

Soft Skills: An Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to evaluate a Bachelor's degree (AB programme) from a faculty in AA University, a public university in Malaysia utilising Tyler's evaluation model. A mixed research method was used to collect data from lecturers and students through modified CEQ questionnaires and semi structured interviews for lecturers and documents analysis (curriculum and program objectives). Data was gathered from 124 students/trainees and 7 lecturers interviewed. The findings revealed that the AB programme has broad programme objectives, a comprehensive curriculum, and influences positively students' employability. The findings indicate educators and industry should focus on enhancing soft skills in their learning programmes.

Keywords: : CEQ, employability, soft skills

INTRODUCTION

To survive in today's workplace, employees must possess soft skills and demonstrate leadership competencies. A study by Noor

(2011) revealed that good grades does not guarantee employability in Malaysia. They also work experience and a good command of English.

Since the introduction of soft skills for undergraduates began in December 2006, only few local articles have been published discussing the problem and the strategies on the subject.

AA University has supported the employability skills agenda through various activities introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education. The syllabus and the scheme of work of this programme detailed

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 15 September 2016

Accepted: 30 December 2016

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out the synopsis, objective, evaluation, learning outcome as well as the matrix of outcome-based learning with the emphasis on soft skills.

The main objective of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of AB programme in developing soft skills. Specifically, this research aims to determine to what extent the AB programme achieves its objectives in developing students' soft skills per se and to ascertain which learning activities are effective in developing soft skills, and thus affect the employability of graduates.

METHODS

The evaluation of AB programme in developing soft skills was carried out using the Tyler's (1949) model which uses qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data. The study utilised concurrent triangulation strategy as to correct mode imbalances (Creswell, 2003).

Tyler conceptualized evaluation as a process to determine the extent to which the objectives of a programme are achieved. The 4 steps recommended for conducting an objective-oriented evaluation are: (1) identify a set of objectives; (2) establish procedures to assess their attainment; (3) data collection; and (4) make judgements on the success of the programme based on the identified objectives (Johnson & Lawrence, 1988; Stufflebeam, 2001). These steps are actually associated with Tyler's basic principles of curriculum and instruction.

The evaluation of the first objective is through document analysis of the

curriculum. The researcher examined the programme objectives, chosen syllabuses content—teaching and learning as well as assessment adequacy, based on personal experiences of conducting the courses as well as literature reviews. Two panel experts were selected from senior lecturers/ programme coordinators. The process involved three steps. Firstly, the researcher analysed the programme objectives and the core courses of the programme to see whether they contained the teaching and learning strategies suited to develop soft skills. Secondly, the panel of experts were consulted. Thirdly, the researcher undertook the task of evaluating to what extent the AB programme achieved its objectives in developing students' soft skills

The evaluation of the second and third component, namely learning experiences and organization of the learning activities, involved evaluating the actual running of the programme using qualitative and quantitative methodology. The modified Course Experience Questionnaires (CEQ) was distributed to the students. A set of semi structured interview questions was developed based on the literature reviewed. Interviews with the lecturers teaching the courses were conducted to seek their perception on the initiatives, implementation, and experience of teaching and learning in relation to soft skills development. The notes and transcriptions of the interviews were reviewed to determine the categories of codes. The codes were classified and organized to create a framework for interpretation. The

codes were then described and interpreted to present the findings (Creswell, 2003). Secondly, students' opinion regarding their experience of undergoing the programme was obtained through a self-administered modified Course Questionnaires (modified CEQ). The students were requested to fill the modified CEQ to gauge quantitatively their opinion and level of satisfaction with regard to the whole programme, the faculty, and the university activities as well as the student development programme. The result of these components provided the answers to the second research objective. Figure 1 illustrates how data was collected for this research.

This research adapted the CEQ questionnaires. This questionnaire was chosen as CEQ measures the development of generic skills and the aspects of the quality of teaching and learning. The CEQ is known as a valuable instrument for the purpose of improving the quality of teaching in universities, managing the institutional performance and promoting accountability in higher education (McInnis, Griffin, James, & Coates, 2001). Together with Entwistle, Ramsden developed the basic form of the CEQ for initial graduates in the United Kingdom in 1981 and 1983. A later version was tested in Australian universities during 1989 by Paul Ramsden and his colleagues. Wilson, Lizzio and Ramsden (1997) reported on the validity and usefulness of the CEQ as a performance indicator of the perceived quality of university teaching.

The researcher had modified the instrument by adding few items in section

A (Teaching and Learning) and B (Soft skills obtained) to gain more information regarding the experience that students obtained during the activities held by either the faculty, or HEP, learning activities that they perceived best to develop soft skills, and their opinion on the best aspect of the programme and which aspects need any improvement. Two pilot studies were carried out even though the first pilot test Cronbach's alpha was .763 as one of the variable (Appropriate Assessment Scale) Cronbach's alpha was .333 and the result of the second pilot test for same variable was .516. The researcher decided to maintain the item/s and the variable as the instrument had been used in countries abroad. Validity of the instruments was established with the help of three (3) content experts from the faculty of the AB programme.

The key element of this phase is a series of semi structured interview with lecturers teaching the courses. Eight questions were developed based on the literature review. A pilot test of the interview was carried out to check against the topic, possibly revise the topic and reconsider the questions (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents—students or trainees and lecturers. Out of the 169 students, 124 (73%) completed the questionnaires. Majority of them were female (85%). The respondents' age groups, as indicated by the demographic data ranged from 21 years to 24 years old. The biggest

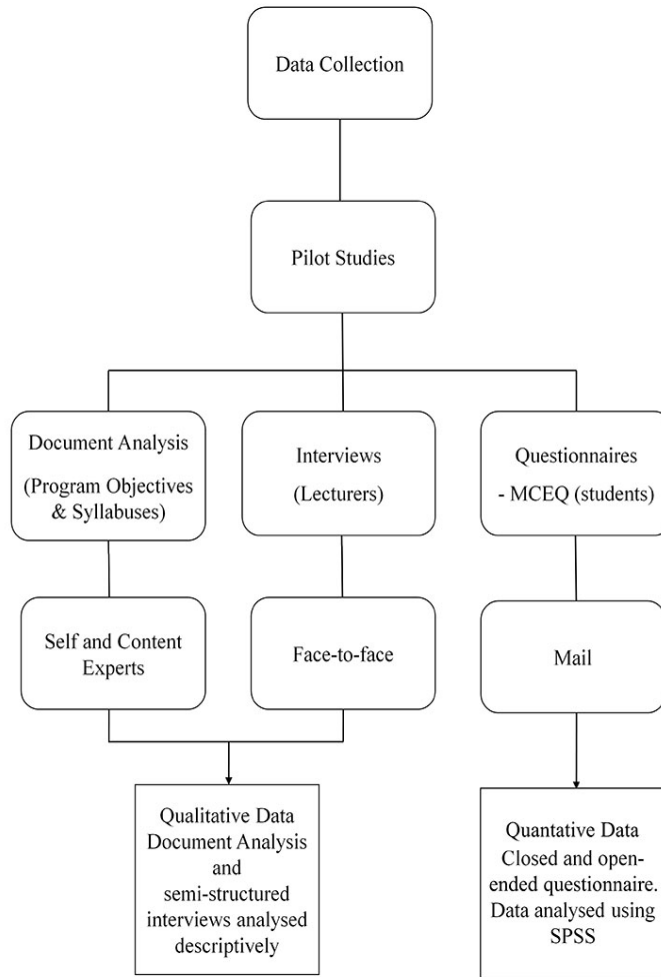


Figure 1. Data collection procedure

percentage (81%) was the age groups of 21 – 22 years old. Meanwhile, the distribution of respondents from the aspect of CGPA showed a total of 49 respondents or 40% of the students comprised from the grade range between 2.51 to 3.00 as well as the range between 3.01 to 3.50 also 49 respondents or 40%. Seven lecturers of the programme were interviewed.

The descriptive statistics were computed on all independent variables to examine the overall mean and standard

deviation. Descriptive analysis was used to describe the perception of students from AB programme of their Course Experience, and the interpretation of the scores is as shown in Table 2. The interpretation of scores was based on Best’s principles by Thaoprom (cited in Narehan, Syahrina, Rohana, Nur, and Nor, 2015).

Table 3 describes students’ perception of their course experience. The table shows that Appropriate Assessment (AAS) has the highest mean among all the dimensions

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristics of respondents	n	%
Students		
Main campus	82	66.1
Campus 1	18	14.5
Campus 2	15	12.1
Campus 3	9	7.3
Gender		
Male	19	15
Female	105	85
Age		
21-22	100	81
23-24	24	19
CGPA		
2.00 – 2.50	3	2
2.51 – 3.00	49	40
3.01 – 3.50	49	40
3.51 – 4.00	23	18
Lecturers		
Lecturers	7	
Years of Teaching Experience		
< 10 years	2	
11 – 19 years	3	
>20 years	2	

Table 2
Mean Score Interpretation

Score range	Interpretation
1.00 to 2.33	Low
2.34 to 3.67	Moderate
3.68 to 5.00	High
11 – 19 years	3
>20 years	2

($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.534$) followed by Soft Skills (SSS) with the second highest mean ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.527$) and Good Teaching (GT) has the third highest mean ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.568$). An inspection of the range mean values of each dimension of Course Experience showed that only the Appropriate Workload (AWS) was identified as moderate. Therefore, room of improvement can be addressed to this dimension to enhance students' Course Experience.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics of course experience dimensions/ constructs

Dimension	M	SD	Level
Clear Goal and Standard (CGS)	3.849	0.539	High
Good Teaching (GTS)	3.91	0.568	High
Soft Skills (SSS)	4.13	0.527	High
Appropriate Workload (AWS)	3.64	0.524	Moderate
Appropriate Assessment (ASS)	4.18	0.534	High

Research Objective 1

Document Analysis—Program Objectives. The analysis of programme objectives indicated that AB programme emphasized on soft skills. The overall

perception of the students on the programme was positive. This was evident in the high mean scores achieved for the scales of CGS, SSS, and OSI.

Interview with lecturers. Majority of the lecturers also felt that the programme has been adequately designed to develop soft skills. According to the lecturers, students were exposed to the skills since the beginning of Semester 1. Two senior lecturers highlighted that the students were still weak in English. One of them felt that the students also lacked leadership skills; however, this skill is difficult to measure. Attitude is another concern for one lecturer arising from punctuality problems. Even though students were satisfied with the AB programme, they felt that the areas that needed improvements were syllabus,

industrial training, teaching methodology, soft skills, and program information.

Modified CEQ. Table 4 discloses the soft skills scales that reflect the extent to which students perceived their studies in fostering the development of the generic skills. Results from the study indicated that majority of the respondents felt that the course or programme has developed their soft skills. Most items achieved mean scores of at least of 4.00. These included the course develop their skills in problem solving, team work, written communication, planning of work, and tackling unfamiliar problems.

Table 4
Soft Skills

Soft skills	M	SD
The course developed my problem-solving skills	4.10	0.72
The course sharpened my analytic skills.	3.87	0.81
The course helped me develop my ability to work as a team member	4.40	0.70
The courses helped me feel confident about tackling unfamiliar problems	4.13	0.66
The courses improved my skills in written communication	4.20	0.71
My course helped me to develop the ability to plan my work	4.23	0.67

Note: 1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree

Table 5 illustrates that 91.1% of the respondents were satisfied with the initiatives, strategies, and methodologies of this programme in developing soft skills.

Table 5
Satisfaction with the Programme

Scale	N	%
Disagree	1	0.8
Neutral	10	8.1
Agree	77	62.1
Strongly Agree	36	29.0
Total	124	100.0

Research Objective 2

Document Analysis-AB programme curriculum. The assessment of the AB programme curriculum revealed that lectures, demonstrations, practices, tutorial, case study, and field trip are part of the syllabus. Learning activities comprised case studies, discussions or interactions, role plays, reading assignment, presentation and simulation, to give students opportunities to learn from experience.

Interview with lecturers. Lecturers stressed that among the activities said to be effective were case studies, group work, role plays, and presentations. Four lecturers felt that case studies worked best in integrating soft skills as the students need to be critical and apply the problem-solving skills. These findings were in congruence with the students' perception whereby the learning activities they found helpful in preparing them for jobs were presentations, case studies, and role plays.

Modified CEQ. Table 6 reveals that the learning activities that the students found effective in developing soft skills were presentation (89.5%), case studies, (72.6%), and role plays (57.3%).

Table 6
Learning Activities

Learning Activities	<i>f</i>	%
Presentations	111	89.5
Case studies	90	72.6
Role plays	71	57.3
Reading assignment	50	40.3
Simulation	49	39.5

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that The AB programme has broad programme objectives, a comprehensive curriculum on soft skills and has positive implications on employability.

The study showed that leadership skills and communication skills, especially in the

English language are vital. Noor (2011) believes that development of these skills should not be confined to the tertiary level, rather it has to begin with primary school education. Therefore, it is suggested that the medium of instruction at the universities, schools, and kindergarten should be reviewed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors gratefully appreciated all those who participated in this study.

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