CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

An important element in nation building is the development of its human resource. Since the late 1980's, managers have been using the term human resource management (HRM) in place of the older term of personnel management. In the year 1990, the former Labour Ministry of Malaysia changed its name to Human Resources Ministry "in keeping with the international trend and need of recognizing people as a key resource for national development" (Yong, 1996, p. 4).

According to Pieper, 1990 as quoted in Yong, 1996 "if human resource can influence the economic success of a company, it can strategically contribute to the success of a nation" (p. 4). The intellectual capability of its people drives innovation, economic development and helps the country grow. To be an industrialized country, one of the more important strategies Malaysia has to take is to build the country's most important asset, which is its human capital. Education and soft skill development is seen as the primary instrument driving the government's effort to build adequate and efficient human capital. This is echoed by the Malaysian Minister of Higher Education, Yg. Bhg. Dato' Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin in his speech at the Second Malaysia Student Leaders' Summit held on 2nd August 2008. He said,

> "*The government attempts to strike a balance between physical and human capital*
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> *development in order to maximize our economic growth and stay on track to reach the*
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> *goals of Vision 2020. Given this understanding, the National Mission and the Ninth*
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> *Malaysian Plan have stipulated the development of first-class human capital as one of*

the five National Development Thrusts. The success of our human capital development agenda rests in large part on the quality of our national education system especially the higher learning."

YB Datuk Khaled Nordin once again reemphasized the importance of education and skills training this at a seminar on "Enhancing Graduate Employability: Issues, Concerns and The Way Forward" on 21st July 2009. He said,

> *"A key contributor in this regard is the knowledge and skills of the workforce. In fact, other than technological change, the education and skills of the workforce will be the key competitive weapon for the 21st century".*

Education is the key component for success and progress of any country. Nelson Mandela, the former President of South Africa from 1994 – 1999 has been widely quoted as saying that, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world". In the 2007, Langkawi International Dialogue, three main topics were discussed namely poverty eradication, capacity building and human capital development. These areas are important and "well suited with Malaysia's aspiration to be an education hub" (Mohd Arshi Daud, 2007). In the same article, Datuk Dr. Ahmed Tasir Lope Pihie, the chief executive of the Malaysian Industry-Government Group for High Technology (MiGHT) was quoted as saying, "From Malaysia's experience, education was one of its strong points that helped it to emerge as a respected nation among developing countries". He stressed that "Malaysia's high investment in developing human capital since independence had successfully lifted the nation out of economic backwardness" and therefore "it is a very critical recipe for human resource development".

"The recent launch of the 'Strategic Plan for Higher Education: Laying the Foundation Beyond 2020' outlines the measures and strategies that will make Malaysia an international centre of educational excellence" (MOHE Official Portal). This plan aims to identify roles and contributions of various parties within the industry and help realise the potential of both public and private institutions of higher learning. Both the public and private institutions of higher learning share common goals and objectives and the main aim is to deliver quality education and develop first class human capital.

Malaysia has come a long way in its efforts to provide good and sound education. The former British Council Director, Gerry Liston acknowledges that, "the expansion of access to education, the retention rates, and the success in ensuring that girls get educated were among Malaysia's greatest achievements; and progress in this regard was rapid in the 1970's. (Prospect Malaysia, 2009a, p.20)

The private sector and privatised public entities were encouraged to expand their capacity and provide for more quality education. This shows the governments continued efforts and focus on improving the providence of education in this country. According to the Minister of Higher Education, Dato' Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin, the government is not able to fund the higher education sector entirely on its own which is why they need to work with the Private Higher Educational Institution to educate and develop student with high quality and calibre (Utusan Online, 2009).

To make Malaysia a higher educational hub, the government needs the help and cooperation from the private higher educational institution. According to the Malaysian Higher Education 2008 statistics published by MOHE, the enrolment figure of students

studying at various levels from both private and public institutions totals 921,548 students. Of this total 399,852 students are from the private higher education institutions. This means that more than 43% of the total student population is studying at private institutions with the remaining 57% studying at public institutions, polytechnics and community colleges (Perangkaan Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia 2008). Private institutions of higher education are indeed playing a huge role in contributing to the vision of the country. Hence, emphasis should be placed on the quality of graduates they produce.

Efforts by both the public and private institutions of higher learning is not enough to guarantee that Malaysia will be the centre of higher education within the region as it is not all a numbers game. Emphasis should also be placed on the quality of graduates that they produce as these students will be leaders of the country ensuring that Malaysia continues to forge forward in economic growth, national stability and development of all its citizens. The focus should also be to develop students to be well rounded individuals that are savvy in both the academic, work and social setting.

1.1   Statement of problem

The obsession with academic performance by parents, students and society is evident as reported in the news after the release of every major examination results. Wye and Lim, (2009) commented that it has always been viewed that remarkable and outstanding cumulative grade point average (CGPA) obtained by graduates through sheer hard work in university has been the passport to desired qualifications and highly rewarding employment and this thinking has prompted the undergraduates to be devoted solely to academic pursuits while neglecting co-curricular activity participation. The focus of every student has always been to get the highest number

of A's, the highest grade point average, the top in class or the graduating cohort. It is

every parents dream to see their child a high academic achiever. In fact, students

have been taught these values at a very young age that numbers of A's equals how

successful one will be in the future. This value is no longer the ideal as more and

more schools and colleges are generating hundreds of students with strings of A's and

all with 100% passes. It is becoming more and more competitive as these young

adults try to outdo each other in academia. An article in CBS News, 2003 indicated

that

> *"Some parents are obsessed with their kids' grade-point averages, and that*
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> *title of valedictorian. Students (and their parents) will do whatever they have*
>
> *to do to raise their grade point average a tenth of a point." Harvard*
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> *psychologist Howard Gardner says this fixation with being Number One*
>
> *comes from the feeling "that life is a race... and that if you don't get into*
>
> *Harvard, or Stanford, you won't have any life chances."*

On the local front, the media has extensively highlighted the Ministry's call to

all private institutions not to be dumping grounds or degree mills. "Vouching for

educational equity" (New Straits Times, 2004), "Don't turn varsities into degree

mills" (The Sun, 2007), "IPTS bukan 'longgokan' pelajar tidak berkualiti" (Utusan

Malaysia, 2009) "Private institutions should not be dumping grounds or degree mills"

(The Star, 2009), "New law on the cards to act against degree mills" (Sunday Star,

2009), "Dodgy degrees" (Sunday Star, 2009) reports that Malaysians are so caught up

with degrees that many would go to any lengths for one. "Got money, got degree"

(Sunday Star, 2009) reports that "The growing diploma mill trend shows that anyone

can get a degree. All you have to do is pay."   These are all causes for concerns as

when there is a demand, there will be supply. Are the issues of quality being looked at?

With the proliferation of tertiary institutions, both public and private, thousands of fresh graduates enter the job market every year (New Straits Times, 2002). These students mostly armed with honours degree or first in their class are competing for the attention of potential employers to take them in. However, of late many local graduates find it difficult to secure a decent job. In April 2000, the Ministry of Human Resources reported that the existence of 40,000 unemployed graduates, translating to some 15% of the total unemployed persons in the country. This figure has since increased about 50% to 60,000 unemployed persons in 2006 (Quah, Nasurdin, Guok, Ignatius, 2009). According to the findings of a Graduate Tracer Study in 2006, 30.7% of graduates remained unemployed six months after convocation, while 5.7% were still awaiting job placement. The study involved 132 900 graduates from 18 public universities, 18 polytechnics, 34 community colleges and 13 private institutions of higher learning from all over Malaysia. (New Straits Times, 2007).

Isn't it ironic, now at a time when access to education is said to be widening and more accessible, yet, more and more employers are bemoaning the quality of candidates that are available. Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) in the UK conducted a survey among industry professionals to find out what employers are looking for in prospective candidates. According to the survey, now employers complain that even candidates with good degrees fail to meet their expectations. Companies are stressing the need for graduates to have certain skills like leadership,

good communication, a strong thinker with good problem solving skills. So just how can graduates "Wow" their employers? (Prospect Malaysia, 2009b).

According to LJMU's Vice Chancellor and Chief Executive, Professor Michael Brown, ... 'if higher education is about developing people, their intellectual and their subject skills, then higher education as it was is fine. But if it is about doing that and preparing people for successful careers in life, then it does not fit the purpose." He added that employers said that many graduates fell short when it comes to attributes such as emotional intelligence, understanding themselves and others, relating and getting along with people, and professional ethics (Prospect Malaysia, 2009b, p.30).

On the local front, some potential employers commented that graduates of some universities do not even have the basic communication skills while a majority have very poor knowledge of English (The Sun, 2007). The findings of a recent survey done by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) indicated that "there is cause for concern that the engagement and performance of undergraduate students has gradually declined"... "The issue of how our institutions of higher learning could add more value by ensuring that students enter the job market to be 'market ready' has been in the public sphere for a long time" (Financial Daily, 2009, p.9)

Gone are the days when a college degree came with a guarantee of job security. The need for students to be well rounded individuals is of importance in this day and age. We not only need doers but more importantly thinkers.

Table 1.1

Summary of soft skills lacking among graduates

Good Comm. Skills / English Prof	Time Mgnt	Team Player	People Skills	Emotional Quotient	Attitude & Aptitude	Leader ship & Motivation Skills	Adaptability / Flexibility	Active Listener	Inter Personal Skills	Self Confidence
The Sun 20th March 2007	UCSI Co-Op Report 2009	The Star 3rd July 1996	The Star 3rd July 1996	The Star 3rd July 1996	Shell Malaysia The Edge 3rd May 2010	The Star 21st February 2010	The Star 3rd July 1996	The Star 3rd July 1996	Quek 2005	UCSI Co-Op Report 2009
UCSI Co-Op Report 2009			Quek 2005	New Straits Times 13th January 2008						
New Straits Times 14th Dec 2002				The Sun 3rd May 2004						
Malay Mail 14th Dec 2002				The Sun 5th May 2009						
New Straits Times 3rd Nov 2005				New Straits Times 20th April 2009						

Table 1.1 above highlights the various skills lacking amongst fresh graduates as reported by the various media and articles. From the evidence above, English is clearly the biggest issue facing managers hiring fresh graduates. This has also been proven true by the employment agency, Jobstreet.com Sdn. Bhd. who conducted an on-line survey in April 2005 concerning unemployed graduates. The survey found a total of 55.8% of the managers were not happy with the graduates command of the English language (New Straits Times, 2005).

Based on the various skills sighted as lacking by the industry and also by the co-operative partners of UCSI, there are four skills commonly cited as lacking amongst fresh graduates.

They are:

i)   Communication skills / English skills

ii)   Leadership skills

iii)   Emotional intelligence

iv)   Time management

The need to focus on the quality of graduates is important, graduates who are equipped with the necessary soft skills that are ready for the job market, graduates who stand out and are different from the rest. The problem is currently too much focus has been given to academia and the focus on soft skills development is very much lacking.   The seriousness of this issue has caused the then Higher Education Minister, Datuk Mustapha Mohamed to state that undergraduates in public universities will be taught 'soft skills' beginning July 2006 (Quah, et.al. 2009).

UCSI University in Kuala Lumpur has also begun to implement such special courses such as Extra Curricular Activities (ECA) and University Life. These courses prepare them for life at university, to encourage students to be more active, participative and engaged with the community around them and thus encourage the development of soft skills. As mentioned by Deloitte Consulting (M) Sdn Bhd human capital services director, Rahmah Ismail, *"Throughout my 20 years' experience, I've found that straight As students do not necessarily do well during interviews but average students who are active in co-curricular activities fare better than them. It is high time to start highlighting what happens to high achievers who scored 15 As or 20 As in SPM after leaving school or university and believe me, many of them don't do well in the real world"* (The Star, 2009).

To prepare students for the working world, UCSI University has been offering the Co-op Education programme since 2004. This Co-Op programme is an internship opportunity for students to gain actual work experience related to their field. The unique feature about UCSI is their internships are offered at every year of study. Every year, they send students for this internship to the various companies and industries depending on the student's major. As of the 2009 Co-op Report, UCSI has placed a total of 1,372 students to 819 companies both locally and abroad. The feedback from the companies of its graduates are generally good however, there are some skills that the students are still lacking. These skills are communication skills, self confidence and time management. This is reflective of what the general employers/companies are saying about today's graduates as indicated in Table 1.1 above.

Table 1.2

UCSI University Graduate Attributes

Our graduates will demonstrate the following attributes

Attributes	Indicators
Effective Communication Skills	The ability to present information in a highly coherent manner across different contexts: • To speak proficiently • To convey written information competently • To utilize various information technology skills • To present information precisely and accurately
Creative and Critical Thinking Abilities	The ability to analyze, assess, and utilize different thinking skills to determine the value of information and ideas: • To utilize analytical thinking skills in different contexts • To employ problem solving skills to resolve issues • To think creatively to generate new ideas • To use critical thinking skills to formulate alternative approaches to learning
Ethical and Civic Responsibility	The ability to function as responsible individuals with ethical values who is accountable to the local, national, and international community: • To strive for justice, equality, honesty, and integrity in all personal and professional pursuits • To acknowledge and accept the common responsibility to preserve the environment and its surroundings • To actively contribute to the development of societal concerns
Knowledge of Disciplines	The ability to demonstrate sound understanding of concepts, theories and skills with effective application in relevant areas: • To possess an in-depth knowledge of the discipline for effective decision-making • To transfer skills across different disciplines • To articulate pertinent interdisciplinary issues • To generate new knowledge in different disciplines
Interpersonal Skills	The ability to work effectively and productively as a member of a group: • To interact and collaborate with others • To commit and focus on group task or decision • To uphold the integrity and passion for individual and group work • To acknowledge and appraise the contribution of others
Lifelong Learning	The attitude of having a high regard for and commitment to continuous learning: • To actively seek new learning opportunities • To use reflective thinking to generate new learning • For continuous engagement in learning new knowledge • To learn independently
Engaged Global Citizen	The ability to function in an international context with a deep appreciation for diversity: • To develop greater appreciation for cultural and racial diversity • To communicate effectively in cross-cultural contexts • To think across national and international borders • To function in a global environment • To become more knowledgeable about international current issues
Leadership	The ability to lead in different contexts to innovate and create change: • To initiate responsible actions to create change for the common good • To adopt and adapt change to motivate others • To initiate the development of new ideas • To lead with a high regard for ethical standards
Entrepreneurship and Management Skills	The ability to create and restructure a context and or an organization to innovate and generate business ideas: • To evaluate the context and viability of an organization or business • To optimize available resources in a constraint environment • To engage risk and reality in decision making • To seek and network with different sources • To generate new ideas for a new business venture • To negotiate effectively

Source: UCSI Unviersity's website: http://www.ucsi.edu.my/university/attributes.asp

Also in response to the need of developing students to be equipped with the necessary skills to join the workforce, UCSI University has recently launched its Graduate Attributes in 2009 and introduced two new courses to the curriculum. They are University Life and Extra Curricular Activities (ECA) in the January 2010 semester in the hope to develop its graduates into all rounded individuals who will thrive and have successful careers in the future. It is important to initiate and integrate the attributes which are required by the employers and incorporate them effectively into the curriculum. The Graduate Attributes are listed in the Table 1.2 above.

1.2   Significance of the study

Thus far, we know that soft skills are important and are required of all graduates entering the job market. We now need to find out how these skills can be developed while the students are still in college or university. Can the 3 or 4 years degree programme that they go through be enough to help them develop these soft skills? This study hopes to identify the influence of student personality type, their relationship with peers, their attitude towards school and emotional intelligence toward the development of soft skills. Since they spend more than half the time in university for the next 3 to 4 year, could there be a possibility that these factors can influence soft skills development? The results of this study serve to help the Academic team and Student Affairs team to determine the factors contributing to soft skills development and subsequently they are able to develop more programmes and activities or modify the curriculum that will aid in the development of soft skills. Besides the formal programmes instituted by UCSI like the Graduate Attributes, University Life course, Extra Curricular Activity course, the researcher would like to

study if there are other factors that could influence soft skills development among students.

1.3 Research Questions

This study hopes to answer the following questions:

1. How does type of personality of the student influence his/her soft skills development?

2. How does the influence of peers contribute to his/her development of soft skills?

3. How does the attitude of the student towards school have an influence on his/her soft skills development?

4. How does emotional intelligence play a part in soft skills development?

1.4 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were:

i. To determine the influence of personality types on soft skills development

ii. To determine how the relationship with peers can influence soft skills development

iii. To determine how the student's attitude toward school can influence soft skill development.

iv. To determine the role of emotional intelligence in soft skills development

1.5 Scope of study

The scope of this research is on the undergraduate students of UCSI University, Kuala Lumpur campus. It covers approximately 300 students from the

various faculties including Medical Sciences, Applied Sciences, Pharmaceutical Sciences, Management and Information Technology and the Faculty of Music, Social Sciences and Design.

1.6 Organisation of study

This study consists of five chapters. Chapter One is the Introduction in which the background, problem statement, research objectives, significance and the scope of the study are explained. Chapter Two consists of Literature Review where exploration on similar research in regards to the current study has been carried and their findings. In Chapter Three we look at the Research Methodology, explaining the techniques and ways of obtaining information when carrying this study and also the sample size of the study. Once the results are obtained, the analysis will be carried out under Chapter Four. Lastly the findings from this study will be presented in Chapter five with the suitable recommendations and suggestions for future research.