

Building Self-Esteem through Work-Integrated Learning

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Abstract—The study was undertaken to investigate Work Integrated Learning (WIL) effects on self-esteem of university students who have participated in such programmes. The rationale for the study is based on previous empirical evidences that students who have undergone WIL achieved improved soft skills and competences and this impacts on the students' self-esteem. Data was collected using structured survey instrument. The respondents are 205 public university students majoring in accountancy who have undergone six months compulsory internship. Findings support that the soft skills obtained during their internship will influence the students' self-esteem.

Index Terms—work integrated learning, soft skills, self-esteem

I. INTRODUCTION

Work-integrated learning (WIL) has been identified as an instrument for enhancing professionalism and work readiness in new graduates. General consensus among Malaysian employers indicates that Malaysian graduates are well trained in their areas of specialization but unfortunately they lack the 'soft skills', such as communication, problem solving, interpersonal and the ability to be flexible [1]. They tend to be less vocal and open-minded. As observed by [2], the grouses from industry about graduates not being ready for the workplace are not unique to Malaysia [3], but is in fact a global phenomenon [4], [5]. Research evidence, however, suggests that a tertiary qualification does not necessarily prepare students for the work environment [6]–[8]. Consequently, organisations invest in work-integrated learning programmes to attract, develop and retain high-calibre graduate interns [9], [10]. Work integrated learning programmes are focused training where graduate interns are provided with an opportunity to learn from the various areas of expertise of an employer [11].

Thus, it is suggested that students' participation in WIL will result in the students obtaining specific and tacit knowledge as they benefit from undergoing realistic experiences workplace demands and practices. It is also

believed that the psychological attributes resulting from the experience of WIL are likely to surpass the development of novel competencies. According to [12] WIL empowers the students as it equips them with the ability to fathom not just the complexities of the working environment, but also to understand themselves better, in relations to their strengths and weaknesses. This was further supported by [13] in his study on graduating pharmaceutical students where it was discovered that high level of self-esteem and self-efficacy enable the students to perform his job with confidence. Therefore the study contends that WIL not only provides university students with the necessary soft skills to enhance their employability and make them attractive for prospective employers, but most importantly, the acquisition of these soft skills will also lead to the enhancement of the students' self-esteem.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Soft Skills

Soft skills refer to human skills. According to [14] human skills consist of communication skills, leadership, team working, helicopter view, creativity, 'can do' attitude and a few other human skills that are important for employees to survive in business and in the borderless job market. These skills are highly demanded because the nature of business has changed drastically from closed market to borderless market. Competency in soft skills is important as well as technical skills. Soft skills are also defined as the "interpersonal, human, people or behavioural skills needed to apply technical skills and knowledge in the workplace" [15]. Soft skills are able to shape a person's personality. Any educator's dream is that graduates, especially from tertiary education institutions, should not only be experts in a certain field but matured personalities with a well-balanced, rounded off education. However, this characteristic is reflected in soft skills, not in hard skills. During the last decades in many societies the opinion on soft skills has changed considerably. Whereas in the past the mastering of hard skills was rated first and soft skills were considered as "nice to have", the perception has been turned upside down. Nowadays in general, people who are extroverted,

who are good in marketing themselves, and who are socialising easily are rated superior to others who lack those attributes [16]. Soft skills are made relevant by the global marketplace, with the complexity and ambiguity of a high complement of multinational key role players and stakeholders, requires a new set of aptitudes (knowledge, skills, abilities and attributes) to perform at the level required of global managers [17]-[19].

According to [20] Soft skills are skills often referred to as interpersonal, human, people, or behavioral skills, and place emphasis on personal behaviour and managing relationships between people. Soft skills are primarily affective or behavioural in nature [21]-[23]. From a graduate perspective, soft skills are seen as being deficient in graduates relative to hard skills [24], [25]. Similarly, soft skills are generally viewed as less important by academics in comparison with workplace professionals [26]. Interestingly, [24] noted that as graduates spend longer in industry, they rate themselves as more competent in their hard skills but not soft skills. Interviews with the construction industry employees in New South Wales, Australia reveals that these employees believe that people with good “soft” skills are born with them as such skills is part of their personal traits. However, research shows a different story, as employees had been able to improve their soft skills with experience and practice [27]. According to [28], excellent verbal communication skills are also necessary in order for graduates to feel confidence in their abilities to communicate the knowledge they have attained during their studies. Studies have also emphasized that effective communication skills are essential for career success [29]-[31].

[32] listed the skills and abilities required by graduates in the arts and related fields (i.e., Humanities, Social Sciences, Communication, Management, and Information Technology) by Malaysian employers. Their study showed that the order of the list reflected the importance of each attribute from the surveyed employer’s point of view. This indicates that the ranking of competencies of potential graduates, as needed by employers, is as follows: management skills, personal qualities, communication skills, interpersonal skills, thinking skills, and ICT skills. According to [33] soft skills such as communication skill accord individuals with the ability to convey their needs more effectively and equip them with the competence to understand the needs of others. [34] is of the opinion that communications skills lead to improvement in self-esteem, as it enhances interpersonal relationship, instil positive behaviour and coping skills. [35] proposes that communication as a non-verbal skill involves giving feedback, verbal and written presentation of ideas, conducting presentations and negotiating to achieve a goal and getting support/agreement. [36] proposes that university students be exposed to activities that can develop their communication skills starting from their first year at university. Interpersonal skills are the life skills we use every day to communicate and interact with other people, both individually and in groups. People who strive to develop strong interpersonal skills are reported

to be more successful in both their professional and personal lives it includes the ability to negotiate, listening skill, assertiveness and problem solving [37]. [38] identified behaviours related to interpersonal skills as working cooperatively as a member of a team; getting along and working effectively with people of different personalities; engaging appropriately in social interactions and situations; and taking responsibility and being accountable for the effects of one’s own judgments, decisions, and actions. According to [39] higher-order thinking skills (and critical thinking in particular) act as enabler for developing employability skills, for transferability of such skills, and for continuing further development of employability skills across the lifespan. Critical thinking or higher-order cognitive skills enable individuals to participate actively in knowledge development and to become independent lifelong learners [40, p.740], [41, p.2]. The development of thinking skills has long been considered to be a core outcome of education and a stated objective of higher education [40].

According to [42] self-management skills relate to the individual’s perception and appraisal of themselves in terms of values, abilities, interests and goals. These competencies are closely related to the concept of career identity [43], [44], which is the perceived congruence between aspects of the individual and their career roles. In their study of mentoring and career success, [45] found that the career identity subscale of the career motivation scale they used positively predicted salary levels, subjective reports of career success and job performance. [46] demonstrated that students who have a well-developed concept of their career goals and a positive, realistic appraisal of their own abilities and aptitudes report themselves as possessing higher levels of employability than other students.

B. Self-Esteem

The psychological outcomes of WIL have recently been investigated in terms of learning outcomes and how these may relate to a successful transition to the labour market [47]-[50]. According to [51] individuals feel confident, competent, strong and useful when their needs for self-esteem have been fulfilled. Likewise, low self-esteem results in feelings of inferiority, anxiety, weak and helplessness. Consequently, the act of gauging, analysing, improving and sustaining self-esteem has become crucial for academic institutions [51]. Individuals with low self-esteem have been found to perform poorly and their achievements are inferior compared to individuals with high self-esteem [52], [53]. Having a higher level of self-esteem allows an individual to possess a higher level of social skills, impressing an employer in the recruitment stage [54]. [55] research agreed with these finding, as they reported that self-esteem shows positive correlation related to assertive and self-confident career seeking behavior.

In addition, [54], research showed a positive correlation through individuals actively seeking for a job, and higher level of self-esteem; which is important for an individual to possess during the job search. Thus, positive levels of self-esteem would assume to help and encourage

an individual to get a career job. It is then predicted that those university students, with a high self-esteem, will directly enter the labour market after graduation. Those individual with lower self-esteem will then choose an alternative path, like attending more school or taking time off to travel, as it does not seem favourable for them to enter the labour force at this time in their lives. Research conducted on Canadian students found similar findings, with WIL students reporting higher levels of confidence, but little difference being found between WIL and non-WIL students in other areas [56]. These conflicting results suggest that this area needs to be further researched quantitatively to establish whether the psychological differences between learners post-WIL would be of value.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Respondents

The study looks at the perceptions of students concerning acquisition of soft skills during internship. Respondents consist of students who have undergone industrial training in various organizations in Malaysia. The sampling design for the study utilised purposive sampling as it targets specific group of respondents. Data were collected from 205 students from four public universities in Malaysia. They are undergraduates in business degree programs, who were majoring in accounting and were soon-to-graduate. Most importantly this group of students have undergone internship for six months according to Malaysian Institute of Accountants professional requirement. 400 questionnaires were distributed, with 205 surveys returned indicating 51.3% rate of return.

B. Measurement

A self-administered survey that rates the level of self-esteem using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory [57] was used. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory was used because it is referred to as generally the standard tool against which other measures of self-esteem are compared. It is composed of 10 questions and scored using the five-point response scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The general self-efficacy scale was adopted from [58], it is composed of eight items and measured using five-point response scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Interpersonal skills, critical thinking skills, communication skills and self-management skills were adopted from [59]. Critical thinking skills contains eight items and measured using five point responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Communications skills contain eleven items and measured using five point responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Interpersonal skills contains eight items and measured using five point responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Management skills contains nine items and measured using five point responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

IV. FINDINGS

The descriptive statistics, in forms of means and standard deviation, as provided in Table I indicates that Thinking Skills has $M = 3.82$, $SD = .44$; Self-Management Skills has $M = 3.73$, $SD = .52$; Communication Skills has $M = 3.67$, $SD = .44$; Interpersonal Skills has $M = 3.92$, $SD = .40$ and Self-Esteem has $M = 3.82$, $SD = .63$.

TABLE I. MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Thinking Skills	3.82	.44
Self-Management Skills	3.73	.52
Communication Skills	3.67	.44
Interpersonal Skills	3.92	.40
Self-Esteem	3.82	.63

Results from multiple regression as indicated in Table II, proved that all the soft skills variables are positively and significantly related to self-esteem. This can be derived from table, where, Thinking skills indicated $\beta = .327$, $p < .01$; Self-Management skills indicated $\beta = .332$, $p < .01$; Communication skills indicated $\beta = .363$, $p < .01$ and Interpersonal skills indicated $\beta = .249$, $p < .01$. In other words, the acquisition of soft skills is significant for the students' to obtain self-esteem.

TABLE II. REGRESSION BETWEEN VARIABLES

Variables	β	<i>Sig.</i>
Thinking Skills	.327	.000**
Self-Management Skills	.332	.000**
Communication Skills	.363	.000**
Interpersonal Skills	.249	.000**

Note * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$

V. CONCLUSION

The results clearly indicate the significant relationship between all the soft skills construct and self-esteem of the university students. This implies that the soft skills acquired while undergoing WIL programs in the form of internships, helps in building and developing their self-esteem. The importance of the result lies in the impact of WIL on the students' personal and psychological characteristics, as, one of the main complaints of prospective employers is that university leavers seeking job lacks confidence and self-esteem to do presentation, voice their opinions and socialise. Indirectly, the results are saying that the value of WIL extends beyond obtaining generic skills. This is a signal to the relevant parties, that WIL programs should be designed specifically to address the psychological attributes of the students. It should not be treated lightly and should be accorded the same importance as with any other

university subjects. WIL should be made a compulsory program, with a minimum duration of four months.

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