,
230 except for some regulated **occupations** such as **electricians** and **professionals** such as
231 physicians (Karmel, Mlotkowski and Awodeyi 2008). There have been numerous studies in

232 Australia and other countries which find that some graduates are in jobs that don't need their
233 level of education (education under use), some are in jobs which normally require a higher
234 level or longer education (under education), some workers are in jobs which don't need their
235 particular qualification (qualification under use), some are in jobs for which they are not
236 qualified (under qualification), some workers are in jobs that don't use all their skills (skills
237 under use) and some workers are in jobs for which they are not fully skilled (under skills)
238 (CEDEFOP 2010; Galasi 2008; Linsley 2005; Mavromaras et al. 2010; Messinist and
239 Olekalns 2007; Miller 2007; O'Connell 2010; Richardson et al., 2006; Ryan and Sinning
240 2011).

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

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

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

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

270 When there has been an appreciation of the broad range of soft skills required by employers
271 there has been some success in developing appropriate training. For example, Nickson et al.
272 (2003), reporting on a short-lived training programme for the long-term unemployed who
273 were seeking work in the retail and hospitality industries, that after the training participants
274 have a better understanding of the performance-related nature of front-line service work and
275 a clear appreciation of the importance of both looking good and sounding right in front-line
276 service work. Thus any account of what potentially comprises employability has to include
277 not just qualifications and technical skills but also the soft skills deemed component of both
278 emotional and aesthetic labor.

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280 7. SOFT SKILLS AND LIFELONG LEARNING

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

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

302 8. CONCLUSION

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

319 From the discussion it is very clear that today's graduates have a tendency to not succeed
320 because they rarely display or communicate their employability skills, only show their factual
321 qualifications. It is very apparent that education institutions should present a well-formed
322 learning experience with enhancing graduate employability as a core constituent where soft
323 skills are embedded in the curriculum process. These soft skills make possible to assist
324 healthy mindset for young workers to conduct social justices to the society. At the vocational
325 educational level, it is necessary to transform the educational institutes as lifelong education
326 center in order to facilitate this soft skill formation among the graduates. In embedding the
327 soft skills into the curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment processes, steps

328 must be taken to ensure that there is a constructive alignment between them. The desired
329 soft skills should be made explicit through the learning outcomes of modules.

330 In order to facilitate the soft skills to the graduate Malhi (2010) recommended that
331 educational institute should adopt a holistic and integrated approach towards enhancing
332 graduate employability, stand-alone soft skills modules, student involvement in work-related
333 projects and extra-curricular activities, work placements, and guidance on job-getting skills
334 through career services focusing to minimize the skills gap. Another important thing is to
335 introduce learner-centered pedagogy in the classroom. Learner-centered pedagogy in early
336 stages of education seems to be more helpful to soft skills development. It is recommended
337 that the authorities should seek to have more of the soft skills elements of this learner-
338 centered approach. They should incorporate the soft skills elements into curriculum to
339 prepare them for the future world of work. Besides, higher education should be aligned with
340 employer needs by developing skills needed in the workplace.

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