

**ASSESSMENT OF A SOFT SKILL INSTRUMENT
FOR SIXTH FORM BUSINESS STUDIES STUDENTS**

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**ASSESSMENT OF A SOFT SKILL INSTRUMENT
FOR SIXTH FORM BUSINESS STUDIES STUDENTS**

By

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CTS	Critical Thinking Skill
ES	Entrepreneurship Skill
ESR	Ethical and Social Responsibilities
<i>M</i>	Mean score
MOHE	Ministry of Higher Education
MPM	Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia
MQA	Malaysian Qualifications Agency
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPS	Oral Presentation Skill
OS	Organising Skill
<i>p</i>	Probability
PSS	Problem Solving Skill
<i>SD</i>	Standard Deviation
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
SPSS	Statistical Packages for the Social Science
STPM	<i>Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia</i>
TWS	Teamwork Skill
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WS	Writing Skill

**PENAKSIRAN INSTRUMEN KEMAHIRAN INSANIAH DALAM
KALANGAN MURID-MURID PENGAJIAN PERNIAGAAN
TINGKATAN ENAM**

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji tahap kompetensi bagi kemahiran insaniah murid-murid Tingkatan Enam yang mengikuti kelas Pengajian Perniagaan di sekolah. Seramai 101 orang murid-murid Tingkatan Enam yang mengikuti kelas Pengajian Perniagaan telah menggunakan rubrik untuk membuat penilaian sendiri terhadap tahap kompetensi bagi kemahiran insaniah mereka. Tiga orang guru mata pelajaran Pengajian Perniagaan telah berpasangan untuk menilai tahap kompetensi kemahiran insaniah murid-murid berkenaan dengan menggunakan rubrik. Kaedah pengumpulan data kuantitatif dan kualitatif telah dijalankan dengan menggunakan tiga instrumen iaitu senarai semak, rubrik, dan temubual berstruktur. Dapatan kajian ini merangkumi sebanyak lapan elemen kemahiran insaniah terkandung dalam dokumen yang dianalisis, tahap pencapaian kompetensi murid-murid daripada penilaian sendiri murid-murid dan penilaian guru. Dapatan menunjukkan murid-murid mencapai kompetensi sederhana untuk kerja berpasukan, pemikiran kritis, penyelesaian masalah, pembentangan dan kemahiran penulisan. Tahap kompetensi pemikiran kritis, penyelesaian masalah dan pembentangan murid-murid adalah di bawah sasaran tahap kompetensi. Statistik kappa yang mengukur tahap kebolehpercayaan telah menunjukkan nilai yang rendah. Namun, kajian mendapati peratus persetujuan yang tinggi (lebih daripada 50%) antara guru penilai dalam menilai elemen kemahiran insaniah murid-murid. Selain itu, hasil analisis korelasi antara guru penilai menunjukkan wujudnya hubungan yang signifikan dalam menilai elemen kemahiran insaniah murid-murid.

**ASSESSMENT OF A SOFT SKILL INSTRUMENT FOR SIXTH FORM
BUSINESS STUDIES STUDENTS**

ABSTRACT

This study aims to obtain in depth information on the competency level of soft skill elements of Sixth Form Business Studies students in a school setting. A total of 101 Sixth Form Business Studies students self-assessed their elements of soft skill. Three Business Studies subject teachers were paired up as raters to assess the soft skills elements' of students using rubrics. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to collect data using checklist, rating rubrics, and structured interview. The findings of this study discovered a total of eight soft skill elements stated in the analysed document via document analysis. Results of rubric ratings, both by student self-rating and teacher rating revealed that the Sixth Form Business Studies students possessed moderate competency for Teamwork, Critical Thinking, Problem Solving, Oral Presentation and Writing Skill. The Sixth Form Business Studies students' competency level for Critical Thinking, Problem Solving, Oral Presentation Skill were found to be severely below targeted competency levels. In obtaining inter-rater reliability of ratings, the kappa statistic had shown a low agreement between the teacher raters. However, a high percentage agreement (more than 50%) between teacher raters for most of the soft skill elements was found. Correlation analyses for the ratings of teachers were significantly correlated for all the five soft skill elements.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Achieving the goals of enhanced student learning and job readiness is always the subject to review at all levels. Research shows that affective skills such as to communicate effectively, to demonstrate a positive work ethics, to solve problems and able to work in a team are some of the soft skills demanded by the employers (Warn & Tranter, 2001). Attempts to identify soft skills or nontechnical affective skills of students so as to develop effective instructional delivery for the soft skills, is therefore necessary and relevant. Integrating and enhancing soft skills such as interpersonal skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills into a core curriculum is the way for educators to serve all students either those who will work directly after high school graduation or proceed to the college studies (Danley & Waters, 2002). Hence, a study on the soft skills of Sixth Form Business Studies students who will work after graduation or enrol to tertiary education studies is appropriate and a cornerstone to those who are participants in the business and labour industries.

The ability to extract and apply new information from ever-changing experiences appears to be one of the most important skills an individual (Brewer, 2013) will need in order to effectively confront new technological advancements (Thangavelu & Guangzhou, 2005). These important skills refer to a blend of skills including academic knowledge and non technical skill or so called soft skills. Education builds a nation and the nation's future workforce is the output of education. Hence, the role

of education is to equip a nation with individuals who have the ability to interpret as well as absorb complex information. As such, education practices should concentrate on instilling soft skills as well as academic and technical skills, requiring students to demonstrate learning mastery in a variety of venues that will enhance their living skills in facing the challenging world.

1.2 Background of the Study

The background of this study focuses on two aspects; the scenario of Form Six Programme and education for future nation.

1.2.1 Scenario of Six Form Programme

In Malaysia, the formal education involves a total of twelve and a half years of adding values to the education process. The students undergo six years of primary school, five years of secondary school, and one and a half years of Form Six Studies before proceeding to tertiary education. Form Six studies is a preparatory education for university education. STPM (*Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia*) examination is held to assess the performance of students who have undergone the Form Six studies. The result of the STPM examination is used to determine entries for university or tertiary studies.

There are two streams in Form Six Studies, namely Science and Arts. Students will take five subjects, two compulsory subjects and three elective subjects. Business Studies is an elective subject for the Art stream Sixth Form students. This subject was first introduced by the Ministry of Education in year 1998. This subject serves as an advanced study to the subject matter of Commerce and Principle of

Book Keeping in the Form Five secondary school education. As a subject matter, Business Studies not only provides a basic knowledge in business education but also nurtures some kind of soft skills among Sixth Form students (*Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia*, 2012). Learning the knowledge and skills in business is relevant to all individuals, especially to those who want to be in the business industries. Students who select this subject in the STPM examination can then further their tertiary education in courses such as Accounting, Business Administration, Management and Economics in university education.

1.2.2 Education for Future Nation

Learning goals are no longer confined to students competing against one another but acquiring knowledge and mastering the essential skills for a living (Ting, Ying, Saad, & Isa, 2012). In the process of acquiring knowledge, competencies and skills in schools, students acquire certain values that enable them to perform various tasks (Betts, Lewis, Dressler, & Svensson, 2009). The added values of formal education include all the knowledge, competencies and skills learned and mastered by students in schools (Adams, 1993). When the students leave schools with the added values, they become products of the school for human resource at the job market.

The world is moving towards a knowledge-based society. In moving towards the knowledge-based society, preparation of students to become competent individuals in new competitive environment shifts the emphasis of teaching and assessing from routine procedural task to a higher level of thinking and behaviour patterns (Business Times, 2006). As Malaysia want to align our nation towards the

knowledge-based society, the role of education is to equip our nation with the ability of individuals to interpret as well as absorb complex information. Individuals are required to consistently perform at the highest levels of the cognitive domain as well as the affective and psychomotor domains (Micklich, 2014).

Besides, the changing nature of work and new technologies also embrace change in assessing performance of students in various aspects. The rapid development and diffusion of new technologies changes in the make-up of the workforce, and increasing complexity of legal provisions are some of the challenges businesses and government have to deal with (Andrews & Higson, 2008). There is an increased demand for employees to embrace change and the changing nature of work (Jailani, Wan Mohd Rashid, Noraini, & Wahid, 2006). Organizations need to re-examine their present practices of human resources to make sure that the contribution of their workforce is still relevant to the organisation's success and competitiveness (Woo, 2006). This has created an interest and need for conducting empirical research to understand the competencies needed by employees in the future to help organizations be competitive in the marketplace. As workforce is the output of educational process, educators will continually revise education plans to meet competitive and ever changing workplace demands (Ames, 1996).

Today's students are motivated to pursue knowledge and skills useful in their life. Systematic and abstract knowledge is a necessity for achieving academic performance and successful career. The ability to obtain and apply new information appears to be one of the most important skills for an individual to effectively confront new technological situations. Under the Tenth Malaysia Plan, special

emphasis will be given to focus on skill development, especially in terms of upskilling workforce (Malaysia, 2012). In short, students need to acquire relevant soft skills that enable them to face a challenging world. Strategic approaches are crucial for schools and teachers in developing the skills needed by students in their life.

The increasing unemployment among young people who are lacking in soft skills needs an urgent solution (Wye & Lim, 2009). There are more complaints from employers on the standard and competencies of graduates (Khoo, 2001; Zakaria, 2006; Andrews & Higson, 2008). Serious concerns have been expressed to higher educational institutions for not adopting the appropriate curriculum and course content (Yunus & Li, 2005; Woo, 2006). Stakeholders including parents, government agencies, and employers have challenged schools to educate and prepare students for workplace (Wilhelm, Logan, Smith, & Szul, 2002). There is a groundswell of demand from education institutions to prepare high school and university graduates for the workplace that is preferred by today's employers (Reio & Sutton, 2006; Spitzer, 2002). Investigations on the acquired soft skills of students as well as to take steps in furnishing students with the required soft skills are very much needed to close the gap in soft skills shortage among high school students.

Investments in education do more than pay significant returns to future citizens (Calman & Tarr-Whelan, 2005). The future workforce of a nation is the output of schools and universities. As such, the key challenge of education today is building a knowledge-based and skilled workforce for the future. Thus, integrating marketable workplace skills into a core curriculum is a way for educators to serve all

students from those who work directly after high school graduation to the college studies (Danley & Waters, 2002). In view of the challenges of education, enhancing student learning and job readiness are the main concern and focus that need to be reviewed by educators.

1.3 The Statement of Research Problem

The problems that drove to this research is the lacking of tools for assessing students' learning especially in assessing the acquisition soft skill among students in schools. The curriculum and syllabus required teachers to cultivate soft skill among Six Form students. However, no specific evaluation tool is introduced to teachers to assess students' soft skill competency. In attempting to measure the student' competency of soft skill explicitly and directly, a valid, suitable and comprehensive instrument is required. As such, there is a dearth of assessment tools for teachers to assess students' soft skill competency and this has contributed to the research problem of this study.

Assessment of students' learning is a complicated but important aspect of education (Winchester-Seeto, Mackaway, Coulson, & Harvey, 2010). Educators have spent much time in developing and refining assessment strategies for all kinds of learning including the learning of soft skills. Soft skills are intangible, not directly observable and are embedded in context specific to the individual and therefore difficult to measure. In addition, the process of acquiring and developing of soft skills among individuals is gradual and vary from an individual to another even though at a similar setting. An effective assessment tool is capable of adequately measuring the students' soft skills with the objective of gaining knowledge of the

subjects studied or to evaluate the effect of psychological intervention programs (Bellack, 1983; Lange & Jakubowski, 1976). Unfortunately, there is a dearth of assessment tools to investigate the depth of soft skills acquired by pre-U students thus far.

In an attempt to assess soft skills, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has developed an assessment instrument to determine the soft skills of university graduates. The tool used by MOHE was developed merely to assess the soft skills of university graduates in general, and the tool focuses on the perception of the ability of using soft skills among university graduates. The tool employed by MOHE is specifically developed for university graduates. Assessment tools are not one-size-fits all, but need to match the criteria and target of assessment. Hence, the tool is not meant for assessing the soft skill competency of Sixth Form students.

The researcher in this study intends to assess the Sixth Form students' soft skills using an assessment instrument which is task oriented or context based in school setting. Less effort has been invested in developing assessment scales to assess the soft skills of students in educational setting. Hence, a valid and reliable instrument to assess students' soft skills is indeed a required tool for teachers to explore students' soft skill competency.

In summary, soft skills are embedded in the curriculum and students acquired soft skills through the process of learning in schools and universities. Research to obtain empirical data on soft skills is necessary so as to convince educational policy makers on their decision making for students. Educators can explore the students'

learning and acquisition of soft skills in various aspects if an effective tool is employed. Hence, educators require reliable and indispensable instrument to assess students' soft skills.

1.4 The Purpose of the Study

This study aims to obtain in depth information on the required and acquired soft skill of Sixth Form Business Studies students in a school setting. As such, the purpose of this study is

1. To identify the expected soft skills elements set by Ministry of Education for Sixth Form Business Studies students.
2. To develop and to refine rubrics for assessing students' soft skills competency.
3. To assess the competency level of soft skill as self-rated by Sixth Form Business Studies students using rubrics.
4. To assess the competency level of soft skill of Sixth Form Business Studies students as rated by teachers using rubrics.
5. To investigate the gap of competency level between the expected soft skills elements set by Ministry of Education for Sixth Form Business Studies students and the actual soft skills elements of Sixth Form Business Studies students.
6. To compare the assessment of soft skills elements of Sixth Form students by students self rating and by teachers rating.

1.5 Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the expected soft skills elements set by Ministry of Education for Sixth Form Business Studies students?
2. What are the feedback of student-raters and teacher-raters on the rating rubric?
3. What is the competency level of soft skill (Teamwork, Critical Thinking, Problem Solving, Oral Presentation and Writing Skill) as self-rated by Sixth Form Business Studies students using rubrics?
4. What is the competency level of soft skill (Teamwork, Critical Thinking, Problem Solving, Oral Presentation and Writing Skill) of Sixth Form Business Studies students as rated by teachers using rubrics?
5. What is the competency gap between the expected soft skills elements set by Ministry of Education for Sixth Form Business Studies students and the actual soft skills elements of Sixth Form Business Studies students?
6. Is there any difference in the level of competency between the assessment of soft skill elements by students' self-rating and by teachers' rating?

1.6 The Significance of the Study

Soft skills have been identified as the most critical skills and in high demand in the current global job market. The educational process is about adding values that are critical and demanding to the human capital. Since soft skills are one of the values to be added through educational process, studies on soft skills are crucial and a necessity. There are four factors which contributed to the importance and a necessity of this study.

First, there is very little research being carried out regarding soft skills among Sixth Form students. A better understanding on the soft skills required by educators and industry as well as the soft skills acquired at Form Six Studies is therefore useful. More research to explore the areas of soft skills is needed. Thus, this study contributes to the educational knowledge as well as to inspire future in depth studies related to soft skills.

Second, educators and education policymakers need to gain some insight into the types of soft skills needed for future business studies and careers (Woo, 2006). In view of this fact, many developed countries continue to review and find ways and means to improve the quality of education in fulfilling the needs of a new challenging environment (Reio & Sutton, 2006). As such, an extensive study to assess employee workforce soft skills and competencies is appropriate for getting into the same pace with developed countries.

Third, educators as well as educational researchers are held accountable for students' achievement and struggle to find ways to teach students (Ballard & Bates, 2008) the knowledge and skills necessary to prepare them for tertiary education and at workplace. The lack of soft skills seems to be an affliction among job seekers (Schulz, 2008; BERNAMA, 2010). Sixth Form Students who will be admitted to universities and colleges, or the job market, need to possess a set of soft skills in order to fit into the learning environment (universities and colleges) and working environment (job market). Therefore, the crucial challenge faced by educational institutions is how to train students of today for the jobs of tomorrow and how to

shape teaching and learning so that people can acquire occupational–relevant competencies for the types of work needed in the foreseeable future.

Fourth, the pressing issue of the increasing unemployment among young people who are lacking in soft skills should be addressed (Shakir, 2009; Wye & Lim, 2009). The future workforce is the output of educational process. The ultimate goal of a quality education is to build a productive nation. The quality of workforce depends on how much value the educational process is added to students. The country should focus the available resources in preparing for a “quality workforce”. The findings of this study can provide information on the required soft skills of students in building a productive workforce.

As the world has revolved from the industrial age to a technology-based society in which individual and societal competence is paramount, the focus on educational system must shift from the basic ABC's to Competency-Based Education (CBE). In addition, the increasing globalization of the workforce and job market imposes much more competitive skills on future workers (Shakir, 2009). Educational priorities must be continually revised to meet competitive and ever-changing workplace demands (Ames, 1996). The findings of this study not only provide feedback for educational planners to consider in revising our educational curriculum, but also to serve as the market research for private institutions to respond to the employers' expectation.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

This study is subjected to some limitations. One of the limitations in this research is the sample of the study. The sample group is limited to Sixth Form students who are at the end of the Form Six programme and Business Studies is one of the subject matter learned by the students. The sample is addressed as Upper Six students. Since the researcher intend to identify the soft skills of the Form Six students, therefore the Upper Six students are selected as the sample is appropriate because they had undergone the Form Six programme for a year. Furthermore, soft skills of these students are able to be assessed by teachers who are teaching the subject matter to students.

This study also limited the scope or element of soft skills of students. In this study, the soft skills that are to be discussed including five skills namely oral presentation skills, writing skills, critical thinking, problem solving skills, and teamwork skill. These five skills are selected to be focused in this research because they are considered as the most common and critical to young adults and in education. In several past researches, oral presentation skills, writing skills, critical thinking, problem solving skills, and teamwork skill are ranked as important soft skills to students and workers.

Another limitation is subjectivity bias of the participants. The participants of this study are Sixth Form Business Studies students and Business Studies teachers. It will be impossible for the researcher to guarantee the participants (Sixth Form Business Studies students) will respond to the self-rated rubrics fairly and honestly. Inter-rating scoring will be employed to control subjectivity bias of participants.

However, in the case of self-rated rubrics, each and every individual student may not perceive the content and criteria of rubrics similarly. The presence of bias is often not avoidable and indeed inherent to certain study designs (Sica, 2006). In the case of Business Studies teachers who participated as rubric raters are familiar with the students they are evaluating and thus may invite potential biases. As such, certain subjectivity bias exists.

1.8 Operational Definition and Terminology

Soft skills are defined as the relevant qualities and skills that lead to effective job performance. The soft skills discussed in this study include: Teamwork Skill, Critical Thinking, Problem Solving Skill, Oral Presentation Skill, and Writing skill. This operational definition is defined based on the definition of the seven elements of soft skill by Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) as well as the understanding of the researcher for the terminology used in various educational context of Malaysia.

1.8.1 Teamwork Skill

Teamwork Skill in this research involves the ability to work and cooperate with people from various social and cultural backgrounds so as to achieve a common goal. Teamwork contributes to supporting others and self in adapting to changes and establishing responsibilities. In this study, the teacher-raters and student-raters using rubric to assess Teamwork Skill based on the four dimensions which include punctualities and met requirements, fulfil team role's duties, collaboration and social interaction among group members, and contributing and sharing ideas. Teamwork Skill in this research is assessed with three performance levels, labelled as 'Low competency', 'Moderate competency' and 'High competency'.

1.8.2 Critical Thinking

Critical Thinking in this research involves the ability to recognize and define and see the connections among unrelated ideas. These skills involve the ability to evaluate and make judgement using creativity, reasoning, and past experiences along with the available information and resources. In this study, the teacher-raters and student-raters using rubric to assess Critical Thinking based on the four dimensions which include interpretation, analysis and evaluation, making conclusion, and presentation.

1.8.3 Problem Solving Skill

Problem Solving Skill in this research refers to the ability to recognize and define problems, invent and implement solutions, and seeing connections among unrelated ideas. These skills involve the ability to find and implement solutions to problems using creativity, reasoning, and past experiences and available information and resources. In this study, the teacher-raters and student-raters using rubric to assess Problem Solving Skill based on the three dimensions which include defining problem, identifying strategies, and implementing solution.

1.8.4 Oral Presentation Skill

Oral presentation skill in this research involves the ability to use verbal and written language effectively in the English and Malay Language. Oral presentation skills also include skills that enable individuals to relay information as well as convey their thoughts verbally with clarity and confidence. In this study, the teacher-raters and student-raters using rubric to assess Oral presentation skill based on the four dimensions which include organization, listening, eye contact, and delivery.

1.8.5 Writing Skill

Writing Skill in this research involves the ability to write text with accuracy in grammar and spelling using appropriate formats, terminology, language and ability in developing and organising coherence and cohesive ideas. In this study, the teacher-raters and student-raters using rubric to assess Writing Skill based on the four dimensions which include Coherency/consistency, relevancy, writing format, spelling and grammars.

1.8.6 Sixth Form Business Studies Students

Sixth Form Business Studies Students in this research are defined as the learners who selected Business Studies as one of the subject matter in Form Six Programme and it is equivalent to pre-university level learners. The syllabus of the Business Studies subject matter is set by Malaysian Examination Council (*Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia*) and has included soft skill in the syllabus. In this study, the Sixth Form Business Studies students self-rate their soft skill elements competency using rubrics.

1.8.7 Teacher-rater

Teacher-rater in this research refers to the three Business Studies subject teachers who assess the competency of students' soft skills elements. In this study, teacher-rater is regarded as expert rater. The teacher-rater has undergone rubric rating training by the researcher, having classroom instruction experiences, interacting with students in classrooms activities, and assessing a number of students using rubrics.

1.8.8 Student-rater

Student-raters in this research refer to the students who self-assess their own competency of soft skill elements. In this study, the student-raters had undergone one session of rating training by the researcher.

1.9 Conclusion

A formation of supportive educational strategy in our formal educational system is required in bridging education to working environment. Attempts to identify soft skills or affective skills among Sixth Form Business Studies students from the perspective of teachers will provide information to improve our educational strategy as well as human resource development. Improving the quality of education remains a primary concern to anyone who has a passion for education (Wong, 1998). Research on soft skills definitely is a valuable topic that is worth exploring topic as every individual is affected by business, either as consumers or workers (Stitt-Gohdes, 2002).

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The content of this chapter is a review of literature on soft skills in six major sections. Firstly, the review begins with brief definitions and terminology of soft skills, and is followed by elements, components, subset or soft outcomes of soft skills. Thirdly, the review discusses on the importance of soft skills. Next, the review also examines the theories that are used to construct the theoretical framework of this study. The literature then further discusses related studies on soft skills and studies on rubrics. Finally, the conclusion of this chapter is discussed.

2.2 Definitions and Terminology of Soft Skills

“Soft skills” is a term that is open to wide interpretations. Definitions and terminology related to those intangible of skills vary from study to study, including terms such as ‘social skills’ (Deil-Amen, 2006; Gow, 1997), ‘generic skills’ (Virgona, Waterhouse, Sefton, & Sansuinetti, 2004), ‘people skills’ (Shakir, 2009), ‘informal skills’, ‘tacit skills’, ‘personal skills’ and ‘interpersonal skills’. Soft skills are also known as people skills (Davis & Gonzenbach, 2001), life skills, non-technical skills, employability skills (Harvey, 2001) and domain skills. The soft skills are referred with different terms across the world. The followings are some of the terms used for soft skills in various countries in the world.

Table 2.1:

The Terms Used for Soft Skills in Various Countries in the World

Countries	Terms Used for Soft Skills
UK	Core skills, key skills, common skills
New Zealand	Essential skills
Switzerland	Trans-disciplinary goals
Denmark	Process in dependent qualifications
Australia	Key competencies, employability skills, generic skills
Canada	Employability skills
US	Basic skills, necessary skills, workplace know-how
Singapore	Critical enabling skills
France	Transferable skills
Germany	Key qualifications
UMP	Soft Skills

Source: National Centre for Vocational Education Research Australia – NCVER (2003:2)

Higher educational institutions in Australia have used ‘employability skills’ as the terminology in most of the research. The Business Council of Australia (BCA) and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) defined ‘Employability skills’ as skills required to gain employment as well as to progress within an organisation so as to achieve one’s potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions’ (Department of Education, Science and Training - DEST, 2002).

Employability skills are also referred to generic capabilities, enabling skills or key skills. Employability skills are not a new concept. They describe non-technical skills and competencies that have always been an important part of effective and successful participation in the workplace (Cleary, Flynn, & Thomasson, 2006). The Allen Consulting Group reported in the assessment and reporting of employability skills, noted that ‘employability skills’ are also known by several other names,

including key skills, core skills, life skills, essential skills, key competencies, necessary skills, and transferable skills (The Allen Consulting Group, 2006: 11). Other terms used for soft skills include ‘human skills’ (Katz, 1955; Northouse, 2004), ‘nontechnical skills’, ‘general skills’, ‘generic skills’(Hamzah & Abdullah, 2009), and ‘essential skills’.

Another common term use for soft skills is generic skill (Hamzah & Abdullah, 2009). The use and popularity of concepts of generic skills has increased around the world, and particularly in Australia, since the 1980s (NCVER, 2002). Generic skills are part of a suite of skills which, in combination, optimise an individual’s productivity. Generic skills complement technical skills and are required by all workers. They are related to work processes. Generic skills contribute to an individual’s overall employability. The skills bring added-value to more job-specific skills (NCVER, 2002).

Soft skills are skills often referred to interpersonal, human, people, or behavioural skills, and place emphasis on personal behaviour and managing relationships between people. According to Northouse (2004), human skill is the capacity to get along with others as the individuals go about their work”. Soft skills are primarily affective or behavioural in nature, and have recently been associated with the so-called Emotional Quotient (EQ) popularized by Daniel Goleman (Caudron, 1999; Kemper, 1999; McMurchie, 1998). EQ is regarded as a blend of innate characteristics and human/personal/interpersonal skills (Kemper, 1999).

In a nutshell, soft skills are considered as skills that are related to individual personal characteristics and embedded in the attribute of a person. Soft skills are required to enable a person for employment and a supplement to hard skills in accomplishing tasks at workplace.

2.3 Elements, Components, Subset or Soft Outcomes of Soft Skills

This section of reviews is divided into two parts. Elements, components and subset of soft skills are discussed, followed by a brief review of the individual soft outcome.

2.3.1 Element, Components and Subset of Soft Skills

Rychen and Salganik (2001) identified four major conceptual elements in generic competencies, namely multi-functional, multi-dimensional, a high order of mental complexity, and relevant across many fields. According to Rychen and Salganik (2001), multi-functional generic competencies are needed to achieve different goals and to solve multiple problems in different contexts. Multi-dimensional generic competencies contribute to individual's analytical, cultural and communicational skills, and common sense. A high order of mental complexity of generic competencies involves an active and reflective approach to life. Generic competencies that are relevant across many fields are the skills that enable individuals to apply in school environment, labour market, political processes, social networks, and interpersonal relationships, including family life and for developing a sense of social well being. According to Male and Chapman (2005), the demands of a 'knowledge society', and to acknowledge the increasingly multi-disciplinary nature

of work, have highlighted the need to incorporate both generic and discipline-specific graduate competencies.

Soft skills were seen to have relevance to both entry-level and established employees. It was also recognised that the skills would be prioritised and adapted to suit various job-roles. Business Council of Australia (BCA) and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) identified eight employability skills required for today's employees (Cleary, Flynn, & Thomasson, 2006). The eight identified skills include communication skills, teamwork skills, problem solving skills, self-management skills, planning and organising skills, technology skills, life-long learning skills, initiative and enterprise skills.

Johnston and McGregor (2005) outlined the scope of soft skills. They include information handling skills like learning, thinking communicating and problem solving. They include organizational skills like planning and managing projects. They also include interpersonal skills like leadership, working with others and in teams. Johnston and McGregor (2005) emphasised the point that the way these skills are exercised in the workplace depends very much on personal values and attributes.

Gibb (2004) in *Employability Skills from Framework to Practice* (Cleary, Flynn, & Thomasson, 2006) outlines the common elements of generic skills. The common elements of generic skills referred to basic or fundamental skills, people-related skill, conceptual or thinking skills, personal skills and attributes, business skills, and community skills.

Expert Group in Future Skills Needs Secretariat (2006) divides soft skills in three categories, fundamental skills, people-related skills and thinking skills. The first category, fundamental skills encompasses literacy skills, skills using numbers and using technology. The second category, people-related skills include communication, interpersonal, team-working, customer-service skills. The third category, thinking skills outline skills such as collecting and organising information, problem-solving, planning and organising, learning-to-learn skills, innovatively and creatively.

Soft skills are personal attributes that enhance an individual's interactions, job performance and career prospects. According to Schulz (2008), soft skills are commonly divided into two components: personal attributes and interpersonal abilities. Personal attributes refers to the attributes such as: optimism, common sense, responsibility, a sense of humor, integrity, time-management, and motivation. Interpersonal abilities include empathy, leadership, communication, good manners, and sociability (Schulz, 2008).

Soft skills are the skills and abilities that are essential to communicate with superiors, peers, subordinates, clients and vendors. These are the skills related to both verbal and non verbal language for effective and efficient communication (Hoo, Nasurdin, Chai, & Ignatius, 2009) Soft skills constitute communication skills and various other skills such as interpersonal, team building, time management, leadership, decision making, problem solving, negotiation skills and willingness to learn. Communication skill is the heart of soft skill (Schulz, 2008; Quah et al., 2009).

Soft skills comprise a cluster of personality traits, social graces, facility with language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism which individuals acquire as they grow and mature. Other soft skills are active listening, negotiating, conflict resolution, problem solving, reflection, critical thinking, ethics, and leadership skills (Dash, 2001; Gorman, 2000; Isaacs, 1998; Schulz, 1998).

2.3.2 Soft Outcomes /Soft Skills Outcomes

Soft outcomes are outcomes from training, support or guidance interventions after workers undergoing educational and occupational training. ‘Soft outcomes’ include achievements relating to interpersonal skills, organisational skills, analytical skills and personal skills (Dewson, Eccles, Tackey, & Jackson, 2000). Soft outcomes have been seen as difficult to measure (Butcher & Marsden, 2003). Unlike hard outcomes, soft outcomes cannot be measured directly or tangibly.

In conclusion, various soft skills are categorized by researchers into elements, components, subsets and soft outcomes. As individuals master the soft skills that are related to their job, they are able to perform the skills to accomplish their task at the workplace.

2.4 The Importance of Soft Skills

In order to understand the importance of soft skills, it is necessary and relevant to look at the needs of employers including soft and hard skills, the nature of labour markets, and the trends in employment. The following section of this review discusses on meeting the needs of the employers, the nature of labour markets, trends in employment and soft skills versus hard skills in the labour market.

2.4.1 Meeting the Needs of Employers

Every employer is demanding a specific set of skills from job-seekers that match the skills necessary to perform a particular job. Most job-seekers possess the skills required by employers to some extent. However there are some job-seekers who are lacking of the skills needed by employers. A gap between those soft skills demanded by today's employers and those skills provided by educational institutions seems to exist (Wilhelm, 2002; Eldredge, 2006). For decades, employers as well as educators frequently complain about a lack in soft skills among graduates from tertiary institutions (Othman, et. al., 2011). In a highly competitive economy, unprepared graduates stand very little chance to be successful in obtaining employment and performing in their jobs. It is therefore imperative to strengthen the soft skills to ensure adequate preparation of graduates (Brungardt, 2006).

In today's knowledge economy, it is not sufficient for a worker to possess adequate basic cognitive skills and discipline-specific competencies (Sycara & Sukthankar, 2006). The nature of work also requires that the person be able to work in teams, be a creative problem solver, and communicate with a diverse set of colleagues and clients. Employers, colleges and universities have become more cognizant of the role that such so-called "soft" or non-cognitive skills play in successful performance in both academic and non-academic arenas. The measurement of skills and traits such as creativity, teamwork and persistence has become a major focus in applied areas such as human resources and industrial-organizational psychology.