CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

Of late, there has been so much mention about soft skills and their importance to the effective functioning in the workplace. Many employers are bemoaning the quality of fresh graduate these days. Most of these fresh graduates seem to be lacking in some skills that are deem to be important by their employers.

UCSI University provides the co-op work attachment as part of the graduation requirements for its Year 2, Year 3 and final year students. These students will work for between 2 – 3 months at the end of each academic year, attached to companies within their field of interest. The employers will provide an evaluation on the students' performance every year. The co-op report feedback by the employers seems to echo what the industry is saying, that indeed there are still skills lacking amongst the students.

This research seeks to find out if soft skills can be developed during the course of study of the students while in university. The rational is that students will be spending the next three to five years of their academic journey with the university. During the course of their study in those three to five years, they will be spending time with their peers, lecturers, faculty and other support staff. This study would like to find out, if at all, there will be any influence their peers, the institution, their personality development have on the ability to develop soft skills. The best times to acquire or polish these skills are during their learning journey in university as they will be spending more than half the time with peers and faculty members in university. This study tests if these 'influencers' do indeed play a role in soft skills development of the students.

5.1   Findings

Interestingly, the study found that there is no direct correlation between the independent variables and soft skills development but there is a moderating effect of culture in the equation.   Despite numerous studies on the influence of peers, personality types, emotional intelligence and attitude towards school discussed in the literature review which found to have positive relationships on student development, there is no correlation of those factors on soft skills development.   The previous studies looked at student development form the point of academic improvement and student involvement in activities.   Perhaps these outcomes are elements that can be measurable.   One can measure academic improvement by the grade reports and feedback by the lecturers and one can observe increase in student involvement through class room participation and the enrolment in clubs and societies. Soft skills development may be difficult to observe and quantify as it leaves to different interpretation by different people.   Also the respondents for this study are majority Year 1 students (42.6%) and the rest are divided by Years 2, 3 and Final year students.   The effect cannot be seen as these Year 1 students have not gone through the full rigors of academic requirement.   They are fresh from high school and are not fully exposed to the coursework, assignments, and academic subjects or have not fully experienced what UCSI can offer them.

Cultural orientation was introduced as a moderating variable to the study. In general terms culture refers to the knowledge, practices and values shared by a society. The study would like to find out if this knowledge, practices and values of different ethnic groups within UCSI University has any effect on the students' soft skills development.   Four different elements were considered.   They are

individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/femininity

According to Triandis (1994) as quoted by Clugston, et al. (2000) individualism is "characterized by attitudes of independence from in-groups, achievement, freedom, autonomy and fairness", whereas collectivism is "characterized by interdependence, norms that favour in-group embeddedness, security, duty, in-group harmony and personalized relationships" (pp.10-11). Generally in the Asian Chinese culture, collectivism is more dominant as compared to the west where people are more individualistic. However according to Clugston, Howell and Dorfman (2000) even within the collectivism culture there exist a level of individualism and collectivism within the individual themselves. People as individuals function at different levels of individualism and collectivism. In other words there are individual level collectivism and individual level individualism. This could probably explain why the effect of individualism and collectivism is not strong in the study.

As the majority of the students who responded to the study were Malaysian students (98.2%) and also from the majority Chinese ethnic background (91.7%), it may be difficult to see the effect of individualism/collectivism as they are quite homogenous. Therefore according to Clugston et al. (2000) a study of culture within a nation requires measurement that tap individual perceptions of culture to get a more accurate understating of how an individual within the same culture view and do things differently.

According to Hofstede (1980) as sighted in Clugston et al. (2000), power distance is "the extent to which an individual accepts unequal distribution of power" (p.9). In a high power distance environment, the individual would be very dependent on his/her superior for guidance and directions on what and how to do. They are more submissive to authority and accept the hierarchy in their organization for fear of insubordination taken against them. In this study, power distance has a moderating effect on self-esteem and soft skills development. The Malaysian high school system was such that the students were taught to respect and obey their teachers and not to question or argue with them. They were thought to respect authority, to listen and do as they are told. Also as the majority of students who responded were Year 1 students, the tendency for them to accept authority is higher. Therefore in a high power distance context, the relationship between self-esteem on soft skills is negative but in a low power distance context, the relationship between self-esteem on soft skills development is positive.

Uncertainty avoidance according to Hofstede (1980) as cited in Clugston, Howell and Dorfman (2000) is the extent to which people feel threatened by uncertainty or ambiguous situations and seek to avoid such issues. For the study, uncertainty avoidance had a moderating effect on attitude towards studies, attitude towards school and self-esteem.

To explain the effect of uncertainty avoidance on attitude towards studies and soft skills development, the analysis shows that in a low uncertainty avoidance context, attitude towards studies has a positive effect on soft skills development where as in a high uncertainty avoidance context; attitude towards studies has a negative

impact on soft skills. The influence of attitude towards studies on soft skills development differs in a high vs. low uncertainty avoidance context. Students who are low on uncertainty avoidance may be more open to new experiences, try new things or seek new challenges. They are not intimidated by the unknown. For them variety is the spice of life and this could contribute towards a positive learning experience for them. They do not mind experimenting with new ideas or participating in different activities for the exposure. These positive attitudes towards their learning can bring about development in soft skills as they continue in their journey in search of new experiences.

On the other hand students who are high on uncertainty avoidance may be weary of new challenges. They are not prepared for what to expect and do not want to go down the road less travelled. They prefer to stick to what is known and may have a set way of thinking and doing things. Therefore, this can hinder them from learning new things and experiences.

The effect of uncertainty avoidance on attitude towards school and soft skills development also shows that there is a moderating effect in high vs. low context. The effect differs as in low uncertainty avoidance context, the impact of attitude towards school on soft skills development is positive whereas in a high uncertainty avoidance context, the impact of attitude towards schools is negative. The reasons could be similar to the findings above as students with low uncertainty avoidance are not afraid to take risks and seek new opportunities and challenges. Conversely, students who are high on uncertainty avoidance may be more concerned about sticking to the book and following the rules and not so willing to explore and try new things.

According to Tsui, Wang, Xin, Zhang and Fu (2004) as cited by Selvarajah and Meyer (2008) the teachings of Confucianism identified 6 leadership dimension as commonly adopted by the Chinese. They are being creative and taking risks, relating and communicating, articulating vision, showing benevolence, monitoring operations and being authoritative. As the majority of students are Chinese, this could explain the effect of high and low uncertainty avoidance context.

The effect of uncertainty avoidance on self-esteem and soft skills development also shows that there is a moderating effect in high vs. low context but in both contexts they yield similar effect. The effect of uncertainty avoidance on self-esteem and soft skills development is both negative in high and low context. The reason could be uncertainty avoidance and self-esteem is not affected by one or the other. Having a high self-esteem is not dictated by high or low uncertainty avoidance context. If one's esteem is high, they are confident, sure of themselves and are not too concern about uncertainty. Therefore in this study, high or low uncertainty avoidance situation, the impact of self-esteem on soft skills development is negative.

Masculinity/femininity is the extent to which how each gender functions according to different situations. They relate more to the different sexes. According to Hofstede (1980) as cited in Clugston, Howell and Dorfman (2000), masculine factors are assertiveness, acquisition of money and material wealth, not caring for others or the quality of life. On the other hand, feminine factors include showing concern for people, empathy, and interdependence and emphasize on quality of life.

Form the study, there is no moderating effect of masculinity/femininity on the independent variables and soft skills development. This could be because the majority of the respondents in this study are female students (69.2%) compared to the male students of only 30.8%.

5.2   Implication of findings

The findings above act as a guide to UCSI to tailor or develop programmes to nurture these areas. For a start, assignments and methods of assessment for the University Life subject needs to be relooked at to include elements of understanding one's personality, working with teams, to include more critical and creative thinking problems , problem solving, time management and to build the ability to work with diverse cultures. Students need to think out of the box, be open to new experiences and be reflect on things. The Student Affairs Office can structure workshops to focus more these areas and to provide a developmental approach to learning new material. In other words, the workshops or programmes need not be introduced all at once to the students but gradually as the student progresses but it must be done consistently and not as a one off to ensure transfer of learning and better retention of information.

Next the implementation and assessment of ECA course needs to be discussed. Currently students only need to participate in any club or society or join in any games or university events to earn points but this does not reflect on any learning taking place. The main objective is to have students gain valuable experience in participating, organizing, managing events but not many students are taking this seriously. Therefore the implementation and assessment needs to be able to reflect these areas.

Finally, the exercise of embedding the graduate attributes into to other subjects across the majors. Currently the graduate attributes is only at its infancy and thorough and carefully planning needs to be carried out to embed these attributes into the curriculum. Therefore, with these present measures, UCSI University can work towards building stronger platforms to develop our students to be ready for the job market.

5.3   Limitations of study

There are several limitations to this research. Firstly the total respondents who participated in the study are not reflective of the student population at UCSI University. Secondly, the respondents who did reply were majority Malaysians and from a similar culture. The majority were Chinese. This could not show the moderating effect of culture on the variables. Thirdly, it was difficult for the researcher to obtain permission to contact the industry partners where our students go for their internship. A request for permission was given to the Student Affairs Offices who handles internship but was declined due to some stipulated policies. Therefore, only the lecturers who supervised these students in-house were contacted for feedback. The drawbacks of this is that the student may not have spent enough time on the on-campus jobs or spend enough contact hours with these in-hours supervisors for them to give a thorough evaluation of the student's work ability as the students have to attend classes as well and not work the full hours every day. Fourth is that most of the students who answered the survey were Year 1 students and so they have not fully exposed themselves into the UCSI system yet to be able to give a fair evaluation. Probably the Year 1 students are more inclined to listen to instructions and follow that the authority tells them. Next this study generalized the culture to the

population but as suggested by Clugston et al, (2000), the need to measure individual perceptions of culture rather than generalize the whole population.

5.4   Suggestions for future research

This is only the first effort on researching how students of UCSI can develop their soft skills. It is still very much exploratory in nature. However this does provide good information to know what the gaps are that exists while conducting this research. The researcher recommends conducting a longitudinal study to observe patterns of student learning over time to find out if there are any personality changes, attitude changes and changes in emotional stability in the second year of study as compared to the first year and in the third year compared to Year 2. As these are majority Year 1 students, it will be good to capture and record their progress, This will explain the type of learning that has taken place and the various factors influencing the students at different years of study.   The socialization they would have obtained throughout each semester may influence the way these students think and behave in subsequent years. The study could be done toward the end of each academic year on students completing one level and progressing to the next to find out what the student has acquired thus far in their academic life and then structure programmes accordingly.

5.5   Conclusion

Soft skills development is an ongoing process.   It is not and cannot be developed and learned over night. It is acquired through the interactions of everyday life in the thinking that takes place, the decisions made, the conflicts faced, the problems solved and the interactions with others be it peers or a more senior other.

Learning takes place through observation and modelling of behaviour that has a good or positive outcome. Therefore, throughout the three to five years that the student is in university, much of their behaviour, attitude and personality can be shaped through their daily interactions and observations of others and by doing.