

Competitive Strategies for Enhancing Soft Skills in Higher Education: Lessons from a Global Pandemic

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the labor market, increasing the importance of soft employability skills. Higher education institutions have had to adapt to produce graduates with the necessary competencies, especially in the shift towards remote work and virtual communication. This paper investigates the factors that influence the enhancement of soft skills among undergraduate students in a selected university in South Malaysia. 121 students participated in the study using a purposive sampling method and an online questionnaire as the data collection tool. The findings suggest a positive relationship between students' awareness and the enhancement of soft skills, as well as significant relationships between university support, teaching methods, and soft skills enhancement. The study highlights the importance of early exposure to soft skills for better interpersonal relationships, effective decision-making, improved communication skills, and positive professional development. Therefore, universities need to emphasize developing students' soft skills through comprehensive approaches that incorporate soft skills into the curriculum.

Keywords: Soft Skills Enhancement, Students' Awareness, University Support, Teaching Methods, Malaysia

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the labor market, and the importance of soft skills in employability has become even more critical. With the pandemic-induced shift towards remote work and virtual communication, appropriate soft skills such as adaptability, communication, and remote collaboration are crucial in ensuring that organizations can align with the challenges of this time. Higher education institutions have had to adapt to this changing environment to produce graduates who possess high competence with the requirements of today's competitive era. The progress of enhancing soft skills among students is based on several factors, such as the quality of the learning

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environment, teaching methods, and assessment strategies. The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the need for students to develop critical soft skills to thrive in the current labor market, and higher education institutions must adapt to ensure students can acquire these skills. Soft skills refer to a set of attributes, including social etiquette, positive attitudes, good communication skills, habits, amiability, and optimism that distinguish individuals to varying degrees. Appropriate soft skills are very crucial in modern society and today's business activity to ensure that the organization could align with the challenges in this era. Students must be aware and attentive to the importance of soft skills to acquire these competencies through the learning process, particularly in higher education institutions. The educational landscape has shifted to produce and motivate a larger number of students with high levels of competence to meet the demands of today's competitive global market demands [1]. [2] identified essential soft skills for the job market, including leadership and communication, which require significant improvement among students. Recently, there has been significant discourse and research on the importance of integrating soft skills into higher education curricula and syllabus development. Soft skills can be acquired through various means, such as observation, reading, training, experience, and practice. It is possible to provide soft skills training to students, which can equip them with essential abilities, knowledge, and skills. Interacting with others is a significant contributor to the development of soft skills [3].

1.1 Soft Skills Enhancement in Higher Education: An Overview

The enhancement of soft skills in students is a highly debated topic in the current literature on graduate employability, as it is crucial for better employability skills in today's labor market. According to a study conducted by [4], self-management skills and personal leadership skills significantly affect educators' teaching effectiveness. In Malaysia, research has focused on the soft skills of educators in public universities and their impact on student's career development. The Ministry of Higher Education aims to enhance students' soft skills, creating a human capital equipped with skills and creativity to meet the demands of society and business [5]. The goals are set by recognizing the critical role of soft skills in developing well-rounded graduates who can thrive in today's competitive job market. In line with this, the Ministry has set an ambitious goal of enhancing students' soft skills to create a pool of human capital that is equipped with the necessary skills, competitiveness, creativity, and innovation to meet the demands of society and business. By developing students' soft skills, graduates are not only well-versed in their academic subjects but also have the necessary interpersonal and communication skills, leadership qualities, and problem-solving abilities to succeed in their chosen fields.

Many educational institutions promote the development of soft skills among students by encouraging them to participate in programs that require them to exhibit their personalities professionally and formally during in-class sessions. Therefore, it is crucial to expose students to soft skills at an early stage of their education in institutions. Soft skills can be integrated into their studies to develop better interpersonal relationships, promote effective decision-making, improve communication skills, and have a positive impact on their professional development (continuance advancement). This paper attempts to reveal the factor that influences the enhancement of soft skills among college students in a selected university in South Malaysia.

1.2 Competitive Strategies for Enhancing Soft Skills in Higher Education: The Related Factors

Enhancing soft skills involved the development of abilities or skills implies the prerequisites of having and accessing certain knowledge, processes, or sequences of behavior leading to specific performance [6]. Besides, economic and technological developments have resulted in new skill requirements for individuals and organizations [7]. While technical abilities are crucial, they are no longer adequate, and applicants are increasingly differentiated based on the soft skills they possessed. [8] highlights that the contemporary job market demands employees who possess the appropriate soft skills for effective business operations. The current global market demands employees who possess soft skills and can use them to succeed in business activities. To keep pace with the global competition,

graduates must adapt and be knowledgeable about the business environment and workplace demands. To enable graduates to meet the demands of the job market and achieve their career goals, developing soft skills is essential. These skills are typically taught throughout higher education, and students must be aware of the specific soft skills criteria they need to master to reap future benefits. By being mindful of these criteria and developing the necessary soft skills, students can improve their employability and enhance their career prospects in a highly competitive job market.

To succeed in adulthood, the job market, and the learning environment, mastering soft skills is crucial. Soft skills play a significant role in shaping an individual's personality by enabling them to cope with obstacles and challenges they may encounter. One critical aspect that affects the development of soft skills among students is their awareness of the skills' significance. Without awareness, students may not prioritize the development of these skills, resulting in a lack of progress. Hence, it is vital to raise students' awareness of the importance of soft skills and how they can benefit their future careers. The university's support and involvement are also essential in developing students' soft skills. The university must provide an environment that encourages the development of soft skills. This can be done by offering opportunities for students to practice and develop their soft skills, such as through extracurricular activities, workshops, and career development programs. Next, the teaching methods employed by educators play a critical role in developing students' soft skills. Educators should focus on active learning methods and provide students with opportunities to develop their critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills. These methods could include group projects, case studies, role-playing activities, and discussions.

This article focuses on these three factors (student awareness, university support, and teaching methods) as the competitive strategies for enhancing soft skills in higher education, specifically in the COVID-19 era.

1.3 Students' Awareness

The awareness of students plays a crucial role in shaping their perspective toward soft skills. When students become aware of the significance of soft skills, they tend to explore them in a broader view. According to [9], student awareness refers to their ability to self-reflect, comprehend, and use the first-person standard individually. Self-awareness is an essential aspect of rehabilitation techniques for improving functional independence, and it is essential to understand the characteristics and rehabilitation processes that affect the outcome. In another study, [10] defined self-awareness as the capacity to perceive oneself objectively while still maintaining a sense of subjectivity. When an individual is self-aware, they can recognize their strengths and weaknesses, which helps them to make informed decisions and improve their overall well-being. This ability to have a balanced perspective of oneself and one's actions is crucial for personal growth, as it helps individuals to identify areas where they need to improve and make adjustments to their behavior and attitudes. Self-awareness is a crucial component of soft skills in academia as it enables students to become more proficient learners and achieve success in both their personal and professional pursuits.

A study conducted by [11] found that most of the respondents had some level of awareness regarding soft skills, but the extent of their understanding varied considerably. While some respondents viewed soft skills as necessary for performing well in job interviews, others saw them as a path to better employment opportunities. A few respondents believed that soft skills were critical for personal growth, while others felt that they could improve a person's overall personality. The findings suggest that students can recognize the importance of soft skills, but they may have different interpretations of what these skills entail. This could be due to the lack of exposure provided by higher education institutions, which are expected to play a crucial role in enhancing soft skills among students. As the job market becomes more competitive, it is crucial to enhance the soft skills of graduates from higher education. Students must be aware of the significance of soft skills and how they can acquire them. According to [12], students who are aware of their strengths and weaknesses can benefit from a strategic professional

development plan, which helps in leadership skill development. Additionally, student awareness can influence their behavior to acquire soft skills by employing various tools and strategies such as interaction, role plays, active involvement, and experiential learning. The research by [13] emphasizes the importance of reflective processes in developing student awareness of their soft skills. The awareness of students enables them to analyze their performance regarding the enhancement of soft skills, evaluate how well their current job fits their chosen career path, and how satisfied they are with their skill abilities. Effective learning outcomes towards betterment can be achieved through student awareness of soft skills. Therefore, raising student awareness of soft skills is crucial in ensuring the enhancement of soft skills among graduates of higher education.

Thus, based on the above-mentioned discussion, we propose that:

H1: Students' awareness relates significantly to soft skills enhancement in higher learning institutions.

1.4 University Support

Next, the factor that influences soft skills enhancement is university support. The support provided by universities is crucial in the enhancement of soft skills among students, especially in the context of a global pandemic. With the incompatibility between the skills taught at universities and those needed in the business world, students must develop their potential in various programs in colleges and universities. Employers around the world, including in Malaysia, demand graduates with the appropriate skills for the job they seek. Therefore, institutions need to equip their graduates with the necessary soft skills to meet the growing demand from employers. In today's employment market, quality is more important than quantity, and higher education institutions have the responsibility to impart these skills to the emerging workforce. Companies and professional bodies worldwide agree that universities should adapt and evolve at a faster pace to produce highly qualified and ready graduates to meet the challenges of global competitiveness. Employers throughout the world, as well as in Malaysia, are always concerned about finding graduates with the right capabilities to fit the position they could possess [14].

In Malaysia, the education system must produce graduates who possess an array of soft skills to be competitive in the job market. Learning institutions should generate graduates with the necessary soft skills because of the growing demand from Malaysian employers. A higher learning institution must continue to work hard to develop its graduates' soft skills in today's employment market, where quality rather than quantity is more important. Universities have a responsibility to teach these skills to the emerging workforce. Furthermore, companies and professional bodies throughout the world agree that higher education institutions should adapt and evolve at a faster rate than in the past to generate a highly qualified and ready workforce to meet the challenges of global competitiveness. Malaysia should have an education system capable of producing graduates who are ready to work with an array of soft skills to be competitive, as soft skills must be fostered in students to prepare them for the job in reality [14]. Higher education institutions need to work harder to develop the soft skills of their graduates. In this era of a global pandemic, university support is even more important in preparing students for the challenges they will face in the job market [12].

Institutions of higher learning are urged to play a significant role in strategizing soft-skills acquisition among university students. The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) emphasized curriculum development and the establishment of a focus on soft skills. The study recommended several actions, including more grooming classes, university-industry collaboration, a specialized engineering curriculum, and increased industrial training. In addition, the study called for a shift from exam-oriented systems to practical skills and the provision of an opportunity for personal growth through exposure to society [5].

Hence, based on the above-mentioned discussion, we propose that:

H2: University support relates significantly to soft skills enhancement in higher learning institutions.

1.5 Teaching Methods

In the current global pandemic era, the teaching method plays a critical role as a competitive strategy in enhancing soft skills among students. A study conducted by [15] focused on the teaching methods used by professors in engineering courses at a private university, with an emphasis on critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. The researchers found that the method used by the lecturers was crucial in enhancing the soft skills of the students, enabling them to improve their ability to work well in a team and cooperate effectively. The incorporation of soft skills into the curriculum was deemed important by both instructors and final-year students. The findings also revealed that critical thinking and problem-solving skills were regarded as the most significant soft skills by both instructors and students. These skills are vital in the development of other soft skills as they are commonly used and can have numerous benefits for the students.

The teaching methods employed by lecturers play a vital role in students' soft skills development as they are the primary mentor or coaches in the classroom. To ensure that students receive the best possible outcomes, lecturers must carefully choose an appropriate approach that can help them become better individuals both inside and outside the classroom. One of the strategies to cultivate soft skills among students is by integrating problem-based learning (PBL) experiences throughout the curriculum. PBL promotes soft skill acquisition and provide examples of challenges, methods, and evaluation methodologies that can help facilitate the learning process. By incorporating PBL, students can develop their critical thinking, communication, and teamwork skills in a practical and relevant context. The implementation of PBL can also foster a more student-centered approach to learning, which can lead to improved student engagement and motivation [16].

In addition, [11] emphasized the importance of integrating soft skills development in various academic environments. They suggest a variety of approaches and strategies that can be used to achieve this goal, including experiential learning, problem-based learning, and team-based learning. Valuable insights and ideas for promoting student engagement and active learning in the classroom, including encouraging peer teaching and feedback, utilizing technology, and providing opportunities for self-reflection and self-assessment. By adopting these approaches, educators can help students develop the necessary skills to succeed in their future careers and become well-rounded individuals. Students can benefit greatly from their lecturers or educators during their formal education at higher institutions, as they can serve as role models for understanding and acquiring soft skills. Educators can guide and inspire students by modeling positive behavior and demonstrating effective communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills [17]. Furthermore, educators can provide valuable feedback and coaching to help students improve their soft skills and reach their full potential. By observing and learning from their lecturers, students can develop the necessary skills and competencies to succeed in their future careers and personal lives [17].

Therefore, we propose that:

H3: Teaching methods relate significantly to soft skills enhancement in higher learning institutions.

2. Materials and Methods

The study involved 121 undergraduate students from an institute of higher learning in South Malaysia. The sampling method used was purposive sampling. The purposive sampling method was used to ensure that the sample represents a cross-section of the population through expert knowledge. To maximize cost-effectiveness and efficiency, an online questionnaire was used as the data collection

tool. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the questionnaire was self-administered through online platforms. The questionnaire consisted of five sections, including demographics, soft skills enhancement, students' awareness, university support, and teaching methods. 4-point Likert scales were utilized to measure the variables, with a focus on soft skills enhancement. The researchers included 23 items that were designed to assess attitudes and behaviors related to soft skills, students' awareness of soft skills acquisition, students' perception of the university's support in enhancing soft skills, and the effectiveness of the teaching methods used. The items were aimed to evaluate respondents' perceptions of their ability to acquire, improve and enhance their soft skills traits. The reliability scores for the scales (soft skills enhancement, students' awareness, university support, and teaching methods) ranged from 0.812 to 0.929. The data collection took place over two weeks, and the collected data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 for interpretation and analysis of the findings.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Descriptive Analysis

Data obtained from the administered questionnaires were used to assess the demographic characteristics of the study participants. A total of 121 respondents completed the questionnaire, of which 75 were female and 46 were male. The majority of respondents were in the 20-21 age group, accounting for 57.9% of the total sample, while the least represented age group was 18 to 19 years old at 13.2%. Among the respondents, 56 students, or 46.3% of the total, were in their 5th semester, with the 4th and 6th semesters having the same frequency of 19 students or 15.7%. Table 1 illustrates the descriptive statistics for four variables: soft skills enhancement, students' awareness, university support, and teaching methods. The minimum and maximum values range from 2 to 4 for all variables. The mean scores for the variables are 3.00 for soft skills enhancement, 3.29 for students' awareness, 3.17 for university support, and 3.32 for teaching methods. In addition, the standard deviation for the variables ranges from 0.32 to 0.62.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of all variables

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Soft skills enhancement	2	4	3.00	0.32
Students' awareness	2	4	3.29	0.46
University support	2	4	3.17	0.62
Teaching methods	2	4	3.32	0.50

3.2 Hypotheses Testing

Table 2 outlines the results of the correlation analysis. Overall, the study showed moderate positive linear relationships between the factors and soft skills enhancement among university students.

Table 2: Results of the hypotheses testing

Variables	R-value	P-value	Decision
Students' awareness and soft skills enhancement	0.490	P=0.000	Accepted
University support and soft skills enhancement	0.561	P=0.000	Accepted
Teaching method and soft skills enhancement	0.544	P=0.000	Accepted

4. Discussion

This study aims to investigate the link between students' awareness and the enhancement of soft skills. The results show a moderate positive relationship between the two variables, with a significant p-value of 0.000. Self-awareness and reflective processes are identified as key factors in developing students' soft skills, as they help students identify and improve upon their strengths and weaknesses. Other studies have also found a positive relationship between awareness and soft skills development, emphasizing the importance of individual and team-related soft skills for students' career advancement. However, the level of awareness among students may vary considerably.

The second hypothesis of the study aimed to examine the relationship between university support and soft skills enhancement among college students. The reported results showed a significant relationship between university support and soft skills enhancement, with an R-value of 0.561 and a p-value of 0.000. University support is considered a crucial factor for students to gain soft skill knowledge, which is essential for their understanding and preparedness for global competitiveness. Universities play a critical role in supplying human capital and developing students' soft and hard skills, and they need to provide enough support in terms of programs, culture, and effort toward soft skill enhancement. The higher education institution in Malaysia needs to emphasize developing students with a comprehensive approach, especially in mastering soft skills attributes.

Besides, this study also examined the relationship between teaching methods and soft skills enhancement among university students and found a significant positive relationship with an R-value of 0.544 and a p-value below 0.05. Soft skills are associated with the learning process, and the appropriate teaching methods seek to incorporate soft skills into the curriculum. The academic environment and course design also play a significant role in developing students' soft skills.

The study encountered two limitations: global pandemic restraints and inadequate research design. The pandemic made it difficult to access information and field data collection, so the researcher relied on instructors for data via e-mail and WhatsApp. To improve future research, it is recommended to expand the scope of the study to encompass both private and public universities, as well as to adopt a mixed-method research design approach. The mixed-method approach can triangulate findings and provide robust conclusions, and compensate for the limitations of using only one type of research design. Combining these two approaches can help researchers to get a complete picture of the research problem and overcome the limitations of using either method alone.

5. Conclusion

The lessons learned from the global pandemic provide a valuable opportunity for higher education institutions to rethink their approach to soft skill development and adopt competitive strategies that enhance the employability and success of their graduates. By doing so, they can ensure that the next generation of professionals is equipped with the essential skills to navigate the challenges and opportunities of an ever-changing global economy. Taking into account the factors that influence the enhancement of soft skills can help provide evidence for effective concepts suitable for soft skill training. In today's world, the government needs to update and modify the approach to education plans due to the ever-increasing complexity of business activities that influence graduates seeking high-paying job opportunities. Employers are also searching for qualified new hires from a pool of graduates to fill job openings [18]. The global pandemic has highlighted the importance of soft skills in higher education and the need for competitive strategies to enhance them. As students and professionals adapt to the new normal of remote learning and work, there is a growing demand for effective communication, collaboration, problem-solving, and leadership skills. There is significant variation in the implementation of soft skills, as viewed by students, with regard to personal development, communication, leadership abilities, and other soft skills. This observation demonstrates that the

enhancement of soft skills among students depends on the study framework in which they participate [19].

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