

DEVELOPMENT OF SOFT SKILLS AMONG STUDENTS THROUGH EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES IN RESIDENTIAL COLLEGES

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Abstract: *Soft skills are deemed important for tertiary students. Unfortunately, most of them focus too much on content causing them not to obtain these skills. Seeing this, the Ministry of Higher Education introduced seven soft skills for undergraduates to possess when they exit university. Among the seven skills, communication, problem solving and teamworking skills are most sought after by employers. Therefore, this study examines the development of the three skills through students' participation in the extracurricular activities held in residential colleges. The data was collected via survey. Findings suggest that majority of the students see residential colleges' activities as effective in equipping them with the skills. The study hopes to provide insights for the better production of graduates to meet the workplace needs.*

Keywords: *Soft Skills, Extra-Curricular Activities, Residential Colleges, Undergraduates*

Introduction and Background

Every year, thousands of students graduated from universities with degrees in hands causing employers to have loads of choices in hiring the best people to work with their companies. This has caused them to set new standard to the job market entries. Employers are not looking for students with only good content knowledge, they also prefer "someone [with] additional skills" (Che Omar & Rajoo, 2016, pg. 371). This is because students with good balance of intelligence quotient and emotional quotient have the tendency to be productive and flexible employees. There are many names given to these additional skills and among them are employability skills, work skills, soft skills, key skills and many more. This study however, defines additional skills as soft skills. James Heckman in Cinque (2015) perceives soft skills as the predictors to a successful life. There is a linear relationship between soft skills and the development of personal and professional life. Therefore, besides ensuring students' successful work performance at both national and international levels (Shanks, O'Neill & O'Mahony, 2013), the skills are also helpful for one's development in all life domains.

The reality is there are still many students who are deficient in such skills even after three or four years of studying at university. In response to this matter, Malaysia's Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) had introduced seven soft skills to be exposed to students at the tertiary level. Many universities react positively to the move by providing many platforms to help students to develop the skills. This is because the skills are not gained overnight. They call for practices within various contexts for the development to occur. The provided platforms for students to practice the skills are normally in the forms of formal and non-formal activities. In the context of this study however, the activities investigated were non-formal activities. These activities are known as non-formal since they are carried outside of the formal institutional contexts. The nature of these activities are believed to support one's personal development through the attainment of related knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. Even though MOHE listed seven soft skills to be important for students to possess, this study focuses only on three skills which are communication skills, problem solving skills and teamworking skills. This is because the three skills are among the most needed skills by the employers (Che Omar & Rajoo, 2016). Therefore, this study aims to investigate students' perception on the communication, critical thinking and leadership skills development through their participation in the extracurricular activities held in their residential colleges.

Literature Review

The number of unemployed graduates was at 31,000 in 2007 and this figure is considered high in view of the many job appointments advertised in the local dailies. The reason often echoed by prospective employers is that local graduates are viewed as technically proficient but lacking in skills. A study by Wong (2010) notes that in 2009, there were about 80 000 to 100 000 graduates who were unemployed. Similarly, the Ministry of Higher Education (2012b) as in the National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017 reports inadequacy in the supply of employees are just because they are lacking in soft skills. Given the situation described above, apart from producing graduates with academic excellence, Institutes of Higher Learning must ensure that their graduates possess the relevant personal, ethical and professional development.

Since a sizeable number of university students reside in residential colleges, the head of colleges could take this opportunity to plan activities that will involve the participation of all the students living in college residences. This is because activities held here are believed to be effective in helping students to gain the skills (Nghia, 2017; Selamat et al., 2013). Activities such as debates, drama competition, sports carnival which includes tally match, charity bazaar, and singing competitions are amongst many activities that could be carried out. Besides increasing social interaction among students, leadership, problem solving and critical thinking, teamwork, and entrepreneurship are among the soft skills that can be nurtured through such activities. These extracurricular activities should be carefully planned (Selamat et al., 2013). and carried out continuously throughout the semester, and to improve teamwork capabilities they should encompass all races and gender. These elements of soft skills are not only relevant to the sales and service industry which obviously requires their prospective employees to possess not only most of the soft skill attributes but also in highly technical based industry such as engineering, information system, and construction.

Methodology

This study focuses on the development of three soft skills among undergraduates through their participation in the extracurricular activities held in residential colleges. The study was carried out in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). 30 participants among UTM students were selected to participate in the survey. The participants were from three residential colleges and they were

the active participants of extracurricular activities at residential college level regardless their age, gender, nationality and course of study.

Convenience sampling procedure was used to have easy access to the participants and data since all researchers are from UTM. Survey was used as a technique to obtain information from the respondents. The survey was self-developed. The statements in the survey were constructed based on the definitions or descriptions of the three skills made by Idris (2010), Pretz et al. (2003) and Hughes and Jones (2011). This is done to ensure the survey is up to the skills' standards. The survey consists of 17 statements with four sections: (1) Section A: demographic information, (2) Section B: Communication Skills Development, (3) Section C: Problem Solving Skills Development and (4) Section D: Teamworking Skills Development. The survey was randomly disseminated to the participants. The data was assessed using a Yes-No scale and later analysed using Microsoft Excel.

Findings

The students' perception towards the gaining of communication, teamworking and problem-solving skills through non-formal activities conducted in residential colleges is positive as all responses in the survey shows a 'Yes' trend. The perception was examined through their responses to 17 statements. The responses are divided into three categories which are communication skills development, teamworking skills development and problem-solving skills development.

Communication Skills Development

The students' responses towards the seven statements on the communication skills development after participating in non-formal activities in residential colleges are shown in Figure 1. All seven survey statements are developed based on the definition of communication skills made by Idris (2010). She defines communication skills as one ability to present ideas be it verbally or in written, do presentation, negotiate in order to reach agreement or support and convey appropriate non-verbal language.

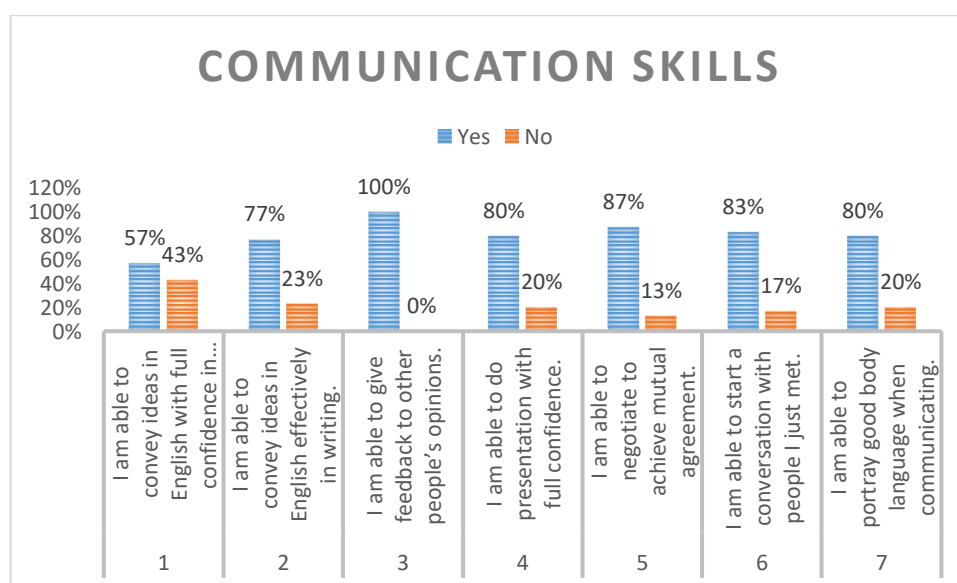


Figure 1: Students' responses towards their communication skills development

From the figure above, it is clear out of 30 students, majority of them agreed that they have more confident in using English in both verbal and written forms, they can comment on the opinions of others, they can do presentations confidently, they are able to negotiate to reach consensus, they are confident to talk to people they just met and they have better non-verbal skills. Ihmeideh, Ahmad, and Al-Dababneh (2010) note that students need to put efforts in sharpening communication skill throughout their years of study in university so that they can succeed in their future career. The findings show that these extracurricular activities have become great platforms for students to put such skills into practice. With good communication skills in hands, students would be able to communicate their ideas across to their intended audience with clarity and confidence. This is the main reason why this skill is a necessary skill for tertiary students to possess (Haji Iksan et al, 2012).

Communication is a cyclic process where both communicator and receiver would receive input and give feedback. This repetitive process is what students need for them to develop their knowledge and skills on how to be good at communicating. According to Haji Iksan et al., (2012, 72), “communication will be more meaningful if the physical, spiritual and social factors are taken into account during the communication process.” This is what extracurricular activities in residential colleges would provide to students. Their communication practices are always with the presence of the three mentioned factors which are the determinants for effective communication. This might be the reason why majority of students reacted positively to all the statements.

Problem Solving Skills Development

Figure 2 on the other hand shows students’ agreement towards the five statements related to the problem-solving skills development through their participation in the non-formal activities in residential colleges. All the survey statements are constructed based on a Pretz et al.’s (2003) problem solving model. Their problem-solving model consists of four cognitive phases which are the identification of problems, the setting of goals, the finding of solutions and the evaluation of problems or decisions.

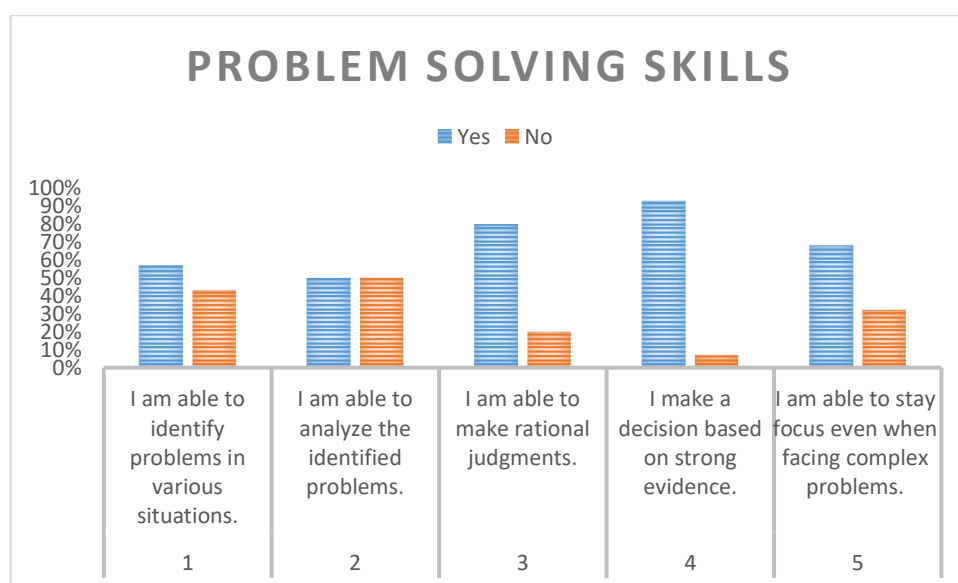


Figure 2: Students’ responses towards their problem-solving skills development

Majority of students claimed that they are able to identify problems in various situations, make rational judgements, make decision based on strong evidence and also stay focus even when facing complex problems. Even though the second statement which is “I am able to analyse the identified problems’ shows only 50% of agreement from students, it is still considered as a positive trend. This positive response from students could be because their participation in the extracurricular activities have exposed them to the real-life problems which are unpredictable, ill-defined and complex. Problem solving skills are believed to be the powerful tools to effectively react and adapt with such situations.

Besides that, students are required to think critically and analyse situations thoroughly in order to find good solutions to the problems. They need to be able to think of new initiatives in resolving issues or problems rather than wait for instructions. Being able to react accordingly to problems can help students to perform well in future workplace settings. This answers why most employers desire employees who are able to think on their own feet regardless of the situations. This is similar to what Coşkun, Garipağaoğlu and Tosun (2014, 675) has said where “people who possess good problem-solving skills can have better lives than others as they are more successful in figuring out the best possible solutions and know how to behave in problematic situations.”

Teamworking Skills Development

Similar to the first two figures, Figure 3 also demonstrates a ‘Yes’ trend response towards all five statements on students’ team working skills development through the participation in non-formal activities in residential colleges. The statements were constructed based on the teamwork definition made by Hughes and Jones (2011, 55). According to them, teamwork is “a set of skills that individuals use to foster the success of groups or teams.” This includes students’ ability to get along with team members from different backgrounds and work collaboratively in order to achieve a common goal.



Figure 3: Students’ responses towards their teamworking skills development

Eighty three percent of students believed that their active participation in extracurricular activities conducted by their residential colleges has helped them to have good relationships with

group members, to accept both roles of leaders and members of the team, to accept the socio-cultural differences of the team members and to show commitment to the group's decision. The participation in the extracurricular activities calls them to work in groups most of the time. This is because of the nature of these activities that requires students to work collaboratively despite the differences that they have in order to successfully execute their plans. At the same time, besides the opportunities to support the team leaders and members, they are also given the chance to lead the teams to progress.

A study carried out by Souto-Otero et al (2013) proves that teamwork is among the most-developed skills in non-formal activities. This is similar to the findings of this study as non-formal activities are also part of extracurricular activities. The aptitude to work in teams has been highly demanded by employers and it has become the new work practice (Cappelli & Rogovsky, 1994). As stated by Fraser and Hvolby (2010, 76), "it is increasingly necessary for groups of people to work together in co-ordinated ways to achieve objectives". This is the reason why the value of teamwork skills is among the skills that are set to be highly requested in the nearest future (Shanks, O'Neill & O'Mahony, 2013, 9).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the students perceive non-formal activities held in the residential colleges as effective in equipping them with the three skills. The skills are communication, problem solving and leadership skills. These skills are among the most-wanted skills by employers. This study provides insights for the management of residential colleges in tailoring the extracurricular activities to fit the needs of the industry. This study also is believed to promote awareness among students to appreciate the learning more and skills development that occur through their participation in activities held outside of the classroom walls. This study hopes for better production of university graduates who have skills beyond their technical content to survive the 21st century workplace culture.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

DEVELOPMENT OF SOFT SKILLS AMONG STUDENTS THROUGH EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES IN RESIDENTIAL COLLEGES

This survey intends to get your response on your development of three soft skills (communication, problem solving and teamworking skills) through your participation in extracurricular activities in your residential colleges.

SECTION (A) – Demographic Details

Instruction: Please tick (✓) the information related to you and write the information in the space provided.

1. Gender ☐ Male ☐ Female
2. Age
3. Residential College
4. Race
 - i) Malay ☐
 - ii) Chinese ☐
 - iii) India ☐
 - iv) Others ☐

SECTION (B) – Communication Skills Development

Instruction: Please tick (✓) 'Yes' if you agree with the statements and 'No' if you disagree with the statements.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

No	Item	Yes	No
1	I am able to convey ideas in English with full confidence in verbal.		
2	I am able to convey ideas in English effectively in writing.		
3	I am able to give feedback to other people's opinions.		
4	I am able to do presentation with full confidence.		

5	I am able to negotiate to achieve mutual agreement.		
6	I am able to start a conversation with people I just met.		
7	I am able to portray good body language when communicating.		

SECTION (B) – Problem Solving Skills Development

Instruction: Please tick (√) ‘Yes’ if you agree with the statements and ‘No’ if you disagree with the statements.

PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS

No	Item	Yes	No
1.	I am able to identify problems in various situations.		
2.	I am able to analyze the identified problems.		
3.	I am able to make rational judgments.		
4.	I make a decision based on strong evidence.		
5.	I am able to stay focus even when facing complex problems.		

SECTION (C) – Teamworking Skills Development

Instruction: Please tick (√) ‘Yes’ if you agree with the statements and ‘No’ if you disagree with the statements.

TEAMWORKING SKILLS

No	Item	Yes	No
1.	I have good relationships with the members of the group.		
2.	I am able to interact effectively with group members to achieve the same goal.		
3.	I am able to accept the role of leaders and followers.		
4.	I am able to accept the socio-cultural differences of the members of the group.		
5.	I am able to show commitment to the group’s decision.		

Thank you for your cooperation.