



## The importance of soft skills acquisition by teachers in higher education institutions

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### Abstract

The aim of this research was to explore the soft skills acquisition of lecturers and to thus determine the importance of soft skills in the teaching profession. A mixed method was employed utilizing a questionnaire and interview protocol as research instruments. In total, eight lecturers and 163 students from four programs of an international college in Khon Kaen, Thailand were selected using a purposive sampling method. The quantitative findings indicated that teamwork and lifelong learning skills were the most important soft skills acquired by lecturers from all of four programs, except for tourism management. In addition, the qualitative findings revealed the importance aspects of soft skills acquisition are: (i) delivery of effective and quality teaching; (ii) career development and enrichment, and (iii) managing student skills. In summary, the findings contribute to and substitute for training and provide significant pronouncements towards the knowledgeable and dexterous development of the country as a total.

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### Introduction

Soft skills are personal traits that enhance a lecturer's interactions, job performance, and career viewpoints. Pachauri and Yadav (2014) defined soft skills as personality traits, social gracefulness, fluency in language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism to varying degrees. Soft skills should be adopted as an ordinary feature of a lecturer's selection of community skills and character traits (Tang & Tan, 2015). A good lecturer is expected to be committed to his or her work and to have the ability to take the initiative.

Teaching is a multifaceted performance, demanding a wide range of knowledge and skills containing hard and soft skills to successfully accomplish the burdens of the classroom (Tang, Hashim, & Mohd Yunus, 2014a). Teaching is a social activity that comprises communal collaboration between lecturer and students (Lim, Tang, & Tan, 2013).

Teaching style can be considered as the sum of behaviors. As a result, the talent of teaching does not only comprise a modest transmission of knowledge from lecturer to students. In its place, it is a multifaceted procedure that eases and affects the process of student learning (Prasertcharoensuk & Tang, 2016). Soft skills are relational and social skills are a necessity for lecturers who toil in a high-performance setting, ultimately promoting efficiency (Tang, Ching, & Mohd Shahid, 2015a).

Soft skills are considered to boost competency and to consequently upsurge one's ability in subsidizing communal progression and transformation (Duncan & Dunifon, 2012; Romedios, 2012). As stated by Salleh, Sulaiman, and Talib (2010), soft skills are the most operative instruments and methods for higher education institutions to appraise the future capabilities of lecturers' and students. Therefore, recognizing and evolving the importance of soft skills acquisition has been a thought-provoking task for curriculum designers (Hodges & Burchell, 2003). A cautiously designed and well-organized education system is perilous to

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the emergence of such human capital. Thus, higher education institutions play a significant part in yielding human capital to meet the requests and expectations of society and the nation by producing skills for uptake by the respective students (Pachauri & Yadav, 2014).

Soft skills acquisition is often viewed as something that happens in the normal course of events and it has the potential to transfer and to create knowledge based on the local requirements (Tang, Nethanomsak, & Ariratana, 2014b). Subramaniam's (2013) study indicated that lecturers have acknowledged the associated role of the soft skills in the curriculum amalgamation, but they fail to integrate them in their instructions. Subramaniam emphasized that soft skills acquisition is relevant for students; intrinsically the lecturers should undertake more widespread preparation and progression to successfully impart soft skills acquisition in their teaching. The understanding of soft skills itself is vital for lecturers to vary their teaching approaches for the students. As teaching becomes a two-way process, it will convert to being organized and operative depending on the understanding, talents, and attitudes of the teachers (Adediwura & Baba, 2007).

According to Schulz (2008), lecturers play a vital part in constructing the soft skills of a student. Intrinsically, a well-versed and designed education system is desired to cultivate such human capital (Pachauri & Yadav, 2014). This study addressed an urgent need to take on the contest of globalization which is heavily reliant on the capacity of a nation's inhabitants to be exceedingly rational and skilled.

## Literature Review

Tang, Mohd Yunus, and Hashim's (2015b) study showed that the absence of excellence among lecturers is related to the idea that lecturers have not sufficiently obtained soft skills during their own learning in higher education institutions. In addition, the qualitative results from 15 novice teachers revealed that soft skills were identified as essential and pertinent to their teaching assignments and were significant to teaching tasks. These skills are communication, critical thinking and problem solving, teamwork, lifelong learning and management of information, ethics (moral and professional), and leadership skills.

Tang et al. (2015a) examined the association between soft skills learned by teachers directed to their excellence in teaching. Their findings indicated that 190 teachers from three High-Performing Primary Schools in Penang, Malaysia possessed the four soft skills namely teamwork/collective work ( $\bar{X} = 3.42$ ,  $SD = .39$ ), communication ( $\bar{X} = 3.29$ ,  $SD = .39$ ), critical thinking and problem-solving ( $\bar{X} = 3.21$ ,  $SD = .37$ ), and leadership skills ( $\bar{X} = 3.20$ ,  $SD = .45$ ). Additionally, Pearson correlation analysis showed that all four soft skills were significantly and positively related to excellence in teaching. Finally, the result also disclosed that critical thinking and problem-solving, teamwork/collective work skills are significant predictors which added 40.3 percent and 3.5 percent, respectively, to the variance of excellence and effective teaching practice. Tang et al. (2015a) concluded that soft skills should be instilled in teachers with the intention of creating excellence and effective teaching practice.

According to Tang et al. (2015b), soft skills supplement hard skills and have a substantial effect on the capability of teachers to organize their work. Their study was intended to explore the breach related to soft skills gained from instructional professional exercise compared to soft skills required in schools amongst the 250 novice teachers purposively selected from all the secondary schools in Malaysia. Their findings showed that teamwork and communication skills were the two significant soft skills not only desperately desired in their work but also extended from their teaching exercise package. Furthermore, t-test analysis revealed that there was a significant difference between the gained and desired level of soft skills. All the mean scores of soft skills desired in the work were greater than what they had gained from their teaching exercise package.

Tang and Tan (2015) examined the ethics, moral and professional skill of novice teachers in secondary schools of Malaysia from the opinions of their superintendents. Their results were triangulated with the self-rating data completed by the novice teachers themselves. Tang and Tan employed a qualitative method involving focus group interviews to gather data from 31 superintendents and a quantitative technique involving a self-rating questionnaire by the 250 novice teachers. Their quantitative findings indicated that ethics, moral and professional skill were the second least-desired soft skills after entrepreneurship skill as stated by the 250 novice teachers. Nevertheless, their quantitative results appeared to be opposed to the qualitative findings. The 31 superintendents stated that the most desired soft skills that the majority of the novice teachers were missing was ethic, moral and professional skills.

Tang, Tan, and Vetriveilmany (2015c) investigated the critical problems of soft skills development through teaching specialized exercise. They employed an in-depth interview method to collect data from two teacher educators who had more than 15 years of operational practice in a public university, Malaysia. The collected data was analyzed consistent with the three main themes, namely, soft skills that need to be emphasized, or abandoned, and the critical problems. Their results revealed that the factors associated with the failure of soft skills development were large class size, academic focus, and insufficient period of exercise. Therefore, they suggested that the embedded model would be a solution to guarantee incorporation of soft skills in every course scheme.

Tan and Tang (2015) explored the levels and processes of soft skills development through the Diploma in Business Studies (DBS) program in a private college situated in Georgetown, Penang, Malaysia from the viewpoints of two educators and six final-year students. A mixed method was engaged. The results from the self-rated quantitative investigation and focus group interviews indicated that the DBS students were not giving adequate effort to all the vital soft skills. In addition, the results showed that teamwork skill arose steadily as the utmost appraisal soft skill aptitude, followed by information management skill. The lowest soft skill was ethics, moral, and professional skills. On the other hand, the results of qualitative methods either through interviews or observations indicated that soft skill acquisition was channeled from both the curriculum and non-curriculum aspects, mainly through entrenched events,

curriculum, classroom communication, and campus setting. On top of that, the qualitative results from educator discussions presented that the progress of soft skill development in the college greatly hinged on the educator's inventiveness and inspiration in functioning events allowing soft skill development.

Tang et al. (2015a) inspected the association concerning the soft skills attained by teachers toward their excellence teaching. They employed a quantitative method using a 76-item questionnaire to collect data from 190 teachers from three High-Performing Primary Schools. Their findings showed those teachers possessed the four soft skills, namely, teamwork/collective work skill ( $\bar{X} = 3.42$ ,  $SD = .39$ ), communication skills ( $\bar{X} = 3.29$ ,  $SD = .39$ ), critical thinking and problem-solving skills ( $\bar{X} = 3.21$ ,  $SD = .37$ ), and leadership skill ( $\bar{X} = 3.20$ ,  $SD = .45$ ). In addition, the overall soft skills ( $\bar{X} = 3.28$ ,  $SD = .36$ ) and excellence teaching ( $\bar{X} = 3.22$ ,  $SD = .35$ ) were at the high level. Pearson correlation analysis showed that the soft skills attained ( $r = .61$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and the other three soft skills—critical thinking and problem-solving skills ( $r = .64$ ,  $p < .01$ ), teamwork/collective work skill ( $r = .60$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and leadership skills ( $r = .51$ ,  $p < .01$ )—were significantly and positively linked to excellence teaching. Their findings also disclosed that critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and teamwork/collective work skills are significant predictors contributing 40.3 percent and 3.5 percent, respectively, to the variance in excellence teaching.

The variables in the current study comprised the soft skills acquisition of lecturers and its importance in their teaching profession. The independent variable was soft skills encompassing communication, critical and problem solving, teamwork, lifelong learning, and leadership skills which are derived from the [Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education Model \(2016\)](#). On the other hand, the importance of soft skills in the teaching profession was the dependent variable. Communication skill refers to the ability of lecturers to practice oral and written language efficiently in the English language. It also includes skills that allow the lecturer to obtain and relay evidence as well as to deliver opinions with simplicity and self-reliance. Lecturers are also expected to be active listeners while providing the necessary response. Critical thinking and problem-solving skills are defined as the capacity to distinguish and describe problems, to create and implement resolutions, and to see the constructions among unconnected knowledge components. These skills include the capacity to discover resolutions to problems requiring the lecturer's creativity, reasoning, and past experiences along with the obtainable evidence and sources. Elements that they must possess as part of this soft skill are the ability to identify and analyze complex situation as well as making evaluations that are justifiable.

Teamwork skill means the capacity to graft and collaborate with individuals from numerous social and cultural experiences in order to accomplish a collective objective. It subsidizes backup for others and the self in acclimatizing to modifications and forming the tasks of lecturers. In order to build a good working relationship with their peers, it is essential that they are respectful toward others' attitudes, behavior, and beliefs. Likewise, lifelong learning skill refers

to the capacity to discover and achieve pertinent evidence from numerous causes thus obtaining novel impressions to achieve independent learning. It contributes the capacity to mature an inquiring mind to pursue understanding. Leadership skill refers to the knowledge of the basic theories of leadership so that lecturers are able to lead a project at the school level. In addition, lecturers are able to comprehend and take turns as a leader and follower alternatively if they possess this skill. Finally, lecturers also have the ability to supervise members of a group.

The above wide-ranging research including expert opinions indicates that current research has to apply effort to regulate the precise soft skills acquired by lecturers in the tertiary education program. Based on the proposed soft skills model from the Ministry of Education in either Thailand or Malaysia, the researcher identified five soft skills to be investigated. The studied soft skills consisted of: communication, critical and problem solving, teamwork, lifelong learning, and leadership skills.

## Methods

The researcher employed a mixed mode method (questionnaires and interviews) to collect data. The target group was all the lecturers teaching the four education programs in an international college located in Khon Kaen province, Thailand. Only two lecturers from each education program were purposively selected to be involved in the face-to-face interviews. On the other hand, 163 students from the four programs were selected using a lottery method of selection. These 163 students were involved in the quantitative survey study. All the selected samples were then classified into four groups according to their programs as indicated in [Table 1](#).

The questionnaire comprised 61 items containing four items of demographic information and 57 items related to the soft skills acquired by lecturers. An interview protocol was organized with the six questions intended for the in-depth interview in order to collect data from lecturers concerning the significance of the soft skills they obtained in relation to their excellence teaching. Pilot testing was conducted using 30 lecturers in a nearby province but they were not then used as samples in the actual study. It was determined that the instruments were reliable and good to use as the Cronbach alpha value was .96. In addition, the contents of the questionnaire and interview protocol were validated by three experts. Quantitative data were evaluated based on descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis.

**Table 1**  
Dissemination of samples surveyed

Program	Frequency	Percentage
Bachelor of Business Administration	83	50.9
Global Business	48	29.4
International Marketing	35	21.5
Bachelor of Arts	80	49.1
International Affairs	45	27.6
Tourism Management	35	21.5

**Table 2**  
Level of soft skills needed by lecturers

Soft skill	Bachelor of Business Administration				Bachelor of Arts			
	Global Business		International Marketing		International Affairs		Tourism Management	
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD
Communication	3.72	.47	3.89	.56	3.83	.53	4.06	.43
Critical & problem-solving	3.53	.49	3.77	.42	3.91	.47	4.07	.44
Teamwork	3.87	.48	4.07	.63	4.00	.42	3.61	.54
Lifelong learning	3.87	.45	4.01	.55	3.93	.49	3.97	.69
Leadership	3.39	.56	3.67	.57	3.82	.59	3.48	.64

## Results

Generally, the descriptive findings of this study showed the three program lecturers represented almost the same pattern in terms of the soft skills needed in their teaching profession, except for tourism management lecturers. The results shown in Table 2 indicate students' rating based on the level of soft skills acquired by their lecturers in their teaching profession in detail. On the other hand, the findings indicated that the tourism management program had different needs for soft skills in their teaching profession compared to others. Critical thinking and problem solving skills were found to be the most important soft skills in their teaching profession. The only similarity among the four programs was leadership skill which found to be the least-required capacity in the teaching profession.

The findings from the t-test analysis showed that there were significant differences in the lifelong learning skills needed by Bachelor of Business Administration and Bachelor of Arts lecturers as well as International Affairs and Tourism Management lecturers. Lifelong learning skill was much more important in Bachelor of Business Administration lecturers compared to Bachelor of Arts lecturers and also in International Affairs lecturers compared to Tourism Management lecturers. Furthermore, there was a significant difference between the teamwork skill acquired by International Affairs lecturers and Tourism Management lecturers, and International Affairs lecturers seemed to need more teamwork skill compared to Tourism Management lecturers (see Tables 3 and 4).

**Table 3**  
Independent t-test between Bachelor of Business Administration and Bachelor of Arts lecturers

Soft skill	F	p	t
Lifelong learning	6.069	.015	0.020 0.021

**Table 4**  
Independent t-test between International Affairs and Tourism Management lecturers

Soft skills	F	p	t
Teamwork	4.432	.038	3.758 4.066
Lifelong learning	7.288	.008	−0.288 −0.317

In total, eight informants voluntarily agreed to participate in the face-to-face interviews. They were six female lecturers (R1, R2, R4, R5, R6 and R7) and two male lecturers (R3 and R8). R1 and R2, R3 and R4, R5 and R6, R7 and R8 were lecturers from Global Business, International Marketing, International Affairs, and Tourism Management programs respectively. The results from the eight informants' points of view related to the importance of soft skills acquired by teachers in the teaching profession are discussed below.

### Delivery of Effective and Quality Teaching

According to the informants, soft skills acquired by lecturers are important to them in order to deliver quality and effective teaching as explicitly pointed out by R1, R3, R5, and R7.

*"It is important for lecturers to become correspondents to get information, comprehend and able to distribute it to our students in order to be effective."* (R1)

*"I consider soft skills are essential to made lecturers to be extremely skilled in every area to surpass in this occupation. Excellence teaching only originates from excellence lecturers with noble soft skills such as communication skill, critical thinking, and lifelong learning."* (R3)

*"Lecturers will be able to comprehend the capability and knowledge speed of the different students. This talent also aids in improving in inspired teaching."* (R5)

*"It is significant in wisdom to be a virtuous communicator for operative teaching and learning to happen concurrently. Soft skills are vital for lecturers to allow them to practice different methods to teaching students who are of diverse aptitudes or levels."* (R7)

The majority of informants considered communication skill was the most needed in teaching. When a diverse teaching technique is used, it permits lecturers to outreach students with varied learning capabilities and levels.

*"It is significant for us to convert outstanding lecturers and correspondents to collect information, comprehend and able to distribute it to our students."* (R1)

*"Without communication skill, a lecturer can't convey whatever to the students. By presence outstanding lecturers, we are talented of delivering the understanding and skills in both in and out of the classroom."* (R2)

*“All lecturers impart but are they able to relate their impressions or information fit so that the students will comprehend the subject material. It does not occur so because of deprived communication technique used. So the learning aim cannot be attained due to that.” (R3)*

*“Communication skill when escorted by inspiration will inspire exciting and operative learning senses so as to aid students to remember innovative information.” (R4)*

*“I consider so because lecturers are merely accountable for assigning academic information to the student.” (R6)*

*“It is the most significant as a lecturer leads the lecture during teaching and learning process. The method a lecturer bearings his or her lecture will resolve whether students are able to track the class or not.” (R7)*

With such communication skills acquired, the informants confirmed that it would be vital for them to convey operative and excellence teaching. For that determination, they conveyed events such as presentations, questioning and answering session, individual attention, peer adjustment, open class discussion, cooperative, active, and reflective learning and group work.

#### *Career Development and Enrichment*

Soft skills are important for professional development and enhancement as was pointed out by R1, R2, and R4. They detailed that the exercise of upright communication skills aided in their career development and enrichment.

*“I consider soft skills are imperative to lecturers to be extremely skilled in these capacities to shine in the career.” (R1)*

*“In my view, it would be desired to retain the qualified liaison positive and to convey competent teaching to students.” (R2)*

*“The skill of communication includes listening, speaking, reading, writing, and non-oral skills. Lecturers are entailed to stance these potentials so as to be extremely skilled to shine in their career.” (R2)*

*“Employment a lecturer needs continuous communication with superintendents, parents, colleagues, and students. Conversation with constructive language, upright listening skills and being elastic can take us go very far.” (R4)*

#### *Managing Student Skills*

The final qualitative finding revealed that soft skills acquisition is important for lecturers to manage their students as was explicitly pointed out by R5 and R8.

*“It is imperative in controlling students that requires more courtesy especially those problematic students. Lecturers should be able to efficiently contract with emotional outburst during the lecture or out of the lecture. We want this skill to resolve daily problems faced by the students and get them back on the correct path” (R5)*

*“In conducting the duty of teaching in a classroom situation with a large class size, lecturers are often fronting with*

*the mass of student problems for example irregular learning competence of a distinct student, managing student with troublemaking actions.” (R8)*

*“Each event confronted by the lecturer is exclusive and the lecturers need to be prepared with the comprehensive problem-solving skill to discover the greatest conceivable solution to manage the problems. This needs the lecturer to own comprehensive problem identification and solution finding competence that usually was not been trained.” (R8)*

When R5 and R8 were probed about the most imperative soft skills desired in the teaching profession, they acknowledged that the critical thinking and problem-solving skills would be the most imperative.

*“All the soft skills are vital. But I would decide critical thinking and problem-solving skills are the most important.” (R5)*

*“I would recommend critical thinking and problem-solving skills are the most vital soft skills for lecturers.” (R8)*

The qualitative findings from the eight informants revealed that six of the lecturers (R1, R2, R3, R4, R6, and R7) considered that communication skill was the most vital soft skill in order to deliver quality and effective learning. However, R5 and R8 viewed critical thinking and problem-solving skills as the most important soft skills for managing students. Moreover, R1, R2, and R4 pointed out that with the exercise of upright communication skill, the lecturers can improve because this assists in their career development and enrichment.

#### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The results revealed average ratings of soft skill levels based on the different mean scores of the four tertiary education programs. All four education programs (except for tourism management) rated teamwork as the most important soft skill acquired by lecturers because most of the lecturers wanted to equip their students with the skills to address challenges that commonly arise in teamwork activities. Generally, lecturers facilitated the teamwork activities that leveraged students' past experiences as a method to assist them in thinking as a lifelong learner. The purpose was to help students to identify and use lifelong learning skills to improve their team experiences.

On the other hand, lecturers pointed out that communication skill was the most important soft skill to acquire. This qualitative result indicated that lecturers are aware of the importance of communication skills in teaching. They also realize that all students have different levels of strengths and weaknesses. It is also through communication skills that a lecturer can introduce creative and effective solutions to the problems of the students. The rationale of the high score in communication skill by lecturers and students was most likely due to English being the medium of instruction in international colleges because it aims to produce graduates who have international level academic and abilities in addition to the capacity to promote international relations for the exchange and development of

knowledge and technology (Khon Kaen University International College, 2017).

Furthermore, the acquisition of critical thinking and problem-solving skills was identified as an essential soft skill, particularly by tourism management lecturers. It is important for lecturers to understand the role they play in developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Lecturers need to act as facilitators to allow for discussion and to encourage a free thought process, as well as to encourage understanding that thinking critically does not always end with a right answer, but helps students to learn appropriate responses to conflicting evaluations and opinions (Henderson-Hurley & Hurley, 2013). The findings were in accordance with past research findings (Tang et al., 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2014a; Tan & Tang, 2015; Tang & Tan, 2015).

In conclusion, soft skills acquisition is often regarded as something that occurs in the ordinary progression of events and it has the potential to be simply handed over and generates knowledge according to local obligations. In order to address the challenges of globalization, the soft skills acquisition of lecturers can affect their quality of teaching and student achievement.

### Conflict of Interest

No is no conflict of interest between researcher and respondents.

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