

**SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS, SELF-DIRECTED
PRACTICES AND SOFT SKILLS AMONG
SELECTED MALAYSIAN HIGHER
LEARNING INSTITUTIONS**

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ASIA e UNIVERSITY

2020

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AND SOFT SKILLS AMONG SELECTED MALAYSIAN
HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS**

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ABSTRACT

Students of Higher Learning Institutions (HLI) have been found to be lacked of soft skills attainment, which have been viewed as important requirements for employment, personal well-being and life-long learning. To counter this issue, the programme standard by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) had included the general courses in the curriculum known as the '*Kemahiran Insaniah*' (KI), the term generally used in Public HLI or '*Matapelajaran Pengajian Umum*' (MPU) for Private HLI. This study believes that students' connectedness with the campus lecturers, campus students, and off-campus community were associated with the attainment of social skills, professional values, and social responsibility. A quantitative research was adopted by using multiple choice questions measuring student learning outcomes selected and survey questionnaires on social connectedness and self-directed practices. A total of 682 Diploma respondents were selected from ten stratified locality of Public and Private higher learning institutions in Malaysia. Data were collected and analysed using the SPSS and PLS-SEM. Findings indicated that 91% respondents were able to demonstrate good social responsibility, followed by 75% with good professional values and 64% with good social skills. Partial least square regression analysis results showed that campus lecturers connectedness had a positive significant relationship with professional values ($\beta = 0.17$). Campus students connectedness had a positive significant relationship with social skills ($\beta = 0.19$), and social responsibility ($\beta = 0.20$). Off-campus community connectedness showed a negative significant relationship with social skills ($\beta = -0.13$) and professional values ($\beta = -0.12$). In addition, self-directed practices (mediator) increased the relationship strength from $\beta = 0.17$ to 0.21, between the campus lecturers connectedness and professional values. Besides, this study also showed that there was a significant difference between Public and Private HLI for

social skills ($t= 4.10$) and professional values ($t= 8.58$). The implication of this study highlighted the dominant influence of campus lecturers connectedness in nurturing professional values among the students. Future studies may be required on the different types of collaboration with the off-campus community connectedness to further justify the negative reactions given in terms of social learning relations. Theoretically, connectedness in the environment aspect concurred with the social learning theory that reciprocally determines the changes between practice and behaviour.

APPROVAL

I certify that I have supervised / read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in quality and scope, as a thesis for the fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis submitted in fulfilment of the PhD degree is my own work and that all contributions from any other persons or sources are properly and duly cited. I further declare that the material has not been submitted either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university. In making this declaration, I understand and acknowledge any breaches in this declaration constitute academic misconduct, which may result in my expulsion from the programme and/or exclusion for the award of the degree.

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'Health is the greatest gift, contentment is the greatest wealth'

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

HLI	Higher Learning Institutions
KI	<i>Kemahiran Insaniah</i> (general courses in Public HLI)
MoHE	Ministry of Higher Education
MPU	<i>Matapelajaran Pengajian Umum</i> (general courses in Private HLI)
MQA	Malaysian Qualifications Agency
MQF	Malaysian Qualifications Framework
PLS-SEM	Partial Least Squares- Structural Equation Modeling
SC	Social Connectedness
SLO	Student Learning Outcomes
SCL	Student - Campus Lecturers Connectedness
SCS	Student - Campus Students (peers) Connectedness
SOCC	Student - Off Campus Community Connectedness
SS	Social Skills Outcome
SR	Social Responsibility Outcome
SPSS	Statistics Package for the Social Sciences
PV	Professional Values Outcome

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

The purpose of learning is to seek and gain new knowledge, affective values and practical skills outcomes in connecting with the social environment for work or personal well-being. Chapter 1 would be discussing the background of the student learning outcomes for the soft skills domain (social skills, professional values and social responsibility) acquired in the Malaysian Higher Learning Institutions. Next, the problem statements acknowledge the lack of soft skills outcomes among students in the higher learning institutions, which is a hindrance towards future personal employability and social well-being. The scope of the study is to assess the association between students' social connectedness (environment) and learning outcomes acquired; forming the Research Objectives, Research Questions, Hypotheses, and contributions. The research limitations and operational definitions are also presented in this chapter.

1.1 Background of the Study

Student learning outcomes in the Higher Learning Institutions (HLI) had been experiencing a paradigm shift in accommodating the needs of the 21st century such as essential skills for employment and social well-being (Balakrisnan, 2017). According to Partnership for 21st Century Learning (2011), the essential key to student success is to be prepared for increasingly complex life and work environments by mastering the elements of the "4 C's" which were referred to the skills such as the critical thinking, creative thinking, communication, and collaboration (Claxton, Costa & Kallick, 2016). Griffin and Care (2014) explained that the 21st century skills referred to the way of thinking; the way people work; the tools for getting employed and living

in the world. The skills concerned are beyond the technical or cognitive skills and related to the soft skills aspect general known as the generic skills or people skills (Matteson, Anderson & Boyden, 2016).

In addressing the issue above, the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) was established in 2006, after merging the National Accreditation Board (*Lembaga Akreditasi Negara*, LAN) and the Quality Assurance Division (QAD) of the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). This single quality assurance agency manages both the Public and Private Higher Education Providers (HEP), under the Malaysian Qualifications Agency Act 2007 (MQA, 2017). One of MQA's responsibilities is the implementation of the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF), a reference point for Malaysian qualifications to monitor the student learning outcomes to be achieved.

The Malaysian Qualifications Agency is the authority in-charge of ensuring that the programmes and courses offered in both the Public and Private Higher Learning Institutions are complying with the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQA, 2017). The Malaysian Qualifications Framework (*Kerangka Kelayakan Malaysia*, KKM) is a declaration of local qualifications and qualities possessed by the programmes offered. MQF is an instrument that develops and classifies qualifications based on a set of criteria agreed nationally and benchmarked with international practices, explaining the programmes' level of study, learning outcomes and credit system based on student academic load (Kaliannan & Chandran, 2012). These criteria have been accepted and used for all qualifications awarded by the Higher Education Providers. As a result, MQF integrates and connects the national qualifications, with the participation of all the stakeholders.

MQF had defined learning outcomes as statements that explained what students should know, understand and can do upon the completion of a period of study

(MQA, 2017). Morcke, Dornan & Eika (2013), refer to outcomes as mainly the skills and qualities we ‘want’ students to achieve, not the skills they ‘need’ to have which they refer to as competency skills. Student learning outcomes are considered as the guiding principles for teaching, learning, and quality standard for the learning institutions. It is also a part of the initiative in affirming that students not only have the knowledge, but the ability to execute the task efficiently.

With that, MQF was given the task to ensure that student learning outcomes in higher learning institutions do acquired the skills equivalent to the employment quality and standard. It has also become the point of reference for standard and quality, curriculum development for teaching, learning, assessment, and credits of students. Student learning outcomes are divided into three categories which are based on the levels of qualification, fields of study, and the programme. The following are the purposes of learning outcomes (Aziz, Yusof & Yatim, 2012):

- (i) Learning outcomes inform students of the knowledge, and skills required.
- (ii) Learning outcomes map the relationship between courses, programmes, and the degree.
- (iii) Learning outcomes map the development of knowledge, and skills.
- (iv) Learning outcomes communicate standards of performance.
- (v) Learning outcomes provide a structure for evaluating teaching, and learning.
- (vi) Learning outcomes inform curriculum design, and pedagogic structure.

At the same time, MQF had established and operationalised eight domains of generic learning outcomes, which is relevant and universally comparable today. Besides, student learning outcomes are also considered as part of the Malaysian Education Blueprint for Higher Education 2015–2025 (MoHE, 2014), to focus on producing holistic, entrepreneurial, and balanced graduates as their number one

paradigm shift. The new policy provides a world-class standard education framework for all programmes offered in the Malaysian higher learning institutions.

The eight domains of generic learning outcomes were the knowledge; practical; social skills and responsibilities; values, attitude and professionalism; communication, leadership, teamwork; problem solving and scientific skills; information management and life-long learning; managerial and entrepreneurial skills (MQA, 2017). Since then, the above list had been clustered, re-profiled and retained to be aligned with the aspirations of the National Education Philosophy (1961), the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, and the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education). At the same time, the new re-profiled learning outcomes clarified the demands and complexities of learning at each level of study, applicable within the context of study and future employment. The five cluster of learning outcomes outlined in MQF's latest edition (MQA, 2017) are:

- (i) Knowledge and understanding
- (ii) Cognitive skills
- (iii) Functional work skills with focus on:
 - a. Practical skills
 - b. Interpersonal skills
 - c. Communication skills
 - d. Digital skills
 - e. Numeracy skills
 - f. Leadership, autonomy and responsibility
- (iv) Personal and entrepreneurial skills
- (v) Ethics and professionalism

Student learning outcomes had remained vital because it demonstrated high professionalism and sociological characteristics (MoHE, 2016). The preference was due to the growth in numbers of qualified hard skilled graduates, whom is lacked of the soft skills requirement to secure a job (Esa, Selamat, Padil & Jamaludin, 2014). According to Rahman, Mokhtar, Yasin & Hamzah (2011) investigation on the level of generic soft skills outcomes among Malaysian technical students were found to be moderately high level of attainment. Thus, supported the industries' report that graduates were lacked of the soft skill attainment (MoHE, 2018)

Furthermore, the implementation of student learning outcomes have resulted in the changes of curriculum content, teaching-learning and assessment approaches. Teaching, learning and assessment of the programmes or courses were aligned with Outcome-Based Education (OBE), to ensure that the student acquires the learning outcomes intended. OBE has been implemented since the 1980's in Malaysian public schools and in higher learning institutions since 2008 (Mohayidin, Suandi, Mustapha, Konting, Kamaruddin, Man, & Abdullah, 2008; MQA, 2017). Besides, these soft skills or people skills are perceived to be learnt through observation or daily interaction with the diversified social environment in the higher learning institutions and at work place. Courses on building people skills are found to be common among the management and social humanities streams, than the cognitive aspect for the technical and applied sciences disciplines (Matteson, Anderson & Boyden, 2016).

Students then and now are being educated to be responsible for their own learning from the primary school till higher learning institutions. Those students who are unable to cope responsibly with the syllabus would be dropped out during the transition phase (Year 6 to Form 1; Form 3 to Form 4 and after Form 5), which could be more than 20,000 students per cohort, according to the Institute for Development

Studies (IDS) Sabah (Chok, 2017). The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 reported that approximately 36 percent of each student cohort did not achieve the minimum passes desired by the intended student learning outcomes.

This meant that the group of students had failed to obtain the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) certificate (MoHE, 2014). This indicated that the dropouts could be seriously lacking in not only the learning outcomes in cognitive knowledge, but also the soft skills outcomes such as basic communication which will enable them to be employable after the secondary education level. For those students who managed to enter the next level of higher learning, using the minimum entry requirement, they were found to be ‘struggling’ to achieve the higher level of cognitive, affective and psychomotor, which were embedded into the new learning outcomes standard for the purpose of employment opportunity and social well-being (Shakir, 2009).

Student learning outcomes or soft skills were either offered as a stand-alone (independent) course or embedded in the existing courses implicitly (Smith & Bath, 2006). The nature of the soft skills outcomes in OBE would emphasised on the face to face approach by connecting students with their lecturers and the environment which was an essential contact time towards acquiring the observable social skills, professional values and social responsible outcomes. These connection have shown that soft skills outcomes were important determinants for education, future employment, career advancement and personal well-being. (Omar, Bakar & Rashid, 2012; Gutman & Schoon, 2013). It was further supported with the technology to encourage development of the communication skills (Davis and Muir, 2004), collaboration and teamwork, initiative, planning and organising, presentation skills and personal effectiveness (Crosbie, 2005; Boyatzis et al., 2017), as part of the soft skills aspect.

As the same time, students were trained to at their own pace and were less dependent on the direct educator as the main source of information towards developing their cognitive knowledge, since the beginning of their formal education (Mohayidin, Suandi, Mustapha, Konting, Kamaruddin, Man, & Abdullah, 2008). Students have the privilege autonomy, and responsibility to be the curator of knowledge, content producers, and connection makers in the 21st century social learning platform (MoHE, 2018). Such practices of student-centered and self-directed approaches supported that acquiring the set of soft skills is necessary.

Thus, good soft skills attainment would result in positive values between the individual and his/her relationship with the environment through the sense of empathy, interaction with others, involvement in group activities, responsible cooperation, ethically professional team builder and problem solving (Lynch & Simpson, 2010). These soft skills are priceless in the world of modern technologies and have been constantly developed since childhood (Kılıç & Aytar, 2017), with applications of different levels of difficulties prior to entering the adult working world (Kim, 2015). The learner without sufficient soft skills after the higher learning studies would be a challenge for employment in the desired industry as well as in their personal well-being among the community at large.

Consequently, higher learning institutions are expected by the stakeholders (parents, society, government, and industries) to equip students with not only cognitive knowledge, but also the ability to demonstrate the affective and psychomotor skills in achieving their daily purposes (Moroney, Czaplinski, Burrage & Yang, 2016). This may help to correct the misconception of some students who thought that it is not important to develop an aspiration to analyse, think critically, write and speak effectively, and having an ability to solve complex problems (Snape,

2017). Concurred with the global changes, the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 outlined a combination of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor outcomes that would lead to a holistic, balance and entrepreneurial students (MoHE, 2014), to enable students acquiring the soft skills for future employment and personal well-being.

1.2 Statements of Problem

The description for the background of the study above has highlighted that students in the higher learning institutions are indeed struggling to equip themselves with the soft skills (affective) such as socialisation, professional values and responsibility practices, which they were unable to demonstrate the talent during the job recruitment process (MoHE, 2018). These few fundamental soft skills are highly expected of the graduates of higher learning by the industry employers and the community for personal well-being. Thus, the problem needs to be mitigated by assessing the factors that could be the contributing source of hindering the students from acquiring the said soft skills.

Indeed, the effect of the lacked of fundamental soft skills was obvious following reports from various departments, sectors and researchers that the fresh graduates were having difficulty getting employment especially among the average performers. They were found to be consistently lacking in soft skills such as critical thinking skills, communication skills, and language proficiency (English language), which limited their capability to express their cognitive knowledge effectively during job interviews (Shanmugan, 2017).

The Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) reported that in 2016, it was estimated that there were about 200,000 unemployed graduates in Malaysia (Balakrishnan, 2017). This showed that academic achievements and stand-alone soft skills courses were insufficiently acquired to secure a job among the growing numbers

of graduates (Beard, Schwieger & Surendran, 2008; Duncan & Dunifon, 2012; Gibson & Sodeman, 2014; Yoke & Ngang, 2017). Industry stakeholders sought and recognised graduates who possessed a diversity of flexible soft skills benefitting the organisation, and the community in service. Employers had high expectations of graduates with good knowledge of socialising, professional values, and responsibility obligation (Hart Research Associates, 2015; Cannoy, 2015).

Soft skills attainment were highly related to proficiency in communication or exposure to real-world situations (Matteson, Anderson & Boyden, 2016) as mentioned above and in many other reports such as Bank Negara's 2016 annual report and researches' findings (Singh & Singh, 2008; Karim, Abdullah, Rahman, Noah, Jaafar, Othman, ... & Said, 2012). Yet, there is a dearth of researches in the area of soft skills (affective) outcomes among Malaysian students that needs to be studied. The current study intends to assess the identified factors that could be hampering Malaysian graduates from acquiring the soft skills required by the industry such as social skills (knowledge of communication) (Singh & Singh, 2008); moral and professional ethics (attitude), and social responsibility practices (Karim et al., 2012).

The problems concerning issues of soft skills outcomes (social skills, professional values, ethics, and social responsibility) for daily engagement have a direct relationship with the social connectedness factor. The study observed that students in the higher learning institutions had limited connectedness or engagement especially with their campus lecturers, campus students, and off-campus community. This study perceived that students' passive action with the people connectedness could be the additional disadvantage in acquiring the soft skills outcomes intended for their future employment opportunity. The students did not utilise the most available