



Meeting the Challenges of Personal Development and Character Building in University Students

Yen Wan Chong^{1*}, Siti Norasyikin Binti Abdul Hamid²

¹School of Business Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia, ²School of Business Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia. *Email: chongywan@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Graduate unemployment and corruption are two major challenges faced by Malaysia. One of the top reasons for graduate unemployment in Malaysia, according to a recent survey of Malaysian employers, is poor character or attitude among university graduates. Despite intensifying anti-corruption efforts, corruption in Malaysia has remained a serious challenge. Character education and personal development programs which instill good values in our future leaders can be effective tools in the fight against corruption. This paper reports on a study which reviews the effectiveness of a campus wide program that was implemented between 2011 and 2013 aimed to facilitate personal development and character building in undergraduates by a Malaysian public university which specializes in management education. In line with the feedback obtained from students and lecturers on the aforesaid program, this paper puts forward some recommendations for improvement of future programs which aimed to enhance character education and personal development among university undergraduates.

Keywords: Character Building, Personal Development, Management Education

JEL Classifications: M14, I25

1. INTRODUCTION

A number of factors have been cited as causes of graduate unemployment including the current global economic slowdown, skills mismatch and the lack of soft skills. A recent survey of Malaysian employers cited poor character and attitude as one of the reasons for graduate unemployment in Malaysia (Leo, 2016). The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MOE Malaysia, 2012) and the National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017 (MOE Malaysia, 2012) have emphasized the need for local institutions of higher learning to produce holistic graduates. In line with the aforesaid national aspirations, Malaysian public universities are implementing various programs to develop student character and instill good moral values.

In 2011-2013, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) implemented its Employability and Enhancement Programme (EEP) which comprises two modules, namely EEP 1032 which is entitled "Personal Development and Character Building" and EEP 2032

which is entitled "Living in the Multi-Cultural Society." Both the EEP 1032 and EEP 2032 are aimed at cultivating various soft skills. Unfortunately, both the EEP 1032 and EEP 2032 were not well received by both UUM students and lecturers. The objective of this paper is report on the results of a study on the effectiveness of EEP 1032 in achieving its course objectives in assisting undergraduates in "personal development and character building" with the aim to provide inputs on how such programs can be improved in the future.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to achieve a better insights on the research issues. A survey questionnaire was used to gather quantitative data and interviews were also conducted to gain further insights. The data presented in this paper is part of a larger research project. The profile of the valid respondents for assessing the effectiveness of EEP 1032 comprises 525 students is presented in Table 1.

3. FINDINGS

The effectiveness of EEP 1032 is measured by items which reflect the course learning objectives as stated in the syllabus and teaching module of EEP 1032. The 23 items or questions on the effectiveness of EEP 1032 are listed in the left most column of Table 2 as variables A1 to A23. Respondents were asked to state their level of agreement on the effectiveness of EEP 1032 in achieving each of the 23 CLOs on a five point scale ranging from 1 = Strongly agree to 5 = Strongly disagree. Therefore, a lower attribute value indicates a higher level of agreement on the effectiveness of EEP 1032 in achieving the stated CLO. Table 3 presents the descriptive of the variables A1 to A23. As shown in Table 2, the value of skew-ness and kurtosis for all the variables A1 to A23 conforms to the rule of thumb that considers a variable as reasonably close to normal if its skew-ness and kurtosis values are between -1.0 and $+1.0$. Thus, the data are suited for parametric statistical analyses.

The sample mean scores for all the items A1 to A23 are <3 indicating that students in the sample agree that EEP 1032 has achieved each of the 23 CLOs. A one sample t-test was conducted on each of the variables A1 to A23 to evaluate whether the sample mean scores for each EEP 1032 learning objective represented by variables A1 to A23 are statistically significant.

H_0 : Effectiveness of EEP 1032 learning/lesson objective A(n) ≥ 3 (Interpretation: EEP 1032 learning objective A(n) is not achieved, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots, 23$).

H_1 : Effectiveness of EEP 1032 learning/lesson objective A(n) < 3 (Interpretation: EEP 1032 learning objective A(n) is achieved, $n = 1, 2, 3, \dots, 23$).

Table 1: Respondents' profile (n=525)

| Classification | N (%) |
|----------------------------------|------------|
| Gender | |
| Female | 411 (78.3) |
| Male | 114 (21.7) |
| College | |
| CAS | 60 (11.4) |
| COB | 306 (58.3) |
| COLGIS | 159 (30.3) |
| Nationality | |
| Malaysian | 519 (98.9) |
| Non-Malaysian | 6 (1.1) |
| Ethnicity | |
| Chinese | 190 (36.2) |
| Indian | 19 (3.6) |
| Malay | 291 (55.4) |
| Peribumi Sabah | 8 (1.5) |
| Peribumi Sarawak | 5 (1.0) |
| Peribumi Semenanjung | 1 (0.2) |
| Others | 11 (2.1) |
| University | |
| Diploma | 107 (20.4) |
| Entry | |
| KPM Matriculation Certificate/UM | 75 (14.3) |
| Foundation/UiTM Foundation | |
| Qualification | |
| STAM | 33 (6.3) |
| STPM | 310 (59.0) |

STAM: Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia, STPM: Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia

The results of the t-tests are presented in Table 3. The t-test results are statistically significant for all tested variables A1 to A23. Thus, the null hypotheses that students perceived EEP 1032 as not effective in achieving the course learning objectives which are represented by A1 to A23 are rejected. The results support the conclusion that students agree that EEP 1032 was somewhat effective in achieving the course learning objectives represented by statements A1 to A23.

Lower scores indicate higher level of agreement by respondents on the attainment of the course learning objective. As such, the lower the mean score, the higher the level of agreement amongst students on the effectiveness of EEP 1032 in achieving that particular course learning objective. Based on the sample mean scores, the EEP 1032 lesson objective ranked as most effectively achieved is A8 (accepting that other people can have different opinions) and the least effectively achieved are A3 (learning to develop good character), A7 (being aware of own prejudices) and A15 (developing critical thinking skills). The effectiveness of EEP 1032 in achieving the lesson objectives A1 to A23, ranked from most effective to least effective, is presented in Table 4.

Factor analysis was also used to identify the components or dimensions of the effectiveness of EEP 1032. The first step in factor analysis is to examine the factorability of the 23 items in Table 3. Several well-recognized criteria for the factorability were used. Firstly, the sample size was sufficiently large and the ratio of cases to variables were larger than 5-1. Secondly, the correlation matrix for the variables contain two or more correlations of 0.30 or greater. Thirdly, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.975, above the recommended value of 0.6, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(253) = 14245.569$, $P < 0.05$). The diagonals of the anti-image correlation matrix were all over 0.5, supporting the inclusion of each item in the factor analysis. Finally, the communalities were all above 0.3 (Table 5), further confirming that each item shared some common variance with other items.

As the above indicators confirm factorability, factor analysis was conducted with all 23 items. The analysis yielded three components explaining a total of 78.23% of the variance for the entire set of variables. The first component comprises 13 CLOs which are mostly related to the development of personal strengths and skills are labeled as the action component. The second component comprises 7 CLOs which are mostly related to understanding what good values, personal strengths are and skills are labeled as the knowledge component. The third component comprises 3 CLOs related to giving and accepting feedback is as the feedback component. Table 6 lists the rotated and sorted factor loadings for the 23 items based on a three factor extraction.

Composite scores were created for each of the three factors, based on the mean of the items which had their primary loadings on each factor. Lower scores indicated higher level of agreement by respondents on the effectiveness of EEP 1032 in achieving the course learning objectives in that component. Descriptive statistics for the three components of EEP 1032 are presented in Table 7.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for EEP 1032 variables

| EEP 1032 has helped me to ... | Mean±SD | Skewness | | Kurtosis | |
|--|------------|------------|-------|------------|-------|
| | | Statistics | SE | Statistics | SE |
| A1. Understand personal development | 2.48±1.137 | 0.460 | 0.107 | -0.565 | 0.213 |
| A2. Understand character building | 2.48±1.087 | 0.500 | 0.107 | -0.413 | 0.213 |
| A3. Learn to develop good character | 2.55±1.073 | 0.398 | 0.107 | -0.397 | 0.213 |
| A4. Understand good personal traits important for individual success | 2.33±1.119 | 0.583 | 0.107 | -0.421 | 0.213 |
| A5. Understand bad personal traits that can lead to individual failure | 2.40±1.121 | 0.467 | 0.107 | -0.586 | 0.213 |
| A6. Learn moral and ethical values | 2.36±1.140 | 0.586 | 0.107 | -0.437 | 0.213 |
| A7. Be aware of own prejudices | 2.55±1.043 | 0.362 | 0.107 | -0.319 | 0.213 |
| A8. Accept that other people can have different opinions | 2.15±1.160 | 0.913 | 0.107 | 0.034 | 0.213 |
| A9. Learn to accept feedback | 2.24±1.111 | 0.739 | 0.107 | -0.203 | 0.213 |
| A10. Learn to give feedback | 2.37±1.034 | 0.524 | 0.107 | -0.295 | 0.213 |
| A11. Identify personal strengths and weaknesses | 2.37±1.067 | 0.523 | 0.107 | -0.323 | 0.213 |
| A12. Develop personal strengths | 2.47±1.064 | 0.383 | 0.107 | -0.502 | 0.213 |
| A13. Improve personal weaknesses | 2.44±1.078 | 0.467 | 0.107 | -0.384 | 0.213 |
| A14. Develop leadership skills | 2.51±1.096 | 0.424 | 0.107 | -0.482 | 0.213 |
| A15. Develop critical thinking skills | 2.55±1.065 | 0.358 | 0.107 | -0.403 | 0.213 |
| A16. Develop problem solving skills | 2.49±1.082 | 0.448 | 0.107 | -0.416 | 0.213 |
| A17. Develop good personality | 2.42±1.129 | 0.623 | 0.107 | -0.337 | 0.213 |
| A18. Develop good virtues | 2.35±1.102 | 0.636 | 0.107 | -0.230 | 0.213 |
| A19. Encouraged to be ambitious | 2.38±1.135 | 0.592 | 0.107 | -0.439 | 0.213 |
| A20. Encouraged to develop career plans | 2.44±1.106 | 0.454 | 0.107 | -0.561 | 0.213 |
| A21. Identify career opportunities | 2.49±1.140 | 0.425 | 0.107 | -0.681 | 0.213 |
| A22. Improve human relationship skills | 2.27±1.073 | 0.626 | 0.107 | -0.298 | 0.213 |
| A23. Develop personal strengths | 2.40±1.102 | 0.480 | 0.107 | -0.546 | 0.213 |

EEP: Employability and Enhancement Programme, SD: Standard deviation, SE: Standard error

Table 3: One sample t-test results of EEP 1032 learning objectives (n=525)

| EEP 1032 has helped me to ... | Mean±SD | One sample t-test (Test value=3) | |
|--|------------|-------------------------------------|-------|
| | | t (524) | P |
| A1. Understand personal development | 2.48±1.137 | -10.482 | 0.000 |
| A2. Understand character building | 2.48±1.087 | -11.043 | 0.000 |
| A3. Learn to develop good character | 2.55±1.073 | -9.554 | 0.000 |
| A4. Understand good personal traits important for individual success | 2.33±1.119 | -13.688 | 0.000 |
| A5. Understand bad personal traits that can lead to individual failure | 2.40±1.121 | -12.227 | 0.000 |
| A6. Learn moral and ethical values | 2.36±1.140 | -12.905 | 0.000 |
| A7. Be aware of own prejudices | 2.55±1.043 | -9.794 | 0.000 |
| A8. Accept that other people can have different opinions | 2.15±1.160 | -16.712 | 0.000 |
| A9. Learn to accept feedback | 2.24±1.111 | -15.595 | 0.000 |
| A10. Learn to give feedback | 2.37±1.034 | -13.970 | 0.000 |
| A11. Identify personal strengths and weaknesses | 2.37±1.067 | -13.498 | 0.000 |
| A12. Develop personal strengths | 2.47±1.064 | -11.366 | 0.000 |
| A13. Improve personal weaknesses | 2.44±1.078 | -11.899 | 0.000 |
| A14. Develop leadership skills | 2.51±1.096 | -10.315 | 0.000 |
| A15. Develop critical thinking skills | 2.55±1.065 | -9.715 | 0.000 |
| A16. Develop problem solving skills | 2.49±1.082 | -10.731 | 0.000 |
| A17. Develop good personality | 2.42±1.129 | -11.831 | 0.000 |
| A18. Develop good virtues | 2.35±1.102 | -13.471 | 0.000 |
| A19. Encouraged to be ambitious | 2.38±1.135 | -12.531 | 0.000 |
| A20. Encouraged to develop career plans | 2.44±1.106 | -11.639 | 0.000 |
| A21. Identify career opportunities | 2.49±1.140 | -10.259 | 0.000 |
| A22. Improve human relationship skills | 2.27±1.073 | -15.574 | 0.000 |
| A23. Develop personal strengths | 2.40±1.102 | -12.520 | 0.000 |

EEP: Employability and Enhancement Programme, SD: Standard deviation

Overall, these analyses indicated that three distinct dimensions underlie student responses on A1 to A23 and that these factors were highly internally consistent as reflected by the values of Cronbach alpha. The skewness and kurtosis of all three factors were well within a tolerable range for assuming a normal distribution. The one sample t-test was conducted on the composite scores of the three dimensions of EEP effectiveness and the results are presented in Table 8.

The t-test results were statistically significant for all three tested composite variables which represents three dimensions of EEP1032 effectiveness as perceived by the respondents. In view of the t-test results in Table 9, the null hypotheses that students perceived EEP 1032 character action objectives, knowledge objectives and feedback objectives as not achieved are rejected. The effectiveness ranking of the three dimensions of EEP1032 based on the sample mean score is presented in Table 9.

Table 4: Effectiveness ranking of EEP 1032 learning/lesson objective (N=525)

| Ranking | EEP 1032 has helped me to ... | Mean score |
|----------------------|--|------------|
| 1 (most effective) | A8. Accept that other people can have different opinions | 2.15 |
| 2 | A9. Learn to accept feedback | 2.24 |
| 3 | A22. Improve human relationship skills | 2.27 |
| 4 | A4. Understand good personal traits important for individual success | 2.33 |
| 5 | A18. Develop good virtues | 2.35 |
| 6 | A6. Learn moral and ethical values | 2.36 |
| 7 | A10. Learn to give feedback | 2.37 |
| 8 | A11. Identify personal strengths and weaknesses | 2.37 |
| 9 | A19. Encouraged to be ambitious | 2.38 |
| 10 | A5. Understand bad personal traits that can lead to individual failure | 2.4 |
| 11 | A23. Develop personal strengths | 2.4 |
| 12 | A17. Develop good personality | 2.42 |
| 13 | A13. Improve personal weaknesses | 2.44 |
| 14 | A20. Encouraged to develop career plans | 2.44 |
| 15 | A12. Develop personal strengths | 2.47 |
| 16 | A1. Understand personal development | 2.48 |
| 17 | A2. Understand character building | 2.48 |
| 18 | A16. Develop problem solving skills | 2.49 |
| 19 | A21. Identify career opportunities | 2.49 |
| 20 | A14. Develop leadership skills | 2.51 |
| 21 (least effective) | A3. Learn to develop good character | 2.55 |
| 22 (least effective) | A7. Be aware of own prejudices | 2.55 |
| 23 (least effective) | A15. Develop critical thinking skills | 2.55 |
| | A. Mean (mean score of A1 to A23) | 2.41 |

EEP: Employability and Enhancement Programme

Table 5: Community of EEP 1032 learning/lesson objectives (N=525)

| EEP 1032 has helped me to ... | Community |
|--|-----------|
| A1. Understand the concept of personal development | 0.831 |
| A2. Understand the concept of character building | 0.852 |
| A3. Learn the tools, techniques and strategies to develop good personality and character | 0.775 |
| A4. Understand good personal traits and habits that are important for individual success | 0.807 |
| A5. Understand bad personal traits and habits that can lead to individual failure | 0.729 |
| A6. Learn moral and ethical values | 0.743 |
| A7. Be aware of my own prejudices | 0.626 |
| A8. Accept that other people can have different opinions | 0.859 |
| A9. Learn to accept feedback gracefully | 0.867 |
| A11. Identify my personal strengths and weaknesses | 0.725 |
| A12. Develop my personal strengths | 0.758 |
| A13. Improve my weaknesses | 0.771 |
| A14. Develop leadership skills | 0.772 |
| A15. Develop critical thinking skills | 0.748 |
| A16. Develop problem solving skills | 0.787 |
| A17. Develop good personality | 0.793 |
| A18. Develop good virtues | 0.809 |
| A19. Encourage me to be ambitious | 0.799 |
| A20. Encourage me to develop my career plans | 0.801 |
| A21. To identify career opportunities | 0.788 |
| A22. Improve my human relationship skills | 0.773 |
| A23. Develop my personal strengths | 0.812 |
| A10. Learn to give constructive feedback | 0.767 |

EEP: Employability and Enhancement Programme

4. DISCUSSION

In line with the findings of this study, we put forward the following recommendations to improve future programs such as the EEP 1032. With regard to individual CLOs, the results of the t-test analyses revealed that the following CLOs were perceived by students as least effectively achieved:

- A15. Develop critical thinking skills
- A3. Learn to develop good character
- A7. Be aware of own prejudices.

We provide the following suggestions to improve the attainment of the above three CLOs.

- Provide greater emphasis in development of critical thinking skills in future programs:

Taking into account the students' feedback on how EEP 1032 can be improved to help students in personal development and character building, the researcher would like to suggest that future programs incorporate a unit on critical thinking to educate students on the tools and techniques to become a critical thinker and creative

Table 6: Identification of factor components

| EEP 1032 has helped me to ... | Factor 1: Action | Factor 2: Knowledge | Factor 2: Feedback |
|--|------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| A6. Learn moral and ethical values | 0.322 | 0.570 | 0.561 |
| A5. Understand bad personal traits and habits that can lead to individual failure | | 0.642 | 0.511 |
| A3. Learn the tools, techniques and strategies to develop good personality and character | 0.468 | 0.718 | |
| A2. Understand the concept of character building | 0.395 | 0.783 | |
| A1. Understand the concept of personal development | 0.386 | 0.781 | |
| A4. Understand good personal traits and habits that are important for individual success | 0.333 | 0.665 | 0.503 |
| A7. Be aware of my own prejudices | 0.339 | 0.538 | 0.471 |
| A9. Learn to accept feedback gracefully | 0.436 | 0.305 | 0.764 |
| A8. Accept that other people can have different opinions | 0.372 | | 0.799 |
| A10. Learn to give constructive feedback | 0.534 | 0.407 | 0.563 |
| A21. To identify career opportunities | 0.797 | | |
| A20. Encourage me to develop my career plans | 0.796 | | 0.317 |
| A19. Encourage me to be ambitious | 0.760 | | 0.382 |
| A23. Develop my personal strengths | 0.757 | 0.381 | 0.306 |
| A13. Improve my weaknesses | 0.701 | 0.455 | |
| A22. Improve my human relationship skills | 0.684 | | 0.465 |
| A14. Develop leadership skills | 0.679 | 0.522 | |
| A18. Develop good virtues | 0.667 | 0.360 | 0.484 |
| A12. Develop my personal strengths | 0.663 | 0.459 | 0.330 |
| A15. Develop critical thinking skills | 0.651 | 0.498 | |
| A16. Develop problem solving skills | 0.635 | 0.556 | |
| A17. Develop good personality | 0.615 | 0.487 | 0.421 |
| A11. Identify my personal strengths and weaknesses | 0.609 | 0.402 | 0.439 |

EEP: Employability and Enhancement Programme

Table 7: Descriptive statistics for the three dimensions of EEP effectiveness (n=525)

| EEP 1032 Learning/lesson objectives | Mean±SD | Skewness | | Kurtosis | | Reliability | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|------------|----------------|------------|----------------|-------------|-----------------|
| | | Statistics | Standard error | Statistics | Standard error | Alpha | Number of items |
| Factor 1: Action | 2.4290±0.95555 | 0.524 | 0.107 | -0.255 | 0.213 | 0.974 | 13 |
| Factor 2: Knowledge | 2.4506±0.95401 | 0.546 | 0.107 | -0.160 | 0.213 | 0.944 | 7 |
| Factor 2: Feedback | 2.2559±1.02344 | 0.810 | 0.107 | -0.010 | 0.213 | 0.920 | 3 |

SD: Standard deviation, EEP: Employability and Enhancement Programme

Table 8: One sample t-test results of EEP 1032 factors or components

| EEP 1032 Learning/lesson objectives | Mean±SD | One sample t-test (Test value=3) | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------|-------|
| | | t stat | P |
| Factor 1: Development | 2.4290±0.95555 | -13.692 | 0.000 |
| Factor 2: Awareness/knowledge | 2.4506±0.95401 | -13.195 | 0.000 |
| Factor 3: Feedback | 2.2559±1.02344 | -16.660 | 0.000 |

SD: Standard deviation, EEP: Employability and Enhancement Programme

Table 9: Ranking of effectiveness of EEP 1032 dimensions

| Ranking | Dimensions of EEP 1032 CLOs | Mean score |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|------------|
| 1 (most effective) | Factor 2: Feedback component | 2.2559 |
| 2 | Factor 1: Action component | 2.4290 |
| 3 (least effective) | Factor 3: Knowledge component | 2.4506 |

EEP: Employability and Enhancement Programme

problem solver. A sample unit on this topic can be found in a book entitled peak performance success in college

and beyond (Sharon, 2015). Many ethical issues are multi-dimensional and complex and require critical thinking skills to evaluate the perspectives of various stakeholders (Wong, n.d.).

ii. Introduce service learning projects in future programs:

The researcher would like to recommend the acceleration of adoption of service learning projects which are integrated into subject curriculum as well as stand-alone on-campus service projects. Service learning is an effective approach in character education. In service-learning projects, young people take on a hands approach to identify community needs and develop and implement solutions to meet those needs (Billig et al., 2008). As pointed out by two students, "...buat lah aktiviti kemasyarakatan bukannya dok membebel pung pung pang, students mengantok dengar ceramah je..." and "...can make us to go visit to old folk house which have multiracial of races in the old folk home and communicating with them..."

iii. Introduce awareness training to identify and eliminate unconscious bias:

Unconscious biases can lead to bad decisions and

unethical action. According to Velasquez (2012), our prejudices about the world, about others, and about oneself is an obstacle to ethical behavior. This is because there are four steps leading towards ethical behavior. The four steps are as follows:

- Step one: Recognizing a situation is an ethical situation
- Step two: Judging the ethical course of action.
- Step three: Deciding to do the ethical course of action
- Step four: Carrying out the ethical decision.

In step two, our ability to assess the ethical course of action can curtail by our biased theories about the world, about others, and about oneself.

Unconscious bias has been identified as one of the main reasons for lack of workplace diversity (Buckley, 2014).

In view of the aforesaid, the research further recommends the introduction of awareness training in line with those practiced by many large corporations (Olson, 2015).

- iv. Teach students theories on ethics and personal development: With regard to CLO groupings, the results of the factor analysis indicated that there were three groups of CLOs, i.e., the first group which comprises 13 CLOs that are mostly related to the development of personal strengths and skills which is labeled as the action component, the second group comprises 7 CLOs which are mostly related to understanding what are good values, personal strengths and skills that is labeled as the knowledge component and the third group which comprises 3 CLOs related to giving and accepting feedback that is labeled as the feedback component. The analysis of the mean scores of the three components indicated that the knowledge component was perceived by students as least effectively achieved. In order to enhance the effectiveness of the knowledge component, we suggest that the EEP 1032 syllabus include theories on ethics and personal development. There is a close relationship between knowledge and action. Better knowledge on theories on ethics and personal development would lead

to more effective action in personal development and character building.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has provided some insights to help improve the effectiveness of a campus wide program aimed at personal development and character building among new university undergraduates that was implemented between 2011 and 2013 by a Malaysian Public University. These insights have led to recommendations on target areas for improvement of future programs at the aforesaid university which specializes in management education.

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