High Impact Educational Practice through First Year Experience: Case of Undergraduates in UNIMAS

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Abstract: A compulsory course known as Soft skills and Basic Volunteerism offered at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) adopted the High Impact Educational Practices (HEIPs) through First Year Experience. This course aims at imparting soft skills among all students in UNIMAS, taken in their first semester of their program. The main course learning outcomes are to develop personal and social skills, academic skills, and conduct volunteerism activities. The course learning units were designed to assist students adapting smoothly to the new university environment while improving academic and people skills. A survey to gauge students’ perception about their learning skills was conducted before the course began and another survey was conducted after the course ended. In the assessment, the students reported group activities relating to meeting faculty members and academic advisors as reflections in e-portfolio platforms. In terms of personal gain, the majority admitted to increased self-confidence to communicate in English as a result of participating in public speaking, presentations and a variety of volunteering projects. Suggestions for future include out campus activities, use of high technology digital training materials and diversification of assessment reflective of the complete soft skills course.

Keywords: Experience, Learning, Soft skills, Training, Undergraduates

1. Introduction

Malaysia is known for persistently initiating major changes to its higher education system, since the turn of century. The national aim is to strengthen and transform higher education to be more progressive and competitive, with one of the agenda for higher learning institutions to improve the quality of student learning experience. This was duly proposed by the World Bank as below:

In order to enhance the learning experience of incoming students as the student population expands, Malaysian universities should consider organizing First Year Experience Seminars which have been found, in other contexts, to greatly facilitate student transition from high school to university as well as quickly integrate the new students into their intellectual community of the university. (World Bank Report, 2007, p. 151)

Subsequently, graduate development continues to be a key national area of concern for all universities, given the upward shift in demand for excellent interpersonal skills in the present-day competitive labour market. In line with the educational goal to improve graduate marketability, the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 specifically requires that exceptional social and thinking skills are successfully transferred to university graduates as part of their preparation to paid employment. Thus, the High-Impact Educational Practices (HIEPs) are implemented for academic program in higher education institutions in Malaysia. HIEPs are techniques and designs for teaching and learning to enhance student participation aimed towards successful learning among students for varied different backgrounds (Guideline for the Implementation of Higher Impact Educational Practices in the Curriculum, 2016).

1.1 Soft Skills

Heckman (2012) in discussion paper for the Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA) defines soft skills to include, personality traits, goals, motivations, and preferences that are valued in the labour market, in school, and in many other domains. Soft skills are expected to incorporate all aspects of generic skills that include the cognitive elements associated with non-academic skills and identified as the most critical set of skills in the current global job market. The reorientation of the national education system aimed at graduate employability and quality sustainability has made the importance of soft skill training more relevant than ever.

However, the pronounced lack of soft skills amongst our fresh graduates in general creates an urgent need to review and restructure the existing soft skills training modules offered at UNIMAS for undergraduate students for the past the past 15 years. Despite the ongoing collaborative efforts to develop the content and assessment of the course
over the years, there are reasons to believe that a sizable number of young graduates enter the employment market ill-equipped with interpersonal skills.

1.2 First Year Experience

The term ‘student experience’ is often used to describe the holistic process of constructing personal meaning across a broad range of formal and informal academic and social settings in the context of university and the outside world, such as referred to by Baird and Gordon (2009). Efforts to introduce and promote First Year Experience Programme was led by University Technology Malaysia (UTM) in 2006.

A follow up study by Hushin and Rahim (2010) on student perception of this programme found students were positive about its purpose, but lacked clarity of its practicality, in terms of helping them adjust to academic culture and social life in university. Later works focussed on factors that influence the integration of new students into the university life. Differences in individual backgrounds were established to impact the transition of first -year experience (Johnson, 2008). In the case of Malaysia, Abdullah et al. (2009) reasoned that students’ failure to adjust quickly to university will affect their well-being and academic performance.

1.3 Background

UNIMAS like the rest of the public universities in Malaysia has been offering soft skill courses managed by the Center for Student Development since the Ministry of Higher Learning introduced it as part of the compulsory curriculum targeted at all first semester undergraduates in 2006. Naturally having gone through several continuous quality improvement (CQI) exercises, it is currently known as Soft Skills and Basic Volunteerism with one credit pre-requisite course for first year students. The course focuses on communication, teamwork skills and volunteerism activities as its learning outcomes.

Given the dynamics in global market and demands of the various industries, the need to revise both the course content and the methods evaluations of student performance remains an equal priority. It is an imperative for UNIMAS instructors to adopt state-of-the-art teaching and instruction strategies to ensure optimal learning experience that will enhance students’ soft skills. In line with this, facilitators are offered in house training regularly by experts to ensure that the front liners are adequately prepared to manage the new students needs and expectations in their transition from high school to university.

First Year Experience (FYE) is one of the High Impact Educational Practices (HIEPs) and is at the final testing stage of full implementation in UNIMAS. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) defines first-year seminars as courses that bring small groups of students together with faculty or staff on a regular basis and place strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students’ intellectual and practical competencies. It is the capacity to enhance levels of self-confidence of students, which affects their readiness towards the choice of their academic programs. Furthermore, First-Year Experience is very useful to develop and inspire students own intellectual curiosity and adopts skills that help students to find, evaluate and articulate answers to their questions.

This study intends to empirically test the effectiveness FYE in the context of the recent revision made based on the conviction that the adoption of selective instructional strategies paired with the constructive alignment of the course evaluation rubric will help improve the effectiveness of the soft skills course module substantially. The fundamental question of interest in this research is: How effective is the First Year Experience (FYE) course to soft skills training provided for the undergraduates at UNIMAS?

2. Selective Literature Review

2.1 Perception

Holdaway, K., & Kelloway, K. (1987) conducted a study involving 937 first-year students in the Faculties of Arts, Business, Education, Engineering, and Science at the University of Alberta to know more about students' perceptions of their university experience. Most assessed that they were working considerably harder than at high school, and many said that high school had not adequately prepared them for university. The greatest need to adjust occurred in the amount of work, stress, difficulty of work, and methods of instructions. Even more than 3 decades ago, fresh from school students needed a systematic course to help them adjust, cope and settle into universities.

Following the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AACU’s) report in 2002, as colleges admit
increasing number of students over time, the lecturers involved claim that greater numbers come in under prepared for college life and work. Even then, in one of the most educationally advanced region worldwide, higher learning institutions were expected to fill what academics coined as the educational gap, left by the high school systems.

Carey, S. (2006) the editor of Peer Review, remarked that the opportunity for fresh university students to participate in first-year programs may make the difference between them struggling and a successful transition into a college, subsequently providing these young adolescents with the outcomes they need to navigate a complex and challenging world.

Regrettably, not many countries provide a comprehensive guide to assist high school leavers in making good choices when it comes to college admissions. To the best the researchers’ knowledge, Malaysia too currently lacks what ta number of developed nations have in place for this target group. While prospective public university undergraduates apply online through the UPU (Unit Pusat Universiti) for placement based on their respective choice of academic program, most often confess to either influenced by parents or deciding randomly. Clearly, with a handbook or a check list of questions similar to the one introduced by Robert Shoenberg in his book titled, Why Do I Have to Take This Course? will serve as a useful tool. Given its absence, a systematic approach of a first year experience course is expected to remedy the above.

Having said that and the growing concern for average graduate employability rate across board in Malaysia, a couple of research universities with the strong support from the Ministry of Education are experimenting on FYE. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) for one has been successful in its effort to strike a favourable balance between sustaining its Research University status and maintaining academic quality control by focusing on providing their first year students with opportunities to be become more engaged in curricular activities. Other universities are now attempting to role model UTM and capitalize on the FYE with the hope to enable new students to adapt into university life and perform better academically.

In 2007, The British Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) reported employers to complain about the lack of verbal communication and teamwork amongst graduates entering the business world. A survey on the importance of soft skills in the lives of the students at and after college in Namibia, by Schulz, B. (2008) discussed the complementary role of soft skills to technical requirements they are trained for. The author concluded that students’ personalities are shaped by soft skills and therefore educators must take special responsibility to embed them during their time in the university.

2.2 Human Capital

Roselina, S. (2009) clarified the underlying reasons for the introduction of a formal soft skills training targeted at undergraduates. Her writing highlighted the need for fresh graduates to complement their academic qualification with other necessary competencies required to put their expert knowledge into successful practice.

Nikitina, L. & Furuoka, F. (2012) focused on the educational expectations of Malaysian university students’ revealed that their expectations of soft skills varied in meaning and unfortunately not all skills introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education were considered important. Despite the less than 1% sample size, the work explored the need to sustain develop soft skill training in tertiary education quite thoroughly.

Abdul Malek A. K, Nabila, A., Abdul Malek, A. R., Sidek, M. N, Wan Marzuki, W. J. Othman, J., Lihanna B, Jamaludin, B., Hamdan, S. (2012) conducted survey to investigate the differences in soft skills between undergraduates in public and private universities in Malaysia. Using the Malaysian Soft Skills Scale (My3S), which consists of 180 items of soft skills required by the Ministry of Higher Education, their findings suggested that, in general, students of public higher education institutions (HEIs) scored higher in all seven skills. With respect to gender, male students scored higher than female students in all elements except for teamwork skills and moral and professional ethics. A comparison between fields of study showed that for both types of HEIs, the vocationally trained students scored the highest in all skills except for moral and professional ethics, provoking a fascinating concern.

Ismail, S. (2013) concisely summarized the findings of her empirical study on the importance of soft skills for accounting students in Malaysia. Despite the total usable response rate of 50.9%, she maintained that the top three reasons for accounting graduates to acquire soft skills are to enable them to provide high quality and professional services, to fulfill the expectation of employers and to have better career prospects. Motives general to all other graduates with a professional degree. A comparative research by Ahmad, S. in 2013 suggests that students in general are very reasonably self-assured in terms of their soft skills proficiency with the mean score of most
hovering between moderate to high. Nonetheless, perceptions of soft skills proficiency are affected to a certain extent by socio-demographic factors of gender, area of residence as well as types of schools. The study revealed diverse confidence levels of students and the importance of helping them to self-identify as areas they were weakest in.

Haimi M. A., Sangeeth, R., Nurulhayati, I and Tahirah, T. in (2014) revealed that even technical-technological undergraduates completing their tertiary diplomas and preparing to enter the labour market had a mix of preconceptions regarding soft skills. In fact, they differed significantly in levels of preparedness to employ skills such as critical thinking and problem solving at their workplaces.

Choudary, V., and Ponnuru, M. (2015) reported communication to be one of the most deficient soft-skills in the MBA students in India. Productivity in business organizations losses amounted to almost $37 billion, or about $26,000 per employee per year, in the US and UK alone. In the case of India, the major problem in engineering colleges that offer MBA courses is the teaching faculties themselves lacking teaching skills, management skills and proficiency in English as most lectures are being conducted in regional languages.

The study by Nganga, T. K, Chanb, T. C. and Uma Devi, V. (2015) attempted to identify critical issues of soft skills development through teaching professional training. Qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews with experienced educators in a Malaysian public universities revealed that factors related to the failure of soft skills development included big class size, academic focused and insufficient period of training. They concluded that embedded models can better ensure integration of soft skills in coursework designs.

Mohammed, I, Azlinda, W. and Mohamed, W. (2017) concluded that, technical skills alone could not bring about the organizational development there must be a compliment of soft skills for any organizational sustainability. Their document analysis suggests soft skills to be essential as they have affect all aspects of personal development of fresh graduates who lack working experiences. A study by Truong, T.T.H.; Ronald, L. and Shaw, K. (2018) on the employability of business graduates in Vietnam, as one of the best performing economies in the world last decade (Nguyen et al., 2008; The World Bank, 2016) found the country to be facing a momentous challenge to provide highly qualified personnel for its emerging modern sectors. It’s Higher Education Institutions also has the task of introducing soft skills, a relatively new term in the context of Vietnamese education and business workplace prior to embedding it into the existing academic and training system.

Faridah, K. (2015), produced a thesis exploring the first year experience of students in in of the largest public university in Malaysia. In her longitudinal case study, focusing on higher education aspirations and decisions, the challenges encountered during their first year in campus and the adjustment process, she found the following. In the early weeks of university, students experienced disjuncture between their expectations and reality of university life, which to her understanding is due to anxiety related to change brought about by the new learning environment and also conflicting roles students had to play in identifying themselves as a university student. Interestingly, feedback also demonstrated that once these students began to get involve in college activities, actively engage in class and familiarize themselves with the support system available in the university, the transition became smooth. Terpstra-Tong and Ahmad, A. (2017), in their attempts to identify the major transition issues experienced by first-year students in Malaysia concluded that independent learning, research, time management, English and critical thinking skills are central to quick adaptation to university learning. They suggest Malaysian universities to strengthen their transition program to bridge the gap caused by racial and cultural diversity among local students.

In summary, past and contemporary studies relating to soft skills around the globe lean towards the revival of its relevance and the critical need for those on education at any level to begin investing resources to ensure that the current generation are adequately equipped to enter workforce and build successful careers of their choice. The ongoing efforts those in the academia comes to show that soft skill remains to be as equally important as areas such hard skills in the context of securing and maintaining paid employments. the challenge is continuous improve the how of achieving this noble yet ambitious grand agenda.

3. Methodology

3.1 Instrumentation

A cross-sectional quantitative survey method was employed in this study. The questionnaire comprised of 4 sections (demography, pre & post course attendance knowledge using ratings) and open-ended type for suggestion for improvement was made available online to all active students registered in the university’s admissions unit. Participation was voluntary and closed within 2 weeks, as soon as the number of complete forms exceeded the target of 1500 respondents.
3.2 Sampling

Given the nature and current online learning situation, the most efficient sampling technique available was both convenience and random sampling. A total of 1891 students from year 1 to year 4 from all 10 faculties in UNIMAS participated in the online survey.

3.3 Method

The data collected were processed using standard measures of descriptive statistics provided by the Excel programme embedded in Google Form Survey. No outliers or missing data were detected.

4. Findings

4.1 Survey demographics

As expected, the ratio between the male to female (3:7) was suggestive of the student distribution in tertiary education in Malaysia. This makes the analysis more reflective and findings applicable to other universities offering soft skills training as a stand-alone course for their freshman. However, interestingly most responses (60.6%) were from Year 2 and Year 3 undergraduates.

![Figure 1. Demographics of survey respondents (A: age and B: age group)](image)

4.2 Knowledge Enhancement

In terms of clarity of the academic programme they are in, the undergraduates from all 10 faculties admitted to having a better idea about the general learning goals of their respective programs upon completing the soft skills course.

4.2.1 English Skills

Figure 2 shows the students perception of proficiency in English language through speaking, listening, presentation and writing skills, before and after taking the course.
4.2.2 Teamwork and computer skills

Figure 3 shows the perception of the students with regards to teamwork and computer skills.

4.3 Content and Assessment

Based on figure 3, a majority of 84% agreed to E-portfolio being useful to planning their extra-curricular activities and career paths. Likewise, 96% maintained that the volunteer project contributed to improving their teamwork, leadership, and communication.

Figure 4. Students preference between volunteerism and E-portfolio
5. Analysis and Discussion

This study aimed at exploring the effectiveness of the First Year Experience course to soft skills training introduced to all undergraduates at UNIMAS beginning with cohort 19/20. The underlying motivation being to specifically collect feedback from the target beneficiaries on if and how FYE works for them.

Firstly, results indicate that modifications made to the existing soft skills course syllabus to incorporate FYE components produced positive outcomes in areas related to understanding the link between the different academic programs, the course itself and its requirement. The significant increase in the percentage (10%-15%) admitting to increased awareness of the learning outcomes related to their degree programs and the course testifies to the fact that including activities engaging first year students with their academic advisors, program coordinators, faculty management staff encouraged them to take responsibility of their 3-year study in UNIMAS.

Secondly, there is a sharp rise in the number of respondents declaring an overall progress in their English proficiency, interpersonal and information management skills integrated in the revised FYE course across board. The shift from low to moderate and high ratings after taking attending seven different weekly sessions, suggests gradual progress experienced by the first-year students. The explicit change in their level of confidence to express themselves in the comment section at the end of the survey is consistent with their self-evaluations. Within the English proficiency category, respondents rated presentation skill to record the largest (20%) improvement individually. Followed by 91% (from 81%) on listening skills, which is undoubtedly an essential ability to nurture for student learners. Taking quality notes during lectures, paying good attention to verbal instructions for assignments and being able to cope with distractions in communications requires selective listening skills. Especially, when the medium of communication is formal and in a foreign language. Incorporating group activities that oblige students from different educational background to work together towards a common goal, ultimately forces them to be less self-conscious and more committed to being a good team player. With assessment tied to individual participation for modules related to personal skills, students are left with no choice but to contribute. This explains the considerable positive change in the speaking and writing in English skills post review.

Next is the feedback on the new roadshow type modules involving primary service centres in UNIMAS. The initiative to incorporate sharing sessions by representative staff from the library and counselling unit turned out to be an excellent idea for FYE. Fresh school leavers need help adjusting to the campus environment and are found to suffer from anxiety the first few weeks in university. Exposing them to the resources and aids available through the course, enables students in their first semester to have better coping strategies. Coupled with the sessions involving faculty management and academic advisors, respondents claim to learn more about the support system on campus in the FYE course. The majority unanimously agree to having better knowledge of the specific roles of the program coordinators, academic advisors and faculty administrative staff completing the assignments in the soft skills course.

While 84% recognized the experience of building their personal e-portfolios to be useful, 96% of all 1193 student respondents insisted volunteerism projects (from the planning to execution) to essentially develop their social skills. This finding is consistent with the feedback on the most preferred FYE soft skills training activity. Regardless of their faculties, age groups, gender and take on perception of other activities, respondents voted the various types of on campus volunteer projects as their favourite and most effective first year experience. The choice of project others (approximately 24%) implied that the volunteerism project allowed them to practice the soft skills addressed in the course during first half of the semester. Communication, working with others and time management were mentioned repeatedly. A slightly smaller group of 20% however recommended that the facilitators diversified the method of delivery with more technologically oriented approaches. Predictably, videos and online games were considered more effective than the tradition type teaching techniques by the millennials. An even lesser number of respondents (5%) recommended for review of assessment categories to include all the activities. The argument was that some teammates refused to cooperate in assignments that did not contribute to their grade. In other words, there was evidence of group conflict and a need for facilitator intervention in some cases. Based on some literature, skills related to volunteering (personal skill based and corporate skill based) is one of the 10 types of volunteering work available.

6. Conclusion

The objective of research was successfully achieved in exploring the effectiveness of First Year Experience through the soft skills course provided for all new undergraduates at UNIMAS, beginning September 2019. This generic course has evolved over the years, to match the growing needs of different student generation and is now in its latest form fitting the University’s slogan to being contemporary in character and forward looking in outlook.

Rebranding soft skills training as First Year Experience signifies the transition made by the Students Development
Centre to emphasize the indispensability of personal growth takes peaks amongst students during their early years in the university. Realizing the importance of providing undergraduates with a sound support system from the time they embark their journey to graduation, UNIMAS is committed to ensuring that students curricular activities both aligned to and complements their respective academic undertaking.

Findings from this study validates the resolution to introduce First Year Experience as part of the existing 10 week soft skills compulsory training for all first semester students. In fact, allocating volunteer is m-project with highest coursework weightage of 50% proved to be an apt idea in view of empirical studies attesting to the relevance of skills transfer that takes place throughout the process. Research on skills transfer from volunteer work to paid employment conducted by Hybels (1978) and Schram (1985) confirms that skills developed through volunteerism improve job opportunities and performance of volunteers.

Skills gained through volunteerism can be put to use effectively in job searches (Phillips and Phillips, 2000). Studies by Austin (1998) and Ross (1997) corroborate these findings by referring to reports by CEOs of Fortune 500 companies who claim that volunteers develop their skills in group communication, leadership, interpersonal communication social justice, critical thinking, workplace literacy skills and character building.

Evidently, soft skills training in UNIMAS plays a key role in students first year experiences and therefore must be sustained with regular quality checks. Recommendations related to higher authority approval will be submitted to the Students Affair Department via the course coordinating unit, the Students Development Center. Preferably future studies in First Year Experiences and Soft Skills should concentrate on how to enhance the course dynamics while maintaining minimum standard practices between the various faculties. Students value equal access to opportunity and equitable experience during their time spent on campus. Issues relating to facilitators engagement and motivation to make the first-year experience course a success at every level provides ample room for potential comparative analysis.

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