

**SOFT SKILL INTEGRATION, QUALITY OF
COLLEGE LIFE AND SOFT SKILL LEVELS IN
MALAYSIAN PRIVATE HIGHER LEARNING
INSTITUTIONS**

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UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

2018

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COLLEGE LIFE AND SOFT SKILL LEVELS IN
MALAYSIAN PRIVATE HIGHER LEARNING
INSTITUTIONS**

by

TAN CHENG YOKE

**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

August 2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Throughout the journey towards the completion of my PhD studies, I have come to realization and heartfelt gratitude to several parties, as well as the blessings from the heavenly mighty power. Thank you for the blessings, best timing and arrangement of everything so that I could march on the journey smoothly, peacefully and joyously.

My deepest appreciation goes to my supervisors Dr. Abdul Jalil Ali and Prof. Dr. Abdul Ghani Kanesan Abdullah. Thank you to my main supervisor Dr. Abdul Jalil for your patience, advice, support and relentless commitment to seeing me through the study so that I am able to graduate on time. Special thanks to my co-supervisor Prof. Dr. Abdul Ghani for sharing your knowledge, your concern and suggestions to enhancing my thesis and prospects, for your time and effort in enriching my learning experience.

I would like to extend my thanks too to the panel examiners, Associate Prof. Dr. Ahmad Tajuddin Othman and Associate Prof. Dr. Mohammad Zohir Ahmad for your contribution and precious comments throughout several sessions of testing moments in prospectus, proposal defend and pre-viva. I have learnt better by going through the periods and truly appreciate some wonderful recommendations provided by the panel.

Thank you also to the Dean and Deputy Deans of School of Educational Studies, Associate Prof. Dr. Shaik Abdul Malik and Prof. Dr. Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan especially, for your time and approval. Thank you to the registrar of School of Educational Studies, Puan Faridah Bharum and also the administrative staff who relentlessly prepare all the necessary documents.

Indeed, most importantly the understanding, assistance and moral support from my teenage son and partner have made this possible. I would like to share this achievement and honour with them, thus adding value and meaning to this milestone of my life. Besides that, I wish to dedicate this to my late father whom had made much sacrifice for his children's lives and their undertakings. I know he will be able to receive the merit and wish he could share this proud moment no matter where he is, who he is now.

Meanwhile, not forgetting my students, my colleagues, ex-colleagues, friends, acquaintances, coordinators and head of schools who have contributed to the completion of this study. I am truly touched by your generosity, openness, help and services rendered during the period of data collection particularly. I am much obliged to all of you and hopefully the findings of this study would have contributed to your endeavour or enlightenment somehow.

In a nutshell, thank you to all of you who have made this achievable within limited time frame.

TABLE OF CONTENT

Acknowledgement	ii	
Table of Content	iv	
List of Tables	x	
List of Figures	xii	
List of Abbreviations	xiii	
Abstrak	xiv	
Abstract	xvi	
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION		
1.1	Introduction	1
1.2	Research Background	7
1.2.1	Soft Skills Development in Malaysian Higher Education	7
1.2.1(a)	Factors and Hindrances to Soft Skill Development among Tertiary Students	8
1.2.1(b)	Soft Skill Integration in Formal Curriculum	9
1.2.2	Malaysian Higher Educational System – An Overview	10
1.2.3	An Overview of the Private Higher Learning Institutions	13
1.2.3(a)	Student Enrolment	14
1.2.3(b)	Enrolment Criteria in Private Higher Learning Institutions	15
1.3	Problem Statement	17
1.4	Research Objectives	19
1.5	Research Questions	20
1.6	Hypotheses	21
1.7	Research Significance	23
1.8	Research Limitations	26

1.9	Operational Definition	27
1.9.1	Soft Skills	27
1.9.2	Perceived Soft Skill Levels	28
1.9.3	Soft Skill Integration	28
1.9.3(a)	Soft Skill Integration of Communication Skills	28
1.9.3(b)	Soft Skill Integration of Critical Thinking and Problem Solving	29
1.9.3(c)	Soft Skill Integration of Teamwork	29
1.9.3(d)	Soft Skill Integration of Ethics and Professional Moral	29
1.9.4	Quality of College Life	29
1.9.5	Communication Skills	30
1.9.6	Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills	30
1.9.7	Team Work	30
1.9.8	Ethics and Professional Moral	31
1.9.9	IPTS Diploma Business Students	31
1.10	Conceptual Framework	32
1.11	Summary	34

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1	Introduction	35
2.2	Definition and Different Terms of Soft Skills	35
2.3	Importance of Soft Skills	36
2.3.1	Contribution to Employability	37
2.3.2	Effects on Socio-economy	39
2.4	Definition and Review of Soft Skill Integration in the Curriculum	40
2.5	Definition and Review of Quality of College Life	45
2.6	Characteristics, Elements and Components of Essential Soft Skill	49

2.6.1	Important Soft Skills for Business Students	54
2.6.2	Malaysian Graduates' Employability Skills	56
2.7	Related Studies	58
2.7.1	Related Studies Overseas	58
2.7.2	Related Studies in Malaysia	59
2.8	Astin's Input-Environment-Output Model (1984)	62
2.9	Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) Soft Skill Development Model (2006) and MOHE Soft Skill Embedded Model	65
2.10	Student Development Theory	69
2.11	Theoretical Framework	73
2.12	Methods or Approaches to Effective Soft Skill Development	75
2.12.1	Curriculum	76
2.12.2	Embedded Activities	78
2.12.3	Internship	80
2.12.4	Pedagogy	81
2.12.5	Educators' Initiative and Commitment	83
2.12.6	Collaboration with Stakeholders	83
2.12.7	Online Tools	84
2.13	Obstacles to Effective Soft Skill Development	85
2.13.1	Human Factor	85
2.13.2	Cost of Investment	86
2.13.3	Organizational Objectives	87
2.14	Summary	87

CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1	Introduction	89
3.2	Research Design	89
3.3	Variables	91
	3.3.1 Independent Variable	91
	3.3.2 Moderator (Moderating Variable)	92
	3.3.3 Dependent Variables	92
3.4	Population	94
3.5	Sampling Technique	95
3.6	Instrument	98
3.7	Ethical Considerations	104
3.8	Pilot Study	104
	3.8.1 Pilot Study – Questionnaire	105
	3.8.2 Pilot Study - Research	105
	3.8.2(a) Results of Pilot Study	106
3.9	Data Collection	108
3.10	Data Analysis	110
3.11	Summary	114

CHAPTER 4 – FINDINGS

4.1	Introduction	115
4.2	Response Rate of the Study	115
4.3	Data Screening and Cleaning	117
	4.3.1 Count Blank	117
	4.3.2 Straight Lining	117
	4.3.3 Check Descriptive Data	118
	4.3.4 Outlier Diagnostic Test	118

4.4	Respondent Profile	119
4.5	Normal Distribution of Data	121
4.6	Validity and Reliability	123
4.6.1	Construct validity	123
4.6.2	Reliability	124
4.6.3	Dimension Soft Skill Integration	125
4.6.4	Dimension Quality of College Life	128
4.6.5	Dimension Perceived Soft Skill Levels	130
4.7	Descriptive Data Analysis	134
4.7.1	Soft Skill Integration Levels	134
4.7.2	Quality of College Life Levels	137
4.7.3	Self Perceived Soft Skill Levels	138
4.8	Hypothesis Testing	141
4.8.1	Influence of Soft Skill Integration on Diploma Business Students' Perceived Soft Skill Levels	141
4.8.2	Influence of Soft Skill Integration on Quality of College Life	145
4.8.3	Influence of Quality of College Life on Diploma Business Students' Perceived Soft Skill Levels	147
4.9	Moderating Effects of Quality of College Life on the Relationship between Soft Skill Integration and Perceived Soft Skill Levels	151
4.9.1	Moderating Effects of Quality of College Life in Academic Aspects on the Relationship between Soft Skill Integration and Perceived Soft Skill Levels	154
4.9.2	Moderating Effects of Quality of College Life in Social Aspects on the Relationship between Soft Skill Integration and Perceived Soft Skill Levels	156
4.9.3	Moderating Effects of Quality of College Life in Facilities Aspects on the Relationship between Soft Skill Integration and Perceived Soft Skill Levels	160
4.10	Summary	165

CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1	Introduction	168
5.2	Recapitulation	168
5.3	Summary of Main Findings	170
5.4	Discussion	176
5.4.1	Soft Skill Integration	177
5.4.2	Quality of College Life and Moderating Effects	185
5.4.3	Perceived Soft Skill Levels	188
5.4.4	Others	194
5.5	Implication & Recommendation	196
5.5.1	Implication for Practice	196
5.5.2	Implication for Theory and Literature Component	201
5.5.3	Implication for Future Study	202
5.5.3(a)	Recommendations Based on the Study	202
5.5.3(b)	Recommendations for Future Researches	204
5.6	Conclusion	207
	REFERENCES	212
	APPENDICES	

LIST OF TABLES

		Page
Table 2.1	Weaknesses or Short-coming in the Industrial Training	43
Table 2.2	Feedback and Suggestion by University Malaya's Trainees to Improve Results of Industrial Training	43
Table 2.3	Measures to Improve Perception of Quality of College Life	49
Table 2.4	Comparison of Seven Essential Soft Skills in accordance to MOHE Soft Skill Development Model versus Major Necessary Soft Skills for Business Graduates	56
Table 2.5	Comparison of Eleven Employability Skills in Literature versus Seven Employability Skills Identified through Factor Analysis	57
Table 2.6	Summary of Components of High Soft Skill Gaps in Overseas	59
Table 2.7	Summary of Components of High Soft Skill Gaps in Malaysia	60
Table 2.8	Summary of Findings in Soft Skill Deficiencies of Diploma Business Studies Students at a Private College	61
Table 3.1	Different and Highlighted Common Soft Skill Components from Past Literatures	93
Table 3.2	Targeted Number of Samples versus Total Number of IPTS from Kedah, Penang and Perak	97
Table 3.3	Amendments in the Survey Questionnaire from its Original Sources	100
Table 3.4	Questionnaire Content Summary	103
Table 3.5	Cronbach's Alpha of Pilot Study	107
Table 3.6	Research Matrix	113
Table 4.1	Demographic Variables of Respondents	120

Table 4.2	Normality Test	122
Table 4.3	Summary for Constructs Reliability	124
Table 4.4	Factor Analysis Results: Soft Skill Integration	127
Table 4.5	Factor Analysis Results: Quality of College Life	129
Table 4.6	Factor Analysis Results: Perceived Soft Skill Levels	132
Table 4.7	Soft Skill Integration Levels	135
Table 4.8	Quality of College Life Levels	137
Table 4.9	Perceived Soft Skill Levels	138
Table 4.10	Standardized Beta Coefficient of Soft Skill Integration on Perceived Soft Skill Levels	144
Table 4.11	Standardized Beta Coefficient of Soft Skill Integration on Quality of College Life (QCL)	147
Table 4.12	Standardized Beta Coefficient of Quality of College Life (QCL) on Perceived Soft Skill Levels	150
Table 4.13	Overview of Significant Influences among Independent Variable, Moderator and Dependent Variable	153
Table 4.14	Moderating Influence of Quality of College Life (QCL) in Academic Aspects on the Relationship between Soft Skill Integration and Perceived Soft Skill Levels	155
Table 4.15	Moderating Influence of Quality of College Life (QCL) in Social Aspects on the Relationship between Soft Skill Integration and Perceived Soft Skill Levels	157
Table 4.16	Moderating Influence of Quality of College Life (QCL) in Facilities Aspects on the Relationship between Soft Skill Integration and Perceived Soft Skill Levels	161

LIST OF FIGURES

		Page
Figure 1.1	Conceptual Framework	32
Figure 2.1	Astin's Input-Environment-Output Model (1984)	62
Figure 2.2	MOHE Soft Skill Development Model	66
Figure 2.3	MOHE Embedded Model of Soft Skill Development	67
Figure 2.4	Theoretical Framework	73
Figure 4.1	Results of Moderator Analysis: Influence of Quality of College Life in Social Aspects in relation to Soft Skill Integration in Teamwork on Teamwork Levels	158
Figure 4.2	Results of Moderator Analysis: Influence of Quality of College Life in Facilities Aspects in relation to Soft Skill Integration in Critical Thinking and Problem Solving on Teamwork Levels	162
Figure 4.3	Results of Moderator Analysis: Influence of Quality of College Life in Facilities Aspects in Relation to Soft Skill Integration in Critical Thinking and Problem Solving on Ethics and Professional Moral	163

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CS	Communication Skills
CTPS	Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
EM	Ethics and Professional Moral
HMMR	Hierarchical Moderated Multiple Regression
HOTS	Higher Order Thinking Skills
IPTA	Public Higher Learning Institutions
ITPS	Private Higher Learning Institutions
MOHE	Ministry of Higher Education
MQA	Malaysian Qualification Agency
SPM	Malaysian Certificate of Education (<i>Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia</i>)
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science
SSI	Soft Skill Integration
STPM	Malaysian Higher School Certificate (<i>Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia</i>)
TS	Teamwork
QCL	Quality of College Life
UKM	<i>Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia</i>
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UUM	<i>Universiti Utara Malaysia</i>

**INTEGRASI KEMAHIRAN INSANIAH, KUALITI KEHIDUPAN DI KOLEJ
DAN TAHAP KEMAHIRAN INSANIAH DI INSTITUSI PENGAJIAN
TINGGI SWASTA MALAYSIA**

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji hubungan antara integrasi kemahiran insaniah, kualiti hidup kolej dan tanggapan tahap kemahiran insaniah pelajar diploma pengurusan perniagaan di institusi pengajian tinggi swasta (IPTS) Malaysia. Kajian ini dijalankan berdasarkan Astin Model Input-Persekitaran-Output (1984) dan Model Pembangunan Kemahiran Insaniah Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia (2006). Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah kuantitatif menerusi soal selidik untuk memperoleh data. Sejumlah 429 pelajar tahun akhir diploma pengurusan perniagaan dari 12 IPTS di tiga buah negeri wilayah utara Semenanjung memberi maklum balas terhadap soal selidik menerusi kaedah persampelan berstrata rawak. Kajian ini menjalankan analisis menggunakan data deskriptif, analisis regresi dan regresi hierarki berganda. Hasil kajian menunjukkan integrasi kemahiran insaniah kerja berpasukan ($\bar{x} = 3.71$), integrasi etika dan moral profesional ($\bar{x} = 3.75$) adalah tinggi. Namun begitu, Cuma tahap kemahiran kerja berpasukan ($\bar{x} = 3.72$) adalah tinggi. Selain itu, aspek akademik kualiti hidup kolej menunjukkan pengaruh signifikansi terhadap pembangunan kemahiran insaniah. Keputusan kajian menyokong kepentingan integrasi kemahiran insaniah terhadap pembangunan kemahiran insaniah, terutamanya integrasi pemikiran kritikal dan penyelesaian masalah, dan seterusnya tahap berkenaan. Kolej digalakkan juga untuk menaik-taraf kemudahan kampus berdasarkan hasil kajian yang menunjukkan pengaruh moderator daripada aspek kemudahan kolej. Dapatan kajian menyorot tentang fokus yang tepat, amalan yang efektif untuk menambahbaik pembangunan kemahiran insaniah demi merapatkan

jurang kemahiran insaniah serta menangani isu kebolehpasaran graduan masa kini. Seterusnya, kajian ini memaparkan data empirikal kepada pihak berkuasa berkenaan, iaitu Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia, Agensi Kelayakan Malaysia serta pengurusan institusi pengajian tinggi swasta dalam perangkaan polisi dan arah tuju dalam aspirasi pendidikan atau usaha seumpamanya pada masa depan.

**SOFT SKILL INTEGRATION, QUALITY OF COLLEGE LIFE AND SOFT
SKILL LEVELS IN MALAYSIAN PRIVATE HIGHER LEARNING
INSTITUTIONS**

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between soft skill integration, quality of college life and perceived soft skill levels of the Diploma Business students in Malaysian private higher learning institutions (IPTS). It was grounded on Astin's Input-Environment-Output Model (1984) and Malaysian MOHE Soft Skill Development Model (2006). This study used quantitative survey method to obtain the data. A total of 429 final year diploma business students from 12 different IPTS from three states of Peninsular Malaysia responded to the questionnaires through stratified random sampling method. The study conducted data analysis by finding the mean average descriptive data, regression analysis and hierarchical moderated multiple regression. The results showed that soft skill integration in teamwork ($\bar{x} = 3.71$), integration in ethics and professional moral ($\bar{x} = 3.75$) were high. However, only the levels of teamwork ($\bar{x} = 3.72$) was high. Besides that, the academic aspects of quality of college life did significantly influence the development of all soft skill levels. The findings advocated to the importance of soft skill integration on soft skill development, especially the integration on critical thinking and problem solving and its levels. The colleges could also upgrade the facilities as the results indicated some moderating influence from facility aspects of quality of college life. These findings highlighted the right focus, effective practices to promote soft skill development in order to bridge the soft skill gaps and tackle employability issues of current graduates. Subsequently, it provided empirical data to the relevant authorities such as Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysian Qualification Agency as well

as the management of higher learning institutions in future policy making and direction in educational aspirations or endeavour in future.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In view of increasing world population and much more competitive market, demand for human capital and quality graduates become acute. In line with the global mobility and modernization, the requirements for graduates have also increased dramatically. The employable graduates should basically be all-rounded, and equipped with not only the field knowledge but also possess the necessary competencies, employability or soft skills in order to be competent at work (Archer & Davison, 2008). For instance, corporate finance professionals these days not only have to master the technical skills, but are expected to possess certain levels of soft skill capabilities such as ability to communicate, coordinate, handling stress and problem solving (Dixon, Belnap, Albrecht, & Lee, 2010).

Researches pointed to the importance of soft skills over hard skills or technical knowledge (Schulz, 2008; Azim, Gale, Lawlor-Wright, Kirkham, Khan, & Alam, 2010). Many past literatures have highlighted the importance of soft skill and other competencies which superseded academic performances when comes to getting employment (Dixon, Belnap, Albrecht & Lee, 2010; Heckman, Humphries, Mader & Headed, 2010). Soft skill acquisition also emerges as the main requirement for entry level jobs in retail line in United Kingdom (Nickson, Warhurst, Commander, Hurrell, & Cullen, 2012). Besides that, other than being an important employability determinant, soft skills are vital towards successful careers or personal lives (Gillard, 2009; Weber, Crawford, Rivera, & Finley, 2011; Duncan & Dunifon, 2012; Karthikeyan, 2013). Al-

Abduwani (2012) also highlighted that soft skills are very valuable and their contribution to personal and institutional development can be profound.

According to Strandh (2000), there was an unhealthy social syndrome that could have affected the mental well-being and confidence levels of the young graduates (Strandh, 2000). Notably, the attitudes and competencies of graduates themselves are also the determinants of entrance into the job market (Tomlinson, 2007). Unfortunately, there are many incidents of employability issues of current graduates all over the world (Archer & Davison, 2008; Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Blom & Saeki, 2011).

With regards to the employability issue, it has been reported of the deficient of soft skills among the fresh graduates as early as in the twentieth century (Gregson, 1992). Kamsah (2004) mentioned that graduates lacking of soft skills had been a global topic. Shortage in skills also leads to the unemployment of required skilled workers in South Africa (Pauw, Oosthuizen, & Van der Westhuizen, 2008). According to Jackling and De Lange (2009), it was noted that the accounting graduates were still much in short of the required soft skills, particularly verbal communication, teamwork and leadership. In the United States, Mitchell, Skinner and White (2010) reported of continuous discrepancies in teamwork, communication skills, ethics, time management and embrace of diversity of new business employees. In addition, the accountants, information system specialist and computer engineers are also being criticized for their inadequacies in the abovementioned soft skills, and their deficiencies were mainly rooted in the problem solving and also decision making skills (Dixon et al., 2010). The industry-relevant competencies and skill gaps in modern graduates have become growing concerns from United States, United Kingdom and Australia in relation to graduates' quality and employability issues

(Lowden, Hall, Elliot, & Lewin, 2011). In Malaysia, a case study of the final year diploma business students in an IPTS showed that the students were inexperienced in handling some reality issues and lack of the real-world problem solving abilities (Yoke & Ngang, 2015).

Based on *Indikator Pengajian* (2013), as high as 34 percent of unemployed new graduates in Malaysia were from IPTS, and 26.6 percent of IPTS graduates had not been working. According to World Bank (2015), the youth (ages 15 to 24 years old) unemployment rate in Malaysia has been consistently high since 2001 (Appendix C). In year 2015, 31.4 percent of fresh degree holders remained unemployed and six out of 10 unemployment were those aged below 24 years old (Monthly principal statistics, 2015). The data also indicated that as much as 31.4 percent of fresh graduate degree holders were jobless upon completing their studies while one in four fresh graduates was remain unemployed six months after his or her graduation (Fresh, 2015). Furthermore, the unemployment rate has also increased to 3.2 percentage in August 2015 from 2.7 percentage in the same month of the previous year, i.e. August 2014, a rise of 0.5 percentage points (Monthly principal statistics, 2015). Although the majority of unemployed fresh graduates were from public universities, which comprised of 51 percent; the percentage of unemployed new graduates from private higher learning institutions (IPTS) also constituted about 34 percentage of the total unemployment categories (Fresh, 2015). This means that despite half of the public university graduates who were unemployed, more than one third of IPTS graduates were also facing the same problem as well. In the year 2016, the highest category of unemployed graduates was still from IPTS, and apparently there was an increase some more to a percentage as high

as 46.8 percent (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia, 2016). The percentage of unemployed IPTS graduates increased from 26.2 percent in year 2015 to 27.2 percent in 2016 (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia, 2016).

Notably in Malaysia, the cost of getting a certificate currently has been getting higher and higher each day due to democratization of education, global franchising of degree programs, mushrooming of private colleges, social mobility, etc. The average costs of getting a Diploma after *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* in private higher learning institution (IPTS) in Penang at the moment currently ranged from RM20,000 to RM30,000 for Business Studies; while another RM50,000 to RM70,000 for Degree courses (Appendix A). Despite the high costs of investment in education, it is sad to acknowledge that not all graduates are equally successful in getting decent employments upon finishing their tertiary degrees. Some fresh graduates have to wait for months or even more than a year just to be employed (Azina & Ismail, 2011). There was also a research in Malaysia which reported that male graduates have better chances to be employed than their female counterparts (Azina & Ismail, 2011).

Certainly, Chamorro-Premuzic, Arteche, Bremner, Greven and Furnham (2010) acknowledged the importance of soft skills in higher education as an enhancement to individual differences and performances other than academic achievements. In relation to soft skill development, Marcial (2012) advocated that soft skills can be learned and not innate, which means there are chances to fill up these prevailing gaps to tackle the employability issues faced by the generation nowadays. Soft skill development at tertiary levels plays a critical role in nurturing the young modern graduates in their respective

professionalism and equipping them with the necessary skills, soft skills and competencies. In some researches, the students themselves concurred that tertiary education has a significant impact in the development of their soft skill capacities (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2012; Low, Samkin, & Liu, 2013). This fact can be comprehended as the course specialization at tertiary education should be able to address more specifically the critical soft skills or competencies needed and required by the industry. Ritter, Small, Mortimer, and Doll (2018) also advocated that academicians have to respond to employers' need by re-examining the curriculum, particularly in management, in order to prepare the students for future employability.

Devadason, Subramaniam and Daniel (2010) conducted a study on the integration of soft skills in the formal curriculum of Malaysian public universities and found that most of the final year undergraduates pointed to the complementary nature of soft skill integration in the formal curriculum. Researches advocated that gaps between the expected and achieved levels of soft skills were being improved by applying various innovative teaching approaches, either in classroom learning environment itself or out-of-class exposure, and during their internship trainings (Adams, 2010; Narayanan, Olk, & Fukami, 2010; Ahmad & Rashid, 2011; Cinque, 2013; Groh, McKenzie, & Vishwanath, 2014). These showed the positive and workable approaches to continue and further improve on the practice or constructs of the curriculum so that wider and more comprehensive results could be achieved in order to reach the targeted levels for all the seven essential soft skill components as suggested by Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in its MOHE Soft Skill Development Model (2006).

Hence, good learning practice in higher education provides a platform for solid foundation of “know-how” among the future graduates to help them to be employable and be productive at the job market (Knight & Yorke, 2003). Therefore, the development of human capital, which lies within the educational system, does not only play a role to fulfil k-economy requirements but also balanced graduates who are able to meet the future challenges in life and work place (Litzinger, Lattuca, Hadgraft, & Newstetter, 2011; Pace, 2012).

Ironically, the graduate soft skill development and employability issues can be rooted from the students themselves, and also the influence from surrounding environment (Pramudyo, 2010). There were tendency for these fresh graduates to “wait” and “choose” for “decent” vacancies. Lim (2011) stated that some of the determinants of employment duration among Malaysian graduates were due to the lifestyle and self expectation of the graduates themselves, other than availability of jobs in the labour market, socio-demographic factors such as ethnicity and family background. Thus, some other moderating factors such as environmental, or personality influences could be affecting the process and levels of soft skill development at the meantime.

Therefore, the study was aimed to address the issue of graduates’ employability by examining the influence of soft skill integration and quality of college life towards the tertiary students’ soft skill development. The effects and results of the study in our Malaysian context would then provide better understanding based on more convincing empirical results so as to call for higher emphasis in policy making and full implementation of soft skill integration by the higher learning institutions, including the private IPTS.

1.2 Research Background

1.2.1 Soft Skill Development in Malaysian Higher Education

It was put forth as one of the very important agenda for the country's progress under the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006 – 2010) to reinforce the development of human capital. Following that, there has been consistent review in education, investigation and researches into the key areas of human capital development, programs to improve intellectual capacity and graduates' quality. It is the vision of Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MOHE) "to make Malaysia a centre of higher education excellence by the year 2020". Subsequently, the establishment of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency Act (2007) paved the way for the formation of Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) as a national quality assurance agency to accrediting higher education programs, regulating the quality and standard of higher education of both public and private higher learning institution nationwide. In the subsequent year also, Malaysian Qualifications Framework (2008) was formed and the implementation of it was overseen by the MQA thereafter. In fact, these moves have been able to strengthen the quality of graduates through proper enrolment criteria, while making some necessary improvements or compliance by the higher educational institutions in the transformation throughout the period of years of studies by the students to achieve the required outcomes stated in the program outlines.

In the year 2006, an important model was developed under the jurisdiction of MOHE after some collaborated researches, that was the MOHE Soft Skill Development Model (2006). In this model, it clearly depicts the necessary generic soft skills to be acquired by the undergraduates and the methods to acquire these soft skills. One of the

most famous methods is through the embedded activities and it is also visibly elaborated in the Embedded Model as part of the whole module in the MOHE Soft Skill Development Model (2006). The seven essential soft skills stated are the communication skills (CS), critical thinking and problem solving skills (CTPS), teamwork (TS), life long learning and information management skills (LL), entrepreneurial skill (KK), ethics and professional moral (EM), leadership skill (LS). This model serves as the only guideline ever since in the Malaysian tertiary education for the continuous improvement by a college or university drive to mould the right and employable candidates to fulfill the nation's aspiration and educational vision or mission.

1.2.1(a) Factors and Hindrances to Soft Skill Development among Tertiary Students

The effort towards more effective soft skill development has been facing some obstacles at the same time. Schulz (2008) reported that some educators were rather oblivious of the importance of soft skills and thus did not really support or show exertion in drilling the soft skills of their students. Osman et al. (2012) advocated that it was a key point that the educators realised their impact on students' development, either from academic or non-academic aspects, and be willing to go extra mile, having satisfaction and taken pride in their contribution towards a student's success.

In other words, hindrances to effective soft skill development arise primarily from human factor including the educators and students themselves, secondly is the sources or resource scarcity, and the intention for soft skill development can be affected also by priority of college's purpose of existence (May & Strong, 2011; Osman, Girardi, & Paull, 2012; Majid, Liming, Tong, & Raihana, 2012; Gade & Chari, 2013). The resource needed such as the necessary equipments and facilities, in addition to the environment or

situational factor, can have either positive or negative impact on the effort in soft skill development of the tertiary students (Murni, Sabandar, Kusumah, & Kartasamita, 2014).

Besides that, despite some cost considerations, the management and staff tend to rely on extrinsic motivation such as monetary rewards in order to motivate them to participate in the process of soft skill development even like using the e-learn platform to build information management skills of the students (Kim, Erdem, Byun, & Jeong, 2011, Al-Abduwani, 2012). On the other hand, the employers or in this context the bosses of private colleges or profit oriented colleges or universities, would consider how much is the rate of return on investment and payback period, hence became quite reluctant to invest heavily in human capital development (Kleibert, 2015), that cause the monetary contribution towards human capital development or its rewards become rather slow and limited.

1.2.1(b) Soft Skill Integration in Formal Curriculum

According to MOHE Embedded Model of Soft Skill Development (2006), the approaches to soft skill development could be achieved through both infusion and diffusion methods. The infusion method refers to the embedded activities in the teaching and learning processes. These activities can comprise of either in-the-class or out-of-class experiential learning or hands-on activities. Hence, the embedded activities appear to be the main way of which the soft skills are to be integrated in formal curriculum learning. As such, a student who undergoes the syllabus shall pick up both the technical or professional knowledge, while at the same time, not neglecting the essential required soft skills in the industry like communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, teamwork and so forth.

Other than the embedded activities, soft skill integration can also be practised during the internship training. This can be observed for the programs that include this module as one of the core subjects in the undergraduates' credit hours accumulation. Experience, exposure, coaching and confidence gained from internship make the undergraduates more prepared to join the workforce in the real world before they leave the universities or educational institutions (Devadason, Subramaniam & Daniel, 2010; Pillai, Khan, Ibrahim & Raphael, 2012).

1.2.2 Malaysian Higher Educational System - An Overview

The higher education in Malaysia comes under the jurisdiction of Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) located at Putrajaya. MOHE is a cabinet-level ministry and is currently headed by the Minister of Higher Education. The Federal Government of Malaysia has always been allocating a considerable amount of yearly budget for education in support of human capital development of the country. For instance, a total of RM56 billion was allocated in Budget 2015 for Education Ministry, and RM100 million for 10,000 placements in technical and vocational private colleges. Besides that, the government is injecting RM112 million under MyBrain15 Program which aims to produce 60,000 PhD holders by year 2020 (Budget, 2014). The educational allocation too has taken up around twenty percent of the total Budget 2016 (Education big winner, 2015). Obviously, other than policy formulation, the Malaysian government has also provided ample support financially towards the upgrading and development in the educational system. These show the seriousness and sincerity of the Malaysian

government and the Education Ministry especially in the effort of human capital development and nation building via formal educational system nationwide.

The program accreditations of higher educational institutions (HEIs) come under a statutory body called Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) starting from year 2007 to replace the National Accreditation Board (LAN). MQA was formed under the Malaysian Qualification Act 2007 to govern and oversee the quality of programs offered by both public and private higher learning institutions locally (*Malaysian Qualification Agency*, n.d.). This serves as a measure for quality assurance in higher education in accordance to Malaysian Qualification Framework (MQF) 2008. It is important to follow the rules and regulations set by MQA to ensure the eligibility of student enrolment, adequate and standard content of the syllabus, proper qualification and no mismatch in teaching subjects of the lecturers, sufficient facilities or laboratories for certain courses and so forth in order to maintain the quality of products and services offered by the Malaysian higher educational institutions.

There are currently twenty public universities (IPTA) in Malaysia. Public universities are funded by the government but they are given much autonomy to decide on internal matters and decision making as self-managed institutions. At the private sector however, there has been burgeoning of private colleges and college universities for the last few decades. At the moment, there are a total of 497 private higher learning institutions (IPTS) in the whole Malaysia. A few IPTS such as University College Han Chiang and Wawasan Open University (WOU) are non-profit oriented and have been offering many certificates and diploma courses under their own names, plus twinning degree programs via franchising with foreign universities at affordable prices.

Nevertheless, due to the large number of IPTS at the region and all of them appear to be offering more or less similar programs, there has been vigorous competition from one IPTS to another. Hence, each of them is trying to be innovative in program design, branding strategy and packaging in program offers, while being cost effective, having value for money or return on capital to the community and potential students or parents especially. In short the IPTS have been facing stiffer competition and exposed to higher complexity from both internal and external environment, for instance, rising costs of foreign exchange, hedging problems, management or stakeholders' conflicts, resource scarcity, and many more.

Nevertheless, the Malaysian educational system is still undergoing transformation and it has yet to keep on monitoring its results and to follow up with the necessary revamp or upgrading. For instance, the encouraging of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) application in school curriculum and teachers' pedagogy is one of the latest input by the Ministry of Education subsequent to poor performance by our students in Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) rating conducted by Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for several consecutive years (Azina & Halimah, 2012). Shah (2008) mentioned about the important roles of the government to identify relevant courses or programs so that there are job vacancies or demand in the market by the time the students have completed their studies. Therefore, proper planning, forecasting and fore-sightedness are certainly much needed in order to maintain sustainability or balanced supply and demand of the programs offered in the job market.

It is surely a hectic and challenging responsibility by the authority to uphold the dignity and prestige of their programs offered, the reputation of the higher learning

institutions and the country by offering reputable or world standard programs, thus producing marketable graduates. Continuous evaluation is also needed because program evaluation at tertiary level serves as the final checking point to assess the levels of competencies required and acquired by the undergraduates before leaving the formal education system. It might not be easy but is definitely rewarding when we finally achieve the aspiration as high income nation by year 2020.

1.2.3 An Overview of the Private Higher Learning Institutions

In this study, the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia covers the state of Kedah, Penang and Perak. The total numbers of IPTS in Kedah, Penang and Perak are ten, thirty and nine-teen respectively (*Profil Institusi*, 2014). Amongst these three states, Penang can be considered the educational hub of the region. Kampar in Perak is another hub for education because of the establishment of *Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman* (UTAR) and *Kolej Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman* in that area. The number of IPTS that offer diploma business courses are four only in Kedah, twenty in Penang and nine in Perak (*Profil Institusi*, 2014).

It was noted that in fact most of the business courses offered at IPTS are located mainly in town or city areas like Alor Setar, Georgetown, Ipoh and Taiping (Appendix B). These places have more merchant, trading and service activities going on with the mushrooming of commercial lots, shops and offices. Thus, this reflects the matching of education with the needs of socio-economic development of the community or region. Furthermore, we could find more of Islamic courses include business and Islamic banking in the state of Kedah like *Kolej Universiti Islam INSANIAH* (KUIN) in Baling.

That shows the relationship between education and socio-community whereby the cultural and demographic factors play a part to influence the roles of education within the context.

To conclude, education is not an isolated field of study by itself. The role and contribution of education to socio-economic advancement of a community, region and thus country development cannot be denied. Therefore, the mission and vision of universities and colleges, regardless whether they are in public or private sector, carry a heavy load and responsibility of moulding the right candidates to fit into the market or system of the country. Hence, it is important that the educators and policy makers of the educational institutions have a close contact with the society and regular updates of the programs, courses, curriculum and delivery approaches of the content to ensure mapping of the requirements versus output of the future graduates.

1.2.3(a) Student Enrolment

From the statistics, there were a total of 178,418 students enrolled into IPTA and 134,420 students in IPTS only in Malaysia in year 2013 (*Indikator Pengajian, 2013, p. 13*). However, it was noticed that before the year 2010, the number of students enrolled into IPTS superseded the number of enrollments in IPTA, but it had shown a reversal trend after 2010 that the number of enrolments into IPTA had exceeded the number of student intakes into IPTS (*Indikator Pengajian, 2013, p. 13*). According to the data, 55.9 percentage of the graduates from IPTS in year 2013 joined the workforce, either were working, still applying for work or intended to work, while 26.6 percentage had not been working (*Indikator Pengajian, 2013, p. 93*). Apparently, the global economic slowdown including Malaysia might have taken its toll onto affordability into private higher

learning institution (IPTS) and therefore the enrollment rates at IPTS. Furthermore, there is also an indication of some worrying trend as the percentage of the graduates joining the workforce has witnessed a downward movement from 64.6 percentage in 2010 and persistently declined to 55.9 percentage only in year 2013; while the percentage of those who chose to go back for further studies increased from 11.1 percentage in 2010 to 17.6 percentage in 2013 (*Indikator Pengajian*, 2013, p. 93), though most of the job requirements in industrial sectors stated minimum qualifications of bachelor degrees, plus some other expectations like experience gained and other employability skills such as problem solving, teamwork, ability to work independently, stress management or willingness to travel frequently as added advantages (Shafie & Nayan, 2010). Therefore, there might be a decline in student enrolment for post-secondary studies at IPTS in the near future if the situation prevails, while the positive side would possibly be some prospects for post graduate courses. Yet somehow, when the economic and financial status of a graduate or the family is not getting any better, the chances of them joining IPTS for further researches or post graduate degrees might look dim either.

1.2.3(b) Enrolment Criteria in Private Higher Learning Institutions

In Malaysia as a whole, the progress in the levels of higher education after a minimum of Malaysian Certificate of Education (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia/SPM*) is to move on to either Certificates or Diplomas, before the candidates can be considered for Degree courses. It takes basically a minimum of SPM one credit only to register for Certificate courses and SPM three credits for Diploma courses. The candidates can also apply with any equivalent qualification like GCSE 'O' Level (*Education Malaysia*, n.d.). A tertiary student has to complete the Certificate level before he or she can be entitled for a

Diploma program. Another option for those who opt to study overseas or further their courses at a foreign university campus in Malaysia is to go for Foundation Studies (A-Level) based on their SPM results.

For those who have completed pre-university studies like Form Six in the national or national type high schools in Malaysia, they can straight away enroll for a Degree program with their Malaysian Higher School Certificate (*Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia /STPM*) results. Of course those who have completed their Diploma, A-Level or equivalent are eligible too for Degree courses. The degree courses are normally three to five years basis for STPM or A-level students, but a Diploma student from the similar field of studies can straight away move on to the second year of the related degree course, thus shorten the study period by one year.

After obtaining the degree qualification, the graduates can further their studies on coursework or research mode by undertaking postgraduate studies at Master's then PhD levels at either IPTS or public universities (IPTA) that registered for the post graduate studies. As for international students, they must acquire their "student pass" from Malaysian Immigration and obtain the Visa Approval Letter before coming to study in Malaysia (*Education Malaysia, n.d*).

1.3 Problem Statement

The underlying problems of this research were looked into from various perspectives.

The main issues arise from lack of soft skills by the graduates and thus employability issues. It was reported that language barrier had been one of the main causes of communication problem faced by most Malaysian graduates (Azina & Ismail, 2011). Studies also advocated that local graduates lacked critical thinking and problem solving skills (Mahat et al. 2009; Abdullah et al. 2012; Yoke & Ngang, 2015). Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia (2016) indicated that majority of the unemployed graduates were from diploma and degree levels, which stood at 26 percent at diploma while 26.3 percent at degree level in year 2016.

Inadequate awareness and drive for required soft skills by the students and also the educators had also led to expectation gaps between the employers and the graduates. These could give rise to skill gaps or skill mismatch due to inconsistency and lack of practices. Leggett, Kinnear, Boyce and Bennett (2004) found that students rated the importance of soft skill components differently at different years of studies, critical thinking was given less attention in the first year of study. Besides that, there was lack of expertise in educators to develop the essential soft skills needed in the industry, though they might fully equip with the technical knowledge (Freudenberg, Brimble, & Cameron, 2011).

On top of that, there was also complaint about the quality of education providers, due to insensitivity and slow responses to the changing needs and technology in the industry. Unsatisfactory practice or implementation of industrial training did not provide

sufficient work-based experiences for the undergraduates (Azina & Ismail, 2011). Hanapi and Nordin (2014) further concurred that rigid and unsuitable curriculum of a study field contributed to soft skill discrepancies of the Malaysian graduates.

In addition, there is also impact from the college environment towards soft skill development (Yoke & Ngang, 2015). Lack of use of English in the social activities among the tertiary students and also with their lecturers would certainly diminish the capacity to improve communication in the language.

1.4 Research Objectives

The main objectives of this study were to explore the process of soft skills integration in the curriculum and the perceived soft skills levels amongst the diploma business students in IPTS Kedah, Penang and Perak. It was also aimed to study the effects of quality of college life on the levels of acquired soft skills. The integration in this study included embedded coursework activities either in or out of the classroom. The four main business soft skill elements for employability examined in this study were communication skill, critical thinking and problem solving skills, team work and ethics and professional moral which were extracted from MOHE Soft Skill Development Model (2006). It was aimed to identify which category or methods worked well in the process while which was/ were not. In summary, the specific objectives of the study were:

- (1) to study the soft skill integration levels, perceived soft skill levels and the levels of quality of college life from the perspective of diploma business students
- (2) to examine the influence of soft skill integration on diploma business students' soft skills
- (3) to examine the influence of soft skill integration on quality of college life
- (4) to examine the influence of quality of college life on diploma business students' soft skills
- (5) to investigate the moderating influence of quality of college life in the relationship of soft skill integration and diploma business students' soft skills

1.5 Research Questions

This study was conducted with an aim to look at the following questions:

- (1) What are the soft skill integration levels, perceived soft skill levels and the levels of quality of college life from the perspective of diploma business students?
- (2) Is there any significant influence of soft skill integration on diploma business students' soft skills?
- (3) Is there any significant influence of soft skill integration on quality of college life?
- (4) Is there any significant influence of quality of college life on diploma business students' soft skills?
- (5) Is quality of college life a moderator in the relationship of soft skill integration and diploma business students' soft skills?

1.6 Hypotheses

Referring to the research objectives and research questions, there were a total of four hypotheses to be tested. The confidence interval of the hypothesis testing was set at 95 percentage and the significant level was $p < .05$. Subsequently, a total of thirteen sub-hypotheses were formed as the following:

- H1: There is positive influence of soft skill integration on diploma business students' soft skills
- H1(a): There is positive influence of soft skill integration on diploma business students' communication skills
- H1(b): There is positive influence of soft skill integration on diploma business students' critical thinking and problem solving skills
- H1(c): There is positive influence of soft skill integration on diploma business students' teamwork skills
- H1(d): There is positive influence of soft skill integration on diploma business students' ethics and professional moral skills
- H2: There is positive influence of soft skill integration on quality of college life
- H2(a): There is positive influence of soft skill integration on the academic aspects of quality of college life
- H2(b): There is positive influence of soft skill integration on the social aspects of quality of college life
- H2(c): There is positive influence of soft skill integration on the facilities aspects of quality of college life

- H3: There is positive influence of quality of college life on diploma business students' soft skills
- H3(a): There is positive influence of quality of college life on diploma business students' communication skills
- H3(b): There is positive influence of quality of college life on diploma business students' critical thinking and problem solving skills
- H3(c): There is positive influence of quality of college life on diploma business students' teamwork skills
- H3(d): There is positive influence between quality of college life towards diploma business students' ethics and professional moral skills
- H4: The positive influence of soft skill integration on diploma business students' soft skills will be stronger when quality of college life is high
- H4(a): The positive influence of soft skill integration and diploma business students' soft skills will be stronger when the academic aspects of quality of college life is high.
- H4(b): The positive influence of soft skill integration on diploma business students' soft skills will be stronger when the social aspects of quality of college life is high.
- H4(c): The positive influence of soft skill integration on diploma business students' soft skills will be stronger when the facilities aspects of quality of college life is high.

1.7 Research Significance

The study contributed to the better understanding in the process of soft skill development to various stakeholders, ranging from the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, policy makers, private educational institutions, educators, the students, any concerned community and future researchers. The study served as a platform for measurement of perceived acquired soft skills, evaluation of student performance and the effectiveness in the soft skill integration throughout the process. This is necessary for planning, controlling and continuous improvements in educational mission to produce world class graduates in this era of high mobility and globalization.

Firstly, the study could definitely help to identify some key areas or spot any weaknesses to be improved, especially in the sections investigated such as embedded activities and soft skill integration. Therefore, it could provide better insights and more convincing data to the higher educational ministry, MQA, the educational providers and policy makers in reviewing their courses, delivery methods, learning outcomes as well as focusing on the importance of soft skill development. Meanwhile, relevant policies can be introduced through careful studies and discussions by supported empirical research so as to maintain order and encourage compliances. Indirectly, this can boost the confidence level of the society in private higher educational studies. Subsequently, that would certainly help in the sustainability of IPTS in view of the current market and economic situation.

Secondly, the study contributed to the human resources development in the areas of training needs to fulfil MQA training hour requirements of the academic staff. For example, these include arranging adequate training and exposure to the academic staff by

updating them the necessary information about the industrial requirements such as essential soft skill components and the relevant techniques or pedagogies in teaching. Ahmad and Rashid (2011) suggested for lecturers' industrial attachment program in relation to this matter, that is to increase lecturers' soft skill and technological competencies first before they could transmit the knowledge to their respective students. With regards to training matter, Kiker (1966) also regarded the needs of investment in human capital for higher productivity and efficiency at the job.

Thirdly, the study enables the program managers and lecturers to learn better about the strength and weakness in the soft skill teaching and learning process, thus come out with prompt measures to improve the students' soft skill levels or performance. For instance, the study could make proposed increase of embedded activities to be more credible so that lecturers are positively encouraged to include more activities like presentations, field visits, industrial visits, group projects and so forth, rather than classroom learning itself. Undoubtedly, the role and impact of the lecturers must be acknowledged as Remedios (2012) had advocated too the critical roles of lecturers in student soft skill development were due to their influence and contact with the students.

Fourthly, the students would be able to be more aware of the requirements in the soft skill components through answering the survey questionnaires. By participating in the research, the students would gauge at their levels of achievements in the soft skill dimensions and made some self evaluations. In other words, it served as an eye opener or self evaluation for the students, especially the tertiary students who were directly involved in the survey. Other than to identify their soft skill levels when filling up the questionnaires, the final year tertiary students are given the opportunities to pick up and

comprehend the items or details of competencies expected. Somehow, to a certain extent, they should learn to realise what to expect or be expected throughout the program and upon graduation.

Lastly, the findings of this study could provide useful information on the development of required soft skills amongst the future graduates in building productive and progressive workforce. This might draw the attention of any concerned stakeholders, researchers or parties of interests, thus leading towards smoother socio-economic development of the society and increase our potential to achieve high income nation in near future. Undeniably, education and nation development are closely linked (Gylfason, 2001). The educational institutions serve as a platform to transform the students, i.e. the outputs, that are to be blended successfully in the industry by the time they are ready to join the labour market.

In short, the significance of the study was drawn from its contribution with regards to insights towards educational, human capital and workforce development, as well as future studies. It advocates some channels to the educational institutions to achieve higher educational status by enhancing their program delivery and accomplishments. The products of these educational institutions, who are the graduates, will be equipped with better soft skills, thus increasing their success rate in employment, on-the-job performance and betterment of alumni of the researched institutions and also the community. Therefore, it would not only enhance public confidence and promote student intakes, but also attract foreign students to enrol in Malaysian higher learning institutions, thus increasing national income from macro-economic perspectives, plus uplifting our country's international status for socio-political advantages.