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The importance of soft skills acquisition by teachers in higher education institutions

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to explore the soft skills acquisition of lecturers and to thus determine the importance of soft skills in the teaching profession. A mixed method was employed utilizing a questionnaire and interview protocol as research instruments. In total, eight lecturers and 163 students from four programs of an international college in Khon Kaen, Thailand were selected using a purposive sampling method. The quantitative findings indicated that teamwork and lifelong learning skills were the most important soft skills acquired by lecturers from all of four programs, except for tourism management. In addition, the qualitative findings revealed the importance aspects of soft skills acquisition are: (i) delivery of effective and quality teaching; (ii) career development and enrichment, and (iii) managing student skills. In summary, the findings contribute to and substitute for training and provide significant pronouncements towards the knowledgeable and dexterous development of the country as a total.

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Introduction

Soft skills are personal traits that enhance a lecturer's interactions, job performance, and career viewpoints. [Pachauri and Yadav \(2014\)](#) defined soft skills as personality traits, social gracefulness, fluency in language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism to varying degrees. Soft skills should be adopted as an ordinary feature of a lecturer's selection of community skills and character traits ([Tang & Tan, 2015](#)). A good lecturer is expected to be committed to his or her work and to have the ability to take the initiative.

Teaching is a multifaceted performance, demanding a wide range of knowledge and skills containing hard and soft skills to successfully accomplish the burdens of the classroom ([Tang, Hashim, & Mohd Yunus, 2014a](#)). Teaching is a social activity that comprises communal collaboration between lecturer and students ([Lim, Tang, & Tan, 2013](#)).

Teaching style can be considered as the sum of behaviors. As a result, the talent of teaching does not only comprise a modest transmission of knowledge from lecturer to students. In its place, it is a multifaceted procedure that eases and affects the process of student learning ([Prasertcharoensuk & Tang, 2016](#)). Soft skills are relational and social skills are a necessity for lecturers who toil in a high-performance setting, ultimately promoting efficiency ([Tang, Ching, & Mohd Shahid, 2015a](#)).

Soft skills are considered to boost competency and to consequently upsurge one's ability in subsidizing communal progression and transformation ([Duncan & Dunifon, 2012](#); [Romedios, 2012](#)). As stated by [Salleh, Sulaiman, and Talib \(2010\)](#), soft skills are the most operative instruments and methods for higher education institutions to appraise the future capabilities of lecturers' and students. Therefore, recognizing and evolving the importance of soft skills acquisition has been a thought-provoking task for curriculum designers ([Hodges & Burchell, 2003](#)). A cautiously designed and well-organized education system is perilous to

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the emergence of such human capital. Thus, higher education institutions play a significant part in yielding human capital to meet the requests and expectations of society and the nation by producing skills for uptake by the respective students (Pachauri & Yadav, 2014).

Soft skills acquisition is often viewed as something that happens in the normal course of events and it has the potential to transfer and to create knowledge based on the local requirements (Tang, Nethanomsak, & Ariratana, 2014b). Subramaniam's (2013) study indicated that lecturers have acknowledged the associated role of the soft skills in the curriculum amalgamation, but they fail to integrate them in their instructions. Subramaniam emphasized that soft skills acquisition is relevant for students; intrinsically the lecturers should undertake more widespread preparation and progression to successfully impart soft skills acquisition in their teaching. The understanding of soft skills itself is vital for lecturers to vary their teaching approaches for the students. As teaching becomes a two-way process, it will convert to being organized and operative depending on the understanding, talents, and attitudes of the teachers (Adediwura & Baba, 2007).

According to Schulz (2008), lecturers play a vital part in constructing the soft skills of a student. Intrinsically, a well-versed and designed education system is desired to cultivate such human capital (Pachauri & Yadav, 2014). This study addressed an urgent need to take on the contest of globalization which is heavily reliant on the capacity of a nation's inhabitants to be exceedingly rational and skilled.

Literature Review

Tang, Mohd Yunus, and Hashim's (2015b) study showed that the absence of excellence among lecturers is related to the idea that lecturers have not sufficiently obtained soft skills during their own learning in higher education institutions. In addition, the qualitative results from 15 novice teachers revealed that soft skills were identified as essential and pertinent to their teaching assignments and were significant to teaching tasks. These skills are communication, critical thinking and problem solving, teamwork, lifelong learning and management of information, ethics (moral and professional), and leadership skills.

Tang et al. (2015a) examined the association between soft skills learned by teachers directed to their excellence in teaching. Their findings indicated that 190 teachers from three High-Performing Primary Schools in Penang, Malaysia possessed the four soft skills namely teamwork/collective work ($\bar{X} = 3.42$, $SD = .39$), communication ($\bar{X} = 3.29$, $SD = .39$), critical thinking and problem-solving ($\bar{X} = 3.21$, $SD = .37$), and leadership skills ($\bar{X} = 3.20$, $SD = .45$). Additionally, Pearson correlation analysis showed that all four soft skills were significantly and positively related to excellence in teaching. Finally, the result also disclosed that critical thinking and problem-solving, teamwork/collective work skills are significant predictors which added 40.3 percent and 3.5 percent, respectively, to the variance of excellence and effective teaching practice. Tang et al. (2015a) concluded that soft skills should be instilled in teachers with the intention of creating excellence and effective teaching practice.

According to Tang et al. (2015b), soft skills supplement hard skills and have a substantial effect on the capability of teachers to organize their work. Their study was intended to explore the breach related to soft skills gained from instructional professional exercise compared to soft skills required in schools amongst the 250 novice teachers purposively selected from all the secondary schools in Malaysia. Their findings showed that teamwork and communication skills were the two significant soft skills not only desperately desired in their work but also extended from their teaching exercise package. Furthermore, t-test analysis revealed that there was a significant difference between the gained and desired level of soft skills. All the mean scores of soft skills desired in the work were greater than what they had gained from their teaching exercise package.

Tang and Tan (2015) examined the ethics, moral and professional skill of novice teachers in secondary schools of Malaysia from the opinions of their superintendents. Their results were triangulated with the self-rating data completed by the novice teachers themselves. Tang and Tan employed a qualitative method involving focus group interviews to gather data from 31 superintendents and a quantitative technique involving a self-rating questionnaire by the 250 novice teachers. Their quantitative findings indicated that ethics, moral and professional skill were the second least-desired soft skills after entrepreneurship skill as stated by the 250 novice teachers. Nevertheless, their quantitative results appeared to be opposed to the qualitative findings. The 31 superintendents stated that the most desired soft skills that the majority of the novice teachers were missing was ethic, moral and professional skills.

Tang, Tan, and Vetriveilmany (2015c) investigated the critical problems of soft skills development through teaching specialized exercise. They employed an in-depth interview method to collect data from two teacher educators who had more than 15 years of operational practice in a public university, Malaysia. The collected data was analyzed consistent with the three main themes, namely, soft skills that need to be emphasized, or abandoned, and the critical problems. Their results revealed that the factors associated with the failure of soft skills development were large class size, academic focus, and insufficient period of exercise. Therefore, they suggested that the embedded model would be a solution to guarantee incorporation of soft skills in every course scheme.

Tan and Tang (2015) explored the levels and processes of soft skills development through the Diploma in Business Studies (DBS) program in a private college situated in Georgetown, Penang, Malaysia from the viewpoints of two educators and six final-year students. A mixed method was engaged. The results from the self-rated quantitative investigation and focus group interviews indicated that the DBS students were not giving adequate effort to all the vital soft skills. In addition, the results showed that teamwork skill arose steadily as the utmost appraisal soft skill aptitude, followed by information management skill. The lowest soft skill was ethics, moral, and professional skills. On the other hand, the results of qualitative methods either through interviews or observations indicated that soft skill acquisition was channeled from both the curriculum and non-curriculum aspects, mainly through entrenched events,

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