Generic Skills of Malaysian University Students

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Introduction

Demands at the workplace are transforming the kinds of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for successful work performance. Evidence from employer surveys suggested that employers are often more concerned about soft skills or attitudes rather than technical knowledge or competencies (Stasz, Ramsey, Eden, Melamid, & Kaganoff, 1996). Empirical studies on work found that employers and workers also feel skills such as problem solving, communication and the ability to work in teams, are increasingly important for workplace success (Stasz et al., 1996). Therefore, apart from providing students with the technical knowledge, universities are entrusted with the task of grooming students with the generic skills required to be successful workers. The importance of some of these skills are documented in the Quality Assurance in Public Universities of Malaysia: Code of Practice document, which states that the quality of a university programme is assessed by the ability of its graduates in carrying out their expected roles with responsibility in society. As stated in the document, among the competencies that students should demonstrate at the end of the programme are critical thinking, problem solving, creative decision making and ability to communicate, apart from mastery of knowledge in the specific fields (Quality Assurance Division, 2004).

Generic Skills

The terminology used to refer to generic skills differs between one country to another. According to Clayton et al. (2003), the Australians refer to generic skills as 'key competencies', 'soft skills', or 'employability skills', the English name them 'key skills' or 'core skills', and the Americans refer to them as 'necessary skills' or 'employability skills'. The skills involved are numerous and some are specific within the context of a particular work environment. Mayer (1992) documented a set of skills articulated as key competencies which are comprehensive although not exhaustive. Since Mayer's publication, additional skills associated with the workplace are now considered essential (Clayton et al., 2003). Among the additional skills are self management, innovation, creativity and initiative, and ability to perform in a changing environment. The generic skills in this study were selected based on literature, and considered essential in ensuring success in university education. The skills are identified through a test on critical thinking and questionnaires on problem solving, emotional intelligence, personality, time management, and study skills. Skills such as communication, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills are subsumed under personality.

Research Problem

The question of concern in this study is whether students are improving on selected generic skills throughout their university years to prepare them for the workplace. Another concern is the performance of students during their university years. Despite the tight procedure in selecting students especially in fields such as medicine, engineering and sciences, the moderate performance of Malaysian university students (Ministry of Education, 2004) caused great concern among university lecturers and administrators. Under the assumption that students are of compatible academic capabilities upon admission, would the acquisition of generic skills contribute to the difference in academic performance in the university?

Information on generic skills acquired by students upon admission and at the end of their undergraduate programme can be used as indicators on the success of school and university curricula. Thus, the knowledge on generic skills acquired by graduates is useful to aid schools and universities in improving the curricula.

Objectives

This study aims to (i) identify the generic skills (problem solving ability, emotional intelligence, personality, time management skills, critical thinking skills and study skills) acquired by high school leavers (first year university students) and among final year university students, and (ii) identify whether relationship exists between selected generic skills and students' academic performance in the university.

Methodology

The study employs the survey method. An instrument was developed based on six constructs identified as skills needed for success in higher learning. The instrument comprises a 30 minute test on critical thinking and a questionnaire on problem solving, emotional intelligence, personality, time management, and study skills. A total of 3025 respondents from seven public universities (UPM, UUM, UM, UKM, UTM, USM, UNIMAS) and two private universities (MMU, UTP) participated in

the study. The data analysis includes descriptive statistics, ANOVA and correlation. ANOVA was used to test whether significant differences exist in the skills acquired by students based on year of study. Correlation was used to establish relationship between students' cumulative grade point average (CGPA) and the generic skills.

Findings and Discussions

In the analysis, the respondents were categorized as first year, intermediate (students who are not in the first year or in the final year) and final year students. In comparing the skills of students based on year of study, the study revealed that final year students obtained the highest scores in problem solving (mean = 3.47, sd = .40), personality (mean = 3.76, sd = .46), critical thinking (mean = 18.13, sd = 4.05), study skills (mean = 2.64, sd = .29) and time management (mean = 2.71, sd = .33). Although the final year students displayed better scores, overall scores obtained by Malaysian students in all these generic skills were just moderate.

There was a significant difference in (i) personality and time management between final year students and students in the first and second year, and (ii) problem solving skills between final year students and students in the first year. It was found that there was a significant moderate positive correlation (p < .01) between CGPA and critical thinking, personality, study skills, and time management. The study also showed that there is a significant and stronger positive correlation (r >.500) between personality and emotional intelligence, personality and study skills, problem solving and time management, and study skills and time management. The findings showed that students improved on certain generic skills in the process of university education. Thus, it can be

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said that universities provide enough experience for acquisition of certain generic skills. Although the correlation established between CGPA and the generic skills was low, universities do need to further emphasize on the development of selected generic skills to ensure that graduates are ready to join the workforce. As stated by Stasz et al. (1996), employers are often more concerned with the generic skills that a graduate has acquired rather than an impressive academic standing alone.

Conclusion

Results from this study indicate that there was an increase in the acquisition of certain generic skills between final year students and the junior students. However, the final year students still had not acquired some of the skills needed in adapting to the challenging workplace. Thus, specific strategies need to be integrated in the teaching, learning and assessment in the university to ensure that students gain in both the technical and generic skills to help them cope better with their study, university life and work life. Although the teaching methods adapted in the university did reinforce the enhancement of generic skills, further research needs to be conducted to identify means on enhancing generic skills through classroom interaction, for both small and large group classes, laboratory and lecture settings. Although the university curricula continuously undergo improvement, the development of skills needs to be incorporated and emphasized further.

(Endnotes)

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