

STUDENT EMPOWERMENT AND RESEARCH UNIT (SERU): A CASE STUDY IN ENHANCING DEVELOPMENT OF SOFT SKILLS AMONG TERTIARY INSTITUTIONAL STUDENTS

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Abstract

Student Affairs Division in University of Malaya launched a unit called SERU in late 2010 to enhance the development of soft skills among our undergraduates in order to increase employability and value of our graduates. This case study describes the process of empowering the students via student designed programmes in detail. It is envisioned that empowerment is driven by student engagement programmes through a unique "training the trainers" module that results in high impact and yet cost effective sustainable student driven projects which will be evaluated and assessed in phases. Other issues like the challenges faced in the setting up of the unit and the methodology used in empowering the students are also described in the paper. The paper also reports the findings of a needs analysis conducted through key informant and user surveys (a qualitative study). The need analysis is done to highlight the gaps in soft skills needed by the students and aid in mapping the strategies to resolve it. It is hoped that with sharing the case study, this will lead to improvement in student driven projects that can be instituted in other tertiary institutions in other parts of the world.

Keywords: empowerment, soft skills, needs analysis, program mapping, qualitative study.

1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we describe the process of setting up the unit, its challenges in empowering the students via "train the trainers" programme and the findings of a qualitative research with key informants in assessing the gaps where soft skills are needed. Soft skills are personal values and interpersonal skills that determine a person's ability to fit into a particular structure, such as a project team or a company. According to Towner as cited in [1], soft skills refer to those attributes that enable effective teamwork, communication, presentation, leadership, customer service and innovative problem solving. As regarding to the future work, soft skills were supposed to enhance graduates ability to lead an organization, to assess the performance of the staff, to make clear and well-balanced decisions and to develop and communicate ideas and visions effectively. It has been reported that the student population has literacy issues that include technology competency, problem-solving ability, critical thinking, and communication competency [2,3]. Employers worldwide look for well rounded graduates who possess discipline-specific knowledge and skills (hard skills), desired soft skills and preferably relevant work experience. They would like higher education institutions to produce 'work-ready' graduates with adequate soft skills. However, in the last ten years, employers in Malaysia have openly criticised that Malaysian graduates are generally academically proficient but they severely lack the "soft skills" that are essential ingredients to compete in the globalised workforce in an information age today [4].

1.1 Soft skills in the Malaysian higher educational context

In the Malaysian context, 'soft skills' can be said to incorporate all aspects of generic skills that include the cognitive elements associated with non-academic skills [5]. Soft skills are identified to be important and critical in the job market. Majority of these soft skills are associated with positive values,

leadership skills, team work force, communicative skills and life-long learning. Please refer to Appendix A.

The study entitled *Kajian Pengangguran (Unemployment Survey)* that was carried out on 19 June 2002 [6] highlighted ideas on producing graduates with outstanding characteristics pertaining to their field of studies. It proposed that inclusion of soft skills will result in producing graduates who are well rounded and thus will be suitably employed. These graduates will have desirable personality, knowledgeable, technologically competent and skilled. The study also listed the views of employers, students, graduates, lecturers, and university's administrators on the university's curriculum. As a result between 2003-2011, Malaysian universities have seen an increase in organized activities to promote soft skills among university students.

This has prompted the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in 2007 to announce that public Universities in Malaysia must introduce soft skill elements and incorporate them in the undergraduate syllabus. MOHE had developed a framework suggesting the approach that should be taken in implementing soft skills in higher institutions [5]. However, higher institutions are allowed to make variations in the implementation aspect. Soft skills which are normally referred as "people skills" are not easily taught nor easily measured. This has led to many interpretations and left to the ingenuity of individual lecturers to embed the soft skills into the curriculum at the faculties.

1.2 The Setting up of SERU

Currently in University of Malaya, most soft skills and professionalism are embedded in the curriculum of the courses offered to the students at various faculties. Soft skills training are also offered by SKET (Section on Co-curricular and electives) and CITRA (Centre for Industrial training). The formation of SKET in the university had also allowed soft skills to be developed campus wide in university courses that are credited and thus given the importance that it deserves. The Centre for Industrial Training (CITRA) has given access to many final year students 'on the job' training in various institutions. Much soft skills are also developed during their years in campus either involving themselves in residential colleges activities or within clubs or associations in the university.

However, there is not a single body looking at coordination of the soft skills development in the university. It is also obvious that not all students in the university are benefiting from the various soft skill development activities around the campus. It is projected only 15-20 percent of the student population is involved actively in college /association activities that would give them the additional skills in leadership and other soft skills that are essential components of 'well-rounded graduates'. It is with this concern that the unit, Student Empowerment and Research Unit (SERU) is proposed under the auspices of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Student Affairs Division) to develop and provide a comprehensive model for creating student-friendly and learning-supportive campus environments. It is envisaged that SERU will coordinate and assess these soft skills development, as well as enable objective measurement of soft skills achievement.

In addition, universities in Malaysia including University of Malaya (UM) are seeking and recruiting an increasingly diverse student body, yet there is internal resistance to dealing with the learning issues that come with the diverse abilities, aptitudes, and skills possessed by the current generation of students. As a result, there are concerns being voiced by faculty in all sectors as to whether the core mission of the institution should include developmental or remedial coursework. Strange and Banning in their book[7] advocated that there are four conditions for successful learning: inclusion, safety, involvement, and community. The wide range of ability, preparedness, background, opportunity, and motivation of higher education students will require more varied and holistic approaches to inclusive learning.

The unit is also aware that the current generation of university students has a preferred mode of activity and interaction that does not align well with the current educational system. Educational consultant, Marc Prensky [8] who coined the term "Digital Natives," writes that today's students are not interested in large lecture halls. They prefer informal small-group discussion, often through text messaging or e-mail, as a means to gain an understanding of curriculum content. They choose search engines to find information and frown on library-centered research methods or the local course management system (CMS). The social nature of Digital Native students, as well as their desire for experiential learning, sends a message to educators that it is important to embed interaction into the

curriculum. Teaching methods and pedagogies, institutional resources and commitment, and the traditional ways of engaging students must be reengineered to meet the contemporary needs of students and the future workforce in Malaysia and in the world.

1.2.1 Objectives of SERU

The general objective of SERU is to create an environment that is conducive for our students to achieve the standard of graduates expected of an internationally recognized university. UM graduates must be empowered, confident, possesses worldly wisdom, communicate effectively, employable and strong in leadership qualities. The specific objectives are : (1)to map out and act as a coordinator of all student activities that take place in UM, (2) to assess and close the gaps that exist between the needs of the students and the campus community in a dynamic manner, (3)to provide a platform for students to interact with each other of similar problems, (4) to develop a core group of student leaders that are able to influence others and develop their peers towards empowering themselves, and (5) to evaluate the effectiveness and outcomes of intervention programmes carried out.

1.2.2 Implications of SERU

The immediate implications of having a unit such as SERU in the university is that there would be an increase in engagement and inclusion of students of all levels into the campus activities, plus there would be empowerment of students on issues of concern e.g. sexual and reproductive health, environmental wellness and other worldly issues. The long-term implications are the improved marketability and employability of UM graduates as well as improvement in level of wellness in relevant areas such as mental, occupational, environmental and physical.

needs analysis of soft skills – a preliminary analysis

This section describes one of the research activities conducted by SERU in the last few months with the aims to explore the real needs of soft skills development in UM.

1.3 Methods

The preliminary study attempted to explore the subjective meanings that students comprehend about soft skills, thus qualitative research method was chosen. Qualitative research has been shown to discover the real meanings and patterns while quantitative seeks causes and relationships demonstrated statistically. Participants were generally the Dean of the faculties or a representative of the higher management of the faculties. Interview data was also obtained from students who were randomly selected in each faculty.

1.4 Data Processing and Findings

Framework for coding were created based on the key ideas asked in the semi-structured interviews, which focused on the students views on the types of activities. With the use of Nvivo 9.0, the transcription of the interviews conducted with the students and dean/deputy dean of both Faculty A and S were then coded using the pre-designed coding framework.

1.4.1 Differences at Faculty Level

Based on the codes found in the interviews, the trend that emerged suggested that there is a marked difference in how the students from different faculty perceived the activities organised by the faculties and the types of soft skills related to such activities. Fig 1 depicts the screen capture of Nvivo which depicts the differences between the faculties, the students from Faculty A seems to be more aware of what constitutes the types of activities that relate to the soft skills. These students managed to list the activities organised by the faculty and identify the types of soft skills they acquired from being involved in these activities. Whilst, students of Faculty S revealed the lack of activities that address the soft skills components.

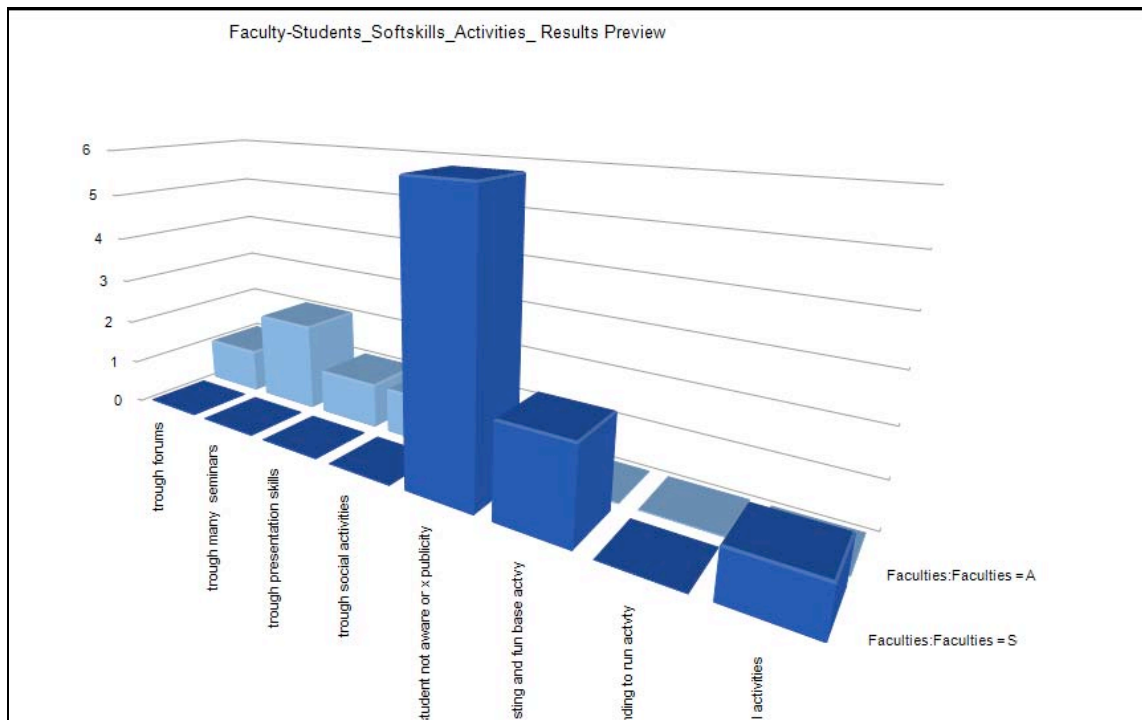


Fig 1: Comparison between Faculty A and Faculty S in terms of activities and types of soft skills found in activities.

Based on Table 1, among the reasons cited by students in Faculty of S for the lack of activities organised were: lack of publicity that inform these students on the activities planned, lack of consideration in incorporating activities that relate to the interest of the participants, lack of funding allocated for such activities as well as lack of activities that allow the students to have hands on experience utilizing their soft skills. Students from Faculty A were able to list out the activities organized by their faculty which were related to the soft skills. These students listed activities such as seminars, forums, presentation skills training sessions and social activities.

Table 1: Coding References showing the differences in students' responses in Faculty A and S.

	Faculty S	Faculty A
1 : through forums	0	1
2 : through seminars	0	2
3 : through presentation skills	0	1
4 : through social activities	0	1
5 : student not aware or no publicity	6	0
6 : lack of activity in faculty or lack or interest and fun based activities	2	0
7 : lack of funding to run activities	0	0
8 : lack of practical activities	1	0

There seems to be starked differences in the feedback obtained from the students in both faculties.

For example, in the case of Faculty S, when asked about their views on the activities related to soft skills organised by their faculty, Student S001 lamented that:

“...I am not aware that our own faculty organizes such activities.”

“...The organiser does not publish information about these activities via emails, so we don't know”

While in faculty A, it seems that the students were aware of the types of activities and their relation to soft skills. For instance, Student A008 said:

“There are quite a number of activities that involved the soft skills, ... for example the activities that involve the communities at large.”

In lieu of the findings, the interviews conducted with the dean of both faculties were deciphered to detect the reasons for the differences in the way both faculties plan and carry out activities which address the soft skills of students.

1.4.2 Perceptions of the Faculty's Higher Management

Based on the coding on the interviews with the deans of both faculties A and S; there seems to be difference in the manner the deans perceived how the soft skills are embedded into the programmes. Table 2 demonstrates the difference.

Table 2: Coding references showing the differences in the higher management's students' responses in Faculty A and S.

	Faculty S	Faculty A
1 : How faculty's curriculum address soft skill.	0	0
2 : Each course department have act towards s.skills	0	2
3 : Embeded in the course content	2	2
4 : S.skills developed in tutorial classes	0	1
5 : Students are encourage to handle activities themself	0	1
6 : How embedded in Non academic actvy	0	0
7 : Agree, much s.skill embedded in non academic actvy	3	4
8 : ASIAN Camp (science fac)	1	0
9 : Carrer related prg	1	1
10: Mobility program or student exchange prg (science Fac)	1	0
11 : Seminar, forums, interaction actvty (API)	0	2
12 : Fac dont have much non academic actvy	1	0

The dean from Faculty A, a non-science based faculty, was of the opinion that soft skills could be entrenched in the tutorials whereby the students learn how to accomplish tasks in groups. In addition, he stated that activities like debate or cooperation among students in carrying extra-curricular activities would be a good avenue for development of soft skills among the students. The dean from Faculty S felt that the nature of the courses would have ensured that the students are exposed to various aspects of soft skills. The dean of faculty S, a science based faculty, indicated that the laboratory sessions attended by the students require them to learn and apply their soft skills in completing the group based experimental studies. Furthermore, the students from faculty S were required to analyse and evaluate each other's work, thus these students will be forced to learn and apply interpersonal related soft skills in order to accomplish the assigned laboratory tasks.

When the feedback of the students of both faculties are mapped against the feedback from the deans, it is evident that the interpretation of the faculty's higher management impacts the implementation of soft skills in activities related to the teaching-learning process, as well as extra-curricular programmes planned by the faculties. In Faculty A, the higher management was of the opinion that activities not directly related to the instruction process would be a viable option to expose the students to various aspects of soft skills. In accordance with that, Faculty A seemed to plan more extra forums, seminars and activities which address the soft skills training for the students. Whilst the dean from the Faculty S viewed the existent laboratory sessions, an integral portion of the learning and teaching process as an adequate avenue to entrench soft skills into the teaching-learning process. Thus, Faculty S seemed not to be too concerned about the planning and implementation of soft skills related extra-curricular activities.

Based on the findings, issues such as the interpretation of the higher management regarding soft skills can be one of many issues and challenges faced by SERU.

2 ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

SERU has two components: the “empowerment” component which seeks to develop a core group of student leaders that are able to influence others and develop their peers towards empowering themselves while the “research” component seeks to assess and close the gaps that exist between the needs of the students and the campus community in a dynamic manner. As the two components are of equal importance, the lack of human resource is heavily felt when both activities are at its peak.

The unit seeks to develop the core group of student leaders via actively engaging a few groups of student leaders through various avenues. Among the engagement methods used is having regular monthly ‘think tank’ sessions with the elected students body. It has resulted in many formulation of student driven ideas that will need to be instituted in the near future. Another method is via engagement with groups of potential leaders like the “Student ambassadors group” and the ‘Sahabat SERU (friends of SERU) group” via the frequently used social network. These groups plus the leaders of associations and colleges committees are then invited for training in programmes like critical thinking courses, responsible leadership modules, communication courses and even courses on etiquette and gender sensitization. With the training they received, the onus is on them to share what they have learnt with their other friends through various innovative ways that are much more cost-effective and productive. A daunting challenge is to keep the students stimulated and wanting to empower other students.

Training of the trainers is also needed to ensure that the contents shared are of high quality and will meet the expectation of the university. This would be a big challenge. To address this challenge, the unit with the collaboration of two consultant firms are now designing a unique “training the trainers” module that will be instituted in early September 2011. The unique “training the trainers” programme will be targeted at current and upcoming student leaders in the university. The content of the programme will emphasize on appropriate teaching and learning methods for the ‘Y’ generation.

Currently, the unit has begun to make several assessment of the current situation, i.e. mapping out the current and the future activities of students within the university. The assessments were conducted via key informant interviews with college principles, deans of faculties, directors of centres and heads of units/sections involved in soft skill development. A matrix is being developed based on both quantitative data gathered through a questionnaire and qualitative data gathered through the interviews. The purpose is to establish a database on all student activities and later on to coordinate the activities so that they are of high quality and cost effective. The unit has also interviewed undergraduate students on the adequacy of soft skills training in UM. Analysis of the interviews and questionnaires distributed to the campus communities will unearth the gaps. In the future, intervention programmes will have to be designed to close the gaps as much as possible without affecting the academic performance of the students.

3 FUTURE DIRECTION

Another plan in the pipeline is the baseline survey of all new students via an e-survey that will be conducted among fresh undergraduates during the orientation week in the beginning of the new semester 2011/12. The students will then be coached via their academic advisor to develop an e-portfolio that will include all their involvement in soft skills outside the faculties. It will also include their reflections and their road maps.

It is envisaged that in the near future, a forum of deans and experts will be created with the Deputy VC(HEP) as the chairperson. The forum will discuss on matters pertaining to soft skills in the varsity and the best approaches/practise to develop our graduates.

Assessment of the soft skills obtained in the varsity will be conducted by SERU, HEP through a rubric that will be developed to give fair weightage to the work done at various levels. The end result would be the graduates of UM will take with them along with the academic transcript another transcript (which will measure the soft skill competency) that can be used to aid employability.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The effort to enhance soft skills amongst our students should be a joint effort between the students, academicians, higher management in the residential colleges, faculties and the Universities. SERU can be developed into a unit that coordinates and facilitates the effective implementation of the soft

skill development campus wide and thus would be able to evaluate and measure the level of soft skills objectively through various structured means. It is indeed a daunting task to change the mindset of our young students who were exposed to rote learning styles and educator led programmes to develop not only themselves but to share with others the newly acquired skills through student led programmes. This is a challenge that needs to be taken up if University is keen to stay relevant and in keeping with the times.

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Appendix A

The Must Have And Good To Have Elements Of Soft Skills

No.	Soft Skills	Must Have Elements (Sub-Skills)	Good To Have Elements (Sub-Skills)
1.	Communicative Skills	Ability to deliver idea clearly, effectively and with confidence either orally or in writing Ability to practice active listening skill and respond. Ability to present clearly and confidently to the audience.	Ability to use technology during presentation. Ability to discuss and arrive at a consensus. Ability to communicate with individual from a different cultural background. Ability to expand one's own communicative skill. Ability to use non-oral skills.
2.	Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills	Ability to identify and analyze problems in difficult situation and make justifiable evaluation. Ability to expand and improve thinking skills such as explanation, analysis and evaluate discussion. Ability to find ideas and look for alternative solutions.	Ability to think beyond.. Ability to make conclusion based on valid proof. Ability to withstand and give full responsibility. Ability to understand and accommodate oneself to the varied working environment.
3.	Team Work	Ability to build a good rapport , interact and work effectively with others. Ability to understand and play the role of a leader and follower alternatively. Ability to recognize and respect other?s attitude, behavior and beliefs.	Ability to give contribution to the planning and coordinate group work. Responsible towards group decision.
4.	Life-Long Learning & Information Management Skill	Ability to find and manage relevant information from various sources. Ability to receive new ideas performs autonomy learning.	Ability to develop an inquiry mind and seek knowledge.
5.	Entrepreneurship skill	Ability to identify job opportunities.	Ability to propose business opportunity. Ability to build, explore and seek business opportunities and job. Ability to be self-employed.
6.	Ethics, Moral & Professional	Ability to understand the economy crisis, environment and social cultural aspects professionally. Ability to analyze make problem solving decisions related to ethics.	Ability to practice ethical attitudes besides having the responsibility towards society.
7.	Leadership skill	Knowledge of the basic theories of leadership. Ability to lead a project.	Ability to understand and take turns as a leader and follower alternatively. Ability to supervise members of a group.

(Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006)

Footnote: Each of the above soft skills comprised of several sub-skills. These sub-skills are divided into two categories of implementation. The first category is the soft skills that every individual **must have** and the second category represents soft skills that are **good to have**. Table 1 shows the seven soft skills and the two categories of sub-skills respectively.