International Journal of Engineering & Technology, 7 (4.28) (2018) 555 -558

International Journal of Engineering & Technology

Website: www.sciencepubco.com/index.php/IJET

Research paper



The Attainment of Soft Skills Among Students: Impact of Abroad Study Visit Program

Muhammad Abd Hadi Bunyamin[1], Mohd Rustam Mohd Rameli[1]*, Zainudin Hassan[1], Nur Hazirah Noh@Seth[1], Rohaya Talib[1], Sanitah Mohd Yusof[1], Hamimah Abu Naim[1], Shaharuddin Md Salleh[1], Mohd Ali Ibrahim[1], Rafeizah Mohd Zulkifli[1]

[1]Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia
**Corresponding author E-mail: mrustam2@utm.my*

Abstract

This study aims to determine the impact of an abroad study visit program on the attainment of soft skills among the students. A questionnaire was used to collect the data using a five-scale range of answers. Thirty-five students were selected among the participants of the program. The data is analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, namely mean, standard deviation, and correlation. The primary finding obtained is that the program has provided a huge opportunity for the students to develop their professional ethics and moral indicated through the highest mean obtained by the items related to the construct. In terms of correlations, the positive and the strongest correlation is between the construct of Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills and the construct of Lifelong Learning and Information Management. The implications of the findings are also discussed.

Keywords: *Soft Skills, Study Abroad, Communication Skills.*

1. Introduction

In January 2018, a group of students from Indonesia had participated in a study visit program in Malaysia. The goal of the program is mainly to educate the students on knowledge and skills required for the twenty-first century era. They were trained through various workshops, lectures, and outdoor activities to attain the primary goal. The organizer involved with the program was the School of Education, under the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). The program was conducted in UTM. UTM was selected because they have many experts in the area of student development. The participants were among the Indonesian students studying at a university in Surabaya, Indonesia.

A study visit program is a type of experiential learning that has the potential to develop the soft skills among the students involved with the program [1, 2]. Such program provides various opportunities for the students to learn new knowledge and skills related to the survival of their careers. Students should acquire various working and employability skills such as professional ethics and moral, critical thinking and problem solving, as well as communication skills in order to increase their chances of getting hired after completing their studies. This study aims to determine the impact of the program on the attainment of soft skills among the students involved. The research questions are: (1) what are the soft skills that could be developed from the study visit program? and (2) how does one soft skill related to other soft skills in terms of statistical correlation? These two research questions are important as they can provide answers on the set of soft skills that could be attained by the students. In addition, the most dominant soft skills attained by the students involved could be determined. Furthermore, the sets of soft skills attained from the program could be connected to each other; hence these interconnections could be taken into consideration upon designing such programs in the future.

2. Literature review

The development of soft skills is a continuous process throughout one's life. Specifically for students, soft skills can be attained from various platforms such as through formal learning in classes or informal learning outside classes. This study focuses on informal learning, specifically a study visit program, to determine the attainment of soft skills among the students involved.

Soft skills can be developed among the students involved in a study visit program [3, 4]. The organizers usually design the study visit program according to the needs of the participants. The structure of the program is mostly informal and the content included in the program is based on the demands of the participants rather than the organizer's. Scholars indicate that study visit programs should have these two primary objectives: (1) developing students' soft skills and (2) enhancing students' content knowledge on specific subjects [5]. The study visit program conducted by UTM focuses more on the first objective because the participants mostly eager to learn more on soft skills rather than content knowledge. Due to the diverse academic backgrounds of the participants, the focus on content knowledge was also quite irrelevant for the program.

The roles of the study visit programs to nurture the soft skills among the students involved are widely known [6, 7]. The study visit program implemented by UTM for the Indonesian students focuses on seven (7) soft skills: (1) professional ethics and moral, (2) critical thinking and problem solving skills, (3) communication skills, (4) lifelong learning and information management, (5) leadership skills, (6) team working skills, and (7) entrepreneurship skills. These soft skills are aligned with the twenty-first century

Copyright © 2018 Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

skills such as complex problem solving skills, leadership and team coordination skills, as well as global citizenship skills [8]. In short, the study visit program conducted by UTM aims to prepare the students for the new era of workforce that requires strong employability skills. This is the main philosophy of the program.

The development of soft skill is not a one-off process. The students need to be given ample opportunities to lead their teams to accomplish complex tasks, to develop their skills to think critically and creatively in solving unusual problems, and to apply entrepreneurial mind set in their networking. These sets of soft skills are important because the students will be able to use them after being hired to apply various kinds of knowledge and skills in their career. The employers have high demand not only on graduates with outstanding academic achievement, but also on graduates with the ability to solve complex problems and the ability to complete their work on time.

Ethics and moral is one of the imperative soft skill especially since the issues related to integrity has been prominently discussed. This soft skill is the hardest skill to develop because it requires the willingness of the students (or the people in general) to practice kindness and honesty at work. The previous study revealed that youth tends to involve in corruptions because they want to get rich relatively in short amount of time. Thus, it is important to educate students or future graduates to be honest with their work, especially when dealing with the conflict of interests.

Another important soft skill is critical thinking and problem solving skills. In the era of multiple versions of information due to the presence of social media, future graduates need to be able to distinguish between right and wrong information, to make judgment based on the right information, and finally decide the best. This is important especially if they work with the sectors that require analysis of public information such as broadcasting, research firms, and academia.

Communication skill is another important soft skill. Future graduates should be able to speak fluently as to convey the meanings to other people. In the future, they need to interact with colleagues to perform tasks in their careers that require good communication skills. Confidence in speaking is vital because it shows that the graduate has learned how to speak confidently while studying in the university. Hanum et al. [9] highlighted that communication skill is one of the primary skill to be mastered especially for those who want to be hired. Employers will see the ability of a candidate to convey ideas smoothly and clearly, portrayed during the interview sessions. Failure to do so will stunt the candidate's hiring possibilities to secure a job especially for a job that requires high fluency of speaking with good public image such as consultants and public relation officers. Other soft skills such as lifelong learning and information management, leadership, team working, and entrepreneurship skills are also important for future graduates.

Nonetheless, one area that lacks of attention is the relationship between these soft skills. Specifically, the existing literature does not provide sufficient information on the levels of interconnection between these soft skills. This study aims to address this knowledge gap, because by knowing the degree of relationships between these soft skills, scholars will notice that one soft skill could be developed with another soft skill in a more holistic way. For example, developing the students' leadership skill might be connected with developing their communication skill. However, empirical data is needed to prove that the correlation exists. By adopting a quantitative approach of research, the empirical data could be presented to support this correlation. Thus, this study can contribute to a new knowledge in terms of the connections of these soft skills and can also contribute to the literature regarding the development of soft skills among the students.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a positivistic paradigm of research, representing a more objective view on the development of the students' soft skills through a study visit program conducted. Specifically, the authors used a questionnaire to gather the information from the students regarding their attainment of soft skills from the program conducted. The questionnaire consists of twenty items related to soft skills. These items are categorized into seven soft skills which are: (1) Professional Ethics and Moral, (2) Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, (3) Communication, (4) Lifelong Learning and Information Management, (5) Leadership, (6) Team Working, and (7) Entrepreneurship.

The survey was immediately conducted after the students have completed the program. Thirty-five students were involved in the survey and they all participated in the program thoroughly. None of them missed any session and thus their answers are reliable. The ten-day study visit program is filled with various activities and workshops including educational technology workshop, outdoor activities such as canoeing, as well as workshop on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) teaching and learning approaches. All of these activities were intended to prepare the students in becoming high quality workers in the future that can communicate well, with high teamwork spirit, able to solve complex problems, and think creatively and critically during task completion.

The data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, namely mean and standard deviation, and correlation analysis, respectively. The categories of items or constructs, according to a specific soft skill, were analysed by the mean score recorded. High (mean≥3.67), moderate (3.66<mean<2.34), and low (mean≤2.33) mean values were identified. The correlation analysis was then conducted and the correlations for each construct were then determined. Finally, the patterns of correlations across the constructs were produced.

4. Result

Tongkonan The study has proven that the soft skills among the students can be gained in different degrees. Table 1 shows the results obtained through the analysis.

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis for Each Construct

Rank	Soft Skills	Items	Mean (S.D)
1	Professional Ethics and Moral	PE1, PE2	4.40 (.53)
2	Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills	PS1, PS2, PS3, PS4	4.38 (.45)
3	Communication Skills	C1, C2	4.37 (.42)
4	Lifelong Learning and Information Management	LLL1, LLL2, LLL3, LLL4, LLL5, LLL6	4.29 (.50)
5	Leadership Skills	L1, L2	4.26 (.57)
6	Team Working Skills	TW1, TW2	4.15 (.51)
7	Entrepreneurship Skills	E1, E2	3.88 (.60)
	Overall Soft Skills Mean		4.25 (.38)

Table 1 shows that the construct of Professional Ethics and Moral recorded the highest mean value (mean=4.40) and recorded the highest effect on the students who participated in the study visit program. This implies that this type of soft skill is the most dominant skill that affects the students. Meanwhile, the constructs of Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills (mean=4.38) and Communication skills (mean=4.37) are ranked second and third place, respectively. Another two constructs that also recorded high mean values are the constructs of Lifelong Learning and Information Management (mean=4.29) and the Leadership Skills (mean=4.26). On the contrary, the Team Working Skills (mean=4.15) and the Entrepreneurship Skills (mean=3.88) constructs ranked at the bottom two with the lowest mean value

compared to five other soft skills. This result reflects that the effects of these soft skills on the students are less significant compared to other soft skills. Nonetheless, the mean values for these two constructs are still greater than 3.67, indicating the positive impacts of the team working skills and entrepreneurship skills among the students.

Pearson correlation analysis was then carried out to identify the inter correlation between all seven types of soft skills (refer to Table 2). The results show positive correlations for all soft skills measured. The significant positive correlation ranges from moderate to high. Specifically, team working skill recorded a significant positive relationship with other types of soft skills (r=.350-.629). At the same time, professional ethics and moral skills also recorded high and positive correlations with other types of soft skills (r=.350-.689).

5. Discussion

The first research question; "what are the soft skills that likely could be developed from the study visit program?", has been answered through the findings showing that all seven soft skills were attained by the students, but with different degrees of attainment. The professional ethics and moral skill, critical thinking and problem solving skill, and communication skill are the three skills that were attained the utmost. This shows that the content of the study visit program has mainly directed these skills to the students, especially through the activities of solving difficult questions in-groups that require good communication skills and critical thinking skills. However, the authors are surprised with the fact that the professional ethics and moral construct scored the highest mean. This result is unexpected to be produced because the construct is usually deemed implicit for many students or people in general. Implicit means that it is hard to define ethics and moral in the context of education because it is subjective and difficult to be taught. This surprising finding has driven us in realizing that the informal teaching and learning process during the study visit program has greatly shaped the students' ethical and moral skills.

Meanwhile, the second research question; "how does one soft skill relate to others in terms of statistical correlation?", has been answered through the highest correlation recorded between the critical thinking and problem solving skill and the lifelong learning and information management skill. This strong correlation indicates that the students could be able to think critically to solve the problem if they have strong skills in searching information pertaining to the task given. It will be hard for the students to solve complex problems in the sense of without good skill in searching, sorting, and categorizing information. In fact, in analysing the information gained requires a good mastery in critical thinking. Thus, it is important for educators and scholars to ensure that the students can master the skills in obtaining, filtering, differentiating, and synthesizing information in order to solve problems in the task given. In the future, these skills, that could be named as "scientific literacy skill" (because it imitates the ways scientists deal with data), will become more critical since the challenges in completing complex tasks will be faced by the students in their career. Outstanding skill in managing information and carefully analysing them is required to solve such particular problems. For example, to solve conflicts among colleagues requires a leader who is able to analyse different perspectives of each person involved in the conflict and must be able to find the best solution, using their critical thinking abilities, in order to reconcile the workers involved in the conflict.

6. Conclusion, Implication, Limitation and Future Studies

It is important to state that the degrees of soft skills attained by the students varied during the study visit program. Thus, the organizers of a study visit program should aware that there might be no equal attainment of the soft skills. Even in reality, it is impossible to be performed. Plus, each student might have different intentions when decided to join the program. Thus, by knowing that some soft skills have higher attainment than others, the organizers of a study visit program could focus on some soft skills that they deem important for the students especially for their future benefits. It is clearly proven that professional ethics and moral, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication skills are the three soft skills that are pivotal. Hence, the organizers may consider in developing these soft skills with a greater focus. Moreover, by knowing that these three soft skills correlate with each other (see Table 2), the organizers can actually develop these skills simultaneously. The soft skills that recorded low correlations imply that they either could be developed with a greater focus or might be irrelevant for the students. This is especially true for the soft skill of entrepreneurship that recorded the lowest mean (Table 1) and low correlations with other soft skills (Table 2). The organizers may need to educate the participants regarding the meaning of "entrepreneurship" since in many situations, the students might think that entrepreneurship is mainly about "conducting business", even though this thought is not entirely accurate. It should be associated with other terms such as "strategic thinking", "analysing risks and benefits", and "understanding the status quo".

This study is limited in terms of having in-depth perspectives of the students regarding their attainment of the soft skills. Detailed explanations of the attainment could be obtained if future studies using a qualitative method, especially by interviewing the students to explain their experiences gathered from the program and how it affects their soft skills, as a supporting data source.

Table 2: Correlations between Soft Skills

	Professional Ethics and Moral	Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills	Communication Skills	Lifelong Learning and Information Management	Leadership Skills	Team Working Skills	Entrepreneurship Skills
Professional Ethics and Moral	1	.689**	.556**	.592**	.656**	.350*	.252
Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills		1	.347*	.772**	.433**	.485**	.468**
Communication Skills			1	.327*	.382*	.393*	.250
Lifelong Learning and Information Management				1	.301	.629**	.652**
Leadership Skills					1	.399*	.241
Team Working Skills						1	.505**
Entrepreneurship							1

Skills							

** The correlation are significant at the level 0.01 (2-tail)
* The correlation are significant at the level 0.05 (2-tail)

References

[1] King C & Gratz K (2011), Building bridge with service-learning. *ASGA School Counselor* 48(3), 20-23.

[2] Prentice M & Robinson G (2010), Improving student learning outcomes with service-learning. *Community College Journal* 10(1), 1-16.

[3] Mohd Rustam MR, Bunyamin MAH, Tan JS, Zainuddin H, Mahani M, Jamilah A & Hanifah J (2018), Item analysis on the effects of study visit programme in cultivating students' soft skills: A case study. *International Journal of Engineering & Technology* 7(2.10), 117-120.

[4] Sukmawan S (2016), Pedoman Pelaksanaan Kegiatan Praktik Pengalaman Lapangan Fakultas Ilmu Budaya Universitas Brawijaya.

[5] European Community Foundation Initiative (2018), Study Visit. Retrieved from https://www.communityfoundations.eu/peer-learning/study-visit.html

[6] Boyle-Baise M & Langford J (2004), There are children here: Service-learning for social justice. *Equity & Excellence in Education* 37(1), 55-66.

[7] Eyler J & Giles D (2001), At a glance: What we know about the effects of service-learning on college students, faculty, *institutions and communities* 1993-2000 (3rd ed).Washington DC, Corporation for National and Community Service.

[8] Ministry of Higher Education (2006). Modul Pembangunan KemahiranInsaniah (Soft Skills) Untuk Institusi Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia. Serdang, Selangor: Universiti Putra Malaysia.

[9] Hanum Hassan, Razli Ahmad & Azuddin Bahari (2008), Kemahiran Insaniah dan Kepentingan Penerapannya dalam Programme Baktisiswa Perdana UniMAP. Universiti Malaysia Perlis.