

DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS IN MALAYSIAN POLYTECHNIC STUDENTS: PERSPECTIVES OF EMPLOYERS AND STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Attributes such as leadership, communication, problem solving, time management and teamwork, also known as soft skills, have become critical for entrance into today's job market. Employers are seeking employees with ability to integrate their technical knowledge with soft skills. Therefore, higher institutions need to play a vital role in integrating soft skills into the curriculum. This paper reports employers' and students' perceptions of soft skills competencies assessed after polytechnic students had undergone industrial attachment in various companies. Respondents consist of employers and students from the northern region of Malaysia in Kedah, Perlis, Penang. Soft skills elements studied are mainly related to skills elements in the ITSS module. Participants consisted of 107 employers and 359 students who answered a survey with a 6-point Likert scale. Overall, employers are satisfied with students' soft skills competency. Time management is found to be an area where improvements are needed most. The skills relating to teamwork, communication, learning and interpersonal skills are identified as need of improvement as well. It is also suggested that more emphasis should be placed on skills like decision making, problem solving and leadership due to an increasing demand by employers.

Keywords: Soft skills, polytechnic, competency

INTRODUCTION

The mismatch in what students learn in higher education institutions and what they need to know and should be able to do in the workplace is a long ongoing issue. Employers always raise a concern that they are not able to find graduates with the required skills (Dunne & Rawlins, 2000; Hesketh, 2000; Lee, 2003). In Malaysia, graduates are found to lack the skills needed to function effectively in workplace (Bakar & Hanafi, 2007; Jusoh, Razak, & Chong, 2007; Kamsah, 2006; Shah, 2008; Sidhu, 2011; Woo, 2006).

Furthermore, employers and professional bodies worldwide are in consensus that higher education institutions should adapt and change at an even greater pace than in the past in order for them to develop a workforce that is highly skilled and ready to face the challenges of increased global competition (Dunne & Rawlins, 2000; Keep & Mayhew, 1999; Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006; Ong, Sharma, & Heskin, 2003). On the other hand, Evers et al. (1996) are of the opinion that education is not doing poorer, but it is the skills demanded by employers that have increased.

To be competitive, Malaysia should have an education system that is market-driven and able to produce work-ready graduates. Students' soft skills need to be developed to get them ready for the workplace. To produce work-ready graduates, the teaching and learning should be up to date

and be able to develop generic competencies as needed by the job market. This can be acquired through real work experience and other hands-on activities. As mentioned by Coll, Zegward and Hodges (2002), not all skills can be acquired in the classrooms. Some skills are best developed in the workplace via hands-on experience. Indeed, industrial training programs form an essential part towards this end.

Industrial training has been proven to be essential in providing students with opportunities for an intensive work-based exposure to a broad range of operations within a company (Crossley, Jamieson, & Brayley, 2007). It can also be considered as a performance measure and as such is thought to be more valid than traditional paper and pencil tests in classrooms (Allen, 2004). In addition, it can be a very effective assessment vehicle in evaluating the quality of academic product. Usually, if employers are satisfied with students' or graduates' performance, it is generally assumed that the institution's curriculum has met or even surpassed the employers' needs (Verney, Holoviak, & Winter, 2009). Realizing the importance of these findings, the Industrial Training Soft Skills (ITSS) module has been developed and incorporated into polytechnic industrial training program.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The Industrial Training Soft Skills Module (ITSS)

The ITSS module was developed and embedded as part of industrial training program for Malaysian polytechnic students to enhance immediate practice of the skills learnt. Feedback from industries collected during the students' industrial training program is used as the basis in designing the ITSS module. This collective feedback will also be valuable for curriculum improvement in order to meet employers' needs and expectations in the future. Issues such as the lack of practical application as lamented by employers can be minimized and students can develop various applied workplace skills for transition from the classroom to the world of work. As mentioned by Peacock & Ladkin (2002), the industry's involvement in course design is essential to ensure the right skills are provided to students. Therefore, the development of soft skills with the participation of industry as was done in the ITSS module is projected to be more effective.

The ITSS module consists of generic elements such as positive personality, communication skills, work etiquette, work exposure and report writing. It is offered in the second and third semester for certificate and diploma level students respectively. This module accounts for one hour credit and students are not allowed to enroll in industrial training if they have not successfully gone through this module. The objective is to prepare polytechnic students with generic competency for industrial training as well as for employment. During their industrial training students are evaluated by their employers. Therefore, in investigating the preliminary outcome of the module, perceptions of soft skills competency from both the employers and students are deemed necessary. Students' self-rating is considered a valuable input in investigating their personal view of soft skills competency. Employers are the consumer of polytechnic's product; therefore they are able to provide a reasonable perception of students' competency in the real work setting. Moreover, it is also crucial to investigate current needs of employers with specific reference to developing an understanding of what employers think are desirable competencies.

Competency

Before employers' and students' perceptions of soft skills competency are investigated, it is appropriate to clarify the term "competency." Initially, competency was defined by Boyatzis (1982) as "the underlying characteristics of a person which involved a motive, trait, skill, aspect of one's self-image or social role, or a body of knowledge used and they are generic in nature or can appear in many different work" (p. 21). For Illeris (2008), "the concept of competence was referred to as what a person is actually able to do or achieve" (p.1). However, Woodruffe (1993) argues that these definitions is open to a multitude of interpretations and suggested that competency should refer to a "set of behaviours, skills, knowledge and understanding which are crucial to the effective performance of a position" (p. 29).

The definitions seem to holds a great deal of promise and hardly get away with different interpretations and practices. To add to the impetus, there are also disparities between competency and competence. According to Eraut (1998), the United States (US) literature refers to the term "competency" as a specific capability and "competence" has a more holistic meaning; meanwhile, Australian authors define "competencies" as particular attributes, such as knowledge, skills and attitudes and jointly underlying "competence". Eventually, in a workplace context, competency is defined as a combination of cognitive skills, personal or behavioural characteristics which are a function of an individual's personality (Hodges & Burchell, 2003).

In summary, the definitions discussed suggest many interpretations of competency, depending on individual or organizational context and purpose. Of particular importance to the definition is the statement that competencies are concerned with people's behaviour that is relevant to performance in the job and it must result in something observable. Given that there is a variety of definitions and interpretations of competency it is appropriate if this term is defined for this study. Competency in this study is refers to something that a person is capable of doing but not necessarily observable, or what a person knows and can do (Eraut, 1998). This adapted definition has not fully taken into consideration the issue of observation at the workplace, as polytechnic students participating in the study are students who have undergone industrial attachment for only five months. This duration is rather short for proper observation to take place. Moreover, the real performance of the students may not be portrayed in a short period of time.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of this research is to explore employers' and students' perceptions of soft skills competency delivered in the ITSS module. The current study sought to answer the following questions:

Research Question I

What is the perceived level of soft skills competency amongst polytechnic students?

Research Question II

Is there any difference between employers' and students' perceptions of soft skills competency?

Research Question III

What are the soft skills elements most required by industry?

PROCEDURES OF THE STUDY

The study looks at the perceptions of employers and students concerning the applications of soft skills during industrial training. Respondents consist of employers participating in the polytechnic industrial training programs and students who have undergone industrial training in various organizations of the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia (Kedah, Perlis and Penang). The targeted respondents from the industry comprise of experienced human resource personnel, site supervisors or senior technicians who are likely to possess substantial experience in evaluating polytechnic students' performance at the workplace.

Students' participation is from four polytechnics in the same northern region studying in engineering, commerce, hospitality and information technology (IT) disciplines. Sample size is calculated from the total population of each discipline base on a model by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). Soft skills elements studied in the ITSS module rather than on a broad range of soft skills are used to develop the questionnaires. Respondents are asked to respond to questions using a Likert scale with six response options; values 1 to 6 are assigned to the responses from incompetent to competent respectively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The employer respondents are categorized into sectors, size and duration of participating in polytechnic industrial training program. A total of 180 sets of questionnaires were mailed and 107 returned with a response rate of 59%. Table 1 displays the details of employer respondents' profile.

Table 1 Demographic Profile of Employer Respondents (n=107)

		Percentage
Industry Sectors	Services	38.3
	Trading	25.2
	Manufacturing	18.7
	Government	8.4
	Finance	6.5
	Consultant	2.8
Number of Employees	Less than 10	31.8
	10 - 50	43.9
	More than 50	24.3
Frequency in taking polytechnic' students as trainees	2 – 5 times	60.7
	6 – 10 times	19.6
	More than 10 times	19.6

For students, their profile is categorized according to institutions, academic disciplines, gender and work experience. Out of 400 questionnaires distributed, 359 respondents returned the questionnaires. The breakdown is as shown in Table 2.

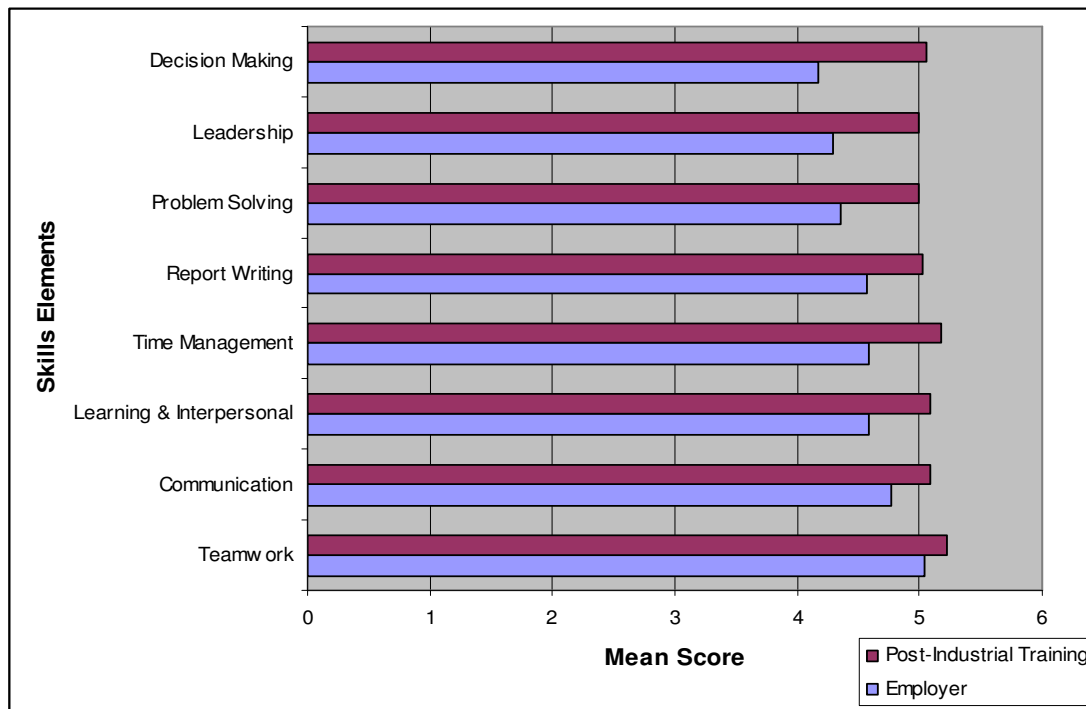
Table 2 Demographic Profile of Students' Respondents (n=359)

Demographic	Post-Industrial Training
Institutions	%
Polytechnic A	32.2
Polytechnic B	23.1
Polytechnic C	23.3
Polytechnic D	21.3
Academic Background/Discipline	
Engineering	40.7
Commerce	29.1
Information Technology	12.8
Hospitality	17.4
Gender	
Male	36.2
Female	63.8
Working Experience	
Experience	66.5
No Experience	33.5
Industry Sector for Industrial Training	
Services	49.2
Government	16.1
Manufacturing	15.9
Trading	9.1
Consultant	6.0
Finance	3.7

To address soft skills application, employers' and students' mean scores competency are ranked and compared. The comparison demonstrates the level of congruence between the employers' expectations and students' self-perceived level of soft skills applied. The ranking will assist in identifying skills elements most required according to the respondents' perspective. The result is presented in Figure 1.

The results show that the students' mean scores are greater than the employers' in all skills listed. Students in this study appear to perceive themselves more competent in all skills as compared to their employers' perception. As there is a difference in mean score between students and employer, the biggest mean score discrepancy comes from the decision making skills, followed by leadership, time management and problem solving skills.

Figure 1: Perceptions of Soft Skills Competency: A Comparison between Employers and Post-Industrial Training Students (n = 107: 359)



Likert-type scale for each category under degree of competence: 1= Not Competent; 6 = Competent

To investigate whether these differences are significant, the independent sample t-test is conducted (Appendix 1). The test indicates that the differences are statistically significant at $p < .05$ except for teamwork skills. This means employers and students have different perceptions in most soft skills competency other than teamwork. Differences in these competency rates show that students are still unable to meet employers' expectations. This infers that polytechnic need to put in more effort to ensure students are able to apply soft skills learnt.

The high self-rating by students is expected as it is a general human tendency to rate oneself in a positive way. It could be also due to difficulty faced in judging or rating one's own self. According to Azam and Brauchle (2003, p. 207), self-rating usually can be affected by one's state of mind at the time of filling out the self-rating instrument. Therefore, there exists the possibility that supervisors' judgment of students more authentic than students' self-rating. However, this does not imply that the supervisors' perceptions of student are always correct. For example, students with good relationships with their supervisors may get a higher rating and vice versa. Nevertheless for this study, supervisors' responses are found to be more evenly distributed than those of the students.

Moreover, the high perceived level of competence amongst students and graduates is not new and has been noted in several studies (Azam & Brauchle, 2003; Feast, 2001; Knemeyer & Murphy, 2002; Mey, 2003; Razak, Latifah, Jaafar, Hassan Mi, & Ab Murat, 2008; Saunders & Zuzel, 2010; Singh & Singh, 2008). The studies found that graduates tend to optimistically rate their own ability. A similar pattern is obtained in a study conducted by the National Higher Education Research Institute of Malaysia (2003) on unemployment problems among graduates.

The study found that graduates generally overrate themselves by believing that they are well qualified and meet all requirements of the regular job market.

This study further explores the ranking of mean score competency by both groups. As shown, the teamwork skills are ranked first by both groups, with slight differences in communication and report writing skills. The disparity in ranking reflects on skills that are prioritized by both groups. Employers and students are found to have different priority and emphasis especially in decision making, problem solving and time management. The distinction in priority will lead to difference in focus given by both groups. Students might have a different or less concern for learning skills which are highly regarded by employers and vice versa. Therefore, it is likely that students will still be unable to meet employers' expectation in this trend is to continue.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings show that, students' soft skills competency has been positively rated by both groups. Overall, respondents identified teamwork, time management, learning and interpersonal skills as well as communication skills as skills that are better developed in the workplace context. The skills which rated low by all groups are report writing, problem solving, decision making and leadership skills.

Nevertheless, although employers have positive perceptions of students' soft skills, the difference in perceived level of skills elements indicates their dissatisfaction in students' soft skills competency. Overall, students' competency has yet to meet their expectations. Thus, the polytechnics should review the delivery method of the ITSS module in order to improve the application of soft skills. Most critical is time management skills; skill which can be easily practiced in the classroom and does not require the latest in technology or equipment. Therefore, for immediate action, it is suggested that academics emphasize on the application of these skills in meeting employers' demands.

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