Undergraduates' perception on 'employable' soft skills for organizations' 'new normal' practice

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ABSTRACT – Due to Covid-19, undergraduates face different challenges to be employable. Apart from theoretical knowledge learnt, they must be equipped with essential soft skills. Fundamental soft skills like problem solving, communication, information technology, and leadership were carefully selected and studied on their relevance in dealing with 'new normal' practice. 280 data were collected through Google forms from management undergraduates of a public university. Data analysis using SPSS (ver.26) shown significance relationship among the soft skills, applicable during pandemic time. Respondents perceived that communication was the most important soft skills facilitating organizational leadership. Hence, the research outcomes suggested that universities could enrich the critical soft skills trainings to ensure greater jobs opportunity among their students.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to thestar.com.my: 'as long as the world has not found a cure or a vaccine for Covid-19, we may have to adjust to a 'new normal''. This refers to 'a new way of living and going about our lives, work and interactions with other people'. In this sense, it may apply that changes to students' learning attributes is unavoidable. Other skills may be necessary to complement the taught syllabus and enhance the potential undergraduates who should fulfil organizations' needs. The ways they operate in the pandemic time have been somewhat different. Researchers pointed out that soft skills as basic skills become highly essential for getting, keeping, and doing well on a job [3]. As education system moves toward information technology based, working system has been further enhanced by IR4.0. As a result, the students ought to acquire relevance skills to make them more 'employable' when they graduate soon [1,2,4].

Learning of communication skills will possibly require new approach due to the development of digital platform. For managers, leadership skills may need to consider problems management in critical situations as organizations now face. Under STEM education, leadership competencies are well integrated for engineering undergraduates to improve on their management deficiencies [7, 9]. Likewise, teaching of technical skills and abilities to other faculty students could be further enhanced them to acquire better design and process capabilities [8].
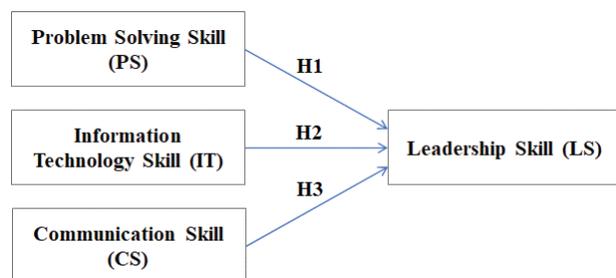

Figure 1 Research Framework

As shown in Figure 1, problem-solving skills (PS), information technology skills (IT), communication skills (CS), and leadership skills (LS) study would be critical to see if there exists an effective relationship during the Covid-19 situation [5, 6]. It would also be vital for non-engineering students to learn "other tools" to create equal opportunities and become challenging to enter the job market. Hence, the researcher would focus on management undergraduates and determine the perceived soft skills for employability in 'new normal'. If not, organizations may need any other skills that meet new management practices during the pandemic.

2. METHODOLOGY

Survey questionnaires were distributed through Google forms to the final semester undergraduates of a public university in Melaka. It consisted of three sections: demographic, employability opportunity, and skill characteristic. A five-point Likert scales was employed for respondents to choose from, with the highest skill (or a score of '5') to the lowest skill (a score of '1') for each question asked. There was a total of 27 questions. However, out of 310 respondents participated, only 280 usable survey managed to be collected for data analysis purpose.

SPSS version 26 was used to process the research data. The study consisted of 3 independent variables (IV) and 1 dependent variable (DV). Accordingly, the main analysis carried out including descriptive, reliability, correlation, and multiple regression. It was important to focus on the research objectives to analyze the relationship and correlation between the IVs and DV; as well as to answer the research hypotheses illustrated by the framework.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Descriptive

Demographic profile of the management students was produced in Table 1. Overall, the number of sample size was valid for 280 respondents. Fair number of samples were taken from 3 different management programs. It was established that 59% of the students perceived that they would still manage to get jobs employment during 'new normal' time, 22% tried to start own companies, while 19% thought jobs opportunity might not really come easy.

Table 1 Demographic profile of respondents

Demographic	Category	Freq.	(%)
Gender	Female	196	70
	Male	84	30
	Total	**280**	**100**
Program	Innovation	95	33.9
	Marketing	93	33.2
	Entrepreneurial	92	32.9
	Total	**280**	**100**
Job opportunity	Full-time	94	33.6
	Part-time	71	25.4
	Self-employed	61	21.8
	Non-employed	54	19.3
	Total	**280**	**100**

3.2 Cronbach's alpha

Cronbach's alpha was an indicator used to check the degree of internal consistency. The value of Cronbach's alpha for all constructs of the study achieved above 0.7. In most cases, Cronbach's alpha coefficient of a scale would be accepted above 0.6. Table 2 described summary of the Cronbach's alpha.

Table 2 Summary of Cronbach's alpha

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	No. of items
PS	.714	6
IT	.738	6
CS	.758	6
LS	.781	6

3.3 Pearson Correlation

Table 3 depicted result of Pearson correlation between the independent variables (i.e. problem-solving skill, information technology skill, and communication skill) and against the dependent variable (i.e. leadership skill) among UTeM's potentially management graduate. Values between 0.4-0.6 were moderately significance.

Table 3 Correlation

		PS	IT	CS
LS	Pearson Correlation	.540**	.494**	.579**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
	N	280	280	280

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

3.4 Multiple Regression

Based on Table 4, the R Square value is 0.455. It translated to 45.5% of variance in leadership skill was effectively explained by the problem-solving skill, information technology skill, and communication skill variables. The finding was significant at 0.000 ($p< 0.05$). In other words, all independent variables were significantly perceived as contributing factors (toward leadership skill) of employability opportunity.

Table 4 R square and ANOVA

R square	ANOVA	
	F	**Sig.**
.455	76.913	.000

Based on Table 5, the t values of 3.804, 4.953, and 6.875 were statistically significance for PS, IT, and CS, respectively. The B coefficient values indicated that communication skill with 0.367 has a uniquely dominant impact in explaining the dependent variable (LS). It followed by information technology skill (0.280) and problem-solving skill (0.217). Most importantly, all variables reported significance contribution in predicting LS as employability opportunity, statistically significance at $p<0.05$ level.

Table 5 Coefficient

	B	t	Sig.
(constant)	.490	2.163	.031
PS	.249	3.804	.000
IT	.280	4.953	.000
CS	.367	6.875	.000

Hence, from the outcomes of Table 5, the multiple regression was representable by following equation (1):

$$Y = 0.490 + 0.249(PS) + 0.280(IT) + 0.367(CS) \rightarrow (1)$$

3.5 Hypothesis Testing

Below Table 6 basically summarized the significance of all hypotheses at $p<0.05$ level.

Table 6 Summary of hypothesis testing

	Hypothesis	**Significant**
H1	There is a positive relationship between problem solving skill and graduate's leadership skill as an employability factor	β = 0.249 p = 0.000 < 0.05
H2	There is a positive relationship between information technology skill and graduate's leadership skill as an employability factor	β = 0.260 p = 0.000 < 0.05
H3	There is a positive relationship between communication skill and graduate's leadership skill as an employability factor	β = 0.367 p = 0.000 < 0.05

4. CONCLUSIONS

The outcomes of the study maintain that the fundamental soft skills are still effective as perceived by management undergraduates for employability opportunity. The F value recorded significance relationship between communication skills, information technology skills, and problem-solving skills toward leadership skill. For 'new normal' practice, findings suggested more facilities upgrade and utilization of IT as new platform for communicating among employees [10]. Undergraduates with soft skills will benefit industries in which they provide leadership and productivity using new conducts against the Covid-19 constraints [11]. Hence, universities management can also smoothen the 'unlearn' and 'relearn' process of the soft skills to create new expertise and approaches. Consequently, the communication skills among undergraduates can be further improved by focusing on the needs to develop good listening skills, clear and confident presentation skills, good written skills (idea, procedure, etc.), confident in verbal skills (responsive), and high in motivation skills (persuasion skill) [1,3].

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