

SOCIAL COMPETENCE IN EMERGING ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

While our country is moving towards a developed nation, there is need for developing human capital for sustaining the development of socioeconomic and technological innovations of the nation. To achieve this, it is crucial for youth today to acquire social competence in order to compete on an international basis. Despite this fact, the remarkable growth in the number of unemployable graduates has highlighted the lack of social competence of our graduates. In this article, it starts with a definition of social competence and briefly discusses the seven soft skills attributes as defined by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia. It is then followed by discussing the extent to which the social competencies among youth are influenced by the school system and education approach. Finally, the article highlights the importance of social competence in determining employment chances.

Keywords: *Autonomy, Emerging Adults, Employment, Social Competency, Soft Skills*

ABSTRAK

Sedang negara kita bergerak ke arah sebuah negara maju, terdapat keperluan untuk membangunkan modal insan untuk mengekalkan pembangunan inovasi teknologi dan sosioekonomi negara. Untuk mencapai matlamat ini, adalah penting bagi belia hari ini untuk menguasai kompetensi sosial supaya boleh bersaing pada tahap antarabangsa. Namun begitu, pertumbuhan bilangan siswazah menganggur telah memperlihatkan kekurangan kompetensi sosial graduan kita. Artikel ini dimulai dengan definisi kompetensi sosial dan secara ringkas telah membahaskan tujuh kemahiran insaniah seperti yang ditakrifkan oleh Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia. Ia kemudiannya diikuti dengan perbincangan tentang sejauh mana pendekatan pendidikan dan sistem sekolah mempengaruhi kompetensi sosial dalam kalangan belia. Pada akhirnya, artikel ini mengemukakan kepentingan kompetensi sosial bagi menentukan peluang pekerjaan.

Kata Kunci: *Autonomi, Dewasa Muda, Pekerjaan, Kompetensi Sosial dan Kemahiran Insaniah*

INTRODUCTION

While our country is moving towards a developed nation, there is need for developing human capital for sustaining the development of socioeconomic and technological innovations of the nation. In light of this, increasing emphasis in being placed on human capital development in the national policies thrust under the Ninth Malaysia

Plan (2006-2010) and Tenth Malaysia Plan (2011-2015) (The Economic Planning Unit, 2006). Specifically, the most recent Tenth Malaysia plan aimed has embarked on the “Ten Big Ideas” project as means of enabling the nation to achieve a high-income economy and developed nation status by 2020. One of the ‘Big Ideas’ is attracting, nurturing, and retaining top talent or human capital within the country.

Recognizing human capital now making an important contribution to competitive advantages, it is thus required to identify the key of developing human capital. In fact, human capital refers to the possession of a set of skills relevant to the job to increase individual’s value in the capital marketplace (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Specifically, academic qualification has considered as a traditional human capital variable. In current trends, employers indeed prefer to incorporate soft skills as a part of human capital development. In such a case, the enhancement of soft skills in young graduates has been considered as a foundation mission of the education system to increase their competence (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006).

According to Sulaiman and Burke’s (2009, p.321), “good soft skills, problem-solving skills and employable value-added skills” are major attributes of career success and nation building. These skills are popularly known as social competency (Robinson, 2006). For effective understanding, this article will review past studies pertaining to youth’s social competencies. This review is divided into several sections. First, it starts with a definition of social competence and seven dimensions of soft skills according to the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia’s definition are presented. It is then followed by a review of literature on the factors that promote and hinder youth competence. Finally, the effect of social competence on employability among youth is also discussed.

DEFINITION OF SOCIAL COMPETENCE

In today’s competitive environment, social competence succinctly defined as a condition of possessing the social, emotional, and cognitive skills necessary to be adapted effectively across a variety of social settings (Welsh & Bierman, 2002). In the concept, one’s environment will place demands on the person, and the extent to which that person can efficiently respond to these demands is determined by the competence he or she has. If the person can balance between personal competence and situation demands, his or her life would probably be trouble-free. Otherwise, he or she may encounter problematic situations that may lead a troubled life.

In more recent years, social competence is closely linked to interpersonal relationships experience. Some psychologists noted that social competence is used to refer to the measure of a person’s ability to interact with others, and successfully form, facilitate, and maintain satisfying relationships (Larson, Whitton, Hauser, & Allen, 2007; Williams & Galliher, 2006). In evolutionary psychology, there are some evidences found that social animals have a higher a survival rate compared

to their solitary counterparts (Jullien & Clobert, 2000). Therefore, humans are expected to utilize their social skills that they have accumulated to connect with surrounding humans. If a person can socially connect (i.e. ability) with family members, neighbor, and the community (i.e. environmental demands), he or she will perform successfully. Failing to do this will affect his or her personal performance, and even cause psychological discomfort (Baumeister & Leary, 1996). However, as individuals move towards adulthood, the need extends beyond interpersonal skills; they need to cultivate work-related competencies such as communication, leadership skills, problem solving and decision making thinking (Roselina, 2009). This was especially crucial where young people today has to accrue a repertoire of social skills to engage in a more globalized and competitive circumstances.

SEVEN DIMENSIONS OF SOFT SKILLS ACCORDING TO MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION'S DEFINITION

Applied to the local context, social competence can be restated in terms of seven essential soft skills attributes including communication, critical thinking and problem solving, entrepreneurial, ethics and professional moral, leadership, lifelong learning and information management, and teamwork (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006). Developing these skills and utilizing them can lead to better social competence. The following paragraphs provide a brief overview of these seven skills.

1. **Communication.** Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2006) defines communication skill is the most desired by employers. Those who are strong communication skill are capable of conveying their thoughts confidently in both verbal and non-verbal forms. In the contemporary trend, this skill is crucial to act as a lubricant that allows employees to interact and socialize with people who come from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Therefore, people with strong communication skills are given priority in terms of employment opportunity.
2. **Critical thinking and problem solving.** The ability of analytical thinking and problem solving can help with making justifiable evaluations in any given situation. Besides, individuals with possessing this skill believe to objectively examine and solve specific problems with intentions of yielding the best outcomes (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006).
3. **Entrepreneurial.** Entrepreneurial can nonetheless make an important contribution to social competence. Commonly used in human resources management, Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2006) defines it relates to the formalization of industrial training, risk awareness and free entrepreneurship. These aspects can be directly correlated to locate, evaluate, and interpret business undertakings, and perhaps encourage entrepreneurial venture.

4. **Ethics and professional morals.** Within any situation, this is valuable for individuals to possess high ethical standards. The inculcation of moral values and development of a positive attitude in personal and professional realm will greatly help the odds of the career succeeding (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006).
5. **Leadership.** Equipping individuals with leadership can help with mentor the implementation of a project for the sake of the accomplishment of an ultimate goal. This skill also stresses the importance of voice out ideas constructively and handling conflict situations well (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006).
6. **Lifelong learning and information management.** Understand that social competence can be developed through training and experience, this is critical to include proactive learning style by viewing learning as an ongoing, lifelong process. Moreover, the ability of information management would nurture individuals to acquire broad knowledge in all relevant fields (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006).
7. **Teamwork.** Engagement of individual in societal and voluntary activities provides opportunities to practice work cooperatively with others. Behaviors such as sharing material, respect for others' feelings and viewpoints, and complying with team rules are emphasized under the scope of this skill. Supportive teamwork will provide a valuable source of support for individuals maintaining harmonious relationships with those whom they work with, and ultimately increase commitment to a team (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006).

FACTORS HINDER AND PROMOTE THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL COMPETENCE

Historically, academic institutions have tended to serve as centers for moral and intellectual development. However, there has been received many employers' complaints about the levels of social competence among graduates. Previous studies indicated that this fact was a result of school system and education approach (Ahmad, 1998; Chan & Mousley 2005; Thang, 2009). In fact, it is common criticism that our school system is too exam-oriented, in which "A" grade is very important to ensure academic success. Straight "A" has been the sole focus of many students who were pressured by their parents, peers, and schools. As a result, many students adopt a robotic lifestyle by routinely devoting time to attend tuition classes for the preparation of the upcoming examinations. Accordingly, they may only be trained in rote learning style, where displaying a high degree of memorizing facts and figure during their 11 to 13 years of primary and secondary education. This learning style applies the brakes on social competencies such as intellectual initiative and analytical skills.

On a parallel note, education approach is also another salient factor that brings down the levels of the social competence. For a decade, it has been suggested that young people benefit in terms of social competence when they are perceived autonomous (Arnett, 2000; Roselina, 2009). In other words, those who lack in autonomy are associated with lack of competency concerning their social ability. Conventionally, parents play a major role in fostering children's autonomy (Arnett, 2000). Of further interest to us, teachers also play a particularly important role in determining whether younger feels that they are autonomous. Perceptions of freedom to express personal thoughts and feelings from their teachers might invoke younger to undergo a profound shift in the sense of self. However, in collective culture, young people always tend to be submissive to their authority agents such as teachers (Thang & Azarina, 2007). That is, the deference to authority is highly valued and challenge these authority agents are socially unacceptable. One of the biggest issues arise from this situation in education system is children tend to view teachers as knowledge givers instead of facilitators. This situation has referred to teacher-centered or spoonfed education approach. In such case, they only will wait the teachers to deliver knowledge base to them. Without putting self-effort, they might experience adverse effect in terms of autonomy development.

The sad reality is that many young adults maintained the same learning approach when they entered tertiary education institutions. This notion was consistently supported in three previous findings of Thang and her colleagues (2003; 2007; 2009). In earlier studies, Thang (2003) documented local students had been less autonomy to learn English. Same study was replicated at three public universities in Malaysia, which similar conclusions were reported (Thang & Azarina, 2007). In her recent study, Thang (2009) further found that students from both the public and private universities preferred teacher-centered approach. Instead of promoting their autonomy, a high proportion of students favored teachers to be in-charge and this included telling them their mistakes, guiding them and motivating them. The study further highlighted university students seemed to exhibit a less autonomous position compared to college counterparts. Not unsurprisingly, various employers have kept saying that they have no problem finding candidates with superior academic or technical qualifications but experience difficulties in acquiring graduates with good soft skills (Roselina, 2009).

THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL COMPETENCE ON EMPLOYABILITY AMONG YOUTH

As noted earlier, human capital involves a set of skills that correspond to the job. Henceforth, Kemper (1999) identifies two distinct forms of skills: hard skills and soft skills. Specifically, hard skill refers to having knowledge about a specific activity and/ or technical skills. Training of such skills for fresh graduates is somewhat easy, given that they have attained the basic knowledge in college. On the contrary, the term soft skills, which are usually referred to as "nontechnical skills," are not easily taught although these skills are highly desired in the work-world.

Traditionally, educational qualification is a key gauge of the graduates' hard skills. Potential candidates who have higher qualifications in education are more likely to be shortlisted for career opportunities. Without doubt, Hunter & Leiper (1993) regarded that the possession of a degree is a useful yardstick for career initiation. It has therefore prompted youth to concentrate solely on their studies for academic excellence while disregarding the acquisition of soft skills. Despite the fact that higher GPA grants more technical knowledge, it is no longer a symbol of creativity, entrepreneurship, and innovation. Thus, the overemphasis on hard skills will result in an imbalance and cause a lack of soft skills that the graduates should have. As a result of this, it is not surprising that graduates are no longer secured of a job although having outstanding academic credentials (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006).

In fact, a substantial amount of research has chronicled a significant positive relationship between graduates' competency levels and their employment (Singh & Singh, 2008; Sail & Alavi, 2007; Sheldon & Thornthwaite, 2005). The point is enlightened employers today not only place value on hard skills, but also emphasize on soft skills such as negotiation skills, leadership, teamwork, and problem solving skills when looking for potential employees. In other words, they regard it is not enough to be solely academically strong, yet candidates must also be able to work comfortably with people from different cultures, to solve problems creatively, to write and speak well, and to critically think. No doubt, to ensure an adequate youth social competence level for the 21st, both hard and soft skills are viewed as strategic weapons (Caudron, 1999).

Nonetheless, there are some researchers have increasingly emphasized the importance of the promotion of soft skills in employees to enable graduates to take the opportunity further. For instance, Roselina (2009) suggested that competency levels have enhanced success at work because individuals with social expertise demonstrate better skills in terms of interpersonal, self-management, communication, problem solving, and teamwork skills. Even in the selection and interview levels, many prospective employers preferred to hire graduates who were able to communicate and "sell" themselves. This would indicate the ability of the person to contribute positively to the company. Spencer and Spencer (1993) also asserted that high levels of generic competencies are positively correlated with high levels of career success. The competencies here included a broader base of general skills, a higher level of technology knowledge, and a commitment to lifelong learning to upgrade relevant skills.

Unfortunately, there is considerable evidence showed that graduates today have not proven themselves yet to the employers in terms of their social competence (Roselina, 2009). From the viewpoint of prospective employers, they are generally academically proficient but lacking in soft skills such as communication and analytic skills. These employers even claimed that academic performance alone will not make a graduate to be a valuable employee. Clearly, it is undeniable that

our education systems are not yet meeting industry requirements. Owing to that, the problem of unemployment among graduates has received all the attention since the 1990s (Lim, 2008). Their high unemployment rate is defined by statistics such as, in a given survey, the number of jobless graduates had increased from 65000 to 71600 although overall Malaysia unemployment rate has been reduced (Aruna, 2011, July 17). According to a report released by Higher Education Ministry, 30,000 jobless graduates fail to secure a job six months after their graduated (Lopez, 2011, Feb 6). It is noticeable that social competence emerges as an important precursor to the success or failure of a career venture.

Interestingly, graduates have a different view, as a substantial number of unemployed graduates considered themselves as not lacking any necessary skills, but attributed their failure to not having the necessary “connection” (National Higher Education Research Institute, 2003). This finding is consistent with results from Association of Graduate Recruiters (2006), noted that graduates regarded that “soft” skills come naturally with them and are part of their personality traits. Not surprisingly, young people’s perceptions of their social competence are always appeared positive. Though graduates ignore the fact that they are social incompetence, perhaps the weak in written and spoken English was reflected it. Some graduates although they have an A in their SPM English may find it very difficult to converse and write in English. This is seen when many graduates remained passive during public speaking, oral presentation, and discussion (Samuel & Baker, 2008). This is supported by other researchers such as Birrell’s (2006) who showed that Malaysia college students were not proficient enough in English in comparison with other overseas students in an Australian university. It is very unfortunate because English is commonly used for communication across a wide range of domains. Therefore, this may help to explain why graduates have lower labor market prospects.

CONCLUSION

The message from foregoing studies reveals the association between social competence and securing job opportunities. Although graduates often view themselves as capable, competitive, and well qualified, there are much evidence shows some mismatch between labor demands and graduates’ qualities. In accordance with employers’ perception towards social incompetent of local graduates, there has been deemed important for relevant practitioners to work collaboratively with young people to overcome the current unemployment trends. In the meantime, knowing that the paper qualification is not the only requirement looked by employers, the lack of soft skills among graduates has led prospective employers refuse to hiring fresh graduates. These events illustrate the urgent need to identify weakness in our education system and revamp it through periodic reassessment in order to produce competent graduates that fit to labor market demands. It would be better if higher education institutions can provide appropriate skills training that oriented towards work-related competencies for the sake of increasing their chance of being employed. Even though graduates are trained with soft skills, enforcement is ultimately left to

the individual. Therefore, graduates themselves should change their attitude and mindset in equipment industry-relevant skills to compete locally and internationally.

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