

Significance and Application of Soft Skill Development in Teacher Education

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Abstract: *Soft skills are personal traits that enhance a person's interactions, job performance, and career viewpoints. Soft skills are considered to boost competency and to consequently upsurge one's ability in subsidizing communal progression and transformation. Soft skills are essential for all graduates to acquire, irrespective of their field of study. The understanding of soft skills itself is vital for lecturers to vary their teaching approaches for the students. As teaching becomes a two-way process, it will convert to being organized and operative with soft skills. This article discusses the same along with the role of teachers in enhancing students' soft skills and models for implementing soft skills in higher education.*

Keywords: soft skills, effective teaching, communication, higher education

1. Introduction

The advent of digitalisation in the field of education has brought about a paradigm shift in the way education is perceived. Today the vital skills of the most effective teachers are very different from those of twenty years ago. It takes more than expertise and knowledge in one academic field to be an effective teacher. Knowledge is still important, but today's teachers must also possess the right soft skills to be successful. In today's world, a different breed of teacher is required. Recent research and findings about the skills possessed by the most effective teachers convey that soft skills are crucial to becoming an effective teacher.

What are soft skills?

Soft skills are personal traits that enhance a person's interactions, job performance, and career viewpoints¹. Pachauri and Yadav (2014)² defined soft skills as personality traits, social gracefulness, fluency in language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism to variable degrees. Soft skills are personal and social skills are a necessity for lecturers who work in a high-performance setting, ultimately encouraging efficiency². Soft skills are considered to boost competency and to consequently upsurge one's ability in subsidizing communal progression and transformation (Duncan & Dunifon, 2012⁵). As stated by Salleh, Sulaiman, and Talib (2010)¹, soft skills are the most operative instruments and methods for higher education institutions to appraise the future capabilities of lecturers' and students. Therefore, recognizing and evolving the importance of soft skills acquisition has been a thought-provoking task for curriculum designers (Hodges & Burchell, 2003)⁶. Thus, higher education institutions play a significant part in this by producing skills for uptake by the respective students.

Soft skills should be accepted as an ordinary feature of a lecturer's selection of community skills and character traits (Tang & Tan, 2015)³. A good lecturer is expected to be dedicated to his or her work and to have the ability to take the initiative. Teaching is a multifaceted performance, demanding a wide range of knowledge and skills containing hard and soft skills to successfully accomplish the burdens of the classroom (Tang, Hashim, & Mohd Yunus, 2014).

Teaching is a social activity that comprises communal collaboration between lecturer and students (Lim, Tang, & Tan, 2013)⁴.

Lets see what the basic soft skills in higher education and teacher education are. Succi⁷ in 2015 developed the taxonomy of soft skills for higher education and employment (Succi, 2015). Table 1 shows a variety of soft skills divided in three parts: personal, social and methodological⁸. Personal soft skills are abilities that relate to the individual alone, for example, commitment and tolerance to stress. Social soft skills are abilities required to relate to another person, such as teamwork, leadership and negotiation. Methodological soft skills are techniques or procedures used to solve a problem, question or situation⁸.

Table 1: Taxonomy of soft skills⁸
TAXONOMY OF SOFT SKILLS

Personal	Social	Content reliant/ Methodological
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning skills • Commitment • Professional ethics • Tolerance to stress • Self-awareness • Life balance • Cultural adaptability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Customer/user orientation • Teamwork • Leadership • Negotiation • Conflict management • Contact network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creativity/ innovation • Decision making • Analysis skills • Management skills • Adaptability to changes • Continuous improvement • Research & information management skills

(ADAPTED FROM Haselberger, Oberheumer, Perez, Cinque & Capasso as cited in Succi, 2015, pp. 252-254)

Importance of Soft Skills

Soft skills are essential for all graduates to acquire, irrespective of their field of study. Soft skills shape human beings' 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.

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For teachers, the capability to use effective soft skills can make or break a career of themselves as well as their students'. Soft skills not only aid in teaching but also are important when working with parents, administration and other teachers. Soft skills translate into the ability of a teacher to successfully navigate the needs of these individuals. A teacher is needed use her oral and written communication skills every day to effectively pass on information to her students. A teacher uses teamwork and collaboration at any school-wide function, including faculty meetings. With the help of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, the teacher can effectively manage classroom behavior or student progress. Such skills can improve the effectiveness of a teacher. A student gravitates toward success when taught by an effective teacher. Differences in teacher effectiveness can be the dominant factor affecting student academic gain.

Another importance of soft skills lies in the job interviews and productivity in jobs. Research suggests that soft skills are just as good an indicator of job performance as traditional job qualifications or hard skills. Today's job-market in many fields is becoming ever increasingly competitive. To be successful in this tough environment, candidates for jobs have to bring along a "competitive edge" that distinguishes them from other candidates with similar qualifications and comparable evaluation results. In bringing along additional knowledge and skills, added up by convincing personal traits and habits. Understandably, employers prefer to take in job candidates who will be productive from a very early stage on. Already during the job interview itself good communication skills are invaluable. They can even serve to successfully cover up weaknesses on the hard skills side¹³.

Role of Teachers in enhancing students' soft skills

Teachers play a vital part in constructing the soft skills of a student. Subramaniam's (2013) study indicated that lecturers have recognized the associated role of the soft skills in the curriculum unification, but they fail to integrate them in their instructions. Subramaniam emphasized that soft skills acquisition is relevant for students; intrinsically the lecturers should undertake more widespread preparation and progression to successfully impart soft skills acquisition in their teaching¹¹. The understanding of soft skills itself is vital for lecturers to vary their teaching approaches for the students. As teaching becomes a two-way process, it will convert to being organized and operative depending on the understanding, talents, and attitudes of the teachers (Adediwura & Baba, 2007).

A first step in improving soft skills of students is to raise their awareness about the importance of soft skills and the effects of inadequacies in this regard. Students should be encouraged to enhance their soft skills by applying the methods like reading dedicated books, attending courses, etc to broaden their horizon. A formal approach to the problem would be to include soft skills subjects into a programme's curriculum. On graduate level conducting courses on management skills, communication skills together with the management of time can be done. But in practice very often the curricula are already overloaded with hard skills courses,

making it almost impossible to add or substitute courses. A very elegant way of offering soft skills training to students is to embed it into the teaching of hard skills. This way, no changes to a programme's curriculum are necessary; instead the change will be reflected in the lecturers' teaching methodology. An increase in group discussions, letting students do presentations, and using special methodologies can be applied throughout a course. This approach to practicing soft skills requires some re-thinking and re-planning of existing hard skill courses.

Models for implementing soft skills in teacher education

The higher education soft skills development programs have generally been introduced by one of the two or a combination of both bolt on and embedded models (Kementerian, 2010; Roselina, 2009)⁹. The bolt on model was recognized by Dunne (1995), while the embedded model might offer an opportunity for soft skills elements to be delivered as part of the core courses (Chaple & Tolley, 2000)¹⁰. Through the bolt-on model of soft skills subject, the teaching and learning of soft skills run in consistent with the current core courses. The advantage of this model is the ability to introduce soft skills without making variations to the core courses curriculum. However, the weakness of this model is in the development of soft skills at out of the context, because there are some opportunities for the transfer of soft skills to occur (Bennett et al., 2000). Based on the literature, the embedded model was found to be able to be applied across the formal teaching and learning activities, thus the model applied should be focused on its advantages in helping students through the learning process, providing an opportunity for practical experience, and focusing on the student-centered learning approach. There are concerns that the situation will persist until these teacher trainees become school teachers, as the findings by Wan-Azlinna and Mohamed-Hafis (2009) found that teachers also have found difficulties to embed the soft skills competencies to students due to lack of understanding related to soft skills¹¹.

Bowden et al. (2000) stated that soft skills should be related to the content of learning or discipline of study explicitly rather than implicitly. The main practices that need to be addressed are by embedding soft skills competency in the curriculum disciplines. Findings from studies reliably showed soft skills competency in higher education are more efficiently developed in the context of discipline knowledge, inculcated into the curriculum (embedding model) rather than through bolt-on model (stand-alone subject), which is isolated from the context of discipline¹². The isolation of soft skills from a disciplinary learning environment might be at risk of shallow technical approaches of teaching and learning of soft skills (Star & Hammer, 2007)¹¹.

In teacher education, the development of soft skills among the students via the formal teaching and learning activities is divided in two models: stand alone and embedded.¹⁴

1) Stand alone subject model-This model uses the approach of training and providing opportunities to students to develop soft skills through specific courses that are carefully planned for this purpose. The number of courses and credits in this category depends on the curriculum design and the

requirements of the program. The stand alone subject model can also be initiated by encouraging students to sign-up several additional courses which can be accumulated to be a minor course which is different from the initial program signed-up.

2) Embedded Model- This model uses the approach of embedding the soft skills in the teaching and learning activities across the curriculum. It does not require the student to take special courses as in the stand alone subject model. Instead the students are trained to master the soft skills through various formal teaching and learning activities that are planned and carried. However, this model lacked the opportunity for students to develop and acquire soft skills as integrated with other knowledge and skills in the major discipline studied. This model requires the lecturers to master specific teaching and learning skills and then apply these skills in teaching the respective core courses for the specific program.

3) Combination of Stand Alone Subject Model and Embedded Model -Each of the respective models described above has its weaknesses and strengths. From the framework, planning, implementing and assessment, the stand-alone model is definitely at an advantage. On the contrary, the framework, planning, implementing and assessment of the embedded model are more challenging than the stand-alone model. Based on the weaknesses and strengths discussed, the teacher education institutes are encouraged to use the suitable model for soft skill development.

2. Conclusion

There has been a change in the foundational skills associated with effective teaching. Today, the focus has moved to the quality of the teacher-student relationship. Educators have a special responsibility regarding soft skills, because during students' School and University time they have major impact on the development of their students' soft skills. Besides raising awareness regarding the importance of soft skills and encouraging students to improve their skills, lecturers should actively practice soft skills with their students. A very effective and efficient way of doing this is to include soft skills training into the teaching of hard skills. As a positive side effect the lessons will become more attractive, which in turn will increase the success rate of learners. Also there should be more emphasis in the curriculum designed for teacher education on soft skills.

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