REMODELLING CURRICULUM: EMBEDDING SOFT SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

With a view to face the challenges of globalization which is in line with the era of information technology, a nation is strongly dependent on the intellectual abilities and skills of its citizens. It is widely held that knowledge, skills, and resourcefulness of people are critical to sustain economic development and social activity in a knowledge-driven society. Given the current high-paced growth and dynamic investment climate in India, the demand for knowledge workers with high levels of technical and soft skills is increasing day by day. Human resources with positive attitude towards life and work and germane skills for advanced knowledge economy are becoming important in today's high momentum, globalised society. The development of human capital is thus essential since it enables a nation to envision its mission. Needless to say, quality human capital emerges from a carefully designed and well-planned education system. Thus, institutions of higher learning play a critical role in producing human capital equipped with technical knowledge, life skills and soft meet the demands and expectations of the economy.

The aim of this paper is to explore to what extent soft skills are considered important for quality professionals and if so, which skills need to be developed among students by institutions of higher learning and in what manner. It also provides a critical review of 'Sahayog' programme, a Soft Skill Development Initiative of the Department of Collegiate Education in Karnataka.

Key words: Soft skills, participatory learning, team-building, peer learning, holistic approach, Stand-alone model, Embedded model

INTRODUCTION

The education industry is one of the fastest developing sector worldwide, generating large scale revenues and employment. All are seeking to improve their institutions, and to respond better to higher social and economic expectations. With the changing scenario and economy, the education sector no more comprises the traditional institutions, especially in the developed communities. The demand of the situation is such that one cannot solely depend on the traditional methods of teacher-centered instruction and school management. While education in such institutions is much beyond the class-room teaching, the focus is on skill development among learners.

Two American studies, one by James R. Evans (1996) and the other by Weinstein et al. (1998), looked into whether higher education institutions were doing the right things and doing things right in providing quality education. Evans found that companies attach a lot of importance to individual employee's quality attitude Further investigation indicated that graduates often did not have the requisite skills. After graduation, many job-seekers needed company soft skills training courses to hone in their employability skills. Evans also observed that in the past, higher education has apparently not succeeded in teaching the required knowledge and skills. The second study, carried out by Weinstein, Petrick and Saunders, focused on the range of courses available. This study also supported Evans' conclusions. The main expectations of the corporate world are either insufficiently covered by higher education or not covered at all. The researchers therefore called for greater awareness of business needs and improvement of courses. Kemenade opines that the traditional type of education is probably insufficient to meet the real needs of the corporate world. Not only should the courses and teaching objectives be updated, but also should the role of the teaching staff be redefined in order to develop 'soft' skills among the students.

DEFINITION

The term 'soft skills' is widely used but scarcely defined. Conrad (1999) states uncertainty of the precise origin of use of the term 'soft skills'. Early reference was found in military training documents of the early 1970s. In a 1972 Training Manual the US Army defines soft skills as job-related skills involving actions affecting primarily people and paper, e.g. inspecting troops, supervising office personnel, conducting studies, preparing maintenance reports, preparing efficiency reports, designing bridge structures" (Fry and Whitmore, 1972). Many definitions, however, are vague. Joubert et al. (2006): "There is no ultimate definition of soft skills, but they include such skills as ethics, attitudes, interpersonal abilities, communication and being a lifelong learner."

Goleman (1998) presented a model of emotional intelligence with twenty-five competencies arrayed in five clusters!

- The Self-awareness Cent and self-des emotional awareness, accurate self-assessment and self-confidence);
- The Self-regulatiss Claptainly des self-control, trustworthiness conscientiousness, adaptability and innovation);
- The Motivation Cluster (includes achievement drive, commitment initiative and optimism);
- The Empathy Cluster (includes understanding others, developing others, service orientation, leveraging diversity and political awareness);
- The Social Skills Cluster (includes influence, communication, conflict management, leadership, change catalyst, building bonds, collaboration and co-operation and team capabilities.

Soft skills have more to do with who we are than what we know. As such, soft skills encompass the character traits that decide how well one interacts with others, and are usually a definite part of one's personality. Whereas hard skills can be learned and perfected over time, soft skills are more difficult to acquire and change.

Core Life Skills to be instilled in Students

Major soft skills to be instilled in Students in higher education institutions include the following:

- ✓ **Self-management skills-** A person's willpower, strong determination and sharp focus on goals. Includes ability to control emotions and overcome setbacks; ability to take initiative, risk and tolerate stress.
- ✓ **Communication/persuasion skills-** Ability to deliver ideas clearly, effectively and with confidence, either orally or in writing; ability to practice active listening skill and respond; ability to present clearly and confidently to the audience/
- ✓ **Critical thinking and problem-solving skills;** Ability to identify and analyze problems in difficult situation and make justifiable evaluation, ability to think beyond, ability to make conclusion based on valid proof.
- ✓ **Interpersonal skills**- Ability to build a good rapport, interact and work effectively with others.
- ✓ **Life-long Learning and Information Management Skill-**Ability Lo find and manage relevant information from various sources, ability to receive new ideas and perform autonomous learning.
- ✓ **Entrepreneurship skill-Ability to propose business opportunities;** ability to build, explore and seek business opportunities and jobs; ability to be self-employed.
- ✓ **Ethics, Moral & Professional**-Ability to develop a code of conduct, understand economic, environmental, social and cultural aspects of life professionally.
- ✓ **Leadership skill-Ability to understand and take turns as** a leader and follower alternatively; ability to supervise members of a group

IMPLEMENTATION

In general, the development of soft skills among students via formal teaching and learning activities takes two models: (1) stand alone and (2) embedded.

1. Stand Alone Subject Model - This model uses the approach of training and providing opportunities to students to develop soft skills through specific courses that are carefully planned for this purpose. Usually, these subjects are offered as university courses (such as English language, entrepreneurship, etc) The stand alone subject model can also be initiated by encouraging students to sign up for several additional courses which can be credited to be a minor course which is different from the initial program. For example, a student who is pursuing an engineering program is encouraged to take minor courses in management or mass communication.

2. Embedded Model - This model uses the approach of embedding the soft skills in the teaching and learning activities across the curriculum. It does not require the student to take special courses as in the stand alone subject model. Instead the students are trained to master the soft skills through various formal teaching and learning activities that are planned and carried out using specific strategies and methods. Learning outcomes related to the soft skills will be integrated and be part of the learning outcomes of the respective courses. This is followed by implementing several teaching and learning activities such as questioning, class discussion, brainstorming, team work, presentation, role play and simulation, task/project, field work and site visits. In general, the development of soft skills using the embedded model requires the expertise of the lecturers to use various teaching strategies and methods that are entirely student centered.Higher education institutes are encouraged to use the embedded model rather than focuses on stude model. This is because ded mobedded model focuses on student-centered learning, suchas experiential learning, problem-based learning and gives students practical experience.

Development of soft skills through support programs - This Doolves programs and activities that are created, developed this used to support soft skills either directly or indirectly. In generat the program and activity can be divided into two areas: (1) academic support programs and (ii) non-academic support programs. The academic support program helps students acquire soft skills that are associated with academic matters. The non-academic support program assists students in acquiring soft skills that are not related to academic matters but more related to the personal and professional development of the students. Most of the programs are in the form of co-curricular and extra co-curricular activities.

The development of soft skills through campus life activities: Most university students spend half of their academic life living in university residences on campus. As such, institutions of higiver learning should use this golden opportunity to develop their soft skills. This can be done through carefully crafted programs and carrying them out in conducive campus grounds.

Life Skills Training Programme in Govt. First Grade Colleges- A Review

During the Academic Year 2009-10, the Department of Collegiate Education, Govt. of Karnataka, launched a novel initiative called 'Sahayog' to impart various skills to the undergraduate students studying in Govt. First Grade Colleges. 'Sahayog' is a concept having the primary objective to improve the employability of undergraduate students of Government Colleges by imparting training to them in vocational and life skills. This project is intended to develop creativity, critical thinking, interpersonal and personal management skills that are very much needed to prepare the students to face the challenges of life. The project is implemented in joint collaboration with the Department of Collegiate Education (DCE) and Karnataka Vocational Training and Skill Development Corporation (KVTSDC). A manual on life skill has been prepared both in English and Kannada and given to the students.

The first phase of project was implemented during the Academic Year 2009-10 in which nearly 7000 students from 112 Government colleges of the State were trained. After this successful Endeavour, in the second phase 15.000 students from 223 Government First Grade Colleges of the State opted for training. Of the total 120 hours of training, 80 hours are spent on imparting Vocational skills training and the remaining 40 hours are spent on giving life skill training to the participants.

Through a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) corporate training agencies that understand the skill requirements in companies have been selected to impart training. Sessions are specially designed to impart a particular skill and involve some of all of the following techniques:

- ✓ Class discussions
- ✓ Brainstorming
- ✓ Demonstration and guided practice
- ✓ Role plays
- ✓ Audio and visual presentations-e.g., arts, music, theatre,
- ✓ dance
- ✓ Educational games and simulations
- ✓ Case studies
- ✓ Story-telling
- ✓ Debates

The peer training approach was also followed. As a result, the trainees were found to have developed certain skills like communication skills, interaction skills, critical thinking skills etc. which enabled them to seek employment in companies with new enthusiasm and hope. The job fairs that followed the training in various places saw a large number of students being placed with reputed companies with good packages. It has generated a lot of

interest among government college students, especially from the rural belts There is a new found confidence and zeal among them. Encouraged by the success and overwhelming response from various stakeholders, the Department is now entering the third phase of this venture. This is a clear evidence to show that learners are eager to receive life skills training and that such a training enhances various skills and prepares them to accept challenges in life.

CONCLUSION

The gap between the needs of the industry and aspirations of the academic community is very large and it is widely held that howledge, skills, and resourcefulness of people are critical to sustain economic development and social activity in a knowledge- Stiven society. It is often said that hard skills will get a person an interview but he needs soft skills to get the job. Soft skills empower individuals to flourish and prosper in the competitive world and adapt to the environment in which they live in. The development of humant capital is important and necessary since it enables the nation to crystallize its vision and mission. Quality human capital comes from a quality education process. Universities are miniature industries generating human resources. Thus, institutions of higher learning play a very important role in producing quality human capital that can meet the demands and expectations of the society. The teaching and learning processes in institutions of higher learning must be capable of providing such knowledge and skills to the students.

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