

## Understandings and Conceptions of Soft Skills for Educators in Public Universities

Ruzlan Md-Ali<sup>a\*</sup>, Fuziah Shaffie<sup>b</sup>, Fahainis Mohd Yusof<sup>c</sup>

\* Corresponding author: Ruzlan Md-Ali, ruzlan@uum.edu.my

<sup>a</sup>*School of Education and Modern Languages, College of Arts and Sciences, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 UUM Sintok  
Kedah, Malaysia, ruzlan@uum.edu.my*

<sup>b</sup>*School of Applied Psychology, Social Work and Policy, College of Arts and Sciences, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 UUM  
Sintok Kedah, Malaysia, fuzi484@uum.edu.my*

<sup>c</sup>*School of Education and Modern Languages, College of Arts and Sciences, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 UUM Sintok  
Kedah, Malaysia, fahainis@uum.edu.my*

### Abstract

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The lack of soft skills competence among new university graduates is an issue and also a reason for unsuccessful job applications. University graduates who excel academically and have appropriate soft skills would stand a better chance of being employed. Students in public universities (PUs) need to be guided to acquire the relevant soft skills and need to have role models to be professionally and socially competent. They can actually learn much from their lecturers or educators as role models. In a recent qualitative exploratory study, 18 educators who were purposively selected from five PUs were individually interviewed to capture their understandings and conceptions of soft skills as part of their professional contribution to support the urge to foster and ensure the acquisition of soft skills among university students in Malaysia. This paper discusses and provides a glimpse into three PUs educators' understandings and conceptions of soft skills within their current professional context. Their thoughts on soft skills and their propositions of other possible skills that could be included as soft skills as well as soft skills that PUs' educators ought to possess, could provide early ideas and initiatives towards the construction of a 'soft skills framework' for PUs' educators. This framework could serve as guideline for educators in PUs to develop, facilitate and enhance soft skills among their students.

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### 1. Introduction

Higher education is considered as a stepping stone to a good job and students went to university to improve their employment opportunities (Lowden, Hall, Elliot, & Lewin, 2011). Graduates from Public

Universities (PUs) must have competence in relevant skills to effectively function in their respective potential workplaces. In today's professional working context, they need to possess hard skills as well as the soft skills. Hard skills are the technical requirements of a job the student is trained to do and soft skills fulfil an important role in shaping an individual's personality (Schulz, 2008).

It is of high importance for every student to acquire adequate skills beyond academic or technical knowledge. Students in PUs need to be guided to acquire relevant soft or generic skills and they would also need role models that they can look up to in order to become well-trained and skilful in these skills. Within their formal education at the higher institutions, they can actually learn much from their lecturers or educators, including looking up to these educators as role models for understanding and acquiring knowledge on soft skills. Bandura explained this easily by proposing a different type of learning called observational learning (Bandura, Grusec, & Menlove, 1966). Bandura claimed that learners' learning is heavily reliant on observation, which is who do learners observe and model themselves on. These include parents, siblings, friends and also teachers.

Employers expect graduates to have technical and discipline competences from their degrees but require graduates to also demonstrate a range of broader skills and attributes that include team-working, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and managerial abilities (Lowden, Hall, Elliot, & Lewin, 2011). Acquisition of soft skills competencies is an essential aspect in Malaysian higher learning institutions. The Malaysian government has been very concerned with the problem of unemployed graduates, an issue which is widely debated (Shariffah Bahyah, 2013). Perhaps educators ought to give due attention to this soft skills related issue. For instance, Hairuzila, Hazadiah, Dahan, and Normah (2014) reported that responses from students in their study showed that the majority of their lecturers integrated communication skills sometimes or rarely during their teachings.

The central research question that guided our broader study was 'To what extent are the Malaysian Public Universities educators' soft skills competencies applicable for the development of professional and social competence of graduates within their working contexts?'. The study set out to gauge educators' understandings of soft skills competencies and the ways in which they incorporate aspects of soft skills when delivering their subjects' contents to their students. Additionally, the study explored other skills, which the educators think, could be considered as soft skills that are necessary for both educators and students in years to come. Within Malaysia National Philosophy of Education, the main goal of education is to produce a balanced and harmonious individual who is intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically, on a firm belief and faith in God (MOE, 2013). PUs need to have the desire and ability to participate in the formation and development of human beings with first class mentality. Hence, PUs are the most suitable venues for developing and polishing soft skills among students. In equipping students with soft skills, it is deemed relevant that educators themselves ought to also possess the appropriate soft skills.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The literature revealed that issue of soft skills issue is a widespread concern among employers world-wide. One example of the depth of the concern is evident in a series of interviews with executives of information technology companies (Golemon, Boyatzis & McKee, 2004). Those

interviewed reported that it was the lack of interpersonal and soft skills that caused projects to fail. Students, in addition to the technical skills required for their careers, also need to develop social or emotional intelligence (Golemon et al., 2004). This can be accomplished by helping them to equip themselves with professional skills like writing, speaking out, presenting, decision making and teamwork. In order to achieve this, new concepts, strategies and methodologies need to be introduced into teaching since teachers are still considered as the source of information and students approached them for every possible solution when they encounter problems (Jayaprakash, 2005).

Schulz (2008) argues that what exactly are soft skills is a basic question, which is not easy to answer because the perception of what is a soft skill differs from context to context. Moreover, the understanding of what should be recognised as a soft skill varies widely. Notably, “Parents and school teachers have superior influence on a young person’s aptitude in soft skills” (Schulz, 2008, p.152). It is recognized that teaching methods can influence the development of several social intellectual abilities such as cooperation, leadership, responsibility, self-confidence, independence, ability to make decisions and communication skills (Kermis & Kermis, 2009).

Educators must take responsibility regarding soft skills because during students’ university time, educators have major influence on the development of their students’ soft skills (Schulz, 2008). The Malaysia Ministry of Education emphasizes on the quality and teaching of educators so that they produce graduates who are able to effectively perform in the real working environment (Shariffah Bahyah, 2013). The results of a study carried out by Syahrina Hayati and Siti Asiah (2015) show that self-management skills and personal leadership skills have significant impact on the educators’ teaching effectiveness. However, little research has been carried out in the country that look into the issues regarding soft skills among educators in PUs, especially their indications and actions during teaching and learning sessions and their students’ construal of soft skills, as well as the students’ development and competence in soft skills. The Bandura Social Theory advocates that students imitate their teachers’ behaviour and actions which teachers show during their interactions with their students in classrooms. Hence, there rose a question as to whether or not educators in PUs need to have soft skills, considering the fact that they are the individuals who are indefinitely responsible to guide and educate students throughout their learning in PUs, including the aspects of soft skills.

### **3. Purpose of Study**

In our recent qualitative exploratory study, 18 educators from selected PUs were individually interviewed to capture their thoughts and understandings of soft skills as part of their professional contribution to support the urge to ensure the acquisition of soft skills among students in PUs. The purpose of this paper is to provide a glimpse into three Public Universities (PUs) educators’ perceptions and conceptions of soft skills. The focus of discussion is guided by three main questions (as indicated within the subsequent section) that were posed to these educators during the interviews, which provided data for the meaning of soft skills, the soft skills that educators need, and other skills that could be considered as soft skills need by educators.

#### 4. Methodology

Qualitative data was gathered via in-depth face-to-face interviews with the purposively selected educators from Public Universities. Two phases of interviews were carried out, whereby in Phase 1, the participants were asked about their understanding and interpretations of 'soft skills'. The questions that guided the focus of the interviews were (i) What is 'soft skills' to you? and (ii) To what extent do educators in Public Universities need to also have 'soft skills'? Their responses in Phase 1 were fully transcribed and analysed, whereby emerging themes were identified. Based on the transcriptions, the participants' responses that warrant further clarification from them were also identified and noted for Phase 2 of the interviews. Hence, Phase 2 was a 'follow-up' phase, whereby the participants were asked to further provide clarifications and meanings to their earlier responses in Phase 1. Additionally, in Phase 2, the participants were interviewed on the relevant soft skills which they believed educators must have to ensure that they could execute their roles efficiently and competently. The question that guided the focus of the interviews was 'What other skills could be considered as 'soft skills' that are needed by educators in Public Universities? The Phase 2 interview data was also fully transcribed and thematically analysed.

#### 5. Results and Discussion

##### 5.1. Understanding of Soft Skills

During the interviews, research participant RAI had mentioned about soft skills as encompassing skills that are related to being fair and equal, integrity and abide to religious demands as well as conformation to professional ethics,

“Soft skills cover wide aspect of skills ... which include critical thinking, ability to solve problems, having positive attitudes, leadership skills, communication skills, having skills to work collaboratively through teamwork, having and practicing professional ethics, having skills for lifelong learning, skills to be always fair and equal, have skills for integrity and abiding religious skills” (RAI, 2014).

Research participant RTZ understood soft skills as related to environment, not inborn and can be taught,

“Soft skills that are not innate but instead can be taught and develop through the individual's the individual's environment. Soft skills need to be interpreted within concrete context so that the soft skills that the individual provides can help the community generally, or specifically brought about the changes in the individuals him/herself” (RTZ, 2014).

Research participant RAA had mentioned that soft skills also involve having high ethics and common-sense when solving problems critically,

“Soft skills refer to the generic skills which are closely related the individual ability to lead groups, communicate interpersonally as well as continuous learning. Other than that, it involves ability to solve problems critically, with high ethics as well as having common sense when solving problems. All these area related to soft skills. These concepts of soft skills can be equated to the context of emotional intelligence quotient

(EQ). All these skills can complement the skills that the individuals' had obtained in their formal education" (RAA, 2014).

The findings from interviews with RAI, RTZ and RAA indicated that educators understand soft skills as to include individual skills needed when confronting situations and solving problems. These skills may include common-sense, critical thinking, religiosity, and professional ethics.

## 5.2. Educators and Soft Skills

The terminology used to refer to soft skills differs in various countries. The range of terms includes: 'key competencies', 'soft skills', or 'employability skills' (Australia); 'key skills' or 'core skills' (United Kingdom); 'essential skills' (New Zealand); and 'necessary skills', 'employability skills' or 'workplace know-how' (United States). Soft skills are defined as intra- and inter-personal (socio-emotional) skills, essential for personal development, social participation and workplace success. They include skills such as communication, ability to work on multidisciplinary teams, adaptability, etc. These skills should be distinguished from technical, or 'hard skills' in order to emphasize the fact that they can be learned or developed by suitable training efforts, and they can also be combined, towards the achievement of complex outcomes within the workplace. As soft skills are characterized skills which are applicable and useful in various contexts, thus they can be supposedly transferred among different work occupations.

When asked whether or not educators in PUs need to also have soft skills, RAI suggest that educators themselves can become the best role models to their students,

"All aspects and components of soft skills are important to all the lecturers and educators in PUs. Being the ivory towers and the place where workforce and educated community are born, it is important for the lecturers to function as the best experts, thinkers, knowledge generators and role models" (RAI, 2014).

To RTZ, academicians need to have soft skills because they are facing advanced students who are technologically competent,

"Academicians need soft skills inside them. This is because nowadays students are exposed to various information from many resources, especially the internet. They have information that could mould them according to various idealism, which could bring about various actions. The students thinking are advancing but nevertheless their actions may not be acceptable or have positive effects" (RTZ, 2014).

During the interviews, RAA had mentioned about the need for the educators to possess soft skills which he believes could make them more visible to the community,

"Lecturers definitely need soft skills...the change in the knowledge landscape through the cyber world, open market, stiff competitions in the academic world will demand those involve to have soft skills too... by having the soft skills, they can become more competent and relevant...the soft skills can make them more visible to the community" (RAA, 2014).

The above findings show that the three educators in the study seemingly advocate the necessity of educators in PUs to have the related soft skills before they can talk about, guide or train their students on soft skills or matters pertaining to soft skills.

### 5.3. Other Soft Skills Needed by Educators

Research participants were also asked to describe what other skills could be considered as soft skills that are needed by educators in Public Universities. RAI suggestion include the following,

“I would say that other skills should be skills related to collaboration across networking and leading by influence, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurialism, effective oral and written communication, accessing and analysing information, and last but not least curiosity and imagination” These skills could assist educators to function professionally and they should also guide their students to be competent in these skills” (RAI, 2014).

RTZ had also suggested some skills, which is related to religious aspect,

“Other soft skills include disposition skills (kemahiran insaniah fitrah), which can guide an individual to take actions based on religion or beliefs. Religion serves as a guide which educators must hold to so that every knowledge they receive and disseminate to their students have added value that is aligned with disposition skills within their religion or beliefs” (RTZ, 2014).

Research participant RAA had proposed skills as follows,

“Other skills that can be considered as soft skills and all educators should have included resilience and optimist. In today’s very challenging world, failure is something which everyone is afraid of but sometimes is necessary to enhance the academia’s learning curve .....you bounce back...learn from experience and attack the next issues with equal boldness... all these need skills to happen. To me other skills can be adaptability, flexible, agile as well as creative ....and proactive and also skills related to being empathy or emphatic” (RAA, 2014).

It can be seen that from the interviews with these educators, there are other possible skills that can be identified as soft skills which PUs’ educators should have and to also educate their students with these skills.

### 5.4. Soft-skills Framework

The proposed soft skills framework perhaps would provide early ideas and initiatives towards the construction of a ‘Soft Skill Framework for Educators in Public Universities’, which can serve as guideline for the educators when they are facilitating and guiding the future, trained university graduates in Malaysia. In a sense, the introduction of the framework, developed by the researchers, can form a basis for the educators go to go about and plan their professional role as models for soft skills development. It will serve as a backdrop for education towards sustaining the enhancement of soft skills among students in Malaysia’s PUs. Picking up on the professional’s views on soft skills that educators in PUs should have currently and in many years to come, as presented within the interview excerpts above, we had constructed an initial version of the framework (see Table 1). This framework

was framed with the assumption that graduate students would take away not only the knowledge relating to their formal study area, but would also learn by observing the behaviour of their educators (teachers) and how they could function within the context of a multi-cultural society in the future. Noteworthy, this initial framework is constructed based only on the interviews with RAI, RTZ and RAA. We believe that the content within this framework will be enriched by collating the results of our interviews with other educators within the broader study.

**Table 1.** Initial Soft Skills Framework for Educators in Malaysia Public Universities

<b>Suggested Soft-Skills for Educators in Public Universities</b>	
• Communication	• Creative
• Reflective	• Proactive
• Considerate	• Resilience
• Collaboration	• Optimistic
• Influence	• Imaginative
• Agility	• Analytic
• Adaptability	• Initiative
• Entrepreneurial	• Disposition
• Common-sense	• Empathy

## **6. Conclusion**

Educators in PUs themselves do certainly need to have appropriate soft skills when teaching their students. There are other skills which the educators in the study think that can also be identified as soft skills. They do acknowledged that PUs’ educators can train or guide their students to be competent in soft skills by themselves indicating the possession of the skills. Educators in this study seemingly support the view that PUs educators’ indication of behaviour that relates to soft skills while interacting or teaching their students could support the enhancement of students’ soft skills. As Kermis and Kermis (2009) indicated, teaching methods has the potential to enhance soft skills. Embedding the training of soft skills into hard skills courses is a very effective and efficient method of achieving both an attractive way of teaching a particular content and enhancement of soft skills. Some of the suggested soft skills in this study, for instance ‘common-sense’, could be considered to be included or integrated in the curriculum or courses taught at the universities, whereby students could be guided to see the conceptions of common-sense as soft skills in relation to reasoning skills since common-sense seemingly is related to logical thinking.

It should be noted that the findings do not represent the thoughts of all the educators in PUs in Malaysia, nevertheless the educators’ conceptions and understandings that emerged from this study could provide early knowledge of what do professionals within PUs think of ‘soft skills’ and the feelings that some of them have about ensuring that graduate students possess the necessary soft skills and how they as educators could contribute towards enhancing soft skills among university students. Additionally, the study had contributed to the notions of soft skills held by educators in PUs. A wider repertoire of thoughts and conceptions about soft skills could be achieved by increasing the number of

respondents and involving various levels of educators and their working experience within the academia as well as their experiences with students' potential stakeholders.

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