A STUDY ON SOFT SKILL DEVELOPMENT AMONG FINAL YEAR DIPLOMA IN BUSINESS STUDIES STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Tertiary students' soft skill development has been given much attention in the 21st century. This study is aimed at exploring the levels and processes of soft skill development through the Diploma in Business Studies (DBS) program in a private college located in Georgetown, Penang from the perspectives of two educators and six final year DBS students. A mixed method that is a combination of quantitative and qualitative data research design was applied. It involves the intentional collection of both quantitative and qualitative data and the combination of the strengths of each to answer the research questions. Therefore data collection methods such as interviews, observations, document analysis, and survey questionnaires were employed. Findings from the self-rated quantitative survey and focus group interview revealed that DBS students were not putting sufficient effort in all the essential soft skill components. The quantitative results showed that teamwork skill emerged consistently as the highest rated soft skill proficiency, followed by information management skill. The lowest rated soft skill was the ethics and professional moral skill. In addition, results of qualitative methods either through interviews or observation also indicated that soft skill acquisition was channelled from both the curriculum and non-curriculum aspects, mainly through embedded activities, syllabus, classroom interaction and campus environment. Nevertheless, the qualitative findings from educator interviews showed that the process of soft skill development in the college largely depended on individual educator's initiative and creativity in carrying out activities enabling soft skill development. The significance of the study lies in providing increased awareness and professional development of educators on human capital development and other related training in the organization.
Keywords: **Soft skill development, acquisition process, higher education, human capital development, education, Malaysia**

INTRODUCTION

Soft skills are deemed to enhance competency and thus increase one's capability in contributing to societal advancement and modernization (Duncan & Dunifon, 2012; Remedios, 2012). In 2006, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), with the assistance of several researchers from various higher educational institutions (HEIs), had identified seven important soft skill components to be attained by tertiary students. They are communication skill, critical thinking and problem solving skills, teamwork skill, life-long learning and information management skills, entrepreneurial skill, ethics and professional moral skill, and leadership skill. The MOHE Soft Skills Development Model for students in higher educational institutions depicts soft skills growth by means of three different approaches, namely: (a) embedded soft skills training in formal teaching and learning activities, (b) supporting co-curriculum activities, and (c) through influential residential college's life and campus environment. Figure 1 illustrates the general philosophy of this model:
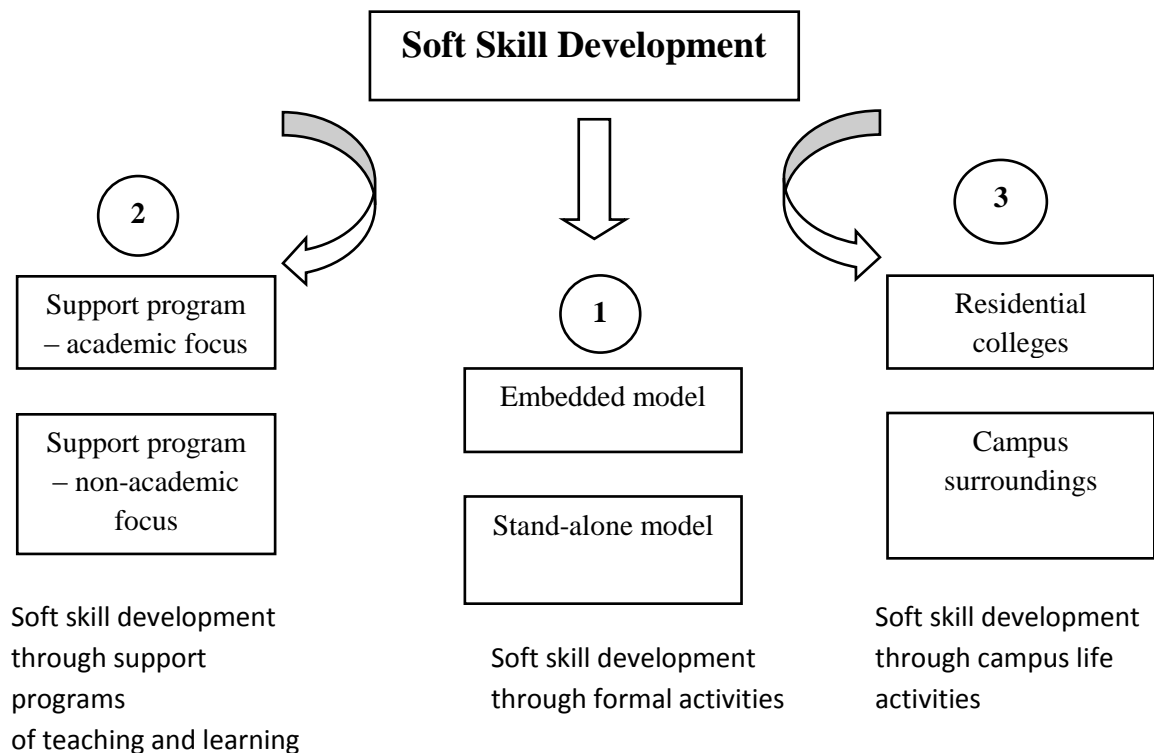

Figure 1. MOHE Soft Skill Development Model
[Source: Ministry of Higher Education, 2006, p. 15)

According to Salleh, Sulaiman, and Talib (2010), soft skills will be one of the most effective tools and approaches for the organizations to evaluate the workers' or graduates' abilities in future. Therefore, identifying and developing the important soft skills required has become a challenging task for curriculum developers (Hodges & Burchell, 2003).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Inactive Roles of Some Educators

The importance of soft skills goes beyond a student's college life and their great impact in students' future achievement is undeniable (Schulz, 2008). Educators play a very influential role in developing students' soft skills (Osman, Girardi, & Paull, 2012; Schulz, 2008). Unfortunately, according to Schulz (2008), some educators might still be ignorant of the importance of soft skills or do not support dedicated effort in this aspect. Some researchers also reported the existence of educators and students who were still unaware of or placed insufficient emphasis on soft skill development (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2012; Osman et al., 2012). In view of the current hectic curriculum and heavy workload faced by each educator, some strategies have to be formulated to inspire the educators so as to be persistently dedicated enough to go the extra mile by offering soft skills training to their students.

Lack of Participation in Soft Skill Development

In a study at Malaysian public universities, it was discovered that not all of the soft skills identified by the Ministry were mentioned by the students who responded to the study (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2012). This showed the lack of participation, effort and seriousness by the tertiary students in acquiring all the important soft skill components. Besides that, it was reported that the students were not actively involved in certain projects and not all the students benefited from some of the college activities.

Hindrances in Soft Skill Development

The result of the students who study in Business Communication in the college under study was not satisfactory either. For instance, the majority of them obtained C+ and C- only in their coursework assessment in November 2012; and the grade point average was C+ in Business Communication for the examination period of February 2013. Moreover, the results in Academic English were also consistent with their inadequate performance in Business Communication. Nearly 38 per cent of the students attained C and below in overall grade for Academic English in the examination period of May and July 2013, while 55.3 percent of them got C+ and below. As a matter of fact, the students might have

enrolled with a weaker academic background, for instance as low as only 3 credits in the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia,* SPM). Subsequently, they would certainly need to acquire higher efficacy in soft skills elements to enable them to compete in the job market upon graduation.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study was to explore the processes of the seven soft skill components development amongst the final year DBS students in a private college. The seven soft skill components are communication skill, critical thinking and problem solving skills, teamwork skill, life-long learning and information management skills, entrepreneurial skill, ethics, professional and moral skill, and leadership skill. In addition, the researchers seek to describe the levels of soft skill development from the perspectives of the DBS students as well as their educators. The specific objectives of the study are:

(1) To assess the components of soft skills of DBS students in Business Studies program by self-rating using questionnaire.
(2) To study the levels of soft skill component development from the perspective of final year DBS students.
(3) To study the levels of soft skill component development from the perspective of educators.
(4) To explore the process of soft skill components development from the perspective of final year DBS students.
(5) To explore the process of soft skill components development from the perspective of the educators.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Post-secondary qualification and other skills are very important for advancement. Previous research findings have reported the significant relationship between soft skills and career success (Duncan & Dunifon, 2012; Franz, 2008; Mitchell, Skinner & White, 2010). In relation to soft skills development, previous studies also revealed that there were prevailing skill gaps in modern graduates nowadays, especially in the era of globalization and mobility (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Jackson, 2009; Mitchell, Skinner and White, 2010; Riley, Horman & Messner, 2008; Wats & Wats, 2009). According to Salih (2008), the tertiary students or even graduates in Malaysia were still much lacking in the soft skills required by the competitive job market.

Soft Skill Development from Students' Perspectives

From the students' perspective, among the most frequently highlighted soft skills were communication skill, teamwork skill, and leadership skill; whereas the least mentioned soft skill components by the past findings thus far was the entrepreneurship skill (Ahmad, Ishak, Ismail & Selamat, 2010; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2012). According to Ahmad et al. (2010), students from different faculties showed some variances in the ranking of soft skill scores.   Nevertheless, communication skill was still the most highlighted soft skill component in many non-science courses throughout the whole duration of the studies (Ahmad et al., 2010; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2012).

Soft Skill Development from Educators' Perspectives

Osman et al. (2012) stated that 60 percent of educators held the belief that soft skills should be taught while they shared joint responsibilities with the learning of soft skill components by the students; at the same time, the educators stated that most students entered into higher learning with deficiencies in basic skills, such as communication skill especially and 12 per cent of educators viewed that soft skills should be assessed.

Remedies and Efficient Soft Skill Development

In order to uplift soft skill levels, designing, evaluating courses and skills development program for business, management and accounting programs have become an important success factor for an educational institution, whether in the US, Europe or Asia (Kermis & Kermis, 2010; Pace, 2012; Pang & Hung, 2012). Written and verbal presentation skills, interpersonal capabilities or communication skills were placed as one of the most important soft skills (Jackson, 2009; Kermis & Kermis, 2010; Dixon, Belnap, Albrecht & Lee, 2010). Other past research findings also regarded communication skills, including oral communication, as one of the most critical soft skill components (Mitchell et al., 2010; Wats & Wats, 2009).

Next, it becomes essential to measure pre-test and post-test of a program to assess the acquisition and differences in the levels of skills to be instilled. Embedding soft skills training into an existing syllabus is a very effective and efficient way of acquiring soft skills (Schulz, 2008). Hence, there are major emphases on program structure and engaging of experiential learning which spells out that learning is a process instead of an outcome.

Active learning in experiential learning can be carried out by concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation (Pang & Hung, 2012; Wats & Wats, 2009). For

example, group work problem based learning (PBL) for electrical and electronic engineering and integration of board game as a teaching methodology in introductory accounting had proven to enhance students' soft skills like teamwork and communication skills (Butun, Erkin & Altintas, 2008; Fouché & Visser, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

A mixed methods research design was applied and two types of interviews, which were in depth face to face interviews with the educators and focus group interview with the DBS final year students, observation, document review as well as questionnaire were utilized in the study. In the mixed methods study, researchers intentionally integrate or combine the quantitative and qualitative data rather than keeping them separate. The basic concept is that integration will maximize the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of the quantitative and qualitative methods. Mixed methods will be the most suitable method to employ because quantitative approach and the qualitative approach, by itself, is inadequate for developing multiple perspectives and giving a complete understanding of the research questions.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to identify samples from two groups of the population, which were the educators and final year DBS students. Two educators (L1 & L2) and six final year DBS students (R1 - R6) were chosen as the participants in the study. Table 1 indicates the background of those participants,

Table 1
Background of Participants

	Position	Gender	Respondent background
L1	Program Coordinator	Male	5 years working experience
L2	Head of School	Male	More than 10 years in the industry
R1	Final Year DBS student	Female	Smart and responsive, CGPA > 3
R2	Final Year DBS student	Female	Good friend to R1, less talkative
R3	Final Year DBS student	Male	Confident and friendly, CGPA > 3
R4	Final Year DBS student	Female	Bit quiet but obedient, good student
R5	Final Year DBS student	Male	Stable outlook and experienced in investment
R6	Final Year DBS student	Female	Average student but active in co-curriculum activities, both within and outside the college

Instruments

Four types of research instruments were used in this study due to different methods of data collection. These instruments comprised of (a) two different sets of interview protocols (for the educators and final year DBS students respectively), (b) one set of questionnaire (for final year DBS students only), (c) observation checklist and (d) document review checklist.

Although there were two different sets of interview protocols for both the students and educators, the main content and soft skill components remained the same for both sets of interview protocols. The interview protocols were categorized into two sections. Section one consisted of two introductory questions and seven main questions pertaining to each soft skill component. This section aimed at exploring the general beliefs of the participants with regard to the levels and processes of soft skill development in their own context. Section two was intended to elicit the participants' comments in relation to the MOHE soft skills development model. Some technical modifications like salutation and addressing of personnel were made for each set of the interview protocols.

The questionnaire was created based on the definition from the MOHE soft skills development model (2006). The items were translated from Malay language into English and validated by an English expert. However, some modifications were made in the questionnaire in view of the context of the study and the changes affected item B15 and B16 where working environment was deleted from the questionnaire since the Diploma students were not yet exposed to the working environment. A five-point Likert Scale was used in grading the questionnaire responses; from 1 for strongly disagree to 5 for strongly agree.

Table 2

List of Seven Soft Skill Components in Questionnaire

Bil	Soft skill components	Items number in questionnaires	No.of items
1.	Communication Skills	A1 - A16	16
2.	Critical Thinking & Problem Solving Skills	B1 - B16	16
3.	Teamwork	C1 - C14	14
4.	Lifelong Learning & Information Management Skills	D1 - D6	6
5.	Entrepreneurial Skills	E1 - E9	9
6.	Ethics & Professional Moral	F1 - F7	7
7.	Leadership Skills	G1 - G5	5

The observation checklist covered all the seven soft skill components, focusing on key areas which could be made visible via normal class observations. Structured observations were made and these included for example the oral communication skills, listening skill, presentation skill, use of ICT in presentation, capabilities to provide explanation and finding solutions. Written communication was excluded in the observation checklist in view of incapability of the observer to evaluate this area. Besides that, drafting of business proposal, ability to grab business and employment opportunities were excluded from the observation checklist for the same limited assessment reason. In this study, three observations in different class activities were made to observe students' practice of soft skills in their course delivery.

Finally, the document review checklist guided the tracking of evidence of the seven soft skill components, either in the Code of Practice for Program Accreditation (COPPA) documentation or the teaching and learning materials in the Moodle e-learn platform. The advantages of using document analysis enable the researcher to obtain written evidence of the language and words of participants at a time convenient to the researchers, besides being less obtrusive (Creswell, 2009).

Data Collection Process

Observations and interviews were conducted simultaneously in February 2014. Questionnaires were distributed to the selected final year students in the real sample after completing their interview sessions. Two chosen educators, based on their experience and involvement in the DBS program, were invited for about an hour's interview sessions with the researchers for compilation of qualitative data. Similarly, the topic and objectives of the study were explained, confidentiality was assured, and introduction was made before directing open-ended questions to the interviewees. Highlights of the interviews were noted down and processes taped for preciseness and reference of interpretation later on.

Three class observations were made to collect field data on the research topic. Non participant observations were conducted by the researchers to take note of what was happening on site. In almost all observations, the researchers limited themselves to a particular aspect of human interaction, targeted the information and limited the scope to a predetermined area (Lichtman, 2010).

Document review was conducted based on official documents relating to the DBS program in the institution. The document review comprised of Code of Practice for Programme Accreditation (COPPA) documentation for the DBS program, educators' teaching materials and student assessment portfolios. The printed copy of COPPA covered many areas of the administration, program structure, benchmarked standards and contents. Moreover, the related teaching materials for three final semester subjects and some student coursework submissions were retrieved from the subject folios contained in the e-Learn Moodle 2.0 computerized system.

Data Analysis procedure

The researchers applied the Colaizzi (1978) strategy of descriptive phenomenological data analysis in this study. First, researchers would transcribe all the data collected from the interviews and participants' questionnaires to get a general sense of the whole and ideas presented. Next, significant statements and phrases concerning the phenomenon being studied were extracted from each transcript. Meanings were then formulated from the significant statements. Then the meanings were organized into themes, and these themes evolve into theme clusters, and eventually into theme categories.

After that, the researchers would write a rich and comprehensive description of the lived experience and from this the essential structure of the phenomenon would be formulated. Validation would be solicited from the participants to compare the researcher's descriptive results with their lived experiences. Triangulation from different data sources were used to build a coherent justification for the themes.

RESULTS

The Acquisition Level of Soft Skills Components of DBS Students by Self-rating

The mean scores of self-rated soft skill levels ranged from 3.33 to 4.19 (Table 3). The highest self-rated soft skill component was teamwork skill; it had an average mean score of 4.19 and a standard deviation of 0.21 only. The second highest soft skill component was lifelong learning and information management skill (M = 4.08, SD = 0.55), followed by entrepreneurial skill (M = 3.80, SD = 0.67).

This is followed by critical thinking and problem solving skills (M = 3.75, SD = 0.29), leadership skill (M = 3.73, SD = 0.79) and communication skill (M = 3.52, SD = 0.61). The lowest self-rated soft skill component was the ethics, professional and moral skill (M = 3.33, SD = 0.17). Based on the standard deviation for ethics, professional and moral skill, it is indicated that most of the students rated themselves within the same range in this capacity.

Table 3
Self-rated Soft Skill Components Level of DBS Students

Soft Skill Components	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Team Work	6	4.19	.21
Lifelong Learning & Information Management	6	4.08	.55

Entrepreneurial	6	3.80	.67
Critical Thinking &Problem Solving	6	3.75	.29
Leadership	6	3.73	.79
Communication	6	3.52	.61
Ethics & Professional Moral	6	3.33	.17

Soft Skills Acquisition Level of DBS Students by Interviews and Class Observation

Communication skill

All the student respondents except R1 stated that they were average in verbal communication. The lecturers also commented that their levels varied.

> *"Their levels are different, some are good, and some are very weak. It's mainly due to their family and educational background, for example, English speaking background. Some of them are quite good, but some cannot speak well, so they cannot express their ideas clearly"* (L1)

However, R3, R4 and R5 claimed that their written communication was better than their oral communication. The graduating DBS students were able to communicate well and perform satisfactorily with people from different background or countries. From class observations, it was noticed that majority of the students contributed to giving explanation, analysis and evaluation in their discussions. Besides that, all the student participants said that they would hinder from providing feedback openly. In the aspect of practising active listening, it depended on the topic and also the way it was presented by the speaker.

> *"I think it depends on the tone and how they speak. For me, I'd rather the lecturer go straight to the point clearly rather than going around the bushes. I like to learn it quick. So that I get it, then, move on…move on."* (R1)

Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills

Both the educators and students acknowledged that the students were still rather inexperienced in identifying and solving problems in complex situations. The students were also indeed not good at tackling problems in unclear situations. They seldom took initiative by trying to think out of box too.

"They might not yet be able to identify the problem exactly, but they know that some issues exist. Sometimes, they just know that there's a problem, but they are not sure what the problem is actually." (L1)

Teamwork Skill

Generally, all the interviewees admitted that there were good relations amongst the students in their group work. They recognized their differences in attitudes or behavior and respected each other. Hence, they were able to interact and work effectively to achieve common goals. Somehow, there might be some disputes and they were usually reported to the educators.

"Some of them argue about the workload. Some argue that one of them is doing the light job and it's not fair. Some members are not contributing…etc." (L1)

Lifelong Learning and Information Management Skill

The students were quite good at sourcing out information from various channels, choosing internet surfing as their first option. The most frequent website they used according to R2 and R4 was "Google". According to R1, she preferred e-book, e-magazine, e-newspaper, ebsCohost, and mostly e-learning.

"My students are able to look up for information from various sources, just that sometimes the information they acquired was not that accurate. But usually they will come to me for confirmation." (L1)

R5 said that they were also willing to get assistance from their peers in the computing program when necessary.

On the other hand, L1 cited that they were average only in their quest for knowledge and L2 also commented that they were below average in terms of passion for study or academic knowledge.

"I don't know…I can establish an inquiring mind. But I'd prefer some general knowledge, want to know more about real life." (R1)
 "No, not towards the study so much. I don't think I have established an inquiring mind" (R2)
"We just always want to travel to other country, learn their culture…that's all." (R4)

Entrepreneurial Skill

The students had experienced many times writing business proposals for different courses such as E-Commerce, Entrepreneurship Development, and so forth. There was no practical or hands-on project in their 2-year learning period. R1, R2, R3 and R5 all indicated that they were not ready yet to be self-employed.

However, it was discovered in the first observation that some students showed rather comprehensive understanding in their business proposal presented as part of their individual assignment for Entrepreneurship Development.

L1, who gave them an E-Commerce project to create a business website, said that:

> *"Some students really have the entrepreneurial skills, so they can see the market potential of their own project. Usually guys will show more of the entrepreneurial skill."* (L1)

Ethics, Professional and Moral Skill

The students were aware of some ethical issues in their portfolio such as plagiarism. They acknowledged certain issues on ethical professional practices, for example harmful ingredients in packaging such as toxic chemical, privacy of customer data, consumer rights, and so forth. As R5 stated:*"If the product is safe, they should get a license from International Organization to certify their product."*

Leadership Skill

Other than the knowledge of basic leadership theories, four out of six student respondents had the experience as team leaders on many occasions. With regard to team management, they all agreed that everything or everybody was still manageable and they were able to act interchangeably as group leaders or members. However, R4 expressed some frustration and dissatisfaction in leading her team members and hoped they could be more accountable and punctual in meeting deadlines. On another occasion, R3 would take the initiative to resolve the conflicts by communicating with the team members.

> *"I will talk to them, try to understand why they can't pass up on time…then we'll discuss with the teammates to solve this problem. We came out with the idea together… then will be more efficient."* (R3)

L1 commented on the leader's accountability in view of the overall quality of their group work.

> *"Some leaders are quite good; they would ensure that all writing style, fonts, etc. are regular; while some just do compilations."* (L1)

The Process of Soft Skill Component Development

The process of soft skill development of DBS students could be divided into a few categories. Firstly, it was discovered that the skills were drilled mostly through the embedded activities and curriculum. The next category was the classroom interaction, followed by the campus environment.

Embedded Activities

Embedded activities refer to the actions or goings-on initiated by the lecturer to the students during course delivery, and they could be based on either individual or group basis. All the 6 student participants stated that presentations and group discussions were carried out in almost every single theory subject.

> *"We always have activities like group discussions, presentations; once we had debate in study skill subject, oral test in Academic English."* (R1)

There were case studies, small scale surveys and interviews, drafting of business proposal, analysis of expert opinions, and so forth, in various courses. There were also other activities such as:

> *"We distributed the survey forms, analyzed the problem and gave suggestions."* (R5)
> *"In marketing course, we look at the opinions from the professionals, from the websites."* (R5)

The educators have some stringent requirements on the work of the students. According to L1:

> *"I'd encourage them to talk more and express their ideas; during the tutorial, I'd request them to do their group discussions and group presentations."*
> *"I don't allow them to read from slides. If they read from slides, I'd stop them from their presentations. They have to practise earlier."*

The findings from observations on student soft skill development in their final year courses portrayed mixed results in terms of the effort and exertion by the participating students.

Curriculum

Curriculum refers to the planned syllabus in the DBS 2-year program in the college. There were certain courses in the program which in fact directly dealt with some specific soft skill components, for example the stand-alone subject of Business Communication and Entrepreneurship Development. Moreover, some topics like leadership theories were reiterated in some related management courses; similarly ethics and morals were found as one of the topics or even as one whole chapter in several courses.

> *"There are components in E-Commerce on business ethics and legal issues also, e.g. how they are going to protect their customer's privacy, data, etc."* (L1)
> *"Students repeated their leadership theories in the topic on business structures."* (L2)
> *"We do have one of the chapters on ethics, eg in International Business, E-Commerce, Marketing, Business Law also."* (R1)

Classroom Interaction

The formal and informal classroom interactions appeared to have played a role in the soft skill development process. There were often group assignments, projects or discussions which eventually led to moulding of teamwork and leadership skills in the process. Most of the time, the team members appointed the group leader on their own without much interference from the lecturers.

> *"There's no specific program to train my leadership skill. It's more informally and by chance when we are selected as group leaders."* (R2)
> *"In the project, they have to take up the role"* (referring to the leader's position). (L1)

In the observations during class or project discussions, it was noted that most of the team members knew how to handle different tasks, initiate or join in discussions, work equally and mutually in order to produce the outputs. The students also made use of non-verbal communication effectively via gestures or body language. R3 said that one of the reasons for choosing non-verbal communication was to avoid interrupting the lessons.

Campus Environment

The campus environment includes any college event or activities organized by the Student Services Department (SSD), and sports or games by the Students' Council, and so forth. The surrounding and

events were viewed as one of the factors affecting the process of soft skill development. The college had been organizing some but not many activities in the campus.

"I think the college did arrange for this kind of practices, but we didn't enrol. For example, we have public speaking last semester." (R3)

When asked why he (R3) did not participate, he admitted that he lacked the time and courage to take part. Figure 2 illustrates the processes of soft skill components development:
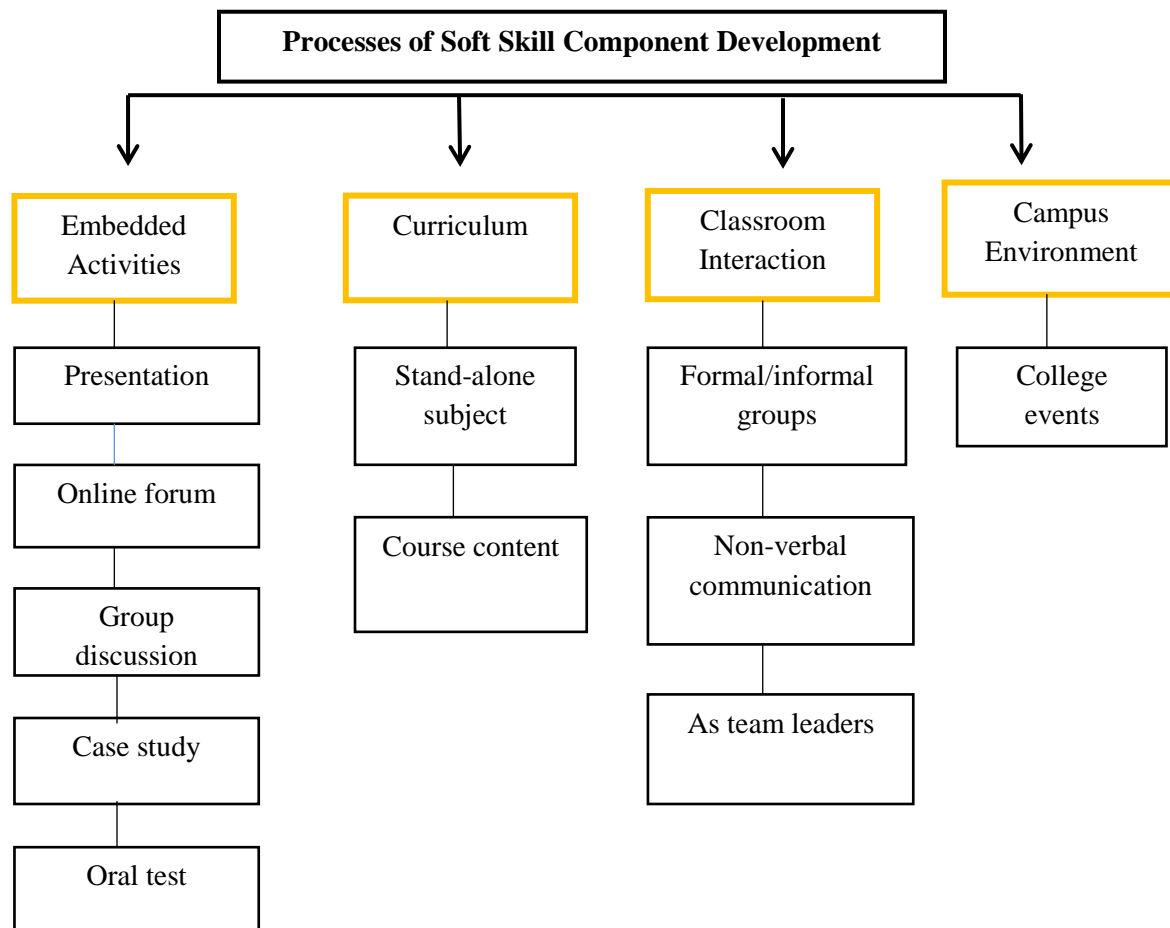
Processes of Soft Skill Component Development

Embedded Activities	Curriculum	Classroom Interaction	Campus Environment
Presentation	Stand-alone subject	Formal/informal groups	College events
Online forum	Course content	Non-verbal communication	
Group discussion		As team leaders	
Case study			
Oral test			

Figure 2. Process of Soft Skill Component Development

DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that there are average ratings of soft skill levels at the different mean scores of 3.33 to 4.19. The rationale for high score in lifelong learning and information management skill was most likely due to greater efficacy by the students to retrieve information from various sources through the internet. The lowest level was ethics, professional and moral skill. Relatively weaker ethics, professional and moral skill also inferred that the students managed to understand only averagely the effects of economic, environmental and socio-cultural factors on professional practices, and so forth.

Nikitina and Furuoka (2012) in their study discovered that students were not focusing on all essential soft skill components. This is consistent with the study that the students ranked the importance of soft skill components at different levels in the questionnaires. Besides that, Ahmad et al. (2010) found that some students enrolled into tertiary education with poor foundations in basic skill (e.g. the communication skill), which is also the case with students in the college's DBS program.

Despite their weakness, it was reported that many activities were done to improve students' communication skill. Some past studies in Malaysia by Ahmad et al. (2010) and Nikitina and Furuoka (2012) found that most students in higher educational institutions regard communication skill as the most essential soft skill component. Osman et al. (2010) also remarked that communication skill was stressed in many non-science courses at university.

A point to ponder was that gender difference might contribute to different levels of achievement in individual soft skill component. According to Ahmad et al. (2010), most males had high competency in teamwork skill, critical thinking and problem solving skills, entrepreneurial skill and communication skill; while females scored higher in life-long learning, leadership, social obligation, ethics and professional moral skills. To a certain extent that appeared to have explained the higher ratings in teamwork skill and lifelong learning and information management skill. Undoubtedly, a more thorough and precise study is needed to fully understand the factors contributing to the differences.

The process of soft skill development in the college largely depended on individual educator's initiative and creativity to carry out embedded activities such as forum, projects, field study, and so forth. It was figured that the most frequently used approach was the embedded activity. That was done through a variety of planned activities such as individual or group presentations, group work, projects, forum, discussions, case studies, and so forth. The findings concurred with the past study by Osman et al. (2012) that the implementation of embedded activities came from personal initiatives by the subject lecturers but not institution's directives in developing the students' soft skills; while the learning part came from the students' effort and willingness to participate.

While it is true that educators play an important role in the soft skill development process of their students (Schulz, 2008), the efficiency and effectiveness in soft skill development could be better with the existence of overall institutional environment and interest by the upper management to invest in this area. Moreover, the results also suggested that common and frequent practices in the process of soft skill development, to a certain extent, led to higher efficacy in certain soft skill development, for example teamwork and information management skills.

According to the MOHE Soft Skill Development Model, the soft skill development was acquired through three different approaches, comprising formal activities of teaching and learning, support program, and campus life activities. In comparison, there was some correspondence, but not all, in the applications of the approaches in the DBS program in the college. The development was basically drilled through formal activities of teaching and learning, yet there were insufficient supporting programs in this case. The phenomenon was similar to the case study in Universiti Malaysia Sabah in 2012 that soft skill development, to a large extent, was based on these embedded activities.

CONCLUSION

This study was an attempt in conceptualization of the levels and processes in essential soft skill component development. The contributions of soft skills not only pertain to the students, but include professional development of the educators, better education quality and higher reputation for a prestige higher educational institution. Further research could be carried out to extend to a wider context or conduct longitudinal studies to keep track of the students' progress in soft skill mastery. Suggestions for improvements and innovative approaches are certainly needed to achieve our educational aspirations in providing quality and world class standards in soft skills development for the younger generation.

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