Public University Educators' Understanding and Conception of Soft Skills for Educators

Ruzlan Md-Ali[1]*, Fuziah Shaffie[2], Fahainis Mohd Yusof[3]

[1]School of Education and Modern Languages, College of Arts and Sciences, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 UUM Sintok Kedah, Malaysia, [2]School of Applied Psychology, Social Work and Policy, College of Arts and Sciences, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 UUM Sintok Kedah, Malaysia, [3]School of Education and Modern Languages, College of Arts and Sciences, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 UUM Sintok Kedah, Malaysia. *Email: ruzlan@uum.edu.my

ABSTRACT

There is still no formally agreed upon, universal set of soft skills. The lack of soft skills competence among graduates from public universities (PUs) is an issue and a reason for unsuccessful job applications. Students in PUs need to be guided to acquire the relevant soft skills and need to have role models to be professionally and socially competent. They can actually learn much from their lecturers or educators as role models. In a recent exploratory study, educators selected from PUs were individually interviewed to capture their understanding and conception of soft skills as part of their professional contribution to support the effort to foster and ensure the acquisition of soft skills among university students in Malaysia. This paper provides a glimpse into three PU educators' understanding and conception of soft skills within their current professional. Their thoughts on soft skills and their propositions of other possible skills that could be included as soft skills, and soft skills that PU educators ought to possess, could provide early ideas and initiatives towards the construction of a "soft skills framework" for PU educators, which could serve as guideline for educators to develop, facilitate, and enhance soft skills among graduate students.

Keywords: Soft Skills, Public University Educators, Graduate Students
JEL Classification: I29

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education is considered as a stepping stone to a good job and students enroll in universities to improve their employment opportunities (Lowden et al. 2011). Graduates from public universities (PUs) must be competent in relevant skills to effectively function in their respective potential workplaces. In today's professional working context, they need to possess the hard skills as well as the soft skills. Hard skills are the technical requirements of a job the student is trained to do and soft skills fulfil an important role in shaping an individual's personality (Schulz, 2008).

It is of high importance for every student to acquire adequate skills beyond academic or technical knowledge. Students in PUs need to be guided to acquire relevant soft or generic skills and

they would also need role models that they can emulate in order to become well-trained and skillful in these skills. A survey on the importance of soft skills in students' lives both at college and after college was carried out by Schulz (2008), who pointed out that the importance of soft skills depends very much on the context and one's personal perception. Among the most important soft skills are communication skills, critical and structured thinking, analytical skills, problem solving abilities, and creativity.

Within the teacher education context for instance, "vast research and expert opinions have been sought in the effort to determine the specific soft skills to be implemented and used in teacher education program" (Digvijay and Aruna, 2014). In their study, Digvijay and Aruna, (2014) identified seven soft kills to be implemented in all teacher education institutions in India, namely communicative skills, thinking skills and problem solving skills, team work force,

lifelong learning and information management, entrepreneur skills, ethics, moral and professionalism, and leadership skills. Noteworthy, each of the aforementioned soft skills comprised several sub-skills.

In another study, also within the context of teacher education but in Malaysia, Aminuddin et al. (2014) reported that 75% of lecturers in their study have never attended courses related to soft skills, which shows these lecturers have no formal knowledge about soft skills. The findings in their study also showed that generally, lecturers are ready and confident to help in developing soft skills of trainee teachers through embedding soft skills into core courses, but they need greater support in the form of knowledge about soft skills, and knowledge about certain soft skills competencies.

Within their formal education at the higher institutions, they can actually learn much from their lecturers or educators, including looking up to these educators as role models for understanding and acquiring knowledge on soft skills. It is crucial to ensure acceptance and comprehension of soft skills by lecturers and trainee teachers so that students can apply the principles of soft skills in their future life (Aminuddin et al., 2014). Schulz (2008) argued that embedding the training of soft skills while teaching hard skills courses could be a very effective and efficient method for teaching content and as well as enhancing soft skills.

Bandura explained this easily by proposing a different type of learning called observational learning (Bandura et al. 1966). Bandura claimed that learners' learning is heavily reliant on observation, which is who learners observe and model themselves on. These include parents, siblings, friends, and also teachers. Undoubtedly, educators need to take special responsibility regarding soft skills, because during students' university time, educators have a major influence on the development of their students' soft skills (Schulz, 2008).

Employers expect graduates to have technical and discipline competences from their degrees but require graduates to also demonstrate a range of broader skills and attributes that include teamwork, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving, and managerial abilities (Lowden et al. 2011). Acquisition of soft skills competencies is an essential aspect in Malaysian higher learning institutions. The Malaysian government has been very concerned with the problem of unemployed graduates, an issue which is widely debated (Shariffah, 2013). Perhaps educators ought to give due attention to this soft skills related issue. For instance, Hairuzila et al. (2014) reported that the responses of the students in their study show the majority of their lecturers integrate communication skills "sometimes" or "rarely." Roselina (2009) pointed out that there are no specific skills listed as "soft skills" but nevertheless the Malaysian Institute of Higher Learning interprets soft skills as incorporating aspects of generic skills such as leadership, teamwork, communication, and lifelong learning.

The central research question that guided the broader study was "to what extent are the Malaysian Public University educators' soft skill competencies applicable for the development of professional and social competence of graduates within their working contexts?." The study set out to gauge educators' understandings of soft skills competencies and the ways in which they incorporate aspects of soft skills when delivering their subject contents to their students. Additionally, the study explored other skills, which the educators think, could be considered as soft skills that are necessary for both educators and students in years to come. Within the Malaysia National Philosophy of Education, the main goal of education is to produce a balanced and harmonious individual who is intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically, on a firm belief and faith in God (Ministry of Education, 2013). PUs need to have the desire and ability to participate in the formation and development of human capital with first class mentality. Hence, PUs is deemed the most suitable venues for developing and polishing soft skills among students. In order to equip students with soft skills, it is deemed relevant that the educators themselves ought to also possess appropriate soft skills.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The concept of soft skills still lacks definition, scope, instrumentation, and systematic education, and training (Matteson et al. 2015). The literature revealed that soft skills are a widespread concern of employers' world-wide. One example of the depth of the concern is evident in a series of interviews with executives of information technology companies (Golemon et al., 2004). Those interviewed reported that it was the lack of interpersonal and soft skills that cause projects to fail. Students, in addition to the technical skills required for their careers, also need to develop social or emotional intelligence (Golemon et al., 2004). This can be accomplished by helping them to equip themselves with professional skills like writing, speaking, presenting, decision making, and teamwork. In order to achieve this, new concepts, strategies and methodologies need to be introduced into teaching since teachers are still considered as the source of information and students approach them for every possible solution when they encounter problems (Jayaprakash, 2005). Schulz (2008) argued that what exactly are soft skills is a basic question, which is not easy to answer because the perception of what is a soft skill differs from context to context. Moreover, the understanding of what should be recognized as a soft skill varies widely and there is still no formally agreed upon, universal set of soft skills (Matteson et al., 2015). It is of note that, "parents and school teachers have superior influence on a young person's aptitude in soft skills" (Schulz, 2008. p. 152). It is also recognized that teaching methods can influence the development of several social intellectual abilities such as cooperation, leadership, responsibility, self-confidence, independence, ability to make decisions, and communication skills (Kermis and Kermis, 2009).

"Research on soft skills has involved both direct investigation of soft skills in particular environments and identification of general workplace competencies in which soft skills are essential to high performance" (Matteson et al., 2015. p. 76). Research on soft skills within the context of educators in PUs is deemed appropriate since educators must take responsibility regarding soft skills because during students' university time, they have a major influence on the development of their students' soft skills (Schulz, 2008). The Malaysia Ministry of Education emphasizes on the quality and

teaching of educators so that they produce graduates who are able to effectively perform in the real work environment (Shariffah, 2013). The results of a study carried out by Syahrina et al. (2015) showed that self-management skills and personal leadership skills have significant impact on the educators' teaching effectiveness. Thus it should be noted that "the University will have to play a more significant role instead of settling to producing and spreading specific and instrumental skills" (Pereira, 2013. p. 117). However, little research has been carried out in the country that looks into the issues regarding soft skills among educators in PUs, especially their indications and actions during teaching and learning sessions, and their students' construal of soft skills, as well as the students' development and competence in soft skills. The Bandura social theory advocates that students imitate their teachers' behavior and actions that teachers show during their interactions with their students in classrooms. Hence, this gives rise to a question as to whether or not educators in PUs need to have soft skills considering the fact that they are the individuals who are indefinitely responsible to guide and educate students throughout their learning in PUs, including the aspects of soft skills.

3. PURPOSE OF STUDY

In our recent qualitative exploratory study, educators from selected PUs were individually interviewed to capture their thoughts and understandings of soft skills as part of their professional contribution to support the urge to ensure the acquisition of soft skills among students in PUs. The purpose of this paper is to provide a glimpse into three PUs educators' perceptions and conceptions of soft skills. Within this study, these educators are identified as RAI, RTZ and RAA. The focus of discussion is guided by three main questions (as indicated within the subsequent section) that were posed to these educators during two phases of interviews, which provided data for the meaning of soft skills, the soft skills that educators need, and other skills that could be considered as soft skills that educators themselves would need to have.

4. METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative study, data was gathered via in-depth face-to-face interviews with purposively selected educators from PUs. Two phases of interviews were carried out, whereby in Phase 1, the participants were asked about their understanding and interpretation of "soft skills." The questions that guided the focus of the interviews were (i) What is "soft skills" to you? and (ii) to what extent do educators in PUs need to also have "soft skills"? Their responses in Phase 1 were fully transcribed and thematically analyzed (Clarke and Braun, 2013), whereby emerging themes were identified. Based on the transcriptions, the participants' responses that warrant further clarification from them were also identified and noted as guidance for Phase 2 of the interviews. Hence, in a sense, Phase 2 was the follow-up phase, whereby the participants were asked to further provide clarifications and meanings to their earlier responses during the Phase 1 interviews. Additionally, in Phase 2, the participants were interviewed on the relevant soft skills which they believed PUs educators must

have to ensure that they could execute their professional roles efficiently and competently. The question that guided the focus of the interviews was 'What other skills could be considered as "soft skills" that are needed by educators in PUs? The Phase 2 interview data was also fully transcribed and thematically analyzed.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Understanding and Conception of Soft Skills
During the interview, research participant RAI perceived soft skills as covering a wide repertoire of skills. To him, soft skills as encompass skills that are related to being fair and equal, integrity and abide to religious demands as well as conformation to professional ethics. Within his understandings, soft skills also include critical thinking, problem solving, and working together.

"Soft skills cover wide aspect of skills … which include critical thinking, ability to solve problems, having positive attitudes, leadership skills, communication skills, having skills to work collaboratively through teamwork, having and practicing professional ethics, having skills for lifelong learning, skills to be always fair and equal, have skills for integrity and abiding religious skills".

Research participant RTZ understands soft skills as related to environment, not inborn and can be taught.

"Soft skills that are not innate but instead can be taught and develop through the individual's the individual's environment. Soft skills need to be interpreted within concrete context so that the soft skills that the individual provides can help the community generally, or specifically brought about the changes in the individuals him/herself" (RTZ, 2014).

Research participant RAA had mentioned about soft skills also involve having high ethics and common-sense when solving problems critically.

"Soft skills refer to the generic skills which are closely related the individual ability to lead groups, communicate interpersonally as well as continuous learning. Other than that, it involves ability to solve problems critically, with high ethics as well as having common sense when solving problems. All these area related to soft skills. These concepts of soft skills can be equated to the context of emotional intelligence quotient (EQ). All these skills can complement the skills that the individuals' had obtained in their formal education" (RAA, 2014).

The findings indicate that educators understand soft skills as to include individual skills needed when confronting situations and solving problems. These skills may include common-sense, critical thinking, religiosity, and professional ethics.

5.2. Educators and Soft Skills
The terminology used to refer to soft skills differs in various countries. The range of terms includes: "key competencies," "soft skills," or "employability skills" (Australia); "key skills" or "core skills" (United Kingdom); "essential skills" (New

Zealand); and "necessary skills," "employability skills" or "workplace know-how" (United States). Soft skills are defined as intra- and inter-personal (socio-emotional) skills, essential for personal development, social participation and workplace success. They include skills such as communication, ability to work on multidisciplinary teams, adaptability, etc. These skills should be distinguished from technical, or 'hard skills' in order to emphasize the fact that they can be learned or developed by suitable training efforts, and they can also be combined, towards the achievement of complex outcomes within the workplace. As soft skills are characterized skills which are applicable and useful in various contexts, thus they can be supposedly transferred among different work occupations.

When asked whether or not educators in PUs need to also have soft skills, RAI suggest that educators themselves can become the best role models to their students.

"All aspects and components of soft skills are important to all the lecturers and educators in PUs. Being the ivory towers and the place where workforce and educated community are born, it is important for the lecturers to function as the best experts, thinkers, knowledge generators and role models" (RAI, 2014).

To RTZ, academicians need to have soft skills because they are facing advanced students who are technologically competent.

"Academicians need soft skills inside them. This is because nowadays students are exposed to various information from many resources, especially the internet. They have information that could mold them according to various idealism, which could bring about various actions. The students thinking are advancing but nevertheless their actions may not be acceptable or have positive effects" (RTZ, 2014).

During the interviews, RAA had mentioned about the need for the educators to possess soft skills which he believes could make them more visible to the community.

"Lecturers definitely need soft skills … the change in the knowledge landscape through the cyber world, open market, stiff competitions in the academic world will demand those involve to have soft skills too … by having the soft skills, they can become more competent and relevant … the soft skills can make them more visible to the community" (RAA, 2014).

The findings show that the three educators in the study seemingly advocate the necessity of educators in PUs to have the necessary soft skills before they can talk about, guide or train their students on soft skills or matters pertaining to soft skills.

5.3. Other Soft Skills Needed by Educators
Research participants were also asked to describe what other skills could be considered as soft skills that are needed by educators in PUs. RAI suggestion include the following:

"I would say that other skills should be skills related to collaboration across networking and leading by influence, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurialism, effective oral and written communication, accessing and analyzing information, and last but not least curiosity and imagination" These skills could assist educators to function professionally and they should also guide their students to be competent in these skills" (RAI, 2014).

RTZ had also suggested some skills, which is related to religious aspect:

"Other soft skills include disposition skills (kemahiran insaniah fitrah), which can guide an individual to take actions based on religion or beliefs. Religion serves as a guide which educators must hold to so that every knowledge they receive and disseminate to their students have added value that is aligned with disposition skills within their religion or beliefs" (RTZ, 2014).

Research participant RAA had proposed skills as follows:

"Other skills that can be considered as soft skills and all educators should have included resilience and optimist. In today's very challenging world, failure is something which everyone is afraid of but sometimes is necessary to enhance the academia's learning curve …. you bounce back … learn from experience and attack the next issues with equal boldness … all these need skills to happen. To me other skills can be adaptability, flexible, agile as well as creative …. and proactive and also skills related to being empathy or emphatic" (RAA, 2014).

It can be seen that from the interviews with these educators, there are other possible skills that can be identified as soft skills which PUs' educators should not only have but to educate their students as well. Soft skills can be considered as social skills that need to be internalized by individuals to enhance performance in the workplaces. Educators can make significant contributions to instill awareness and acquisition of soft skills among university students if they play their role effectively. The responses of the three educators in this study provide indications of the various interpretations of soft skills among educators in PUs, which seemingly support the view of Roselina (2009) with regards to there being no specific skills that are listed as "Soft" skills.

5.4. The Soft-skills Framework
The proposed soft skills framework perhaps would provide early ideas and initiatives towards the construction of a "Soft Skill Framework for Educators in PUs," which can serve as guideline for the educators when they are facilitating and guiding the future, trained university graduates in Malaysia. In a sense, the introduction of the framework, developed by the researchers, can form a basis for the educators go to go about and plan their professional role as models for soft skills development. It will serve as a backdrop for education towards sustaining the enhancement of soft skills among students in Malaysia's PUs. Picking up on the professional's views on soft skills that educators in PUs should have currently and in many years to come, as presented within the interview excerpts above, we had constructed an initial version of the framework (Table 1). This framework was framed with the assumption that graduate students would take away not only the

Table 1: Initial soft skills framework for educators in Malaysia public universities

Suggested soft-skills for educators in public universities	
Communication	Creative
Reflective	Proactive
Considerate	Resilience
Collaboration	Optimistic
Influence	Imaginative
Agility	Analytic
Adaptability	Initiative
Entrepreneurial	Disposition
Common-sense	Empathy

knowledge relating to their formal study area, but would also learn by observing the behavior of their educators (teachers) and how they could function within the context of a multi-cultural society later on. Noteworthy, this initial framework is constructed based on the responses in our interviews with RAI, RTZ and RAA. We believe that the content within this framework will be enriched by collating the results of our interviews with other educators within the broader study. We also believe the PUs educators can make vital contributions towards the effective functioning and management of workplaces by recognizing the small changes in their behavior that make their roles as role models for soft skills in the university more authentic.

6. CONCLUSION

Educators in PUs themselves do certainly need to have appropriate soft skills when teaching their students. There are other skills which the educators think that can also be identified as soft skills. The educators in this study do acknowledge that PU educators can train or guide their students to be competent in soft skills by themselves indicating the possession of the skills. Educators in this study seemingly support the view that PU educators' indication of behavior that relates to soft skills while interacting or teaching with their students could support the enhancement of students' soft skills. As Kermis and Kermis (2009) indicated, teaching methods has the potential to enhance soft skills. Embedding the training of soft skills into hard skills courses is a very effective and efficient method of achieving both an attractive way of teaching a particular content and an enhancement of soft skills. Some of the suggested soft skills in this study, for instance "common-sense," could be considered to be included or integrated into the curriculum or courses taught at the universities, whereby students could be guided to see the conceptions of common-sense as soft skills in relation to reasoning skills since common-sense seemingly is related to logical thinking. Noteworthy, technical competence is indeed important and need to be frequently refreshed while equally important are the collection of people-based, emotionally aware, perceptive, and interactive skills (Matteson et al., 2015).

It should be noted that these findings do not represent the thoughts of all the educators in PUs in Malaysia, nevertheless the educators' conceptions and understandings that emerged from this study could provide early knowledge of what do professionals within PUs think of "soft skills" and the feelings that some of them have

about ensuring graduate students possess the necessary soft skills and how they as educators could contribute towards enhancing soft skills among university students. Additionally, the study had contributed to the notions of soft skills held by educators in PUs. A wider repertoire of thoughts and conceptions about soft skills could be achieved by increasing the number of respondents and involving various levels of educators and their work experience within the academia and their experiences with the students' potential stakeholders when they graduate.

REFERENCES

Aminuddin, H., Marina, M., Norhasni, Z.A. (2014), The readiness of lecturers in embedding soft skills in the bachelor's degree program in Malaysian institutes of teachers education. Journal of Education and Training Studies, 2(3), 138-143.

Bandura, A., Grusec, J.E., Menlove, F.L. (1966), Observational learning as a function of symbolination and incentive. Child Development, 37, 499-506.

Clarke, V., Braun, V. (2013), Teaching thematic analysis: Overcoming challenges and developing strategies for effective learning. The Psychologist, 26(2). Available from: http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/21155.

Digvijay, P., Aruna Y. (2014),). Importance of soft skills in teacher education programme. International Journal of Educational Research and Technology, 5(1), 22-25.

Golemon, D., Boyatzis, R., McKee, A. (2004), Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence. New York: Perseus Publishers.

Hairuzila I., Hazadiah, M.D., Normah A. (2014), Integrating soft skills in the teaching of hard sciences at a private university: A preliminary study. Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, 22(S), 17-32.

Jayaprakash, J.C.M. (2005), Strategies in teaching accounting in higher education. In The Reflective Practitioner. Proceedings of the 14th Annual Teaching Learning Forum, 3-4 February 2005. Perth: Murdoch University. Available from: http://lsn.curtin.edu.au/tlf/tlf2005/refereed/jayaprakashj.html.

Kermis, G.F., Kermis, M.D. (2009), Model for the transition from ethical deficit to a transparent corporate culture: A response to the financial meltdown. Journal of Academic and Business Ethics, 2, 1-11.

Lowden, K., Hall, S., Elliot, D., Lewin, J. (2011), Employers' Perceptions of the Employability Skills of New Graduates. Glasgow: The SCRE Research Centre. University of Glasgow.

Matteson, M.L., Anderson, L., Boyden, C. (2016), "Soft Skills": A Phrase in Search of Meaning. Portal: Libraries and the Academy, 16(1), 71-88.

Ministry of Education (MOE). (2013), Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Preschool to Post-Secondary Education). Available from http://www.moe.gov.my/cms/upload_files/articlefile/2013/articlefile_file_003108.pdf.

Pereira, O.P. (2013), Soft skills: From university to the work environment. Analysis of a survey of graduates in Portugal. Regional and Sectoral

Economic Studies, 13(1), 105-118.

Roselina, S. (2009), Soft skills at the Malaysian institutes of higher learning. Asia Pacific Education Review, 10, 309-315.

Schulz, B. (2008), The importance of soft skills: Education beyond academic knowledge. Journal of Language and Communication, Journal of Language and Communication, 146-154.

Shariffah, B.S.A. (2013), Soft skills level of Malaysian students at a tertiary institution: A comparative case study based on gender, area of residence and type of schools. International Journal of Asian Social Science, 3(9), 1929-1937.

Syahrina, H.M.J., Siti, A.M., Mary, T., Peter, F. (2015), The predictors of lecturers' teaching effectiveness for public and private universities in Malaysia. International Journal of Social Science and Humanity, 5(4), 384-388.