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Towards Soft Skills Framework for Social Work Educators

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Abstract
Social workers must be competence with their helping skills and need to be guided to acquire relevant soft skills. Hence, Social Work students need to have significant role models that they can look up to in order to become professionally and socially competent. Within the formal Social Work Education at the higher institutions, they can actually learn much from their lecturers or educators as their role models. This paper discusses conceptualizations of the soft skills which educators, currently as well as in the years to come, would need in order to sustain their competence as educators. In an exploratory study recently carried out, a Social Work expert was asked to describe the experiences of and viewpoints on, soft skills as part of the professional socialization of Social Work educators to become professionally and socially competent. It is important to raise awareness of soft skills competencies among Malaysian Social Work educators to help them in assessing themselves, and identify where and how they could actively improve themselves as educators within the context of their workplace. Embedding the soft skills competencies into their career as social workers is assumed as one of the effective and efficient method of achieving both professional and social competence. The propose soft skills, perhaps, provide early ideas and initiatives towards the construction of a 'soft skill-framework for Social Work educators', which can serve as guideline when facilitating and guiding future qualified social workers in Malaysia.
Keywords: Soft skills framework; Social competence; Social work; Social work educators; Communication skill.

1. Introduction
Acquisition of soft skills competencies is an essential aspect in Malaysian higher learning institution. The central research question in the broader study is to what extent are the Malaysian educators' soft skills competencies applicable for the development of professional and social competence within their working contexts? The broader study sets out to gauge higher education institutions educators' understandings of soft skills competencies and the ways in which they incorporate the delivery of these skills into their working contexts. At the same time, it is important to determine the critical elements for the effective acquisition of these skills.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a glimpse of the preliminary findings from the interviews that were carried out with an expert social worker (hereafter referred to as SWE1 – Social Work educator 1), who has been involved in Social Work Education in Malaysia for more than 20 years. The study was carried out to explore the conceptions of soft skills among experienced higher instructions educators, as well as their thinking about what soft skills are relevant to educators, at higher institutions levels, that is, generic skills that these educators must have. Thus, the two research questions that directed the construction of this paper are: (1) How do educators in higher education institutions conceptualize soft skills for educators, and (2) What soft skills must the higher education institutions educators have?

2. Soft Skills Competencies
The terminology used to refer to soft skills includes' key competencies', 'soft skills', 'employability skills', 'key skills', 'core skills', 'essential skills', and 'necessary skills', 'employability skills' or 'workplace know-how. Soft skills, which can be defined as intra- and inter-personal skills, include skills such as communication, ability to work on multidisciplinary teams, adaptability, etc. Moreover, soft skills are deemed vital for personal development, social participation and workplace accomplishment. These skills should be differentiated from technical, or 'hard skills' in order to accentuate the fact that they can be learned or developed by suitable training endeavours, and they can also be combined, towards the achievement of complex outcomes within the workplace. As soft skills are characterized skills that are applicable and useful in various contexts, they can be purportedly transferred among different work occupations.

Based on Malaysian National Philosophy of Education, the main goal of education is to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Higher educational institutions are the most suitable venue for polishing soft skills among

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students. These institutions need to have the desire and ability to participate in the formation of future Malaysian human capital with first class mentality. In order to equip the students with relevant soft skills, the educators themselves must possess the required soft skills as well.

The literature revealed that soft skills are a widespread concern of employers' world-wide. Students, who will be entering the workforce, certainly need to develop social or emotional intelligence (Golemon *et al.*, 2016). This can be accomplished by helping them to equip themselves with professional skills like writing, speaking out, presenting, decision making and teamwork. In order to achieve this, new concepts, strategies and methodologies need to be introduced into the teachings within the higher educational institutions. In the old paradigm, teachers were considered as the sole source of information and students approached them for every possible solution for problems encountered (Jayaprakash, 2005). It is recognized that teaching methods can influence the development of several social intellectual abilities such as cooperation, leadership, responsibility, self-confidence, independence, ability to make decisions and communication skills (Kermis, 2009; Riccio, 2008).

3. Social Work and Social Work Education in Malaysia

Based on the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW): *"Social Work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing"* (International Association of Schools of Social Work). From the perspective of the Dictionary of Social Work, social work is *"the paid professional activity that aims to assist people to overcoming serious difficulties in their lives by offering care, protection and counselling"*(Pierson and Thomas, 2010).

Social workers play an important role in maintaining and promoting social wellbeing of society. In providing social care and promoting social wellbeing of clients, social workers need to use a variety of social interventions in the context of development, prevention and not only subjected to recovery and social treatment. In order to meet the social expectations of the community and also the profession itself, Malaysia should have trained social workers who can solve social problems and restore effectively the social functioning of their clients.

Singapore Accreditation Council of Social Workers (SACSW) defines the term social workers only to those who have a degree and post-graduate degree in Social Work or those who have qualifications in a recognized field of Social Work (http://www.sasw.org.sg). Generally, social workers can be divided into two categories. The first is that they are trained, who obtained qualifications recognized by professional bodies in the field of Social Work (Americana, 2006). This group is seen as a social worker or professional Social Work practice with the advantages of belonging to a degree. The second category is those who do not possess a degree or certificate in the field of Social Work, but directly involved doing charitable work or community work in the long term either in government agencies, private or voluntary bodies recognized by the government. Experience and knowledge possessed by the latter can sometimes be stretched or they can be made to be more skilled than the former (Wan *et al.*, 2013).

Social work education is relatively new in Malaysia though Abdullah (2003). claims *"the excuse that social work is a new profession in this country is no longer valid… there seems to be a sense of frustration among many social workers that it has not made much progress over the years"* (p.3). The development of social work education in Malaysia appears to be slow. Prior to 1952, the Department of Social Welfare (DSW), as the statutory social service agency and the largest agency that employs social workers, had to hire expatriate officers in social welfare from the United Kingdom while sending Malaysian staff for social work training abroad (Fuziah, 2006; Yasas, 1974). Locally, the majority of social welfare workers were trained in social work at the National University of Singapore, which was formally known as the University of Malaya in 1952.

Prior to the formation of social work programme at the University Sains Malaysia in 1975, it was estimated there were about 150 Malaysian social workers were trained at this department. Even though the programme was called social studies, its curriculum was very much based on the philosophy of Social Work. The establishment of social work program at USM was also a conscious effort on the part of Ministry of Social Welfare to meet the demand for professionally qualified social workers. The main objective of its formation was to produce more graduates and trained professionals in the field of social work (Fuziah, 2006; Ismail, 1992; Yasas, 1974).

In 1990s, the major development of Social Work education at other institutions of higher learning in Malaysia took place. By this time, six universities i.e. Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Universiti Sarawak Malaysia (UNIMAS), University Malaya (UM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) have introduced Social Work programme.

Social Work as a profession is still having its own problems especially in building its own identity. The public still perceives Social Work as a voluntary work that does not require professional training. As a result, many claim that they are 'social workers' when the actual fact is they are merely volunteers. Even though the country have produced many graduates in Social Work, the relevant ministries such as the Department of Social Work and the Ministry of Health are still hiring graduates who are not trained in social work. Concurrently, graduates in Social Work are complaining that they are unable to secure jobs in Social Work.

4. Social Competence and Professional Competence

The Malaysian Cabinet approved several proposals by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development in 2010 to establish, among others:

i) A National Social Work Competency Standards;

ii) A Social Workers Act to implement the competency standards;

iii) A Social Work Council under the Act to regulate social work practitioners and educators;

iv) to standardize programs in social work education in institutions of higher learning;

Nevertheless, the Social Work Act is still pending until the present day for cabinet's approval (Ismail, 2012). The issue of whether or not social workers in Malaysia are professional is still being debated. It will not be resolved until the country is able introduce its own Social Work Act and develop a proper infrastructure for competency and a set of practice standards.

Social work continues to flourish as a 'profession' and has been recognized as a discipline that needs further development despite our own diversified perceptions on the discipline (Ismail and Fuziah, 2014). The growth of Social Work education and the social work profession have become more visible, at least intellectually, in terms of their usefulness, particularly after seven universities have decided to offer social work education in the country. The development of these programs also suggested that Malaysia recognized the need to train more social workers in order to address its own social problems. They further point out that the emergence of these education programs has served as a social indicator that Malaysia needs to develop competence social workers and quality social services for its people.

5. Methodology

In the broader qualitative study, in-depth face-to-face interviews were carried out with the participants from public universities, who were experts in various fields, including the field of Social Work. The participants were selected using purposeful sampling technique that allows selection of informants from a diverse group or public universities, who had best answered the research questions and helped develop multiple and diverse perspectives. The qualitative data was collected within two phases, namely Phase-1 and Phase-2. In Phase-1, in order to discover the initial essence of the conceptions of 'soft skills', open-ended questions were emailed to the potential participants.

In-depth face-to-face interviews (Phase-2) were then carried out to develop a better understanding of the participants' responses in the emails. The purpose of this approach was to extract as much detail as possible and verify their earlier responses in the emails. Similarly, data from SWEI was collected via the aforementioned phases and the questions that guided SWE1 in both phases were: (1) How would you conceptualize the soft skills for social work educators?, and (2) What are the soft skills that you perceived as relevant for Social Work educators currently and for years to come? As this study were conducted in phases, there was a temporal overlap between them, for example, the analysis of Phase-1 will take place before Phase-2 data collection can proceed. Findings of Phase-1 had initially provide knowledge which helped inform and probes in Phase-2. The interviews were transcribed as verbatim and the data was thematically analyzed.

6. Results

6.1. Proposed Soft-Skills Framework

Social work is a complex, uncertain and value-based activity in which the social worker work with people from different backgrounds who are likely to have experienced personal difficulty, loss or tragedy (Lishman, 2009). The proposed soft skills perhaps provide early ideas and initiatives towards the construction of a 'Soft Skill Frameworks for Social Work Educators' (SSF-for-SWE), which can serve as guideline when facilitating and guiding the future, trained social workers in Malaysia.

The introduction of the soft skill framework to form the basis for the Social Work educators (SSF-for-SWE) developed by the researchers provides a framework for the way in which higher education institutions and social workers should think about and plan their professional development. It will serve as a backdrop for Social Work education in Malaysia. The SSF-for-SWE will clarify shared expectation of what is expected at the point of qualification.

To be a social worker, it requires certain types of personality and characteristics and one of the attributes the profession is interested in is humanity i.e. kindness, empathy, emotional intelligence, good manner and ability to work with everyone (Ismail and Fuziah, 2014). Social Work is a profession that requires skills, knowledge, and values. The profession has its own standard and work ethics that the social workers must observed and followed. The personal attributes needed for social workers include work ethic, teamwork, problem solving and critical thinking and communication skills.

6.2. Communication Skills

Social Work is fundamentally dependent on good communication. Qualified social workers must be able to demonstrate sound communication skills. However there is a big gap between being able to communicate and being able to communicate effectively. Social workers need to communicate effectively with service users and carers, other social workers, and other professionals (Fuziah, 2013). It is necessary for social workers to have effective communication skills if they are to promote self-help and empowerment (Lishman, 2009). Without effective

communication skills, a social worker may not be able to obtain or convey that information, thereby causing detrimental effects to clients.

SWE1 was asked how he would conceptualize soft skills among social work educators. To him, "Social Work educators certainly need to have soft skills as well because they need to show the best … they need to become an effective role model". When asked what he meant by 'effective role model', SWE1 said, "the Social Work educators need to actually do what they preach. These soft skills would be the social and human touch … something very relevant with the role of social workers".

During the interview, SWE1 had identified 'communication skill' as one of the relevant soft skills that social work educators need to have for now and for the future as well. His justification was:

"…the main problem …there is conflict…because of communication problem …in whatever situations…because conflict can happen when there is communication problem…when there is communication breakdown. So, I think if we need to have communication skills… it must be good communication skills. Communication skills also have values …so that it makes you to be considerate and so on. So, I think …if we can enhance communication skills …in its true sense, I think we can enhance our relationship with other people …our friendship…our understanding".

SWE1 had also mentioned about having appropriate values within context. He expounded that:

" …the importance of soft skills …like for Social Work, for counselling, …for clinical…psychologists… I think they emphasize on issues related to soft skills. For instance … when we want to shape an individual …guide him or her on how to have good relation with the client. We are taught about basic values …but the basic contexts for these values are not emphasized. That is the reason why there are differences in interpreting the values. Islam stresses on values…but differences in background … different social environment…make them interpret the same value differently".

The Social Work educators' behaviour may influence the Social Work students' competence (SWE1, 2014). To SWE1, Social Work students may learn a lot of things related to soft skills and values from their educators. As mentioned by him:

"…there are differences because of the values which we brought from the society we came from…or even from our teachers…our lecturers…from the role models which we got… it could be from our teachers, parents, our brothers or sisters …our relatives ...or even from our readings".

In enhancing the communication skill, Social Work educators "must also be a reflective educator" (SWE1, 2014). When asked why the need to be reflective, SWE1 responded by saying:

"Social worker also needs to be reflective…about …whether I am on the right directions or not…or whether what I am saying is right or wrong. Yes, I think that to be able to reflect is very much in the communication skill also. In communication skill, we also teach our students on how to confront the clients …and know how to deal with the clients who are trying to take advantage out of us. So, the clients won't feel defensive …and all these are related to communication skill".

SWE1 had also highlighted the need for competence in communication skill among the social work educators within the context of Malaysia. According to him:

"As for the context of unity in Malaysia, I still think the most important is communication skill because we are a very much multi-ethnic, multi-religion… multi-cultural as well… I think the main problem is when conflict arises in communication… conflict happen because of communication problem…communication breakdown. So, we must have good communication skill because in communication skill we also have values …for instance being considerate. So, I think if we can enhance the communication skill in its true sense, I think our friendship… or any other sort of relationship…we can be more understanding".

From the excerpts above, we had identified three themes (communication skills, reflective skills, and considerate) that in a sense characterized SWE1's conceptions of soft skills as well as soft skills that Social Works educators should have within their workplace.

6.3. The Framework

Drawing upon the expert's views on soft skills that Social Work educators should have now and in many years to come, as presented within the interview excerpts above, we had constructed a preliminary proposed version of the Soft Skill Framework for Social Work Educators (see Table 1). This framework was outlined with the assumption that Social Work students could gain knowledge related to Social Work fields and they could also learn by observing the behaviour of their educators or instructors as well as and how they could function as social workers within the context of a multi-cultural society. We believe that the elements within this framework will be a promising guideline for other Social Work educators.

Table-1. Proposed Soft Skill Framework for Social Work Educators (SSF-for-SWE)

Relevant Soft-Skills	Descriptor	Implication for potential social workers
Communication skills	Social Work educators demonstrate effective communication skills appropriated to the context.	Social worker possess high level and effective communication skills that could avoid conflict when performing tasks or rendering services to the service users or receivers.
Reflective skills	Social Work educators demonstrate reflective behaviour.	Social workers become effective reflective practitioners towards enhancing effective and meaningful services that they provide to the community and the service users or receivers.
Considerate	Social Work educators demonstrate sensitivity and consideration towards their students.	Social workers become more sensitive and considerate towards the service users in a multi-cultural society and able to effectively function within an appropriate context.

7. Conclusion

Social workers must be competent with their helping skills and also need to be guided to acquire relevant generic skills. Hence, Social Work students need to have role models in order to become well-trained and skilful social workers. Within the formal Social Work education at the higher institutions, they can actually learn much from their lecturers/educators. Integrally, Social Work educators themselves must have appropriate soft skills when teaching these future social workers. Noteworthy, Social Work, apart from being an art and science of helping others, is also bound by its values and ethics. These values and ethics are very much mirrored in client self-determination and respect for clients. Social workers should try to maximize efforts to support his/her clients' actions to cope and accustom within his/her environment (Cummins *et al.*, 2006). It is important for social workers to be sensitive when dealing with their different clients. Undoubtedly, as a very diverse society, the future social workers in Malaysia must also be culturally competence to ascertain effective and meaningful help services.

Acknowledgments

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