Soft Skills At Workplace: An Experienced Public University Educator's Thoughts on Kemahiran Insaniah Competencies for Professional Development

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Abstract

Public universities educators were probed to describe and share their notions, and personal viewpoints, on KemahiranInsaniah (KI) (softs kills) competencies within their profession, as part of the professional socialization of Public Universities (PUs) students towards becoming professionally and sociallycompetent human resources at their workplace. In-depth interviews were used as means of gathering qualitative data, which was fully transcribed and then thematically analyzed.This paper highlights the opinions of one very experienced PU educator on the notions and viewpoints pertaining to KI and PU educators, who insinuated that it is important for PU educators to embrace the notions of KI as also encompassing the aspects of thinking, ethics, personality, spirituality, scientific, intellectual, creativity, religiosity, rationalization, professionalism, humanity, truthfulness, skillfulness, wisdom and truthfulness. Embedding these elements within their teaching context is assumed as one of the possible ways of inculcating and cultivating soft skills among PU students. The results of the study provided significant insights into the notions and views of an experienced educator with regards to KI. The proposed elements that had emerged could contribute to the construction of a KI Reference Framework for educators to refer, adapt and adopt throughout their endeavour to educate and cultivate humane human resources, who possess substantial soft skills, at their upcoming workplace.
Keywords: Soft skills; Educators; Humane human; Thinking; Ethics.

1. Introduction

Soft skills, the necessary complement to functional and other hard skills, are the personal attributes that aid modern work and personify how an individual interacts with others and with institutions. Soft skills are very much needed at workplace today. Historically, technical or hard skills, were very much the only skills for career employment but today's workplaceare indicating that technical skills alone are insufficient to uphold the employment of individuals when organizations are right-sizing and reducing positions (James and James, 2004).

Acquisition of *KemahiranInsaniah*(KI) (soft skills) competencies is essential in higher learning institutions. Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) should prioritize the development of soft skills competencies among their students since this could ensure the marketability of their graduates (Lim *et al.*, 2016), and that would also include all Public Universities (PUs).

Soft skills, that complement subject-specific knowledge, are generally stipulated by employers when looking for workforces and this inherently makes possessing soft skills as avital factor that affect students' employability (Haselberger *et al.*, 2012) in various careers. Noteworthy, the definition of soft skills as skills needed for workplace was stated since 1990s. Within the context of workplace, soft skills consist of communication skills, problem solving skills and the ability to work in groups. Consequently, it is important for employees in any organization to decide which soft skills are required and important to ensure the attainment of their jobs as well as which skills are needed to ensure proficient and quality accomplishments of works that need team work and support because "Soft skills are centrally important for human capital development and workforce success" (Lippman *et al.*, 2015).

There are evidence of soft skills predicting employability and incomes compared to academic or technical skills (Kautz *et al.*, 2014). In fact, due to extensive modernization of workplace throughout the world, the demand for soft skills escalated over the past 20 years (Balcar, 2014); (Carnevale, 2013). Nonetheless, many employers still noted a soft skills 'gap' and reported that job candidates are lacking in the relevant soft skills needed to fill the unfilled positions (Manpower, 2013). Could lack of appropriate human models or exemplars during their undergraduate or postgraduate years contribute to the lack of soft skills among universities' graduates or job candidates? However, to date, there is no clear consensus concerning which soft skills are most vital for success at workplace (Lippman *et al.*, 2015).

The term 'soft skills' has other terms in various countries, which include: 'key competencies', 'soft skills', or 'employability skills' (Australia); 'key skills' or 'core skills' (United Kingdom); 'essential skills' (New Zealand); and 'necessary skills', 'employability skills' or 'workplace know-how' (United States). Soft skills are defined as

intra- and inter-personal (socio-emotional) skills, essential for personal development, social participation and workplace success. They include skills such as communication, ability to work on multidisciplinary teams, adaptability, etc. These skills should be distinguished from technical, or 'hard skills' in order to emphasize the fact that they can be learned or developed by suitable training efforts, and they can also be combined, towards the achievement of complex outcomes within the workplace. As soft skills are characterized skills which are applicable and useful in various contexts, thus they can be supposedly transferred among different work occupations.

Education in Malaysia is an ongoing effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated approach to sustain stable and harmonious intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical individuals. Efforts are being designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable, honourable, responsible, competent and capable of achieving well-being and contribute to the betterment of family, community and country, on a firm belief and faith in God. HEIs are deemed the most suitable venue for polishing soft skills among students. HEIs' educators need to have the desire and ability to participate in the formation and development of human capital with first class mentality. In order to equip students with soft skills, the educators themselves ought to possess the required soft skills as well. Hence, in a sense, these educators would need to indicate and inculcate soft skills among their students during their formal interactions with them.

Educators are can be considered as the unique source of information and students approached them for possible solutions to the problems they 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 and Kermis, 2009); (Riccio, 2008). The current study is therefore set out to explore public universities' educators'notions of KI competencies and their thoughts on the ways these competencies can be incorporated in their working contexts. At the same time, it is important to determine the critical elements of effective acquisition of these skills from their perspectives. Nevertheless, within this paper, we will present the results of our in-depth interview with one of our research participants, a very experienced educator at one PU in Malaysia.

2. Methodology

Within the broader study, the qualitative data was collected in two phases. In the first phase, the data was collected via emails that were sent out to research participants who werepurposively selected. These research participants were requested to response to five questions and to email their answers to the researchers within seven days after receiving the emails. Nevertheless we had received all their responses within three days after the emails were sent out. These data were organized before thematically analyzed. The results of this first phase's analysis were used during the second phase of the study, whereby semi-structured, face-to-face, and in-depth interviews were implemented.

This paper highlights the opinions of one of the research participant who was a very experienced educator, from one public university. Noteworthy, the broader study was carried out to explore the conceptions of soft skills among experienced higher education institutions' educators as well as their thinking regarding soft skills that are relevant to higher education institutions educators. Additionally, the research participants were also asked regarding the soft skills competencies that HEIs' educators need to have, and the ways that these educators could incorporate these skills during their working contexts. At the same time, the study also aimed to determine other elements, in the views of the research participants that could also be embodied within the notion of 'soft skills'.

The central research question addressed in this paper is 'What are the thoughts and views of the experienced Public University's educator on the professional development of soft skills competencies for professional development applicable at workplace? The educator, who will be known as KIMY within this paper, had been involved in the field for over 35 years when the interview with him was carried out.Currently, he isattached at a public university in Malaysia. During the first phase of data collection (via email), one of the questions that was asked to KIMY was "What does the term 'soft skills' mean to you?" His response was thematically analysed, whereby the emerging themes were identified. Along with these themes, the researchers had identified the related verbatim or KIMY' responses that warrant further clarification from him. In a sense, the researchers had constructed an interview guide or protocol for each research participant, which was used during the second phase of the study. In the second phase, the purpose of implementing in-depth interviewswas to seek further clarification and meanings from the participants based on their responses to the emails. The two central questions that guided the focus of the interviews were: What are your notions of soft skills for Public Universities' educators?and(ii) What are the soft skills that you perceived as relevant for Public Universities' educators to embrace throughout their formal interactions with their students? The next part of this paper provides results of the in-depth interviews with KIMY.

3. Results and Discussion

The interview data was gathered to answer the two research questions that focused on KIMY's notions of soft skills for Public Universities' educators and KIMY's perceptions of soft skills that are relevant for Public Universities' educators to embrace throughout their formal interactions with their students. During the interview sessions, nine contingency questions were elicited by the interviewer (researcher) to obtain answers for the two main research questions above. The contingency questions were:

(1) In your opinion, to what extent does *KemahiranInsaniah* soft skills (*KI*) is needed by those who are involved in the education profession at the Higher Education Institution level?
(2) So what do you see is the role of educators then?

(3) How would you suggest the educators do this… continuously disseminate *KI* to their students?

(4) What are needed by these educators to ensure that they can actually incorporate *KI* during their interactions with their students?

(5) What do you mean by 'face' here?

(6) How do all these elements linked?

(7) What then should our educators at the higher institutions do?

(8) What other things do you think would constitute the soft skills aspects for higher Institutions?

(9) In one diagram, how would you picture all these components?

The interview excerpts presented below are taken from KIMY'sunique responses, which were fully transcribed. The themes that had emerged from his responses are (i) soft skills in relation to the human brain, heart and face, (ii) soft skills in relation to spirituality, scientific skills, intellectual thinking and creative thinking, (iii) soft skills in relation to religiosity, rationale, professionalism and humanity, (iv) soft skills in relation to being truthful, skillful, wisdom and truthful, and (v) soft skills in relation to quality of thinking, ethics and personality.

3.1 Soft Skills, Brain, Heart and Face

This section highlights KIMY's responses as evidence to support the theme 'soft skills in relation to the human brain, heart and face'.

3.1.1. Interviewer

In your opinion, to what extent does KemahiranInsaniahsoft skills(KI) is needed by those who are involved in the education profession at the Higher Education Institution level?

3.1.2. KIMY

We need to be aware of KI, we need to understand its content, we need to embrace its goals and objectives and subsequently practice it wholly in our everyday lives. Now these tasks need to be anticipated by all the educator at the Higher Education level. Interestingly, this aspect had initially be explored by the late Emeritus Professor Tan Sri Awang Had Salleh, our prominent education figure. He had establishment the School of Language and Scientific Thinking at Universiti Utara Malaysia in 1984…now this is the basic for KI – language for communication and scientific thinking which encompasses ethics, professional moral, leadership, entrepreneurial, working in teams, and continuous learning. All these were before the KI mentioned by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2006.

3.1.3. Interviewer

So what do you see is the role of educators then?

3.1.4. KIM

Those who are involved in the education profession at the higher institution level must be individually aware, must understand, appreciate and individually practice or apply…and continuously disseminate knowledge about KI to their students.

Interviewer:

How would you suggest the educators do this… continuously disseminate KI to their students?

3.1.5. KIMY

Well…for instance… the educators could design their very own modules, models or KI theories…in order to strengthen their efforts to incorporate of KI during the teaching and learning process, which are supported with technical as well as pedagogical aspects.

3.1.6. Interviewer

What are needed by these educators to ensure that they can actually incorporate KI during their interactions with their students?

3.1.7. KIMY

Educators in Higher Education Institutions are encourage to understand, internalize, and practice the theories on thinking, ethics and personality in KI. I myself had personally constructed such theory by referring it to three main notions or sources…which are I-B-M…I stands for Islam as being the official religion of Malaysia, B for West (Barat) and East…which are developed regions with prominent figures or personalities and developed technologies…. M for Malaysia…that has a plural society…a multi-racial country…I will sketch diagrams to show what I mean for you….[KIMY began to draw diagrams on a blank paper]. …From these three sources, we form and educate three elements of humanity that comprises of W-H-O and H-O-W … with W [Face (Wajah)] = H [Heart (Hati)] + O [Brain (Otak)].

3.1.8. Interviewer

What do you mean by 'face' here?

3.1.9. KIMY

According to this module, the face refers to personality…it is a combination of what comes from the heart …that is ethics and moral…and the brain which is the thinking and its mind. In other words, this KI is all sorts of thinking and mind that is mixed with ethics and moral…hence on the individual's face will shine the look of a humane human. It shows the personality. Based on three sources, I-B-M and that three elements W-H-O/H-O-W…the thinking, ethics and personality theories will be formed to become the principal elements for KI.For thinking…there would be another theory…I will call it the Integrated 4K Thinking System…that is Spirituality (Kerohanian), Intellectual Instinct (Kebitaraan), Scientific (Kesaintifikan), Creativity (Kekreatifan).

Figure-1. Diagrammatic representation of KIMY's thoughts on KI
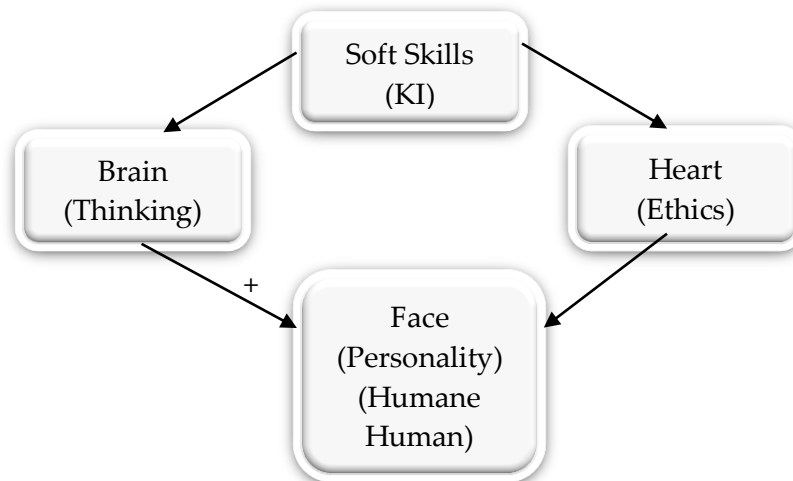
Interestingly, among others, KIMY had highlighted the need for the educators to understand, internalize, and be appreciative of 'soft skills'; soft skills as related to all sorts of thinking with the mind that is mixed with ethics and moral, and that soft skills is related to becoming a 'humane human'.

3.2. Spiritual, Scientific, Intellectual and Creative

This section highlights KIMY's responses as evidence to support the theme 'soft skills in relation to spirituality, scientific skills, intellectual thinking and creative thinking'.

3.2.1. Interviewer

How do all these elements linked?

3.2.2. KIMY

I will draw a diagram to explain interplay of all these elements. Spiritual thinking is like a sacred thinking or a saintly thinking…it has something to do with religiosity. Educators should in a sense also possess this sort of thinking…because this could indicate their sincerity in educating their students. This thinking is a kind of thinking that is pure, virtuous, and of a very high level. Now by intellectual instinct I mean that it is a type of thinking that is culture related…it shows ingenuity, it shows cunningness, mmm…cleverness, smartness, intelligence, excellence, finesse, agility…or savvy.Scientific thinking or I would also call it critical thinking… is the factual thinking, objective and truthful thinking. Next is the creative thinking…it is the innovative, imaginative and creative thinking. So this 4K-Thinking is also the SISC-Thinking, which is Spiritual, Intellectual, Scientific, Creative thinking.

Figure-2. KIMY's representation of the interplay among spirituality, scientific, intellectual and creativity element
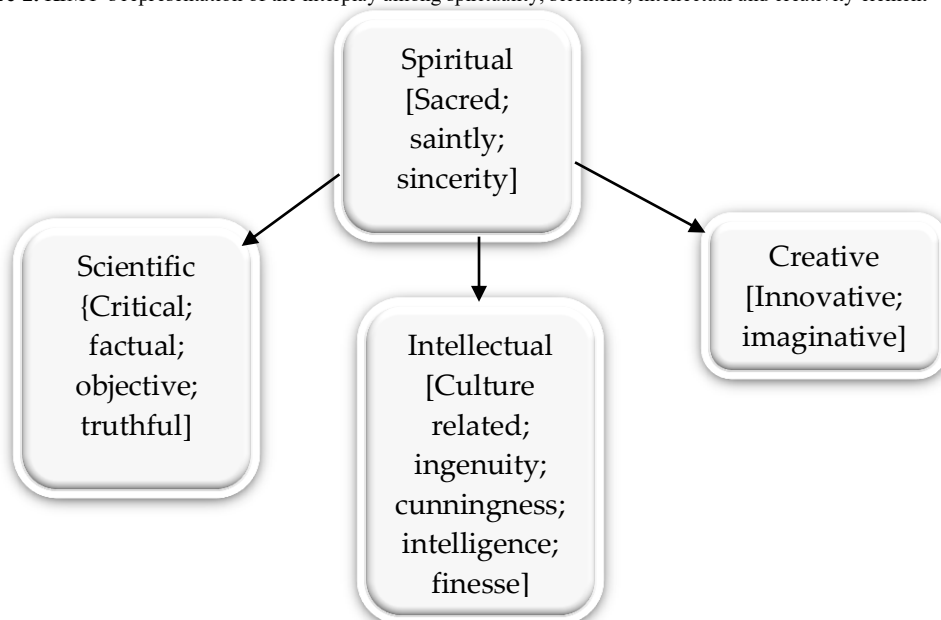
KIMY had highlighted on the notion of spiritual thinking that to him is related to sincerity among educators when educating the students since this kind of thinking is not only a high level of thinking but it is also pure and virtuous. KIMY had also talked about the need for educators to have intellectual thinking that shows their ingenuity, cunningness, cleverness, smartness, intelligence, excellence, finesse, agility or savvy.

3.3. Religiosity, Rational, Professionalism and Humanity
This section highlights KIMY's responses as evidence to support the theme 'soft skills in relation to religiosity, rational, professionalism and humanity.

3.3.1. Interviewer
What then should our educators at the higher institutions do?

3.3.2. KIMY
There are four types of actions that comes out from the educators' heart…they are 4K or R-P-R-H…that is Religion, Professional, Rational, and Humanity. This is how they can be presented in a diagram …[KIMY proceeded to draw the diagram as shown in Figure 3].

Ethics, moral are the behaviour, character that are triggered from the Integrated 4K Ethics System theory…Religion (Keagamaan), Professionalism (Keprofesionalan). Rationalization (Kerasionalisan), and Humanity (Kemanusiaan). This means we act in four ways or methods … Religiosity that is following our religion's instructions and prohibitions; …Professionalism, that is according to our jobs or tasks and roles in life; Rationalization, that is actions based on factual arguments. Next is Humanity…it involves actions with love, concern, gentle and full of humanitarian characters.

Figure-3. KIMY's representation of the Ethics/Morality Theory
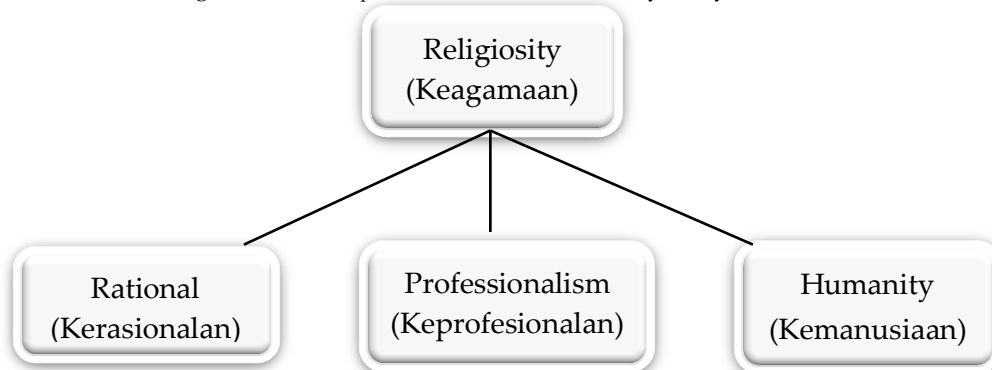
KIMY had emphasized on the notion of ethics, moral and humanity, which to him is related to actions with feeling of love, concern, gentle and humanly.

3.4. Truthfulness, Skillfulness, Wisdom and Truthfulness
This section highlights KIMY's responses as evidence to support the theme 'soft skills is related to being truthful, skillful, wisdom and truthful.

3.4.1. Interviewer

What other things do you think would constitute the soft skills aspects for higher Institutions?

3.4.2. KIMY

I would propose another theory here… in Malay it would be called 'Teori SSB4K'…SistemSahsiahBersepadu 4K or Integrated Personality System Theory. The first K refers to Kebenaran (Truthfulness), next is Wisdom (Kebijaksanaan), and next is Trustworthiness (Keamanahan) and then Skillfulness (Keterampilan). I guess we could call it the T-W-T-S Theory.
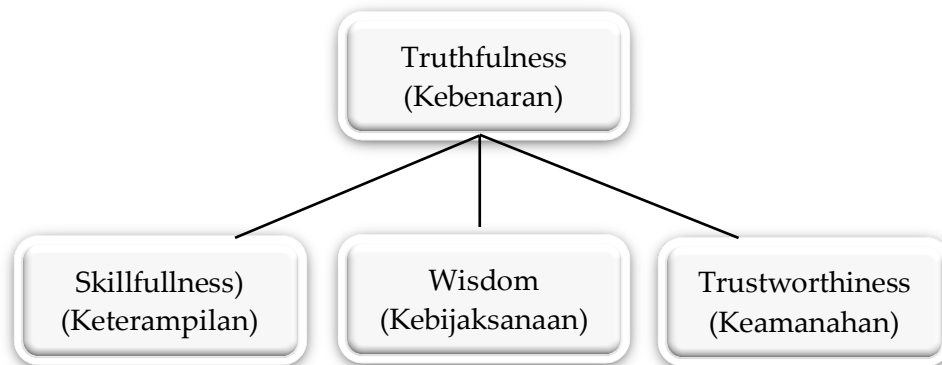
3.4.3. Interviewer

In one diagram, how would you picture all these components?

3.4.4. KIMY

This SSB4K–TWTS Theory can be like this… [KIMY drew a diagram to diagrammatically represent the theory as shown in Figure 4]

**Figure-4.** KIMY's depiction of the SSB4K-TWTS Theory

All the three theories thus far focus on the integrated elements that are holistic and well-balanced. Stylish looks and personality are based on real truthfulness, wisdom, skillfulness or communicative leadership, teamwork, trustworthiness, and continuous learning. These theories involve attitudes and attributes towards human. Hence, KI that educators should understand, embrace, modeland disseminate to their students can be represented as shown in Figure 5.

3.5. Thinking, Ethics and Personality

This section accentuates KIMY's interpretation of 'soft skills as something related to quality of thinking, ethics and personality among the educators.KIMY had considered the notion of soft-skills (KI) within a significantly wide context that extends beyond the elements crafted by MOHE. His notions and statements would warrant pondering among HEIs' educators – perhaps something that can be further researched on so that a comprehensive and holistic framework can be constructed to assist educators to educate students who will be well-received by colleagues at their workplace, and perhaps most importantly, graduates who are respected by the stakeholders.

Figure-5. KIMY's thoughts on the interplay of elements in soft skills
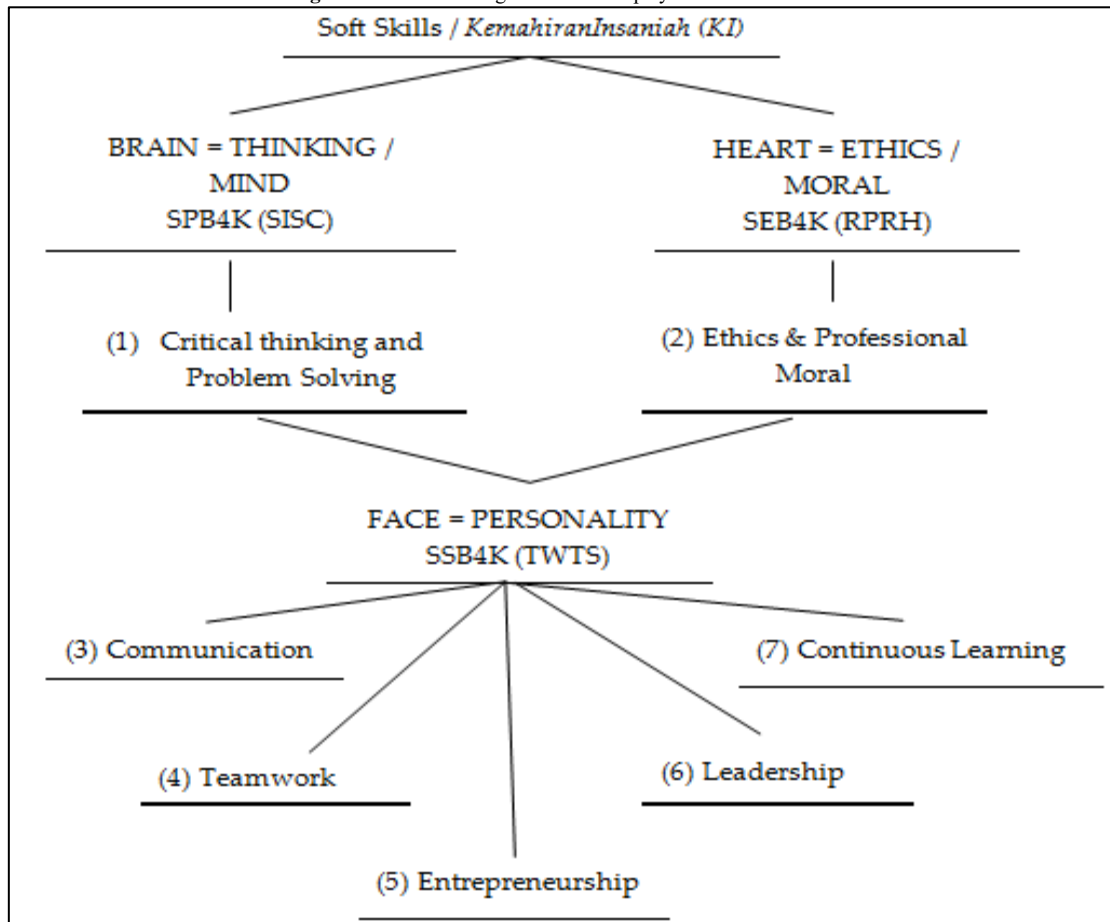
4. Conclusion

The themes that emerged from the analysis of the transcribed interview data with KIMY are notions of *KI* as encompassing the aspects of thinking, ethics, personality, spirituality, scientific, intellectual, creativity, religiosity, rationalization, professionalism, humanity, truthfulness, skillfulness, wisdom and truthfulness. In a sense, *KI* should embed thinking skills, that can be taught, learned, modelled, demonstrated, and genuinely indicated by educators, and 'a behavior than can be copied by others. *KI* 'encloses' ethics towards developing and nurturing humane human or humane human capital. *KI* could be 'enhanced' with the presence of religiosity or spirituality. In other words, religiosity orientations and engagement has link with soft skills. PUs'educators can train their students to understand and appreciate the KI elements by embedding them within their teaching and learning approaches or sessions. These elements are needed for survival in the future – to become humane human resources that are able to function effectively and significantly at their workplace. Perhaps, it is worthy to note that PUs' educators are not to only disseminate the subjects' content knowledge to their students, but they certainly need to also educate the elements of soft skills – and manners – to their students.Though the results within this paper limit generalization because they were drawn from only one very experienced respondent, and the findings could not be claimed as compulsive and comprehensive, nevertheless the personalized theories, elements, and notionsproposed by KIMY that had emerged from this study, could probably contribute to the future construction of a 'KI Reference Framework' for PUs' educators to refer, adapt and adopt throughout their endeavour to educate and cultivate humane human resources, who possess substantial soft skills, at their upcoming workplace. To conclude, KIMY's thoughts on *KemahiranInsaniah* competencies for professional development are endorsed within the excerpt below:

"These thinking, ethics and personality theories, which embodied aspects of soft-skills (KI), should be inculcated among our HEIs' students so that our nation becomes strong and well-established – Not only rich in material wealth but also bountiful heart of service (KIMY, 2014).

Acknowledgments

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