Employers' Perception On Soft Skills Of Graduates: A Study Of Intel Elite Soft Skill Training

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Abstract

Acquiring soft skills competencies becomes increasingly important and relevant for those who are providing services. Human Resource practitioners and employers still find the local graduates lacking or mismatching of relevant soft skills competencies required in their job positions. This paper is a survey research. Basically, this research is about employers' perception on soft skills and about the Intel eLite soft skill training to enhance the soft skills of the graduates. The Intel eLite Program, which is initiated by Intel Malaysia, is an university-industry collaboration between Intel and Faculty of Electrical Engineering of Universiti Teknologi Mara. The objectives are to identify the soft skills required by local and multi-national companies and to identify the contributing factors of graduates' unemployment. This research is done to evaluate the soft skills training program for the Intel eLite students, in terms of speaker, content of the training modules and the facility where the session was held. A total of 79 employers responded to the Questionnaire A and 93 Intel eLite students responded to the Questionnaire B. The findings show that all skills identified in the soft skill training of Intel eLite program are important in working place. Lacking of soft skills become the most likely factors to the unemployment issue of our graduates. Intel eLite program has proven to be a good intervention program to overcome the lack of the relevant soft skills from the perception of students. However a few improvements were suggested.

Keywords: Soft Skills, graduates, Intel Elite Program

1. INTRODUCTION

A significant percentage of the graduates of the local Malaysian universities are still lacking relevant soft skills competencies, leading to their unemployment in a highly competitive job market. A preliminary finding of study on the employability of Malaysian graduates by the National Economic Action Council (2003) indicated that there is mismatch of competency between the industry requirements and the graduates produced by the universities. A study done by a group of lecturers from Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia tells that there are gap between the importance of soft skills needed at the work place and graduates' soft skill competency performance perception by the HR practitioners. Limited collaboration between university and industry is one of the reasons why this problem occurs. Universities are then not sufficiently exposed to industry demands in order to produce the right competency mix of marketable graduates. There are organizations which produced intervention programs to undertake this issue. Some examples are; Young Executive Scheme (YES) by United Engineers Malaysia (UEM) GROUP, Industrial Skill Enhancement Program (INSEP) by Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, and Graduates Training Scheme (GTS) by Pembangunan Sumber Manusia Berhad.

2. BACKGROUND

The three intervention programs, namely, YES, INSEP and GTS, look at graduates who have completed their Degree studies. The programs are more of a 're-skilling' process, trying to 'repair' or 'bridge' the competency 'gaps' in the graduates. The re-skilling process typically takes up longer time duration, anything from 12 months to about 24 months and is very costly to companies and government, who bear the re-skilling training costs. There are also 'finishing schools' in some of the universities, but again the focus is primarily on new student intake and the graduating final year students. The universities ensure new fresh students' can assimilate into the university quickly and the graduating students exit with enough job-seeking skills information. This is considered as a reactive approach and a late intervention to undo 'damage' or inculcate new skills in a short time.

One multinational company, Intel Technology Sdn. Bhd. attempts to help resolve unemployment among local graduates by deploying a unique concept of a structured Industry-University partnership. Intel acted on the information and developed an intervention program, which is known as the *Intel eLite Program.* It is designed to address the soft skills competency issue and ensure that the local universities are producing relevant industry-ready graduates. Intel eLite Program is a different concept compared to the YES, INSEP and GTS programs. It is a more structured and predictable approach to create Intel-ready graduates through a more 'proactive' approach or early involvement of the students approach. This can only happen with a good partnership with universities. Intel collaborates with the university through the faculty chosen and the Intel eLite program covers students from the first to the graduation year.

On the issue of unemployment, Intel Technology (M) Sdn. Bhd. is now assisting the selected local universities in resolving the soft skills weakness among their graduates through the Intel eLite Program. It can be considered as one of the most appropriate initiative to undertake the unemployment graduates issue, through effective university-industry collaboration. The research work done is to look at the effectiveness of the soft skill modules in the Intel eLite program.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is on the factors that cause the unemployment of graduates from the perception of employers, the significant relationship between the employers' perception on soft skills importance and employers' perception on graduates' soft skills performance. It analyses the Intel eLite Program, focusing on the soft skill training by the Intel Technology Sdn. Bhd. The findings are compared against the soft skill criteria needed by the employers in local Malaysian companies, to ensure that the soft skill training in the program is also applicable in them.

This research is a survey research. The survey covers the two aspects. Firstly, perceptions from the industry about the importance of soft skill in working place and graduates' soft skill performance, and secondly, perception on factors of unemployment and the evaluation of Intel eLite soft skill training. The survey is done to industry representatives from local and multinational companies and to the Intel eLite students who attended the soft skill training in the Intel eLite program.

For this research, there are two samples that have been identified. They are:-

i. Industry: Employers from 150 industries comprising of local and multinational companies who have participated in Career Fair at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia from year 2004 to 2007

ii. Intel eLite students: The sample for this research are the Intel eLite students of UiTM who have attended the sessions of the Intel eLite Program such as "Marketable Graduates", "Effective Communication", "Creative and Analytical Thinking", "Problem Solving and Project Management", and "Resume Writing and

Interview Skills". The number of Intel eLite students who attended the session was 93 students from the population of 120 Intel eLite students.

There are two instruments used in this research; questionnaires and interviews. The Questionnaires is the main instrument. There are two types of questionnaires which are categorized into Questionnaire 'A' and Questionnaire 'B'. Questionnaire 'A' distributed to the industry and Questionnaire 'B' distributed to the Intel eLite students. These questionnaires are developed by the researcher and have gone through a pre-test to indicate the reliability of the questionnaires.

The interview acts as a support instruments to the data collection and it was done with an academician, Prof Dr Mohd Salleh bin Abu, Dean of Faculty of Education, UTM and with a 1st class Honours student who completed the Intel eLite program, Ili Shahirah Bt Abdul Halim from Faculty of Electrical Engineering UiTM.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Soft Skill Importance

Table 4.1: Soft Skills Importance Rating By Employers

No of Items	Soft Skill Criteria	Mean Score	Significance Level
01	Communication Skill	4.59	Important
02	Creative & Critical Thinking	4.38	Important
03	Teamwork	4.56	Important
04	Program & Project Management Skill	4.13	Important
05	Decision Making & Problem Solving	4.41	Important
Average		4.41	Important

From the Table 4.1 above, it shows that all soft skills mentioned are important in the working environment. This result revealed an average mean of 4.41 which is "Important". The highest soft skill rated was the communication skill.

Figure 4.1 shows the mean trend of multinational and local company responses on importance of soft skills. There is no significant difference in mean from both type respondents. Communication Skill (I1), Teamwork(I3), and Decision Making & Problem Solving(I5) has the same orders rates by both company whereby the communication skills appears as the most needed skills in the working environment. For Local Company, Creative & Analytical Thinking Skill (I2) is

rated higher than Program & Project Management (I4) but quite the opposite for multinational company.
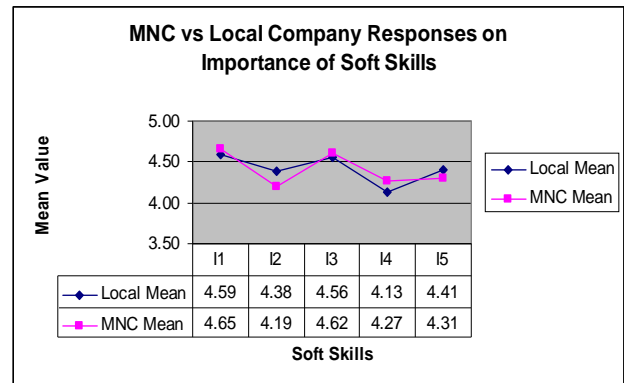
Fig 4.1: Responses Trend of Multinational and Local Company on Soft Skill Importance

4.2 Graduates' Soft Skill Performance

The perception on the graduates' soft skill performance by the employers is based on their performance at the working place for those who has graduated, during the internship or industrial training period. The Table 4.2 below show the result for the graduates' soft skills performance questions. Every item was rated "moderate" by the employers.

Table 4.2: Rating of Graduates' Soft Skill Performance by the Employer

No of Items	Soft Skill Criteria	Mean Score	Performance Level
01	Communication Skill	3.13	Moderate
02	Creative and Critical Thinking	3.10	Moderate
03	Teamwork	3.54	Moderate
04	Program and Project Management Skill	3.01	Moderate
05	Decision Making and Problem Solving	3.06	Moderate
Average		3.17	Moderate

As been shown in Figure 4.2 below, the responses trend of multinational and local company on graduates' soft skill performance are most likely to be the same. Both companies have the same order of rating. However, multinational company rates the same order for Creative & Analytical Thinking and Decision Making & Problem Solving which contributes a mean of 2.96. The descending order rating was Teamwork (p3), Communication Skill (p1), Creative & Analytical Thinking (p2), Project & Program Management Skill (p4) and lastly Decision Making & Problem Solving Skill (p5).
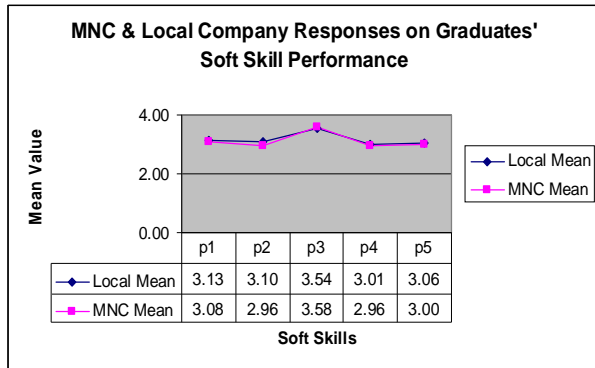
MNC & Local Company Responses on Graduates' Soft Skill Performance

Soft Skills	p1	p2	p3	p4	p5
Local Mean	3.13	3.10	3.54	3.01	3.06
MNC Mean	3.08	2.96	3.58	2.96	3.00

Fig 4.2: Responses Trend of Multinational and Local Company on Graduates' Soft Skill Performance

Ranking of Factors by All Companies

(Weighted Rank: Lack_SoftSk 309, Neg_Att 285, Wrg_Maj 254, Lack_Exp 250, Curr_NotMtgEp 244, Ind_PreferExp 236, Low_CGPA 230, Uni_OverS 222, Limited_Job 207)
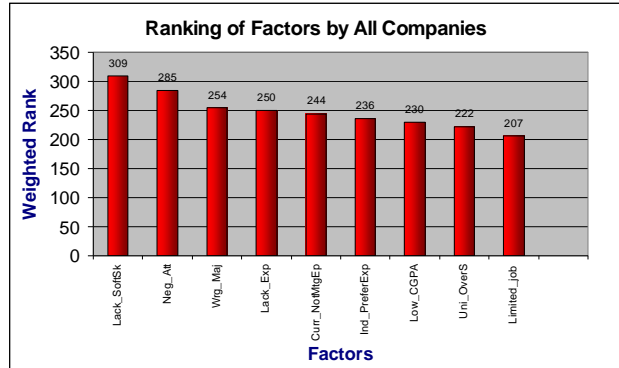
Fig 4.4: Ranking of Graduates' Unemployment Factors by Both Companies

4.3 Soft Skill Importance and Graduates' Soft Skill Performance

This section will combine both result of soft skill importance and soft skill graduates' performance for each soft skills. They are plotted on the same scale for comparison and be showed in different graph for each type of company.
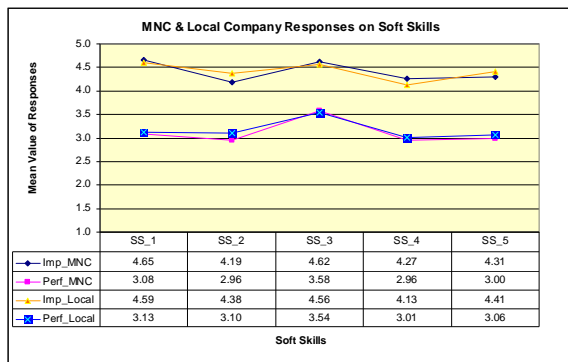
MNC & Local Company Responses on Soft Skills

Soft Skills	SS_1	SS_2	SS_3	SS_4	SS_5
Imp_MNC	4.65	4.19	4.62	4.27	4.31
Perf_MNC	3.08	2.96	3.58	2.96	3.00
Imp_Local	4.59	4.38	4.56	4.13	4.41
Perf_Local	3.13	3.10	3.54	3.01	3.06

Fig 4.3: Responses by Multinational Companies for Soft Skill Importance and Graduates' Performance Combined

Overall, Figure 4.3 shows that the graduates' performances are perceived to be below expectation to the importance of soft skills in the workplace.

4.4 Factors of Graduates' Unemployment

For the first question in Questionnaire "A", employers need to comment the factors of graduates' unemployment by rating them with 5 scales. Start with scale "1" as strongly disagree and "5" as the strongly agree, the graph below shows the result.

Figure 4.4 indicates the ranking of graduates' unemployment factors by both multinational and local company, and explained below:

1. Graduates lack of soft skills such as communication skills (oral/written), teamwork, decision making, and critical thinking.
2. Graduates have negative attitudes such as being choosy, demanding high salary, lack of confidence, no job preparation and lack of initiative in seeking employment
3. Graduates take the wrong majoring and cause them to have insufficient knowledge and wrong kind of expertise.
4. The curricular taught in the university does not meet the employers' expectation
5. Industries prefer to hire experienced workers than fresh graduates
6. Graduates lack of 'hands-on' experience which they cannot apply what is learned.
7. Graduates have low academic achievement (Low CGPA).
8. Universities oversupply with graduates in the wrong field.
9. There are limited job position and low hiring numbers.

4.5 Evaluation on Intel Elite Soft Skill Training

In this section, there are three categories to be evaluated. The categories are speaker, material and facility. The topics of the soft skill training to be evaluated are "Marketable Graduates" (Topic 1), "Effective Communication" (Topic 2), "Creative & Analytical Thinking" (Topic 4), "Problem Solving & Program Management" (Topic 6) and "Interview & Resume Writing" (Topic 7). Using the Likert scale of "1" as the strongly disagree and "5" as the strongly agree, respondents need to rate each of the category in the session that they attended. Outcome of the analyzed data are shown below.

Table 4.3: Evaluation on Speaker Category

SPEAKER	Mean						
Topic / Item	1	2	4	6	7	Avg	Scale Interpretation
Delivery Method	4.20	4.07	4.42	4.44	4.34	4.29	Agree
Delivery Style	4.30	4.29	4.42	4.78	4.43	4.44	Agree
Knowledge	4.40	4.21	4.50	4.89	4.71	4.54	Agree
Language	4.30	4.50	4.58	4.56	4.40	4.47	Agree
Instructions	4.10	3.86	4.42	4.44	4.26	4.22	Agree
Interaction	4.30	4.14	4.25	4.78	4.37	4.37	Agree
Personality	4.10	4.29	4.50	4.89	4.49	4.45	Agree
Average	4.24	4.19	4.44	4.68	4.43		4.40
Evaluation Interpretation	High	High	High	High	High		High

Table 4.3 shows the result on evaluation based on speaker category. There are 7 items for this category to evaluate. They are delivery method, delivery style, knowledge, language, instruction, interaction, and personality. Topic 6 is rated as the highest mean in speaker category with average mean is 4.68 compared to other topics while topic 2 is the lowest mean which contributes a mean of 4.19. The other 3 topics which is topic 1, 4 and 7 give a mean of 4.24, 4.43, and 4.44 accordingly. All the average means for each of the topics in this category give 'high' means.

The respondents 'agree' all items in the speaker's category. They agree in the aspect of delivery method (mean = 4.29), delivery style (mean = 4.44), knowledge (mean = 4.54), language (mean = 4.47), instruction (mean = 4.22), interaction (mean = 4.37), and personality (mean = 4.45). Overall, the average mean of the speaker category for all topics is 4.40 which translate a 'high' mean.

Table 4.4: Evaluation on Material Category

MATERIAL	Mean						
Topic / Item	1	2	4	6	7	Avg	Evaluation Interpretation
Clarity	4.20	4.21	4.33	4.44	4.29	4.29	Agree
Helpful / Useful	4.40	4.21	4.21	4.78	4.17	4.35	Agree
Presentation	4.40	3.86	4.42	4.67	4.40	4.35	Agree
Content	4.40	4.07	4.48	4.22	4.34	4.30	Agree
Avg	4.35	4.09	4.36	4.53	4.30		4.33
Evaluation Interpretation	High	High	High	High	High		High

From the data analysis in Table 4.4, students' rating towards each of the item in material category for each of the topic is at the level of "agree". The material is evaluated based on 4 items which are clarity, helpful/useful, presentation and the content. Clarity means whether the material is clear or easy to understand and helpful/useful means whether the material is useful/helpful during or after the session. The material is also evaluated whether the material is presentable or well designed. The last item evaluated in the material is content, whether it is enough and suitable with the topic. Items clarity contributes an average mean of 4.29, helpful/useful and presentation contributes an average mean of 4.35 each, and content contributes an average mean of 4.30.

Among of all the topics, topic 6 contributes the highest average mean for material category with a mean score of 4.53, followed by topic 4 with a mean score of 4.36, topic 1 with a mean score of 4.35, topic 7 with a mean score of 4.30, and lastly topic 2 with a mean score of 4.09. For all items and topics in material category, overall, the average mean is 4.33 which indicate a "high" mean.

Table 4.5: Evaluation on Facility Category

FACILITY	Mean						
Topic / Item	1	2	4	6	7	Avg	Evaluation Interpretation
Room Layout	4.40	3.64	3.58	4.22	4.00	3.97	Agree
Equipment	4.10	3.71	3.71	4.33	3.97	3.96	Agree
Personal Comfort	4.20	3.71	3.96	4.56	4.03	4.09	Agree
Avg	4.23	3.69	3.75	4.37	4.00		4.01
Evaluation Interpretation	High	High	High	High	High		High

Table 4.5 above shows the evaluation on facility category. Three items that are evaluated for this category are room layout, utensils, and personal comfort. The findings revealed that the mode of mean for this category is 3.71 which are the mean of equipment for topic 2, the mean of utensil for topic 4 and the mean of personal comfort for topic 2. The ascending order of mean based on topics in this category is topic 2 (mean = 3.69), topic 4 (mean = 3.75), topic 7 (mean = 4.00), topic 1 (mean = 4.23) and topic 6 (mean = 4.37).

For all the topics, students' perception on the items of room layout, utensil and personal comfort are at the level of "agree" which contribute a mean of 3.97, 3.96 and 4.09 accordingly. However, the average mean of all the items for all the topics given of facility category falls into the level of "high" whereby the average mean is 4.01.

With the results shown in the tables, comparison is made between the three category; speaker, material and facility. For the category of speaker, the average mean score is 4.40, and for the category of material, the average mean score is 4.33. Meanwhile, for the category of facility, the average mean score is 4.01. Therefore, category of speaker is rated as the highest

category amongst the three categories. However, all the categories are at the level of "high".

This section needs respondents to rate the comments given in the questionnaire. The comments are about a few aspects such of topics, duration and expectation to the soft skill training.

Table 4.6: Rating of Respondents' Comments

Topic Item	Mean						
	1	2	4	6	7	Avg	Scale Interpretation
The topic is of great interest to me	4.50	4.00	4.42	4.67	4.54	4.43	Agree
The duration for this topic session is just right or adequate	4.00	3.50	4.29	4.33	3.89	4.00	Agree
This session should be held at this hour	4.20	3.57	4.08	3.89	3.43	3.83	Agree
The topic is well suited for my study year (this semester)	4.00	4.00	4.17	4.67	4.14	4.20	Agree
This session meets my expectations	4.20	4.07	4.25	4.56	4.26	4.27	Agree
I found this session beneficial	4.30	4.14	4.42	4.67	4.60	4.43	Agree
I would recommend this session to my colleague	4.20	4.21	4.42	4.44	4.49	4.35	Agree
Avg	4.20	3.93	4.29	4.46	4.18		
Scale Interpretation	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	4.35	Agree

From the findings above, the average mean of 4.35 shows that the students "agree" with all the items in this section. The least mean among the items for all the topics is about the time session is held which contributes a mean of 3.83. However, this mean is still at the level of "agree". They "agree" with the items saying that the topic is of great interest to them (mean = 4.43) and they found the session is beneficial (mean = 4.43) whereby these two items are the highest mean compared to the others. Thereby, they would recommend the session to the colleague. This item falls into the second highest mean which is 4.35. "This session meets my expectation", "The topic is well suited to my study year" and "The duration for this topic session is just right or adequate" contributes a mean of 4.27, 4.20 and 4.00 each.

The table 4.6 above revealed that topic 2 has the lowest average mean for all the items in this section which is 3.93 and topic 6 appears as the topic with the highest mean compared to the other topic with the average mean of 4.46.

The table 4.7 below shows the evaluation of all the aspects for each of the topics. The finding indicates that all the topics for the training were rated "high" by the respondents. The average mean is 4.30. The ascending order of rating for the topics are topic 1

(mean = 4.25), topic 4 (mean = 4.26), topic 7 (mean = 4.30), topic 6 (mean = 4.33) and topic 2 (mean = 4.36).

Table 4.7: Overall Rate Of The Soft Skill Topics

Topic Item	Mean						
	1	2	4	6	7	Avg.	Evaluation Interpretation
Overall Rate	4.25	4.36	4.26	4.33	4.30	4.30	High

4.6 Interview

Interview is done to Prof Dr Mohd Salleh Abu and Miss Ili Shahirah Bt Halim, Electrical Engineering student of Universiti Teknologi Mara, Shah Alam.

4.6.1 Interview with an Academician

Prof Dr Mohd Salleh Abu, the Dean of Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, who is actively, involved in soft skill researches. From the interview, he said that employability skills which consist of two skills; technical skills and generic skills, are vital in working place. Technical skills are skills that are related to certain topics and usually we gain from a formal classroom teaching. For example, repairing the computer, or managing company's account. Meanwhile, generic skills are non-technical skills that are highly associated with employability. Generic skills can be applied across a variety of subject domains, jobs and life contexts. He said that our graduates' soft skills are still lacking and need a lot of improvements to meet employers' expectations. And that is why soft skills incompetence is one of the factors that contributes to local graduates' unemployment. About 70 to 80 percents of the factors come from the soft skills deficiencies.

From the opinion of Dr Mohd Salleh, university and industry collaboration is important in order to produce graduates, as required by industries. Collaborations will reduce the mismatch between what the industry wants and what the university can produce. Basically, it bridges the gap between University's curriculum and the relevant industry employability skill, by closely partnering to enhance graduate competency. The examples of university industry collaboration are scholarship for students, fellowship grant for research post-graduates, and research grants for university research work.

He tends to agree that Intel eLite program is a good example of collaboration between university and industry, as an effort to overcome the graduates' unemployment issue. This program includes technical and soft skills training whereby these two skills are important for graduates to be more marketable. The topics identified by the Intel eLite committee seems to be in demand and important. The level of suitability

for each topic with the student's study years is depending on the subject syllabus taken by the students. He commented the collaboration model presented in Intel eLite program, can be adapted by other companies and universities.

4.6.2 Interview with an UiTM Student

Miss Ili Shahirah Halim is a recent graduate and is one of the 30 graduates who achieved First Class Honours Bachelor Degree in the 2007. She is a member of the Intel eLite program and in this interview she expresses her thoughts on reasons for her outstanding achievement.

Overall, the soft skills training topics are very relevant for her soft skills development. However, she had commented that some sessions would be better done in a workshop session mode. The depth of the topics is somewhat sufficient to create the right amount of awareness for any student to realize their weakness and strength, pertaining to their soft skills competency development. She feels that the topics are being introduced at the right study year. "How to be Marketable Graduates" was singled out to be an eye-opener for her and her fellow graduates, to realize the need to plan their academic achievements.

She commented that the Intel eLite program is one of the contributing factors to her success and she recommended that the program to be continued.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From the findings, we can conclude that all the soft skills criteria given in the questionnaire were rated "important" by the employers. The five essential soft skills criteria needed by the employer in the working place in a descending order of importance are Communication skill, Teamwork, Decision Making & Problem Solving, Creative & Critical Thinking and Program & Project Management skill. In the current search for talent workforce scenario, a graduate having technical skills without sufficient relevant soft skills will not be assured of a job.

The finding in this research shows that soft skills, identified by the Intel eLite program, are relevant and very important in the workplace. The soft skills are also demanded by other multinational and local companies which are in different type of business, namely, manufacturing, research and design, services and accounting. Communication and teamwork are the examples of soft skills that are demanded by most employers. Lalithambigai (2003) supported this view and said in her thesis that:

"Today's job seekers not only require specific work-related skills, but they also need good general workplace skill sets. Examples of workplace skills sets being demanding at increasing rates by employers are communication skill."

From the findings that have been mentioned before, it shows that the graduates' soft skill performances are below expectation from the perception's of the employer. Both type of company gave the same rated which is 'moderate' for the graduates' soft skill performance. Therefore, they gave the same pattern when plotted on the same graph.

This finding is supported by another research finding done by a group of lecturers from Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia. In the paper, "Keperluan Kemahiran Pihak Industri Lawan Kemahiran Dimiliki Graduan Di Malaysia" (2007) indicated that there is significant difference between the importance of soft skills and the soft skill performance of the graduates from the context of industries, lecturers and students.

From the previous research, the findings show that graduates' soft skill performances are still below the requirement of the industries. Consequently, there exists a mismatch between teaching focus and the deployment of soft skill through the curriculum in the university and the requirement of soft skill by the industries. This view is supported by the National Economic Action Council (2003) who said that there is a mismatch between the graduates' characteristics exists with the industry requirement graduates' characteristic.

A few soft skill sessions which cover seven topics of the Intel eLite program are evaluated. Overall, the three categories which are speaker, material and facility of the session were rated 'high' by the students. Although the students rated 'high' to every elements of the Intel eLite session, there are still room for improvements.

Acknowledging that soft skills competency is a key for employability, a few actions should be taken to overcome the lacking of soft skill issues. Action should be taken by the university, industry, government and also the student to increase the graduates' employment rates.

Collaboration between university and industry is highly recommended to resolve unemployment caused by soft skill deficiency. To encourage more collaboration, the government should give incentives to industry and university, alike. It can come in the form of tax exemption for the money spent on such collaborations and training or in the form of budget for university to upgrade facilities to cater for industry related training and research work.

In conclusion, the mismatch of graduates produced by the educational institute and the industry requirement seems to be the critical factor of unemployment among our local graduates. Generic skills taught in university have to be improved to the requirement of the industries. Knowing the requirement of the industry may reduce the unemployment rates of our graduates. Therefore, it is

recommended that companies and institute of higher learning to deploy the Intel eLite concept as well. Intel eLite is collaborating with the faculty and review the syllabus so that the faculty have close working relationship with Intel. Intel eLite program is a 'win win' concept of program implemented whereby both party gains from the program.

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