AN EVALUATION OF SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OF A DEGREE PROGRAMME IN A PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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2015

AN EVALUATION OF SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OF A DEGREE PROGRAMME IN A PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

by

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**Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

February 2015

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

feel your support, love, and encouragement at all junctions. To Mom, you are my inspiration. To my children, thank you for your love and constant support and laughter that keep me motivated and happy.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AA university: one of the public universities in Malaysia

AB programme: a bachelor degree programme producing graduates in the area of office administration and management

MPG: *Malam Pra-Graduan*

Cairex: Career and Industrial relation Exhibition

APIP: *Akademi Pembangunan Imej dan Profesionalisme*

UiCEL: UiTM International Conference on e-Learning

MCEQ: Modified Course Experience Questionnaire

ETS: Employers/Trainees Survey

CGS: Clear Goal scales

AWS: Appropriate Workload scales

GTS: Good Teaching scales

AAS: Appropriate Assessment scales

SSS: Soft Skills scales

OSI: Overall Satisfaction item

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PENILAIAN PEMBANGUNAN KEMAHIRAN INSANIAH PROGRAM SARJANA MUDA DI INSTITUSI PENGAJIAN TINGGI AWAM

ABSTRAK

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk menilai program ijazah Sarjana Muda (program AB) dari satu fakulti di sebuah universiti awam (Universiti AA) di Malaysia, dalam membangunkan kemahiran insaniah dengan menggunakan model penilaian Tyler. Kaedah penyelidikan campuran telah digunakan untuk mengumpul data dari para majikan, pensyarah dan pelajar melalui dua jenis soal selidik iaitu soal selidik CEQ yang diubah suai dan borang kaji selidik Majikan/Pelatih, serta temu bual separa berstruktur untuk para pensyarah dan analisis dokumen (kurikulum dan objektif program). Data telah dikumpulkan daripada 124 orang pelajar/pelatih dan majikan dan 7 orang pensyarah telah ditemu bual. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan program AB mempunyai objektif program yang luas, kurikulum yang menyeluruh, dan mempunyai kesan positif terhadap kebolehpasaran para pelajar. Dapatan ini disokong oleh keputusan temu bual dengan para majikan, pensyarah, dan pelajar. Aktiviti pembelajaran yang digunakan di dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran yang terdiri daripada kajian kes, perbincangan, lakonan peranan, dan sebagainya, adalah selaras dengan aktiviti yang telah diutarakan di dalam kajian literatur. Para pensyarah perlu kreatif, manakala pensyarah baru perlu dihantar menjalani latihan untuk mendapatkan pendedahan dan pengalaman. Para pelajar berpendapat bahawa latihan industri mampu membangunkan kemahiran insaniah mereka. Walau bagaimanapun, para pensyarah dan majikan menyatakan para pelajar lemah di dalam tiga bidang kemahiran iaitu kemahiran kepimpinan, pemikiran kritikal

serta kemahiran lisan dan komunikasi, terutama di dalam bahasa Inggeris. Oleh itu, para pendidik dan industri perlu fokus dan menumpukan perhatian kepada bidang-bidang kemahiran ini serta memberikan penekanan yang lebih terhadap jenis aktiviti pembelajaran yang dapat meningkatkan kemahiran insaniah pelajar.

AN EVALUATION OF SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OF A DEGREE PROGRAMME IN A PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to evaluate a Bachelor's degree (AB programme) from a faculty in AA University, one of the public universities in Malaysia, in developing soft skills utilizing Tyler's evaluation model. A mixed research method was used to collect data from employers, lecturers, and students through two types of questionnaires, namely, Modified CEQ questionnaires and Employer/Trainee Survey form, and semi structured interviews for lecturers and documents analysis (curriculum and program objectives). Data were gathered from 124 students/trainees and employers and 7 lecturers were interviewed. The findings revealed that the AB programme has broad programme objectives, a comprehensive curriculum, and has positive effects on students' employability. This is supported by the results of the interview with employers, lecturers, and students. The learning activities used in teaching and learning comprising of case studies, discussions, role-play, and so forth, are in accordance with the activities suggested in the literature reviewed. Lecturers need to be creative, while new lecturers should be sent for training to get exposure and experience. The students were of the opinion that the industrial training is able to develop their soft skills. However, lecturers and employers expressed that the students are lacking in three skills, namely, leadership skills, critical thinking and oral and communication skills, especially in English language. As such, educators and the industry should focus and concentrate on these skills and place more emphasis on type of learning activities that would enhance students' soft skills.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0   Overview

This introductory chapter presents the research background, the programme structure, the definition of soft skills, the problem statement, research objectives and research questions, and the significance of the study. This is followed with the limitation, research operational definitions and conclusion.

1.1   Background

To survive in today's workplace that is changing rapidly, leaders must possess soft skills in addition to traditional leadership competencies. According to Kaur and Sharma (2008), graduates possessing academic qualification only would not be able to secure a job in the 21st century. Furthermore, a study by Noor Azina (2011) revealed that graduates with good grades did not guarantee employment for Malaysian graduates. They need to acquire soft skills, work experience and a good command of English. As such graduates today not only need to have proven technical competencies, but also need to have soft skills (Hairuzila, Hazadiah and Normah, 2009; and Mohd Yusof, Mohamad Sattar, Ramlee, Syed and Rose, 2013). According to Mohd Yusof, Ramlee, Syed, Mohammad and Seri (2013) employability skills is the deciding factor in hiring graduates by potential employers in today's workplace.

Leaders such as administrative office managers today face more complex challenges as compared with before (Quible, 2005). They have several important job responsibilities which include the five basic management functions: planning, organizing, staffing, directing, and controlling. In addition, managers coordinate

employees' efforts, not only to achieve departmental objectives, but also to achieve those of individuals in the organization as a whole. According to Quible (2005), as an administrative office manager, one will have to face a number of challenges such as being a change agent, keeping up with changes in technology, adhering to a variety of government regulations, increasing productivity, introducing and implementing new office systems, tackling issues related with culturally diverse workforce, and facing challenges of globalization.

One of the roles of the manager is to act as a change agent, whereby the manager carries the responsibility for implementing a variety of new systems and helping employees overcome their resistance to change, to help them cope with change, and to help others to accept change. Another area in which the administrative office managers will have to bear responsibility is organizational productivity. They need to continually develop efficient systems that will enable their employees to maximize their productivity. In addition, they also need to design strategies to motivate office employees to become more productive. As the arms of globalization have encroached into many organizations, managers now have to ensure that their employees are receptive and competent. Besides, they need to ensure that the operating systems and technology in all their locations fit together and comply with governmental regulations (Quible, 2005).

Besides that, administrative office managers have to play many roles and thus, they need to have many skills to perform their tasks within the organizations in which they work. Some of the important roles in which they have to be responsible for are decision-making roles, information-roles, and interpersonal roles. This is because employees look on them for direction and motivation and for achieving their

own goals. They need competent leadership, and they need leaders who can show them some humility and treat them like individuals. Hence, successful managers utilize every available skill, besides coordinating collectively efforts to achieve specific goals. They will also have to deal professionally with their subordinates, peers, and superiors. Thus, possessing managerial skills (conceptual skills, human skills, and technical skills), especially soft skills, are critical to them.

Graduates of a Bachelor's degree (in AB programme) from a faculty in AA University, one of the public universities, would allow them to obtain careers in the administration of any organization, with excellent opportunities for advancement. The AB programme consists of the technical and managerial perspectives of office system that makes it a unique programme. Currently, only AA University offering this programme in the country. As such students majoring in this programme will discover all aspects of office systems. In this programme, the students are exposed to various teaching and learning methodologies via lectures, actual problem solving, seminars and office practicum. Furthermore, the programme receives recognition from the industries. Graduates from this programme are well-prepared to hold positions such as Administrative Office Managers, Office Services, and General Administration Executives, Administration/Corporate Services Executives and Chief Office Support. This would overcome the shortage of skilled office systems professionals. Furthermore for those who are highly motivated will have the opportunity to advance and hold more important position such as Head of Department, General Manager or Chief Information Officer.

The faculty has designed the programme which would expose and provide them with the opportunity to experience and equipped them with positive personal

attributes to excel in the lives. The lecturers of this programme come from different disciplines such as computer and information technology, information management, human resource, corporate administration, management and communication. The course content encompasses fundamentals of business, office automation, communication for Administrative Professionals, Management of Administration Records, Administrative Office Management, Administrative Office Procedures, Office Systems Analysis and Design, Management of Computer Networks, and so forth.

1.2   AB Programme Structure

Under the AB programme structure, students have to complete minimum of 121 credits to obtain a degree. One credit hour is equivalent to one or two hours of lecture or tutorial or lab hours, depending on the course. There are four important components: Curriculum Studies (Programme and Faculties), Co curriculum, University, Minor and Elective. These components are the requirements for students to obtain their degree.

1.2.1 Curriculum Studies (Syllabus)

The syllabus and the scheme of work of this programme detailed out the synopsis, objective, evaluation, learning outcome as well as the matrix of outcome-based learning with the emphasis on soft skills.

Besides that, students will undergo a one-month industrial training during the final year. This would help to provide students with an opportunity to gain practical experience in an organizational setting and end-user information systems environment. Students will be placed (during semester holiday) in selected

organizations during which they may perform supervisory and/or end-user support duties, conduct observation, analyse the office systems and recommend systems improvement.

1.2.2 Soft Skills Development

AA University has always support the employability skills agenda through various activities. The faculty has even implemented the soft skills development which was introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education, that is, through the holistic approach—stand-alone subject, embedded, and faculty's activities.

Besides including the soft skills in the syllabus to ensure the development of soft skills, the *Hal-Ehwal Pelajar, (HEP)* (Students Affairs) also develops several programmes, which include a programme that consists of 5 modules with the objective of enhancing soft skills. Each of the modules will be delivered every semester.

1.3   Definition of Soft Skills

Moss and Tilly (2001) stated that the term "soft skills" was first used in 1972, but then it was not widely used until the early 1990s. They stressed that soft skills is not the formal or technical knowledge as they are skills, abilities, and traits that related to personality, attitude and behaviour. They group them under two main clusters (1) Interaction, which includes friendliness, teamwork, ability to fit in, appropriate affect, grooming, attire; and (2) Motivation, which includes enthusiasm, positive work attitude, commitment, dependability, integrity, and willingness to learn.

Soft skills complement hard skills, which are the technical requirements of a job. Changes in the economy have resulted in the need for employees who can trouble shoot and work well with people (Audibert & Jones, 2002). Soft skills are also known as people skills (Audibert & Jones, 2002).

From the literature review, soft skills are defined as those performance of employees demonstrate consciously or unconsciously on the job in term of behaviours and characteristics. According to Cranmer (2006), the behaviours differ from hard skills as much as they are acquired through practice and experience in ones' life. These skills will prepare them to survive in the workplace.

Soft skills comprise of receptive and influential behaviours among many attributes, which include various traits and attitudes. Individuals with receptive and influential behaviour will be able to use active listening to send and receive communication, using oral communication, having persuasiveness ability, able to analyse problem, make decision, responsible, time and stress management, aware of nonverbal communication, and a cognitive approach to the exchange.

Graduates need to acquire soft skills to secure and retain a job. According to Szul (2002), soft skills are nontechnical skills, abilities, and traits required for employment and can be placed in the following categories:

- Problem solving and other cognitive skills: skills which involve identifying problems, formulating, and evaluating alternative solutions by weighing the risks and benefits.
- Oral Communication skills: skills which include the ability to speak well and listen well.

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- Personal qualities: qualities that are important for job performance which include self-esteem, self-management, responsibility, and motivation.

- Interpersonal and teamwork skills: skills needed to negotiate with others, to participate as a member of a team, to serve clients and customers in a way that meets their expectations and to resolve conflicts maturely (Conrad & Leigh, 1999; Szul, 2002).

These are the elements or competencies of soft skills. Thus, the challenge nowadays is to identify the most effective ways that will provide students the opportunity to acquire and apply their soft skills.

1.3.1 Soft Skills for Graduates

Much has been written on the needs in preparing graduates for the workplace. This includes industries that have called for the reformation in the ways that the traditional universities prepare students to solve problems in the business world. Organizations are looking for executives who are able to demonstrate their knowledge, apply it, and able to solve problem and make decisions effectively. They are unwilling to employ graduates who just know how to explain textbook management theories (Burrel, 2006). Both technical and soft skills compliment each other and a balance between these two is what makes graduates a complete professional.

Technical and job related skills are necessary, but they are insufficient when it comes to securing and progressing up the organization ladder. Mohamad Sattar, Rose, Azlin, Ruhizan and Mohamad Yasin (2013) reported that employers emphasized great importance of communication skills, problem solving skills,

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teamwork and personal qualities. In addition, graduates need to acquire leadership skill, entrepreneur skill, technology skill and information skills. Soft skills are very important to a leader, as one should have the ability to convey and express idea effectively. Organizations need employees with acquired soft skills to sustain in a competitive global market.

1.3.2 Implementation of Soft Skills Development in Malaysian Universities

In 2006, the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MoHE) introduced a soft skills module to help prepare graduates entering the working world. The MoHE organised the writing of the module, where several academicians from Institution of Higher Learning participated in writing the module to be used as a guideline and reference for Malaysian universities. The MoHE also organised workshops to furnish lecturers with the information and knowledge required in implementing soft skills at their respective universities.

Hence, the researcher has gathered some information on the implementation of soft skills from the respective universities presented at the Conference of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education 2007 (CLTHE07) jointly organized by Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). The information gathered is shown in Table 1.1.

Since the introduction of soft skills to all undergraduates starting December 2006, thereon, the local universities have used various ways and strategies in implementing soft skills development. Most of the strategies used were effective.

Table 1.1

Implementation of Soft Skills

University	Programme/Strategies	Remarks
Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM)	Cocurriculum: Students Perception Survey	
University Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP)	Holistic approach: Stand alone subject, embedded and nonacademic curriculum	SS Transcript will be given.
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI)	1. English Language Support Programme - 10 days 2. *Program Ketrampilan Diri* – 2 weeks 3. Embedded subject and cocurriculum	Certificate of attendance will be given SS Transcript will be given
Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP)	Holistic approach: Stand Alone subject, Embedded and non academic curriculum	Will be assessed and the score can be seen in the academic transcript
Universiti Darul Iman Malaysia (UDM)	*Program Ketrampilan Graduan* – 6 weeks (Final year students)	
University of Malaya (UM)	Pre-Employment Programme – 5 weeks. Students with CGPA below 3	
Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)	Finishing school and starting school programmes Cocurriculum	All students – 14 hrs All new students – 7 hrs 2 credit/14 courses

Notes. Adapted from Conference or Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (CTLHE07), 12 – 14 December 2007.

As the issue is still new in Malaysia, only few local articles have been published discussing the problem and the strategies that could be effective in solving the problem. However, in other countries, initiatives to provide students with employability skills, workplace competencies, and generic skills have long existed, especially in US and UK, yet they are still facing problems with finding graduates with the right skills for employment.

What is it that makes the three to four years of study in the Universities fail to prepare students for the workplace? Furthermore, will the courses offered before their graduations enable the graduates to possess and apply these skills in the workplace?

1.4   Problem Statement

The economic challenges and changes arising out of the rapid globalization resulted with the need for both soft and hard skills. As a result, all businesses call for soft skills as these skills would enable them to achieve growth and competitiveness. However, students passing out of educational institutions do not possess these skills, even though they are good at hard skills which are the technical knowledge and competency. Universities today globally face intense criticism that their curricula fail to teach graduates with the change of management skills, the employee development skills, team-building skills, and the importance of ethical behaviour, or in preparing them for the work place (Burrel, 2006, Johnson & Spicer 2006; Smith, 2005). Although test results of graduates are improving worldwide, they are still struggling to find employment. The number of unemployed graduates is partly caused by imbalances in the economy. In addition, many graduates are not qualified for the workplace today because they are steeped in theory, but unable to communicate, handle projects, or work in a team. Therefore, the right skills required for graduates to enter the work place need to be clearly understood (Lay & Erika, 2012). As such, this would enable higher education to foster these skills to the students. Universities are therefore challenged to provide valuable services to their customers, and the key challenge is to equip students with the skills they need to be hired and valued by industries (Koffle, 1994; Shuayto, 2001).

A report by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) has reiterated its call for the UK Government and employers to work more closely together to improve the employability of school leavers. Their views are based on the latest CIPD/KPMG quarterly Labour Market Outlook, a survey of over 1,400 UK

employers, which shows that employers are placing more emphasis on the soft skills of school leavers; skills such as communication skills and work ethics, rather than skills that emphasised on literacy and numeracy (CIPD/KPMG, 2006). According to a report by the BBC, four out of 10 large employers in the UK were expected to struggle to fill graduate vacancies because of a shortage of applicants with the right skills (Graduates, 2007). The report quoted the findings from a biannual survey by the Association of Graduate Recruiters, which said employers found many graduates lacking in soft skills. They are usually excellent in paper qualification, but lacking in soft skills such as communication skills as well as verbal and numerical reasoning. Undoubtedly, the gap between the need and the supply is still huge. This strongly indicates that it is easy to find candidates who are strong in technical expertise, but difficult to find those with soft skills (Nicolaides, 2002). In Australia, a study by Monash University showed that more than one-third of foreign students are graduating from Australian universities with very poor English skills (Overseas graduates, 2007). The findings showed that South Korean students fared the worst, with 55.5% not meeting the required English standard to work professionally in Australia. Next is Thai students (50.9%), Nepalese (47.9%), Taiwanese (47.4%), Chinese (43.2%), Chinese from Hong Kong (42.9%), and Japanese (36.8%). And for Malaysian students, about 23.5% did not meet the required English standard. In view of this problem, the initiatives to foster generic skills or soft skills in Australia are receiving increasing attention as these skills are also becoming a requirement for future employees (NCVER, 2003).

Organizations are managed by people; and soft skills are all about how to deal with people and present oneself. Research quoted by The Protocol School of Washington, DC, and conducted by Harvard University, the Carnegies Foundation

and the Standard Research Institute has shown that technical skills and knowledge account for about 15% of the reason for an individual to get a job, keep the job, and advance in the job. The remaining 85% of job success is based on the individual's "people skills" (Crosbie, 2005). Bolton (1986) reported that 80% of workers unsuccessful on the job are due to their inability to work as a team rather than lack of technical skills.

The same phenomenon is affecting Malaysia. Morshidi (2005) reported that the private industry lamented the public university instead of the private sector for the unemployed graduates. Since Malaysian public Universities are being assessed in terms of the employability of its graduates, the government has emphasized that graduates should be prepared for the global marketplace. The Ministry of Higher Education is responsible to continuously improve its standard to produce quality graduates who are prepared for the workplace. Some of the major challenges affecting the Higher Education in Malaysia are capacity building through increased access to higher education, the development of quality human capital, the application of ICT, enhanced teaching and learning, and so forth. (Morshidi, 2005). An interview with the Deputy Minister of Human Resources, YB Datuk Abdul Rahman Bakar revealed that various governments' schemes and programmes such as Graduate Training Scheme, *Sure Kerja* were introduced to graduates before and after graduation which to help graduates become more employable (Elia & Zuraidah, 2006). Apparently these efforts are fairly successful. He further emphasized that most important would be that the graduates having to change their mind-set and taking the initiative to become more employable by doing part-time jobs during the holidays as to learn to be disciplined in the workplace, to experience teamwork, and to acquire leadership skills and other attributes.

For the past few years, Malaysia was stunned by the revelation that over 50,000 graduates were unable to find jobs. There was no shortage of commentaries and finger pointing, with some saying that universities are being out of touch with reality and others blaming the graduates for being unable to present themselves or even being choosy. A survey on Graduates Unemployment conducted on 24 September to 7 October 2005 by Ministry of Human Resources and Ministry of Higher Education revealed that 59, 315 graduates were unemployed. Among factors that lead to graduates unemployed were:

- mismatch in supply and demand,

- quality of graduates do not match industry demand,

- overall personality of graduates reflect lack of self-confident during interviews,

- courses offered by Universities do not match industry demand,

- poor communication skills,

- lack of general knowledge due to poor reading habits,

- poor personality,

- lack of experience,

- choosy about jobs,

- demand high salary,

- unwilling to take up jobs away from home.

A tracer study by UiTM in 2007 reported that 28.5% of graduates from AB program were unemployed, 4% continued with their studies and 67.5% were employed. As such, this issue needs to be looked into seriously. Furthermore, a report in the Document of the World Bank (2009) indicated that the shortage of

skilled labour is perceived as the biggest obstacle in doing business by firms across industries in almost all regions in Malaysia. The top criteria in 2007 for recruiting according to the employers are education, technical skills and experience. The report depicts that 20 percent of the firms surveyed in 2007 consider that foreign skilled workers are better qualified than their domestic counterparts. This indicates a deficiency of the local education system in producing marketable graduates. Thus, in 2007 more than half of the firms provided formal in-house training for their workers as it is difficult to find experienced and qualified workers. Overall, skill shortage, skill mismatch, and high wage demanded largely explain why firms spent longer time to find suitable employees. The survey looked into the following skills and attributes: English proficiency, communication skills, social skills, teamwork, leadership skills, time management, adaptability, creativity/innovation, numerical, problem solving, IT and technical/professional skills. It was found that the percentage of firms perceived English proficiency and numerical as important skills more than doubled for manufacturing as well as for services. Other important skills needed are team work, leadership skills, time management skills, problem solving skills. According to the report "Inadequate skill have long been a major constraint for Malaysian businesses despite a rapid increase in the number of high-school and university graduates in recent years" thus the Ninth Malaysia Plan placed emphasized high priority on human capital development.

The issue or problem of preparing graduates for the workplace seems similar worldwide. The researcher therefore looks for various strategies said to be effective to inculcate soft skills. As Angeline (2001) emphasized the key issue in this situation is whether the schools or faculties have the relevant curriculum and delivery systems to prepare future leaders for the dynamic changes in the workplace. Hence, the

curriculum content should meet the needs of the industry. As such, an evaluation of the programme is therefore necessary.

1.4.1 Rationale of Study

In Malaysia, so far there are not many empirical studies that have been done or published to ascertain the effectiveness of soft skills development. Since the soft skills module (KPT) in Malaysia is newly developed and the implementation is up to the respective public universities, its strengths and weaknesses need to be evaluated.

Moreover, very few studies have been conducted to examine the success or challenges of a programme or curriculum effort in developing soft skills using the evaluation model approach. It is therefore beneficial to all universities and stakeholders to share the best practices in developing soft skills. Furthermore NEP 10 (Chapter 5: Developing and Retaining a First-World Talent Base) stressed the need of higher education institutions to review the curricula and courses and seek to align programme and learning outcomes with requirements of industry and employers.

Therefore, this study aims to undertake this study to evaluate AB programme in developing soft skills using Tyler's evaluation model (1949) so that understanding of its strengths and weaknesses may be used to improve the programme or future programmes. This study also includes an extensive literature review on the effective ways and strategies in developing and enhancing soft skills of graduates.

1.5   Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of AB programme in developing soft skills. Specifically, this research aims to achieve the following objectives.

1. To determine to what extent the AB programme achieves its objectives in developing students' soft skills per se.

2. To ascertain which learning activities are effective in developing soft skills, and thus affect the employability of graduates.

3. To identify whether the AB programme or curriculum has a significant impact to assist students in making the transition from the university to the workplace.

1.5.1   Research Questions

The evaluation of the AB programme is based on Tyler's model approach where both qualitative and quantitative methods are used. The study is framed to answer the following questions:

i. Are the contents of the AB programme or curriculum designed adequately to achieve its objectives in developing students' soft skills per se?

ii. How effective are the teaching, learning and assessment in providing opportunity for the students to acquire and develop their soft skills in the learning process?

iii. Of the many types of learning activities used, which one is perceived by graduates as the most helpful in preparing them for their jobs?

iv. Do the students exhibit the ability to apply the knowledge and skills acquired during the learning process?

v. To what extent do the co curriculum activities or student development programmes provide opportunities to enhance the students' soft skills?

vi. How well does industrial training provide opportunities for trainees in applying soft skills in the workplace?

vii. Are graduates performing the job they were trained for, and are they able to transfer the knowledge and skills gained to the workplace smoothly?

viii. What do employers believe about the adequacy of the job preparation of graduates from the AB programme, and what are the soft skills expected by the companies that offers internship to the students in the AB programme?

There are various opinions on the appropriate or best method in developing soft skills. However, this study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of soft skills development of the AB programme. Koffel (1994, cited in Shuayto 2001) posed a question for educators to think about: Does the education provide the right formula for students to prepare them with necessary skills for work?

1.6 Significance of the Study

Malaysia's former Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi when addressing the 13th Nikkei International Conference stated that Malaysia's future lays firmly in development, specifically the human capital development. He further stated that there are structural adjustments that need to be made, but Malaysia will

continue to give special attention to the people who are left behind (Fauziah, 2007).

As stated in Chapter 11 of the Ninth Malaysia Plan,

> ... the quality of the labour force improved with the increasing supply of educated and skilled human resource. Various initiatives were undertaken including the implementation of several training and retraining programmes to reduce skills mismatch and enhance the employability of labour, particularly graduates. (Ninth Malaysia Plan, Chapter 11, p.237)

and in Chapter 5 of 10th Malaysia Plan,

> As there is still a sizeable gap between the competency levels of graduates and comparable international standards, the issue of graduate competency needs to be addressed to ensure that Malaysia has a skilled, well-rounded and employable graduate pool to enter the workforce. (Tenth Malaysia Plan, Chapter 5, p.215)

Thus, this study is in line with the RMK 9 (Chapter 11 − Enhancing Human Capital) and RMK10 (Chapter 5 − Developing and Retaining a First-World Talent Base), as its intention is to evaluate the AB programme and identify the most effective ways that best prepare the future generation to become skilled and competent workers, whereby people are the most precious asset.

As this issue is still new in Malaysia, there are not many articles found or published discussing the problem with strategies that are effective in solving the problem. In fact, most studies examined the employability of graduates but not many using any of the evaluation models or approaches. Therefore, this study is significant to universities as a checklist to examine whether the existing curriculum has provided opportunity for students to develop soft skills; and do businesses provide an opportunity to trainees to further develop and apply the skills in the workplace. It is also intended to identify the best method of developing soft skills. It is hoped that

this study will also provide an insight to universities and industries/employers on the ways and opportunity for students to acquire and apply the competencies needed.

Furthermore this study will add to the body of knowledge on learning activities by providing empirical support on the impact of learning of knowledge and soft skills acquisition and also of employability. Therefore, it might also spare the government from spending so much (e.g., RM70 million) on specialised training for unemployed graduates in view of the global economic recession. A statement by Datuk Dr. Idris Haron, the Deputy Higher Education Minister said,

> We are doing our best to provide skills courses to enhance the rate of employability among graduates. (Hamidah, NST January 14, 2009)

Consequently, it is important to evaluate the teaching and learning of soft skills of AB programme. The result might prove more effective in the areas of skill acquisition, transfer of learning, and learner motivation and self-confidence. This study believes that it will be able to contribute some recommendations for the improving the programme.

1.7 Limitations

This study had several limitations.

First, the study is limited to students from the AB programme and employers' demographic differences (i.e., employers from different states and more probably the subjects will consist of more females than males). In addition, the characteristics of the students of the AA University.

Second, only AB programme core courses were analysed and evaluated.

Thirdly, this study was conducted in several states depending on where the students of AB programme did the industrial training.

Finally, the results of this case study should not be generalizable to populations outside of the institution selected for this study. Similar studies performed in different institutions may yield different results. This study focused only on the relevant soft skills elements in understanding faculty members' efforts to develop soft skills as well as strategies identified by the literature.

1.8 Operational Definitions

This section describes the operational definitions of the CEQ scales, Soft Skills and employability terms and concepts used in this research.

1.8.1 Course Experience scales

The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) is a development of work originally carried out at Lancaster University in the 1980s by Paul Ramsden. It is used to measure perceived teaching quality in degree programmes in the Australian higher education system and is increasingly being employed as a measure of the quality of teaching in universities in the UK (Wilson, Lizzio & Ramsden, 1997). The most widely used version of the CEQ is the 23-item short form (CEQ23), which is divided into five subscales:

a)   **Soft skills/Generic skills**

Students report that the program has helped them develop problem-solving skills, including confidence with unfamiliar problems; analytic and communication skills; the ability to work as a team member; and the ability to plan their own work.

b)   Good Teaching

Students get useful qualitative feedback on their progress, and find that their lecturers explain things effectively, make the program interesting, motivate students, and understand students' problems.

c)   Clear Goals

Students are clear about the standard of work expected, know where they are going and what is expected of them, and feel that staffs clearly communicate their expectations.

d)   Appropriate Workload

Students find the workload is manageable and allows them enough time to understand what they are learning.

e)   Appropriate Assessment

Assessment focuses on understanding, not just recall of information.

1.8.2 Employability

Employability is defined as an individual's ability to find a job , retain a job and move between jobs or organizations should the need arise (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003; Norshima, 2008). Jamilah (2006) agreed with Dence (1997) that employers are looking for graduates who are "well-rounded."

(g)   Well-rounded person: Individuals with the qualities of able to communicate, dependability, punctuality, learn to prioritise, show initiative, enthusiastic, overcome weaknesses, team player, think creatively, flexible, accept criticism, willing to learn, cool head, and a load of common sense (Jamilah (2006) & Dence (1997).

1.9   Summary

To sum up, students graduating from the AB programme would have a promising career and a choice of positions, either as Administrative Office Managers, Office Services and General Administration Executives, Admin/Corporate Services Executives, or Chief Support Officers. It is a unique programme that blends both the technical and managerial perspectives of office systems. In addition, it is required for students to have soft skills when holding managerial posts.

Besides having academic skills, students should also have other requirements such as communication skills, personal qualities, interpersonal skills, problem solving and other cognitive skills, which are desirable traits for entry level workers, for their employability (Lewis, 2007). Malaysia has lined up a list of measures which includes the soft skills module by MoHE to help the nation's graduates to secure employment. Since the soft skills module (KPT) in Malaysia is newly developed and its implementation is up to the respective public universities, its strengths and weaknesses need to be evaluated.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0   Overview

This chapter consists of eight sections. The first section discusses the responsibilities of an administrator as a leader, as well as the problems associated with soft skills and employability of graduates. The second section focuses on soft leadership skills, graduates' lack of soft skills, and employability of graduates. The third section discusses theories used to guide this study, namely the human capital theory, the social cognitive theory, and the self-efficacy related to education, learning, and development of soft skills. The fourth section concentrates on the universities' roles and responsibilities: Malaysian soft skills module and curriculum, teaching, and learning. The fifth section reviews literature related to acquiring and enhancing soft skills, learning activities, industrial training, and transfer of learning. The sixth section discusses the programme evaluation and conceptual framework. The seventh section highlights successful practices and research, and finally, the chapter gives a brief conclusion.

2.1   Introduction

Successful operation of any organization requires competent administrators. Office Administrators coordinate activities and employees within an office setting. Administrators provide instructional leadership and manage the day-to-day activities in any type of business organizations: factories, schools, colleges, and universities. Many executive jobs require a bachelor or master's degree and experience in a related occupation. However, nowadays, the roles of office administrators are more

challenging. Not only are they required to manage the office, they must possess knowledge on basic filing manually and electronically, able to operate and troubleshoot various office equipment's, handling basic accounting systems, provide training for new staff, plans and schedules meetings, organizes and gathering information. Office administrators also perform interpersonal and informational roles in the workplace.

Strong interpersonal and communication skills are crucial because most of the administrator's jobs involve working and collaborating with others. Besides that, administrators also need to set goals and establish the policies and procedures to achieve them. They also supervise middle managers, support staff, and other employees. They may be required to develop programmes, train and motivate staff, manage career, administer record keeping, prepare budgets, and perform many other duties. Administrators need to have regular communication with their staff to clarify or explain procedural questions or to give advice. They will evaluate, and provide feedback to help employees improve their performance and skills.

According to Quible (2005), one of the common tasks of administrative office managers is supervision of subordinates. Supervisory effectiveness is largely influenced by the amount of leadership ability and skills the manager possesses. As a leader, one needs the ability to manage human behaviours to accomplish a mission. Influencing a group of people to move towards organizational goals or goal achievement is one of the responsibilities of a leader. As such, he must possess adequate personal attributes to match his authority. In the absence of sufficient personal competence, a manager may be challenged with various conflicts. To be an