

SoTL

Bulletin Vol 1/2022

Fostering Advancement and Innovation in
Teaching and Learning

A publication by the Centre for Applied Learning and Multimedia

Editorial Info

Patron

Professor Datuk Dr Mohamad Kadim Suaidi

Advisor

Professor Dr Ahmad Hata Rasit

Chief Editor

Dr Kartini Abd Ghani

Editors

Dr Nor Mazlina Ghazali

Ts. Dr Dayang Azra Awang Mat

Design and Layout

Marzuki Barahim

Views expressed by the author(s) in the article do(es) not necessarily reflect the views of the Editorial Committee. Images are taken from open sources databases namely [unplash.com](https://unsplash.com) and freepick.com.

All articles published in this bulletin are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Content in this Volume

1. Teaching and Learning Activities: UNIMAS Students' and Lecturers' Perspectives
2. Evaluation on Team-Based Self-Directed Learning in Undergraduate Year 5 Surgical Posting – A Preliminary Report
3. Detection of At-Risk Students Via Data Mining of Temporal Online Behaviour Patterns
4. Student's Perception Towards Emergency Remote Learning During COVID-19 In Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
5. Games Based Application for Mandarin Language Study PBC 0033 Mandarin Level 1 At Faculty of Language Study, UNIMAS
6. Progit: Programming Instructional Framework for Cognitive Science
7. Understanding Educators' Beliefs About Transformative Teaching and Learning: An Examination Within UNIMAS
8. Investigating the Attitude Factor Affecting the Adoptions of Synchronous E-Learning Conferencing Applications
9. Feedback from UNIMAS Second Year Medical Students Towards Implementation of Flipped Pathology Classroom
10. Student's Performance Through Gamification Implementation In Teaching and Learning Activities In Quantity Surveying Programme, Unimas
11. Developing Soft Skills in Students Through Final Year Project
12. Engaging Students in a Critical Style of Reflective Practice Through Formative Assessment
13. Pycodevr: Immersive Visualisation of Python Coding using Virtual Reality

Developing Soft Skills in Students Through Final Year Project

Project Leader
Noor'ain Aini

Teams Members
Dr Wan Sofiah Meor Osman | Dr Wan Robiah Meor Osman | Noorhaslina Senin |
Nordiana Ahmad Nordin

INTRODUCTION

Discussions on the importance of graduates mastering academic knowledge and gaining soft skills to increase their employability never cease. Acknowledging the importance of lifelong skills for life and employment alike, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) introduced the soft skills development module in 2006 to complement academic knowledge or hard skills. The seven soft skill components introduced (refer to Table 1) were supposed to be incorporated into the undergraduate curriculum structure either formally, informally or non- formal. They are geared toward enriching students' learning experiences to produce more competent, competitive, and versatile graduates.

Communication Skills CS

Critical Thinking and Problem Solving CTPS

Teamwork Skills TS

Lifelong Learning and Information Management LL

Entrepreneurship Skills KK

Ethics and Moral Professionalism EM

Leadership Skill LS

Table 1: Seven Soft Skill Elements

Source: Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2006)

While research on soft skills is admittedly inexhaustible, they are, however, mostly limited to the issue of soft skills and employability, soft skills and taught courses, soft skills and the industry, or soft skills and the technical fields, and carried out almost in its

entirety, quantitatively (e.g. Samat, Annual & Md Rashidi 2019; Sharberi et al. 2019; Mariappan, Veloo & Shanmugam 2018; Haron et al. 2019; Tan, Kanesan & Ali 2019; Date, Singh & Remeli, 2018; Succi & Canovi, 2019; Ngoo, Tiong & Pok, 2015; Tan & Tang 2015; Syed Ahmad 2013; Sejzi & Yuh 2013; Dharmarajan, Pachigalla & Lanka 2012; dan Phang & Hung 2012). The aspect of students' ability and capability to develop their soft skills in the FYP process, however, has largely been ignored. FYPs constitute a formal learning mode that upholds independent learning (IL) whereby, in most cases, students carry out a one-year research project individually. This process combined academic knowledge and soft skills to complement each other to enable students to conduct their research and complete the write-ups of their FYPs.

This study thus intends to discover students' perceptions regarding their roles in developing soft skills when conducting their FYPs, besides exploring their experiences during the entire process. This study also seeks to identify solutions - as in best practices - to improve the roles of both students and lecturers in developing students' soft skills through the process of FYP. However, for the purpose of this paper, only the first objective will be addressed.

All programs in the five social sciences and humanities-based faculties at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) chosen in this study offered the FYP courses in the final year of their study plans. The five faculties involved are the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (FSSH), Faculty of Cognitive Science and Human Development (FCSHD), Faculty of Language and Communication (FLC), Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts (FACA) and Faculty of Economics and Business (FEB). Other than the Linguistic Program in the FLC where FYPs carry the weightage of six credits, all the other programs however have a seven-credits worth of FYPs distributed in two courses that spread over two semesters. In terms of percentage, the FYPs take about 5 - 6% of the total credits offered with a minimum load of 120 credits for an undergraduate degree.

It is worth mentioning that with a few exceptions, the participants in this study conducted both their FYPs entirely online due to the Movement Control Order imposed at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The closing of universities caused much delay and FYP1 only began in mid-October 2020 and ended in mid-Feb 2021. FYP2, meanwhile, began in mid-March 2021 and was completed in mid-July 2021.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

While researchers have demonstrated that soft skills, either embedded or in standalone courses, are inarguably significant elements required for effective teaching-learning, internship, and higher graduate employability, there is a paucity of literature examining the significance of soft skills in FYPs. This study proposed that developing soft skills in their FYPs would enable students to apply and further enhance the necessary skills for conducting better research and producing better quality writing products. Given the fact that FYP is conducted independently, and mostly individually, over two semesters, it is therefore imperative to understand how students perceive their roles and experiences in developing soft skills during the entire process, especially with the sudden transition to an emergency remote teaching mode because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Equally important is exploring students' perspectives on the roles of supervisors in the FYP process, considering that FYP acts as a personal and one-to-one interaction space between students and their supervisors.

Left unexplored, the effectiveness of soft skills training that students had received earlier on in their preliminary courses, and the ability of students to transfer this training into their research and writing exercises towards the end of their study, will remain unknown. This study hence aims to close the gap in the literature concerning the significance and importance of soft skills in the FYP process, and of equal importance, to provide a point of view from the qualitative perspective to balance quantitative studies which are aplenty.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This qualitative study adopted an exploratory design to gain background information on the general nature of the problem to provide insight into the issue of soft skills and FYP. Rather than measuring the level of soft skills, this study, however, identifies which soft skills are critical to be developed for effective FYP supervision. Because of the restrictions imposed by the MCO, the study had to be adjusted to reflect the undergoing of the FYP process online instead of on a face-to-face basis.

Data was collected through in-depth online interviews with 22 final-year students from the social sciences and humanities backgrounds across the five faculties mentioned earlier. Three programs, namely Strategic Communication, English for Global Communication and Animation, were exempted because they have yet to have students undergoing FYP when the study commenced in 2020. The Accountancy Program, meanwhile, does not require students to conduct an FYP in compliance with the

Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA). As all five faculties differ in their fields of study, naturally their conduct and assessment of FYPs would also differ to a certain degree. Thus, additional data were obtained by reviewing course outlines, course plans, course assessments and other relevant materials that provided a basic understanding of the overall picture of FYP supervision in the respective faculties.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile

The main independent variables chosen in the study would be students' gender, number of students supervised by the same supervisor, frequency of FYP consultation and frequency of chapter submission. Since the FYP was conducted online, other factors were also taken into consideration, such as the location of students when they were doing their FYPs and the level of their internet connection. Both were considered to have direct and indirect impacts on the FYP process as not only did these factors determine the outcome of the FYPs, but they also influenced the level of soft skills development in students depending on the kind of experience that they went through.

Demographic Characteristics	n
Gender	
Male	12
Female	10
Faculty	Faculty
Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts	6
Faculty of Cognitive Science and Human Development	4
Faculty of Economics and Business	4
Faculty of Language and Communication	2
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities	6

Table 2: Profile of Participants (n = 22)

Table 2 shows the distribution of participants according to gender and faculty. Altogether, 22 participants were identified representing 22 programs across the 5 non-science faculties. Participants were randomly recommended by the Program Coordinator based on the criteria set by the research, namely the student's gender as well as academic rank of supervisor. Despite careful planning, the study ended with slightly more female ($n = 12$) students than male ($n = 10$) and more lecturers with the grade DS52 and below.

Preliminary Findings

As all participants in this study conducted their FYPs during the COVID-19 pandemic, the process required arrangements that suited the situation and both parties. Hence, consultations were either carried out online or face to face or a combination of both (hybrid). The selection of supervisor was either done by students or assigned by Program Coordinators. Likewise, the titles of FYPs were either initiated by students or suggested by their supervisors. In this study, the majority ($n = 18$) of participants worked on titles of their own choices.

The location as well as the level of internet connection of participants when they were undergoing their FYPs was also of the utmost importance. 16 participants conducted their FYPs online while 5 were present on campus during the whole process. One student completed his FYP1 at home in the first semester but returned to campus in the second semester, thus enabling him to complete his FYP2 on campus.

41% ($n = 9$) of participants attested to having strong internet connections, 45% ($n = 10$) had moderate connections, while 14% ($n = 3$) had poor connections. Out of 16 students who conducted their FYPs at home, 6 had a strong internet connection, 8 with moderate connection, and 2 had poor connections. Meanwhile, out of 5 students who conducted their FYPs on campus, only two had a strong internet connection, two had a moderate connection and one claimed to have a poor connection.

The level of internet connections inadvertently posed challenges to students, especially in terms of accessibility for consultation and communication with both supervisors and friends. In almost all cases, it restricted access to resources and the ability to collect data well as the interpretation of data especially for participants who conducted desktop research. The level of internet connection also affected the frequency of consultations that students had with their supervisors, including those who were present on campus. The findings suggested that participants with poor internet connections had to resort to fewer consultations. The most frequent is twice a month, while one student said she rarely had a consultation with her supervisor at all.

However, participants who have moderate and strong internet connections did not necessarily have more frequent consultations with their respective supervisors either. This could be attributed to two reasons. One, the issue of affordability whereby online learning imposed a heavy financial burden on students. Thus, having a strong internet connection seemed inconsequential if students could not afford to buy the phone data. Two participants resorted to communicating with their supervisors via Whatsapp and email, which was not very effective in terms of clarifying points and conveying messages across. Second, is the issue of a technicality where a couple of students admitted to being technologically illiterate. The issue is compounded when the supervisor also had trouble adjusting to online learning. At least two participants stated their supervisors did not execute online meetings due to their unfamiliarity with online technology. Having less consultation thus required students to be more independent and resourceful in the process of completing their FYPs, indicating a direct correlation with the development of their soft skills.

Another factor considered to have a direct impact on the development of students' soft skills during the completion of their FYPs was the number of students supervised by each supervisor. The findings highlighted a quite significant variance in the group size, with the highest number of students supervised by the same supervisor at 17, while the least was 2 students. Programs in which the supervisors had to supervise more than 15 FYP students were all from FSSH - namely International Studies (16 students), Politics and Government and Industrial Relations and Labor Studies at 17 students each. These three programs were identified to have 5 lecturers or fewer vis-à-vis a large number of students (between 85 - 95 students per enrolment).

The study found that a few lecturers who supervised more FYP students were still able to conduct frequent consultations than those who have fewer students. Similarly, some lecturers who supervised more FYP students required their students to submit their FYP drafts more often than those who have fewer students. The two students who admitted to never submitting any FYP working drafts at all only had one or two other students doing their FYPs under the same supervisor. Although the findings showed little correlation between the number of students supervised by the same supervisor with the frequency of consultation and draft submission, the argument still withstands that the quality of supervision afforded by lecturers who have a large group of students would be compromised due to time constraints. A few participants stated that they mostly turned to their peers for information and guidance than to their supervisors.

Definition of Soft Skills

Despite the regular use of the term soft skills, almost all participants seemed to have difficulties describing what constitutes soft skills to them. Their definitions, thus, vary widely. Interestingly, though, their definitions almost altogether fit into one skill specified by MOHE, which is communication skills (CS). They described soft skills as interpersonal skills, common sense, people skills, human skills and social skills that an individual possessed. Only one participant came close to the widely accepted definition of soft skills, in which she described soft skills as "social skills, how we would solve problems, communicate, interact with people and critical thinking". Other definitions included time management, independence, and technical and practical skills.

Most Dominant Soft Skills Developed During the FYP Process

Although the study discovered that more than half of the participants (n = 13) were not aware that they were applying soft skills in their FYP journey, data revealed that all of them believed that soft skills are important to produce quality FYPs. The most mentioned soft skills are communication skills followed by critical thinking, problem-solving and information management. When asked which of the seven skills were dominant during the process of completing their FYPs, ten participants concurred that they mostly developed communication skills because online consultation means obtaining information will rely heavily on their ability to communicate effectively with their supervisors. This would include getting clarification for points and ensuring their messages get across.

Meanwhile, eight participants emphasized that they mostly developed critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Again, conducting FYPs online called for resourcefulness on the student's part, as they need to mostly work on their own. Working independently enhances the student's ability to think critically and analytically or, as one student aptly named it, "thinking outside the box". Being left mostly on their own also enhanced their creativity to solve problems that may arise during the FYP process.

Challenges and Motivation

All students stressed the challenges in managing their academic knowledge and soft skills in the completion of their FYPs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to necessity, they must interact virtually or use both virtual and physical platforms to communicate with others, especially their supervisor. While most participants (n = 13) focused mainly

on the technical challenge of switching from face-to-face learning to online learning, a couple of participants (n = 3) mentioned that conducting FYPs fully online may lead to a lack of understanding as they may misinterpret the information that the supervisor was trying to deliver.

FYP and Social Interaction

In the process of conducting FYP, students were expected to merge theory and practice since all participants in this study conducted their FYPs within two semesters in the final year. The process involved "guiding and growing" both their academic knowledge and soft skills. The metaphor of guiding and growing referenced by Bergh et al. (2006) and discussed by Meor Osman (2017) addresses the importance of interaction in learning spaces as part of the development process. Guidance from their supervisor and assistance from their friends and others are vital in conducting their FYPs.

"... we discussed with our supervisor to obtain opinions, to get feedback, regarding our progress..." (7B)

Their academic knowledge and soft skills grew naturally throughout the process. They learned through direct and indirect interaction with their supervisors, friends, and others. Goffman (1983) defined social interaction as the process through which two or more people act and react to each other in their environment. This study found that this process supports the development of academic knowledge and soft skills.

FYP and Soft Skills Development

Conducting FYPs during the pandemic posed serious challenges to students, especially in managing academic knowledge and soft skills, as both are supposed to complement each other. If they manage their academic knowledge and soft skills well, they can improve both, and produce quality FYPs. However, the pandemic had impacted the quality of the learning experience due to dependence on virtual platforms to interact with others, especially their supervisors. The majority of participants (n = 19) believed that the completion of their FYPs directly or indirectly motivated them to develop their soft skills. They learned a lot about academic knowledge and soft skills in the process of completing their FYPs. The study discovered that most students were initially unaware they were applying soft skills in the process of completing their FYP. But all agreed to have noticed the differences in their soft skills development after completing their FYPs, such as improvement of their communication skills, critical thinking, problem solving and teamwork.

"... not so, it just like a part of learning so this course, yes I'm learning so I did it so just like that never thought while conducting FYP actually we (hmm ahh) soft skills, (ahh) we practise them..." (15D)

Moral support and help from individuals who were close to them, especially their supervisors, was also important motivator for them to proceed with their FYP journey. Guidance in the form of feedback provides the students with evidence about their current knowledge and skills development. Receiving feedback from a variety of sources as mentioned above helps them in increasing their academic knowledge and developing their soft skills. Effective feedback assists students in improving their academic knowledge and soft skills by projecting what they know and what they need to keep working on (Chappuis, 2012). Besides improving the performance of learners, feedback is also important in building their confidence and sense of achievement (Yorke, 2001; Knight, 2001). Thus, FYP is one of the important platforms to be used to develop their academic knowledge and soft skills.

CONCLUSION

This study highlighted the challenges that students faced while conducting FYPs during the COVID-19 pandemic that necessitated the switching to online learning and consultation. All participants viewed the FYP process as "guiding and growing" whereby they must merge theory and practice with guidance from their supervisors whose feedbacks are invaluable. They also received direct and indirect help from others like their friends, consequently strengthening their teamwork skills. Although many did not realise at the beginning of the FYP journey they were applying soft skills, they noticed the improvement in their soft skills upon completion of their FYPs a year later. They strongly believed that soft skills are important to produce a quality FYP.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researchers owe our appreciation to the Center for Applied Learning and Multimedia (CALM), UNIMAS for granting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Grant (grant number SoTL/FSSK/2020(1)/011) without which this study would be impossible.

REFERENCES

- Bergh, A. M., Van Staden, C. W., Joubert, P. M., Kruger, C., Pickworth, G. E., Roos, J. L., ... Lindique, B. G. (2006). Medical students' perceptions of their development of 'soft skills' Part II: The development of 'soft skills' through 'guiding and growing'. *South African Family Practice*, 48(8), 15.
- Chappuis, J. (2012). "How am I doing?" *Educational Leadership*, 70(1), 36-41.
- Dharmarajan, P V Pachigalla, R & Lanka, K 2012, 'The significance of inculcating soft skills in students in the process of teaching hard skills', *International Journal of Applied Research & Studies*, Vol.1, Issue II, Sept-Nov, 2012/209.
- Goffman E. (1983). The interaction order. *American Sociological Review*. 48(1), 1-17.
- Haron, MA Mohammad Hussain, MA Ali, E Che Rus, R & Mohammad Zulkifli, R 2019, 'The Importance of generic skills for technical and vocational students employability', *International Journal for Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, Vol.9, No.7, 2019, pp.33-45.
- Mariappan, U Veloo, A & Shanmugam, KS 2018, 'Pembinaan dan pengesahan instrumen kemahiran insaniah bagi perakaunan di Matrikulasi', *Jurnal Kurikulum & Pengajaran Asia Pasifik*, Oktober 2018, Bil.6, Isu 4.
- Meor Osman, W. S. (2017). Understanding educator beliefs in teaching and assessing soft skills: An examination within the Malaysian public higher education sector. Unpublished Doctor of Philosophy thesis. Perth: Murdoch University.
- Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia. (2006). Development of soft skills for Institutions of Higher Learning. Universiti Putra Malaysia.
- Ngoo, YT, Tiong, KM & Pok, WF 2015, 'Bridging the gap of perceived skills between employers and accounting graduates in Malaysia', *American Journal of Economics*, Vol. 5, pp.98-104.
- Pang, E & Hung, H 2012, 'Designing and evaluating a personal skills development program for management education'. *Journal of College Training & Learning*, 9 (3), 159-169.
- Samat, MF Annual, N & Md Rashidi, RA 2019, 'Soft skills among students: a case study of UiTM Cawangan Kelantan', *Advances in Business Research International Journal*, May 2019, viewed 22 May 2020, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/n/335146074>

Schmidt, R. (1995). Consciousness and foreign language learning: A tutorial on the role of attention and awareness in learning. In R. Schmidt (Ed.), *Attention and Awareness in Foreign Language Learning* (pp. 1-64). Retrieved from https://books.google.com.my/books?hl=en&lr=&id=P2gGD0HnjcYC&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&dq=Attention+and+Awareness+in+Foreign+Language+Learning&ots=C44xyeXhEO&sig=wJDX98kelWeSSKzQ9fVcWDr6ol&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Attention%20and%20Awareness%20in%20Foreign%20Language%20Learning&f=false

Sejzi, AA Aris, B and Yuh, CP 2013, 'Important soft skills for university students in 21st century', in Conference: 4th International Graduate Conference on Engineering, Science, and Humanities (IGCESH 2013), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Johor.

Sharberi, SNM Yee, MH Ibrahim, MR Kok, BC & Yeo, KJ 2019, 'Module development of teaching soft skills application in learning and facilitating theory class for technical', *International Journal of Innovative Technology and Exploring Engineering*, Vol.9, Issue-1, Nov 2019.

15. Syed Ahmad, SB 2013, 'Soft skills level of Malaysian students at tertiary institution: a comparative case study

based on gender, area of residence and type of schools', *International Journal of Asian Social Science*, 2013, 3(9): pp.1929-1937.

Tan, C, Kanesan Abdullah, AG and Ali, AJ 2019, 'The effects of soft skill integration on quality of college life of diploma business students: Evidence from Malaysian private higher education', *Journal of International Education in Business*, Vol.12 No. 2, pp.133-146.

Tan, CY & Tang, KN 2015, 'A Study on soft skill development among final year Diploma in Business Studies students', *Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Management*, April 2015, Vol.3, Issue 2, pp.32-50.

Yeen-Ju, HT Mai, N & Selvaretnam, B 2015, 'Enhancing problem-solving skills in an authentic blended learning environment: a Malaysian context', *International Journal of Information and Education Technology*, Vol. 5, No.11, p. 841.

Yorke, M. (2001). *Employability in the first cycle of higher education. A working paper for the 'Skill plus' Project.* Liverpool John Moores University.

KEYWORDS

Soft Skills, Final Year Project, Teaching and Learning, Higher Education, Quality Education

Noor'ain Aini
Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

Noor'ain Aini is a Senior Lecturer in the International Studies Program at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. She has 25 years of academic experience and specialized in the area of contemporary issues in international relations, political geography and North-South relations. Her research passion lies in exploring the impacts of socio-political issues on the local communities in developing countries, in particular issues related to education and the environment.





Centre for Applied Learning and Multimedia
Level 2, Faculty of Computer Science and
Information Technology,
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak,
Jalan Datuk Mohammad Musa, 94300,
Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia