

Posted by Vishal Jain

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What are ?Soft Skills??

?Soft skills? can be said to incorporate all aspects of generic skills that include the cognitive elements associated with non-academic skills. Soft skills are identified to be the most critical skills in the current global job market especially in a fast moved era of technology. The reorientation of education which is one trust of education for sustainability also relates the importance of these so-called ?soft skills.

Vast research and expert opinions have been sought in the effort to determine the specific soft skills to be implemented and used in higher institutions of learning. Based on the research findings obtained, seven soft skills have been identified and chosen to be implemented in all institutions of higher learning here. They are:

- i. Communicative skills.
- ii.. Thinking skills and Problem solving skills.
- iii. Team work force
- iv.. Life-long learning and Information Management
- v. Entrepreneur skill
- vi.. Ethics, moral and professionalism
- vii. Leadership skills

Each of the above soft skills comprised of several sub-skills. These sub-skills are divided into two categories of implementation. The first category delineates the soft skills that every individual must have and the second category represents soft skills that are good to have. Despite the emphasis being put on the soft skills that must be present (must have), it is also encouraged to inculcate the soft skills that are good to have. All elements of soft skills must be acquired by each individual student and evaluated effectively and comprehensively. Table 1 shows the seven soft skills and the two categories of sub-skills respectively.

The ?must have? soft skills must be acquired by each and every individual in the institutions of higher learning without which, the student is regarded as incompetent in the above skill. The ?good to have? soft skills can be regarded as the additional generic skills and a bonus to the student. If these skills are acquired by the students together with the ?must have? soft skills. Table 1 gives a detail description of the different categories of implementation for each of the sub-skills for the respective seven soft skills.

It can be observed that education is an essential tool for achieving sustainability. We all realized that the current economic development trends are not sustainable and that

Table 1 the ?Must Have? and ?Good To Have? Elements of Soft Skills

No.	Soft Skills	Must Have Elements (Sub-Skills)	Good To Have Elements (Sub-Skills)
		Ability to deliver idea clearly, effectively and with	Ability to use technology during presentation.

1.	Communicative Skills	<p>confidence either orally or in writing Ability to practice active listening skill and respond. Ability to present clearly and confidently to the audience.</p>	<p>Ability to discuss and arrive at a consensus. Ability to communicate with individual from a different cultural background. Ability to expand one's own communicative skill. Ability to use non-oral skills.</p>
2.	Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills	<p>Ability to identify and analyze problems in difficult situation and make justifiable evaluation. Ability to expand and improve thinking skills such as explanation, analysis and evaluate discussion. Ability to find ideas and look for alternative solutions.</p>	<p>Ability to think beyond.. Ability to make conclusion based on valid proof. Ability to withstand and give full responsibility. Ability to understand and accommodate oneself to the varied working environment.</p>
3.	Team Work	<p>Ability to build a good rapport , interact and work effectively with others. Ability to understand and play the role of a leader and follower alternatively. Ability to recognize and respect other's attitude, behavior and beliefs.</p>	<p>Ability to give contribution to the planning and coordinate group work. Responsible towards group decision.</p>
4.	Life-Long Learning & Information Management Skill	<p>Ability to find and manage relevant information from various sources. Ability to receive new ideas performs autonomy learning.</p>	<p>Ability to develop an inquiry mind and seek knowledge.</p>
5.	Entrepreneurship skill	<p>Ability to identify job opportunities.</p>	<p>Ability to propose business opportunity. Ability to build, explore and seek business opportunities and job. Ability to be self-employed.</p>
6.	Ethics, Moral & Professional	<p>Ability to understand the economy crisis, environment and social cultural aspects professionally. Ability to analyze make problem solving decisions related to ethics.</p>	<p>Ability to practice ethical attitudes besides having the responsibility towards society.</p>

7.	Leadership skill	Knowledge of the basic theories of leadership. Ability to lead a project.	Ability to understand and take turns as a leader and follower alternatively. Ability to supervise members of a group.
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public awareness, education and training are the key elements to move our society towards sustainability. Only a quality future human capital can envision development of its nation to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Therefore, the inculcation of soft skills among the students will be two prongs, to produce quality human capital and to develop their knowledge, understanding, values and skills as well. How the two skills blend together will be discussed here.

(1) Communicative Skills

The communicative skills involve effective communication in both the *national language* and English language in different contexts and with different people. There are eight sub-skills under communicative skills of which three are the must have skills and five are the good to have skills. Communicative skills are an integral part of any education system either in higher education or lower education. As mentioned earlier, in many countries, basic education or primary education is mandatory and it focuses on reading, writing and ciphering. People learn to read books, write letters, figure accounts and develop skills necessary to fulfill their expected roles in their households and community. At this very level, emphasis has been given to develop the communicative skills of individual so that by the time they leave college, they are able to participate in public and community activities and decision making. What is found to be missing in the nation's present human capital is the lack of communicative skills. The absence of good communicative skills somehow or rather has an influence on the poor presentation of their views and decisions made to gain others' confidence and respect. Communicative skills have also been greatly emphasized in the reorientation of basic education for ESD (Education for sustainable development) which is: the ability to communicate effectively (both orally and in writing). The communicative skill seemed to be one important component that lacks in the future human capital. The incompetence of the future graduates to master both languages will be a set-back to a lot of potential development and advancement of the country. Thus, this is a good time to reorientate the curriculum of higher institutions to embed communicative skills.

2. Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills

This skill includes the ability to think critically, creatively, innovatively and analytically. It also involves the ability to apply knowledge and understanding to new and different problems as well. For ESD to be successful, it must give people practical skills that will enable them to continue learning after they leave school, to have a sustainable livelihood and to live sustainable lives. The critical thinking skills, skills to organize and interpret data and information, skills to formulate questions and the ability to analyze issues that confront

communities are greatly addressed in the reorientation of basic education in ESD. The following are some examples of skills that comply with ESD and some of these skills are similar to the 'soft skills' being emphasized in the curriculum of higher education. The ability to think about systems (both natural and social sciences).

- (i) The ability to think in time-to forecast, to think ahead, and to plan.
- (ii) The ability to think critically about value issues.
- (iii) The ability to separate number, quantity, quality and values.

All the above skills are important and students will require them as adults.

(iii) The Skill of Team Work

The ability to work with people from different social cultural background to achieve a common goal. Students are encouraged to play their role in the group and to respect opinions and attitudes of others in the group. They are also expected to contribute to the group's plan and coordinate the group's effort besides being responsible to the group's decision. This skill is also part of ESD as stated in the reorientation of basic education: the ability to work cooperatively with other people. If the future human capital can attain these skills, we can be rest assure that the future generation will collaborate ideas and cooperate a taskforce towards the well-being of the nation.

(iv) Life-Long Learning and Management of Information

This skill involves an effort to learn to be independent or self-regulated learning in acquiring skills and new knowledge. The ability to find and manage relevant information from various sources is also a criterion of this soft skill. Besides this, students are also expected to develop an inquiry mind and crave for knowledge. As mentioned earlier, these characteristics are equally important in ESD in order for an individual to be media literate and consumer knowledgeable. Life-long learning will enable individuals to accumulate as much knowledge and skills over the years. The ability to manage information well will allow an individual to distinguish between good and bad, to adopt the best practices and to make sound decisions.

(v) Entrepreneurship skill

The ability to seek business opportunity and develop risk awareness. It also involves being creative and innovative in activities related to business and tasks. To design and plan business propositions and the ability to be self employed. This skill can in some ways contribute to the society if the training and practice is done for a good purpose.

(vi) Ethics, Moral and Professional

The ability to practice a high moral standard in professional tasks and social interaction. This skill also includes the ability to analyze ethical problems and make problem solving decisions. Having a sense of responsibility towards society is another criterion of this soft skill.

(vii) **Leadership skill**

The ability to lead in various activities and tasks. This is an important criterion in ESD for planning and implementing ideas in a group. This skill is also important to lead in discussion and make decision.

Model for implementing soft skills in higher education

A holistic approach is used to plan and implement the soft skills among students of higher education. This approach is based on the combination of several programs and main activities; formal teaching and learning activities (include all curricular and co-curricular elements); support programs (academic and non-academic focused) and the students? campus life (students? residences and the campus surroundings). Figure 1 shows the framework for implementing soft skills among students of higher institutions. In general, the development of soft skills among the students via the formal teaching and learning activities takes two models: (i) stand alone and (ii) embedded..

(i) **Stand Alone Subject Model**

This model uses the approach of training and providing opportunities to students to develop soft skills through specific courses that are carefully planned for this purpose. Usually, these subjects are offered as university courses (such as English language, entrepreneurship, etc) and elective courses (such as public speaking, critical thinking, etc). The courses in this category are often a part of the overall requirements that make up the program. The number of courses and credits in this category depends on the curriculum design and the requirements of the program. The stand alone subject model can also be initiated by encouraging students to sign-up several additional courses which can be accumulated to be a minor course which is different from the initial program signed-up. For example, a student who is pursuing an engineering program is encouraged to take minor courses in management or mass communication. However, such an approach will require an increase in the number of credits and time spent for the particular program.

(ii) **Embedded Model**

This model uses the approach of embedding the soft skills in the teaching and learning activities across the curriculum. It does not require the student to take special courses as in the stand alone subject model. Instead the students are trained to master the soft skills through various formal teaching and learning activities that are planned and carried out using specific strategies and methods. In this way, the content and learning outcomes to be achieved for the respective courses are maintained. The learning outcomes related to the soft skills will be integrated and be part of the learning outcomes of the respective courses. This is the suggested model to be implemented in all the courses for the different programs in institutions of higher learning. Each element of soft skills is spelled out in the learning outcomes and then translated into the instructional plan for the semester. This is followed by implementing several teaching and learning activities such as questioning, class

discussion, brain storming, team work, presentation, role play and simulation, task/project, field work and site visits.

In general, the development of soft skills using the embedded model requires the expertise of the lecturers to use the various teaching strategies and methods that are entirely student-centered. It also involves active teaching and learning and students should participate actively in the activities. Some of the appropriate strategies and methods that are practical include (i) learning by questioning, (ii) cooperative learning, (iii) problem-based learning (PBL), (iv) e-learning.

(iii) Combination of Stand Alone Subject Model and Embedded Model

Each of the respective models described above has its weaknesses and strengths. From the framework, planning, implementing and assessment, the stand alone model is definitely at an advantage. This is because the course or subject is specially developed to assist students to acquire the soft skills. However, this model lacked the opportunity for students to develop and acquire soft skills as integrated with other knowledge and skills in the major discipline studied. The existing number of credits for the respective program is also a constraint for students to sign-up for additional courses on soft skills.

On the contrary, the framework, planning, implementing and assessment of the embedded model are more challenging than the stand alone model. This model requires the lecturers to master specific teaching and learning skills and then apply these skills in teaching the respective core courses for the specific program. However, when carefully planned and used the appropriate teaching and learning strategies, this model is more effective in developing and acquiring the soft skills as integration with the other knowledge and skills in the program. In addition, this model does not require any additional courses to the already existing courses of the respective program.

Based on the weaknesses and strengths discussed, the higher education institutes are encouraged to use the embedded model as compared to the stand alone model. This is because the embedded model focus on student centered learning such experiential learning, problem-based learning and gives students the practical experience as well.

Development of soft skills through support programs

This involves programs and activities that are created, developed and used to support soft skills either directly or indirectly. In general, the program and activity can be divided into two: (i) academic support program and (ii) non-academic support program.

The academic support program is to help students acquire the soft skills that are associated with academic matters. Some of these programs include ?Learning Skills? and ?English Language Support Program (ELSP).

As for the non-academic support program, it assists students to acquire the soft skills that are not related to academic matters but more of personality and professional development of the students. Most of the programs and activities are in the form of co-curriculum and extra co-curriculum.

The development of soft skills through Campus Life Activities.

Most of the university students spend half of their students' life living in residences in the university campus. As such, institutions of higher learning should use this golden opportunity to develop their soft skills. This can be done through carefully crafted programs and carrying them out in the conducive campus grounds.

Conclusion

To live to the challenge of globalization which is in line with the era of information economy, the strength of a nation is strongly dependent on the ability of its citizen to be highly intellectual and skillful. The development of human capital is thus important and necessary since it drives the nation to the envisioned vision and mission. Without a quality human capital, a nation will be weak as there is no human factor that is capable to embark on new initiatives and perspectives. A quality human capital comes from a quality education process. A carefully designed and well planned education system is critical to developing such human capital. Thus, institution of higher learning plays a very important role to produce a human capital that is highly knowledgeable and skillful to meet the demand and expectations of many people. The teaching and learning processes in institutions of higher learning should be capable to provide such knowledge and skills to future graduates.

Archna Sharma

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