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How Does the Teaching of Soft Skills in Institutions of Higher Learning Not Seem to Be Working Out Very Well? A Systematic Review

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Article History	Abstract
	Soft skills like communication and team management have been increasingly gaining importance to improve the employability of students graduating out of college. The educational institutes have been trying to incorporate soft skills in the curriculum of these students to make them more employment ready though the output is far from satisfactory. This research aims to identify the reasons why the educational institutes are unable to fill the gap even though soft skills, specifically communication, has been a part of the module and what are some of the steps that can be taken to make this whole exercise more effective. The paper suggests that all three stakeholders i.e. students, higher educational institutions and employers have a role to play to gauge the shortcomings and implement ways to improve the transfer of soft skills to students and their ability to apply their learnings better in real work scenarios.

1. Introduction

Soft skills are gaining importance across the industry and educational institutions because of its seeming association with employability of any individual (Chiara Succi & Magali Canovi, March 2019). It is being observed lately that students graduating from higher educational institutions, irrespective of their grades, are unable to either get jobs or are unable to adjust well into the jobs they get placed into (Mona Khare, January 2016). That is where soft skills come into play. Soft skills are those skills which help an individual to carry out his hard skills or core skills better. They are usually about what a person is rather than what he knows. It is about his attitude, personality and emotional intelligence. Soft skills include skills like communication skills, teamwork, leadership, ability to handle pressure at work, analytical thinking, finding creative solutions to problems, etc. They also include personal attributes like punctuality, sincerity, honesty, integrity, empathy, etc. Developing soft skills are a key to generating employment for fresh graduates. Employers are looking for a balance of hard and soft skills. They feel that soft skills not only improve the productivity of the graduates but also increases the sustainability of the organisation (Mansura Nusrat, Nafia Sultana, January 2019). Also, the workforce is a reflection of the organisation and therefore needs to be smart and efficient (Mansura Nusrat, Nafia Sultana, January 2019).

The origin of Soft skills can be traced back to the US Military somewhere between 1968-72 where groups of soldiers were being trained on use of some new machinery and it was observed that certain groups outperformed the other groups. On delving deeper, it was found that it had something to do with the way the teams were led. Leadership, another important soft skill, could make a huge difference to the way the teams work and their ability to achieve targets and thus the overall performance of an organisation. A good leader will use his emotional intelligence to motivate his team, have good interpersonal skills and develop a great rapport with his team members, inculcate team spirit, encourage communication, problem solving, critical and creative thinking and thereby successfully binding his

team, working collectively towards achieving the organisational goals. Those are the kind of employees every organisation would like to hire and therefore are on a look out for those skills when hiring fresh graduates. However, it has been observed lately that the graduates passing out of universities today are not job ready (Mona Khare, January 2016). They do not have the key skills necessary to work effectively at jobs like working cohesively in a team, handling pressure, problem solving or communication. They over estimate themselves as being smart and capable but lack basic traits like professionalism or the drive to learn and win against all odds (Lorelei A. Ortiz , Michelle Region-Sebest, and Catherine MacDermott, July 2016). Also, students are not adequately made aware of what to expect at their new work places and therefore they are unclear of what skills to work upon and are also unable to make the right choices professionally (Vera G. Goulart, Lara Bartocci Liboni and Luciana Oranges Cezarino, July 2021). Last few years, the educational institutions have included soft skills as a part of their syllabus to help graduates learn some of these soft skills before they face the world. However, though soft skills are now an integral part of the curriculum of many big universities and other educational institutions, they are unable to inculcate these soft skills into the students as they would wish (Mohamed Osmani, et. Al, January 2019). Soft skills seem difficult to teach or learn or even measure and moreover the students are not aware about their importance or at least the level of it.

The aim of this study is to systematically analyse and evaluate the reasons why the universities are unable to transfer these skills successfully to the graduates to empower them better for the work place. Are the course curriculum outdated or is it lack of practical knowledge? Is the faculty not trained to take up additional responsibility of introducing and implementing job oriented courses or is it just lack of awareness among students? There could be multiple reasons why the implementation of these courses and expected results are not falling within the reach of the institutes and the study would like to dig deep to understand the mechanics and also find ways on how these institutes can revamp their modules in a manner that would help the students to actively master these skills and apply their learnings, improve their thinking and analytical abilities and be capable, responsible, successful and valuable resource wherever they decide to go!

Research Questions

RQ1. What are the key soft skills that the employers deem necessary when hiring fresh graduates?

RQ2. What are the reasons why HIEs are not able to fill the gap between soft skills possessed by graduates and the expectations from the employers?

RQ3. What steps can be taken to inculcate these soft skills into the students successfully.

2. Literature Review

A This study aims to systematically review and understand the reasons why more and more students who graduate from HIEs and other educational institutes are unable to find jobs or get placed even if they have good theoretical knowledge and grades and identify how to reduce this gap. It aims to understand the role of soft skills in increasing the employability of fresh graduates.

Soft skills

Soft skills have been introduced in the HIEs for the last decade or so but they are not being able to create the magic that the HIEs would so prefer (Trish L. Clokie and Elna Fourie, July 2016). But what exactly are soft skills? Soft skills are any life skills and competencies that help an individual to deal with the everyday challenges of life in a more effective manner such as social skills, interpersonal skills, communication, etc. Soft skills are a combination of dispositions, attributes, understandings and practices that help an individual to cope with uncertainty and find creative solutions across different situations (Chiara Succi & Magali Canovi, 2019). Soft skills such as teamwork, communication, analytical skills, ability to solve problems, and self management are critical skills required for employees to work effectively and constructively in any workplace. (Phyllis Kaburise, Dec 2016). There could be various reasons why the HIEs are unable to improve the employability of the students even though various soft skill modules are included in their curriculum. Lack of practical knowledge, poor industry related knowledge among faculty, less stress on research and outdated curriculum are some of the reasons for the skill gap and academic leaders must acknowledge the same and find ways

to counter it (Neha Bhatnagar, December 2020). Another research also believes that soft skills are self regulatory traits and other social and attitudinal traits that allow us to communicate well, work better in teams and manage day to day challenges. But it ignores the cultural, socio-economic background and structural forces that limit the learning ability of the students. Rather than soft skill paradigm this research preaches cultural capital paradigm where skills are more contextual and require pedagogical expertise and can be learnt over a long time slowly rather than over a weekend or a short semester (Matthew T Hora, Ross J. Benbow and Bailey B Smolarek, 2018)

Stakeholders

Extensive research has been done to understand why more and more employers report lack of basic skills among fresh graduates in spite of the HIEs constantly working towards imparting these skills as a part of the syllabus. One of the major revelations is the difference in perspectives of stakeholders which include employer groups, Higher Education Institutes, Government/policy makers and the graduates, with regard to the importance and relevance of soft skills. (Alex Tymon, August 2011). There is limited alignment of views among the different stakeholders. (& Magali Canovi Chiara Succi, March 2019). Perception of graduates is very different from that of the employers. While the students feel they have the necessary skills, the employers seem to disagree (Kyriaki Matsouka and Dimitrios M. Mihail, August, 2016). Also the first and second years students' perception of the relevance of soft skills is different from those of the final year students. The government is obviously interested in increasing the employability of the students, not only as they are the future taxpayers of the country and need to be capable of more and more income but also they are a performance indicator of the educational institutions. Graduate employers are greatly more interested now in the soft skills and personal attributes of the individuals than their university grades and subjects (Alex Tymon, 2011). Even though not the first and second year students so much, but final year students are getting increasingly aware that qualifications and grades alone are not going to help them gain employment but their ability to communicate, handle pressure, their personal commitment to work, interpersonal skills and problem solving abilities make them more employable (Alex Tymon, August 2011). Higher Education Institutes (HIEs) existence is based on their ability to admit more and more students in their institutes each year which in turn is based on its placement success rate, which further depends on the core knowledge and employability skills of the students. It is definite that the employers and government expect the higher educational institutions to take the complete responsibility to inculcating the soft skills and make the students more employable but extensive research proves that the employability skills enhancement can be attained if all stakeholders embark upon themselves a role each, with the learners or graduates at the centre of the system making them more connected globally and future ready (Surabhi Koul & Burna Nayar, 2020). The HIEs have enhanced the classroom experiences for the students by introducing advanced technological tools, better infrastructure, made considerable changes in the design of the curriculum, teaching pedagogies, invested in faculty development and gaining relevant accreditations proving their intention to make the much needed changes but are still unable to implement it practically to ensure the overall success. This is primarily because producing work ready graduates is a collective responsibility of all stakeholders (Phyllis Kaburise, 2016) and this task can only be successfully accomplished with a joint effort from them all. HIEs, employers and policymakers all need to collaborate to improve the soft skills of graduates to make them more employable (Kyriaki Matsouka and Dimitrios M. Mihail, August 2016).

Communication Skills

Communication and Integrity were considered the top two soft skills expected or desired by employers where communication included oral, speaking ability, listening and presenting (Lorelei A. Ortiz, Michelle Region-Sebest and Catherine MacDermott, July 2016). Only with good communication skills can the employees work collaboratively, build trust, share and discuss ideas and find creative solutions to problems, network and negotiate deals etc which are all required to be successful at any job (Phyllis Kaburise, 2016), so not able to communicate is one of the major contributing factors towards unemployment. Communication skills (both oral and written) are not on the most crucial skills required by MBA students to be employable, (Neha Bhatnagar, December 2020). Even during selection process the candidates are selected on the basis of their core skills but the final decision is made after a personal

interview that assesses a person's communication skills as it is considered a key to success (Phyllis Kaburise, 2016).

Higher Education Institutes

Universities are constantly facing increasing competition and therefore are currently under tremendous pressure to increase their placement figures. They need to prepare students for the labour market and so need to redesign their curriculum to ensure it includes soft skills along with hard skills (Elvy Pang Hong Kong, C. H. Leung, John Coombes, 2019). The researches confirm that the HIEs are incorporating these courses as compulsory in first year or education however, they are not sufficient as they do not translate into competencies when the students join work (Trish L. Clokie and Elna Fourie, 2016). However, some HIEs feel that colleges are not a place for job training and are more for self discovery and self learning (Benjamin R. Garner, Michael Gove and Ashraf Mady, 2019).

HIEs need to generate more awareness among students about the role of soft skills in their future whether placements, careers or everyday life. (Alex Tymon, 2011). The responsibility of Higher Education Institutes is not only to train the graduates for soft skills but to develop their overall personality to make them more responsible individuals. Some graduates believe that their university has developed the necessary soft skills in them through classes, internships, voluntary work and actively participating in different conferences (Kyriaki Matsouka and Dimitrios M. Mihail, 2016). HEIs need to motivate students to change their attitude towards learning these skills and also know that it is a slow process (Alex Tymon, 2011).

Students' Employability

It is believed that one of the major challenges with the development of employability skills is the lack of coherence in what the term actually means. The term employability may mean differently to the different stakeholders as the perspectives of each i.e. employers, HIEs and students may differ. There are a few similarities as well though among the different definitions that we come across and a most relatable definition is one by Yorke who defined employability as:

" a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes, that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy" (Alex Tymon, 2011).

Employability skills are basically the ability to acquire a job, sustain it and get a new one if and when needed (Fatima Suleman, 2017). There is a difference of opinion about the key soft skills that are considered important by graduates, HIEs and employers but there are some which have featured on all stakeholders' lists as relevant and necessary. Communication skills, team work and interpersonal skills are essential as per the employers, students and HIEs across different ages, countries, sectors, genders, etc. but there are various others which not only fail to match with other stakeholders but also within the same groups (Alex Tymon, 2011). Also, not just skills but personality traits / personal attributes of individuals also play a major role in enhancing their employability. Most employers are looking for person oriented skills like attitude, personality, etc rather than job oriented skills like qualification and also socio-emotional skills (EQ), interpersonal skills, teamwork, decision making and planning ability are key (Fatima Suleman, 2017). Ability to deal with social and emotional issues is a plus as social and emotional learning enables students to apply their skills more positively, interact with peers and work in teams better, be empathetic towards their colleagues, better decision making ability and create positive relations with their peers (Vera G. Goulart, Lara Bartocci Liboni, and Luciana Oranges Cezarino, 2021)

Employers

Acquiring competent employees is crucial for any organisation. Poor recruitment decisions can cost the companies and therefore employers lay emphasis on hard skills but more on soft skills while other researches said both were equally important (Elvy Pang Hong Kong, C. H. Leung, John Coombes, 2019). Universities are under tremendous pressure to make students job ready and so they need to redesign their curriculum to ensure it includes soft skills along with hard skills. The top five competencies required by employers are ability and willingness to learn, teamwork and cooperation,

hardworking, willingness to take extra work, self control and analytical skills and exposing them to real work environments is the only way to teach them these skills (Elvy Pang Hong Kong, C. H. Leung, John Coombes, 2019)

Research confirms that communication and other soft skills, generic skills are some necessary skills that are being expected as necessary skills by employers when hiring graduates. It also confirms that the HIEs are incorporating these courses as compulsory in first year or education however, they are not sufficient as they do not translate into competencies when the students join work (Trish L. Clokie and Elna Fourie, 2016). Also, employers are uncertain of what they want and it changes from time to time and organisation to organisation (Fatima Suleman, 2017). Employers do expect graduates from reputed institutions to possess certain skills and attributes which means that the credentials of the HIE do make an impact on selection process or employablity of a graduate. 84% of the students believe that they have the necessary soft skills as they have done communication as a part of their course and participated in various projects and internships, etc. but only 50% of the employers agree (Lorelei A. Ortiz , Michelle Region-Sebest, and Catherine MacDermott, 2016).

Findings

Through review of different literature, many different findings have been inferred which are:

a) Not all jobs need good communication skills – written or oral and most students will learn the appropriate writing skills specific to their jobs after they take up those jobs (T. Moore and J. Morton, July 2015)

b) There may be a difference between the understanding of soft skills by students and employers based on their nationality, gender, age, etc. though both acknowledge that the importance of these skills has gone up since the last decade or so (Chiara Succi and Magali Canovi, March 2019)

c) The first and second year students do not realise the importance of soft skills but the final year students know. The HIEs need to increase the awareness and motivate students to change their attitude towards learning these skills. (Alex Tymon, August 2011).

d) Learning soft skills is a slow process and the best way to learn them is on the job (Alex Tymon, August 2011).

e) Mobile apps and other technological tools are helpful for EFL Students to practice beyond what is available in the universities to improve their speed and chances of learning communication without fear of judgement from friends. (Zhong Sun, Chi-His Lin, Hai Jiao Shen, Song Qi and Liming Luo, April 2017).

f) There is a need for greater standardization and deliberate and structured assessment practices (Gerard Beenen, Shaun Pichler and Shahin Davoudpour, April 2017). Authenticity and integrity in assessment process continuously poses a challenge to the HIEs in imparting the soft skills and interactive oral examinations is the best way to ensure that students do not indulge in any form of academic misconduct. (Popi Sotiriadou, Danielle Logan, Amanda Daly and Ross Guest, February 2019).

g) Students value service learning and appreciate the opportunity to work with the community which helps them to interact with people and feel a part of the community and at the same time improve their ability to communicate. (Donella Caspersz & Doina Olaru, September 2015)

h) Task based activities are the best way to motivate students to practice communication skills though sometimes they can be lazy and confused on how to express themselves. It is also time consuming and needs teachers to be skilled in controlling the class. (Ehsan Namaziandost, Arash Hashemifardnia and Sajad Shafiee, June 2019)

i) Students feel that their performance in interview was the main factor determining their acceptance or rejection for a job followed by resume, internship experience, specialisation, employability skills and recommendations (Meenakshi Dhingra and Subhash C. Kundu, August 2020). It was also believed by students that even a few lectures on interview preparations

increases their chances of getting hired and therefore soft skills should be part of the academics. Mock interviews are a good way to make students job ready where one part is based on their skills and experiences and how to project them in an interview and second part on their verbal and non verbal cues and body language and its role in the interviews (Barton J. Hirsch, January 2017).

j) Various different industries have different requirements in terms of skills and HIEs cannot satisfy all employers. The universities should teach the students to stay alert and pick all relevant skills on a day to day basis (Mohamad Osmani, Vishanth Weerakkody, Nitham Hindi & Tillal Eidabi, January 2019).

k) The career oriented education is very limited to India and graduates who are socially adept, can solve problems, differentiate right from the wrong and take decisions are valued by employers (Mona Khare, January 2016).

l) Work integrated learning in coworking spaces provide great learning opportunities compared to traditional settings and helps graduates to learn some soft skills like communication, critical thinking, innovation etc thereby increasing their confidence and preparing them for future work (Denise Jackson, Hairon Shan & Stephanie Meek, September 2021).

m) Institutes have revamped their curriculum to suit the global market requirements and the educators need to focus more on EQ vs IQ as holistic learning will help learners to not only gain information passively but actively participate to learn (Surabhi Koul & Burna Nayar, July 2020).

n) While the students are of the opinion that they possess the necessary soft skills, the hirers find them majorly lacking. The HIEs' responsibility is not only to train the graduates for soft skills but to develop their overall personality to make them more responsible individuals and graduates feel that their universities have developed the necessary soft skills in them through classes, internships, voluntary work and actively participating in different conferences (Kyriaki Matsouka and Dimitrios M. Mihail, August 2016).

o) The skills cannot be seen in a vacuum. Job markets are not based only on technical and soft skills expertise but there are various other factors that determine the job scene such as structural inequality and discrimination, social networks, business cycles, etc. (Matthew T Hora, Ross J. Benbow and Bailey B Smolarek, 2018)

Challenges

Soft skills are personality traits and behaviours that characterize our relationship with other people and complement hard skills in the workplace. But it ignores the cultural, socio-economic background and structural forces that limit the learning ability of the students. (Mathew T Hora, Ross J. Benhow and Bailey B Smolarek, 2018). This research believes that skills are not easily markable as soft or hard or easy or difficult etc but are more contextual and require pedagogical expertise and can be learnt over a long time and not a short weekend or semester course in college. Also, job markets are not based only on technical and soft skill expertise but also various other factors like, social connections, the repetitive economic cycles, inequality and discrimination between different categories of people, etc. (Mathew T Hora, Ross J. Benhow and Bailey B Smolarek, 2018). It is a long drawn process to instil the skills and not something that can be done overnight. In the engineering field, the technical skills are abundant but the soft skills are even more absent (Fernando Almeida and Jose Morais, May 2021). The technical education and environment at the engineering colleges is important but the main factor is recruitment, training of the novice engineering students that can help them to get placed and face the competition outside (Dr. Sayyad Abdul Gani Ansar Ali, International journal of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research ISSN 2456-4567 Volume 12 Number 4). Some other challenges faced are reduced size of these courses, legal obligations regarding evaluation processes for the HIEs, difficulty in finding effective evaluation methods, etc. (Fernando Almeida and Jose Morais, 2021). Faculties' resistance to change is another major obstacle that comes in the way of implementation of these revised plans (Benjamin R. Garner, Michael Gove and Ashraf Mady, 2019). Another major challenge that was seen and proved through various researches is that the perception of the graduates vs the employers is

very different from each other. While the students feel that they have the necessary skills, the employers find them majorly lacking (Kyriaki Matsouka and Dimitrios M. Mihail, 2016).

Implications of the Study

This study aims to understand and address a major concern across all HIEs i.e how to increase the employability of fresh graduates to make them more job ready. As we all know, the value and reputation of any higher education institute is based on the number of jobs it can provide to its graduates. It is therefore necessary for HIEs to not only focus on the core skills of their students but also making them employability skill conscious. This study not only is beneficial to HIEs but also to other stakeholders like faculties, students, recruiters etc. as it provides insight into the various roles each stakeholder can play to ensure that students graduate out of colleges with a well rounded off personality making them suitable for any job. The study emphasizes the importance of a collaborative involvement of all stakeholders in making this dream a possibility.

4. Conclusion

HIEs should not only focus on educating the students but also preparing them for careers. An integrated version called Career academics should be considered in schools (Barton J. Hirsch, January 2017). The way to reduce this gap of expectations vs what students have to offer are better structure in programs offered in college, more case studies and internship offers. (Trish L Clokie and Elna Fourie, 2016). The expectations are not uniform across different employers and therefore more engagement of HIEs with employers is necessary. Some more solutions could include business simulation, roleplays, in class presentations, group activities, case studies etc, work integrated learning (WIL) and internships. Curriculum revision should involve all stakeholders like faculties, students, employers, as they all have different perceptions (Benjamin R. Garner, Michael Gove and Ashraf Mady, 2019). Some more steps that can be taken are involvement in projects to use problem solving techniques, having more connection with companies and providing more internships, visits to companies, more field work by taking students to job fairs where training sessions, workshops and interviews are part of the training, serious games, team activities, seminars etc. (Fernando Almeida and Jose Morais, 2021). Enough awareness and emphasis is not given to soft skills in the MBA courses across US and there is need for greater standardization and deliberate and structured assessment practices (Gerard Beenan, Shaun Pichler and Shahin Davoudpour, 2017). Exposing students to real work environments is the only way to teach them these skills and therefore there is urgent need to collaborate with the industry to provide more opportunities and learning to the students to make them job ready in the future (Elvy Pang Hong Kong, C. H. Leung, John Coombes, 2017). Holistic learning will help learners to not just gain information passively but actively participate to learn. We need to empower the students to be able to execute and implement their learnings and hone their thinking abilities through discussion and team work, to make them suitable for today (Surabhi Koul & Burna Nayar, 2020). The focus has to be on how to enhance the skills rather than what specific skills are being taught (Mohamad Osmani, Vishanth Weerakkody, Nitham Hindi & Tillal Eldabi, 2019). Some more suggestions include doing odd jobs to learn soft skills, get involved in various in-school activities both academic and non academic such as competitions, debates and other extra curricular activities such as presentations and case studies which are all good ways to learn soft skills while studying (Mansura Nusrat, Nafia Sultana, January 2019). The students basically need to be good at grammar, people skills, confident speaking, team speaking, social skills and adjust to their audience and basically get the work done (Lorelei A. Ortiz, Michelle Region-Sebest, and Catherine MacDermott, July 2016).

Limitation of your Study

The limitation of this study is that it is entirely based on secondary data i.e. inferences from literature review of research done in the past in the area and no primary data was collected or evaluated to understand the current scenario of soft skills and their perception and comprehension among the different stakeholders.

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