# INVESTIGATING IMPEDING FACTORS OF GENERIC SKILLS' TEACHING AND LEARNING IN PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF PERCEPTION BY PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS' STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

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## ABSTRACT

*This study discusses the impeding factors of Generic Skills' (GS) Teaching and Learning in Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEI) in Malaysia. A total of 365 respondents from PHEIs' Year 3 and 4 students were involved in this study. Data was collected through questionnaires and interview. Reliability and validity of the instrument have been proven through Cronbach Coefficient values and Rasch Measurement Model. The results showed: (1) There are four main impeding factors that hindered GS in Teaching & Learning based on the students' perception which is lack of time, extra workload), multiple responsibilities and students' own attitudes, and (2) incompatibility factor of PHEIs' curriculum is not a major obstacle in GS' Teaching & Learning. The study also shows that there is a need for PHEIs and policy makers to improve the existing GS module as well as PHEIs' policies, taking into account the impeding factors.*

**Keywords:** Generic skills, PHEI students, PHEI, Students' Perception, Teaching & Learning, Employability.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Malaysia have started focusing on generic skills (GS) due to the implementation of Malaysian Qualification Framework (MQF) in 2006 (Sharifah Hapsah, 2006) that are needed in forming a balanced human capital (Biggs, 2003; Smith and Bath,

2006; Allan and Clarke, 2007), the formation of outstanding individuals in terms of personal, interpersonal and organizational (Birkett, 1993; Coll and Zegwaard, 2006), has become the priority of corporate world to recruit future graduates with work experience and sufficient GS (Ahmad, 2005; Syed, 2005; Mohd *et al.*, 2011) as well as to better prepare students in the work field (Ranjit and Wahab, 2008).

In terms of employers' priority and needs, they are giving priority to employees who have a variety of skills according to studies by (Mason, 1992); (Quek, 1996a); (Lee, 2000); (Ball, 1989); (Bould and Middleton, 2003); (Kanapathy, 2001); (Schroder, 1989); (Jacobsen, 1993) ; (Lee *et al.*, 2001). However, the present scenario showed poor command of GS among the graduates in this country according to (Malaysian Employers Federation, 2005); (Hasliza, 2002); (Ungku Harun, 2004); (Ahmad, 2005) and (Ranjit, 2009) and do not meet the employer's standard (Bank Negara Malaysia, 2003; Cruez, 2003; Cox and King, 2006; Sonia, 2008). This contributes to a very low level of employability and serious cause of unemployment among this group (Cruez, 2003; Ungku Harun, 2004; Malaysian Employers Federation, 2005; Razak, 2005; Hariati, 2007; Ranjit, 2009).

The situation occurred due to the various obstacles that exist in GS T & L in HEI. There are HEIs in the country that have put less emphasis on the mastery of GS among their students (Asma and Lim, 2000; Lee, 2000; Quek, 2000; Kanapathy, 2001). In fact, not all of the HEIs especially private institutions, provide clear T & L methods in inculcating and enhancing GS among their students as well as explicit in nature (Zalizan *et al.*, 2007). It is also stated that though GS T & L can increase the employability of students, it would undermine the value of academic learning and higher education institutions should only serve for the purpose of learning process, rather than aiming to get a job and educators are not supposed to follow the market trend (Dzulkifli, 2009).

Based on the literature review and problem statement, the objective of this study is to identify the main impeding factors in implementing GS T & L based on the perception of students in private universities.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is a quantitative study as the primary method of data collection that involved a total of 365 respondents consisting of PHEI's students in year 3 and 4 from 11 private higher educational institutions (PHEIS) with the university status in the country. Meanwhile, qualitative data obtained through interviews involved 2 students from PHEI.

The construction of the questionnaire items involved with the impeding construct in implementing GS T & L was adapted and modified from a study carried out by Zalizan *et al.* (2007). Questionnaire items used Cronbach Alpha Coefficients to measure the reliability of the items and Rasch model analysis to evaluate the validity of the items. To classify coefficient of Cronbach Alpha coefficients, the classification is based on the reliability index by Babie (1992) and adopted by Azhar (2006) and Kamarul (2010).

**Table-1.** Classification Index Cronbach Alpha

| Indicator | Cronbach Alpha Value |
|---|---|
| >0.90 | Very high |
| 0.70 -0.89 | High |
| 0.30- 0.69 | Moderate |
| <0.30 | Low |

**Source:** Babie (1992)

Cronbach Alpha value that is adequate for a Social Science study is 0.60 (Nunnally, 1978; Rahayah and Rashid, 2001; Mohd, 2005). Cronbach Alpha values obtained from this survey is 0635 and in the moderate scale (0.30-0.69). However, the value of 0.60 for this study was sufficient. Meanwhile, the interpretation of the data is made in the form of frequency as shown in Table 2.0 below.

**Table-2.** Frequency Percentage Interpretation

| Frequency Percentage | Interpretation |
|---|---|
| 75%  - 100% | Very frequently |
| 50%  - 74% | Frequently |
| 0%    - 49% | Rarely |

**Source:** Alias (1999); Tuckman (1999); Gay and Airasian (2003)

The background of PHEI's students who are the respondents in this study consists of 53.2% male and 46.8% female students. Students from the Faculty of Science / Technical are 54.5%, while the students not from the Faculty of Science / Technical are 45.5%. 4th year student respondents of the study are 25.2% and 74.8% for 3rd year students.

## 3. FINDINGS

The findings of the study have been able to prove that all of the items used in the questionnaire to measure the construct of the obstacles in GS T&L were able to measure these constructs. Validity of these items has used Rasch Measurement Model as shown in Table 3.0 below.

**Table-3.** Analysis of Item Validation of Impeding Factors in GS Development Using the Rasch Measurement Mode.

| Entry Number | Total Score | Count | Measure | Model S.E. | INFIT MNSQ | INFIT ZSTD | OUTFIT MNSQ | OUTFIT ZSTD | PT Measure CORR. | PT Measure EXP. | Exact Match OBS% | Exact Match EXP% | Item |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2 | 403 | 365 | 1.40 | .19 | 1.03 | .3 | .99 | .0 | .36 | .37 | 88.0 | 88.7 | EII |
| 1 | 422 | 365 | .82 | .16 | .97 | -.3 | .99 | .0 | .42 | .41 | 83.3 | 83.0 | EI |
| 8 | 442 | 365 | .35 | .15 | .98 | -.3 | .92 | -.7 | .46 | .44 | 77.3 | 77.7 | EVIII |
| 10 | 507 | 365 | -.80 | .13 | 1.10 | 2.2 | 1.14 | 2.0 | .47 | .53 | 64.7 | 67.3 | EX |
| 6 | 488 | 365 | -.49 | .13 | 1.06 | 1.2 | 1.08 | 1.1 | .47 | .51 | 63.7 | 68.3 | EVI |
| 3 | 432 | 365 | .57 | .13 | .92 | -.9 | .82 | -1.4 | .47 | .42 | 80.7 | 80.3 | EIII |
| 9 | 466 | 365 | -.11 | .13 | .99 | -.1 | .98 | -.2 | .48 | .48 | 73.3 | 72.2 | EIX |
| 4 | 471 | 365 | -.20 | .13 | .98 | -.4 | .93 | -.8 | .50 | .48 | 69.7 | 71.3 | EIV |
| 7 | 466 | 365 | -.11 | .13 | .95 | -.8 | .91 | -1.0 | .51 | .48 | 72.0 | 72.2 | EVII |
| 5 | 545 | 365 | -1.42 | .13 | 1.05 | 1.0 | 1.03 | .4 | .55 | .57 | 63.7 | 69.2 | EV |
| MEAN | 464.2 | 365.0 | .00 | .14 | 1.00 | .2 | .98 | -.1 | | | 73.6 | 75.0 | |
| S.D. | 40.0 | .0 | .78 | .02 | .05 | .9 | .09 | 1.0 | | | 8.1 | 6.7 | |

From table 3.0, Point Measure Correlation-PTMEA CORR for items of 10 constructs that is available in the questionnaire. All items indicate positive values (> 0.30), ranging from 0.36 to 0.55. According to Bond and Fox (2001) CORR PTMEA positive values validated that the items have measured the construct it is supposed to be measured. Therefore, all items for impeding factors are working in tandem, in measuring 10 items of impeding factors of GS development. This analysis is a fundamental step to measure the validity of the constructs used to design and validate questionnaires. Results from the analysis of the reliability and validity of the items have concluded that the construct for impeding factors that are used in the questionnaire are: i) insufficient time, ii) workload, iii) various responsibilities, iv) student attitudes, v) university culture, vi) too exam-oriented, vii) the attitudes and abilities of lecturers, viii) insufficient facilities, ix) English language proficiency and x) curriculum incompatibility.

Based on the impeding factors that have been identified, the results show factors that become major obstacles in GS T & L according to the perceptions of PHEI students is the insufficient time factor (89.6%), followed by work load (84.4), various responsibility (81.6%) and attitudes (78.9%). These four factors are the main impeding factors of GS T & L among the students based on the frequency percentage interpretation as it is on the very frequently scale (75% -100%). Overall, the impeding factors of GS development based on the PHEI students' perception are shown in Table 4.0:

**Table- 4.** Frequency of Impeding Factors in Generic Skills Implementation from PHEIs Students' Perceptions

| Factor Category | Frequency (%) | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|
| Insufficient time | 89.6 | Very frequently |
| Work load | 84.4 | Very frequently |
| Various responsibilities | 81.6 | Very frequently |
| Students' Attitude | 78.9 | Very frequently |
| University's culture (PHEI) | 72.3 | Frequently |
| Too exam-oriented | 72.3 | Frequently |
| Lecturer's attitude and ability | 71.0 | Frequently |
| Inadequate facilities | 66.3 | Frequently |
| English profiency | 61.1 | Frequently |
| Curriculum incompability | 50.7 | Frequently |

Frequency percentage of factors such as university culture, too exam-oriented, attitude and ability of the lecturer is placed on the frequently scale. This shows that these factors are also major obstacles in developing GS based on the students' perception. Meanwhile, factors such as insufficient facilities and English language proficiency will moderately affect the GS T & L. However, factor like curriculum incompatibility is not perceived as a major obstacle for these students in learning GS.

Besides, the findings from the quantitative data are also supported by data obtained from interviews with 2 students from private institutions. Interview with Student 1 (S1) and Student 2 (S2) showed negative attitudes of the students on the importance of GS and even considered GS T&L as a burden. S1 and S2 responses are in the following excerpt:

".... don't need to have generic skills. Uh ... why do I have to learn this skill .., why do I have to study organizational leadership ... people say if I work later..for the people .. I want this job, I will weld and all…operate machine and all , I do not have to use this GS .. at least I can talk, can make people understand, that is enough .. Why do I need GS? People really feel that this really burdens them ... (S2)

S2 statement is supported by S1 responses as follows:

"Like I was saying earlier, it comes from the student's attitude ... and also coming from lecturer's attitude... lecturer's ability .... I mean there are lecturers who do not know how to talk ... or deliver contents. So, how to show to the student that soft skills are important? Others, I think we're too focussed on exam, lecturer is trying to finish off the syllabus, so they do not really care about these soft skills "(S1).

The most interesting findings of the two methods are students' perception of lecturers' attitude and ability as one of the main factors contributing to the GS T & L barriers in HEI. Moreover, in terms of percentage, this factor contributes a high percentage of 71%. This finding is actually in line with the study of Ahmad and Hisham (2009) who found that the role of the lecturer can improve the ability and competency of students. This indirectly demonstrated that the lecturer is a mentor to students. There is a demand for lecturers that can be role models to the students and capable in many respects. However, there are still many students who question the quality of the lecturers for their teaching is boring, not associating knowledge with the current state of the world and consequently make T & L devoid of fun (Robiah, 2000). Apart from the views of the students, the study by Sufean (2002) and Chua and Adi (2002) found that the lecturers are not skilled in dealing with teaching as well as lack of creativity. This is consistent with the findings that found that teachers who are less experienced and high trade-off of staffs among PHEIs' lecturers (Baharudin, 2003; Baharin and Magrit, 2010) and moderate commitment of academic staff (Rusinah, 2005). Negative perception of the students on the lecturer is a also a form of barriers to GS T & L. This data is actually in line with a study carried out by Jeffrey and David (2007) which show time factor as the key factor that caused most organizations to face problem in providing employees' T & L. In fact, these findings supported the findings of the study by Zalizan *et al.* (2007) and Baharin and Magrit (2010).

Based on the interview data, this study is also able to grasp the impeding issues in detailed as perceived by the students as follows:

1. Lack of knowledge and understanding of lecturers in GS will lead to inability to deliver and implement aspects of GS effectively.

2. Lack or absence of exposure to the students on the GS concept will cause them not to appreciate the current T & L conducted.

3. An additional burden on students and with the addition of the subjects will increase tuition fees to students.

4. Narrow knowledge related to the GS interests and needs of students for their future.

Shortage or obstacles must be overcome before GS T & L can be implemented. It should be taken into account and not be ruled out by the PHEI in order to achieve T & L objective.

## 4. CONCLUSION

It is very clear that every aspect of an individual's life and work requires GS as the main criteria in addition to technical skills as a basic skill. Thus, the main factors that impede the increase of GS T & L such as workload, time constraints, various responsibilities and students' negative attitudes need to be addressed by the students, higher education institutions, the Ministry of Higher Education and also school authority and parents. Lecturers' role is critical in ensuring that GS T & L can be implemented effectively, the negative perception of lecturers and efficiency needs to be changed and improved. Moreover, GS development methods need to be implemented as standalone methods, across the curriculum and the method is carried out indirectly. It shall be the responsibility of HEIs to provide their students with the aspects of GS that is in high demand, especially from the organization as well as to fulfill the dream of the government to produce excellent human capital.

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