

## **The Application of Soft Skills Development Module Through the Preparation of Group Assignment of the UiTM Professional Islamic Education Courses, Based on the Leadership Approach**

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*Abstract: Managing student group assignments as one of the assessment instruments with the need to ensure student soft skills development which were mapped to the course outcomes of a program of study, is one of the major challenges to the teaching and learning process. This is because of the using of cross-curricular approach where students are not trained specifically to those skills, but at the same time the development of the skills is evaluated. For the Islamic education professional courses offered to the UiTM diploma students, there are four soft skills to be developed through the preparation of group assignments namely: teamwork; information management and the lifelong learning skills; communication skills and professional ethics. The aim of this study is to propose an appropriate module that faculty can integrate into the teaching and learning process of the courses, to ensure that every student receives training before their soft skills are evaluated. The module reliability test was conducted by five lecturers on five groups of student from four different Islamic education professional courses. Feedback was obtained through the interviews with the lecturers involved and the review on the assignment meeting minutes submitted by the students. The findings from this study are suggested to be applied as a training module using guided meeting minutes as a mechanism*

*to develop soft skills and its assessment.*

**Keywords:** *Continuous Assessment, Group assignment, Rubrics, Soft skills, Student development*

## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the main reasons for graduates' failure to effectively market themselves in the job system is the lack of sufficient soft skills (Devadason et al, 2010). These weaknesses are found to be related to the weakness of the education system to produce graduates with necessary soft skills (Mourshed et al., 2014). In this regard, the development of soft skills has been recognized as one of the key solutions to the problem of unemployment among Malaysian graduates (Sulaiman & Burke, 2009). In Malaysia, the Ministry of Education Malaysia has set eight education domains in the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) for higher education, which consist of the aspects of knowledge; practical skills; social skills and responsibilities; values, attitudes and professionalism; communication, leadership and teamwork skills; problem solving and scientific skills; information management and lifelong learning skills; and management skills and entrepreneurship. Six from the eight domains mentioned above are related to soft skills. In Malaysia, studies have found that most student-level programs are carried out in the form of coursework which involves group assignments or projects, presentations and discussions (Jedin & Saad, 2006). This makes group learning as one of the most important educational instruments in the Malaysian higher education system to achieve the goal of developing such soft skills (Neo, 2005).

## **RESEARCH BACKGROUND**

Group assignment is one of the methods of instruction based on teamwork. It involves the formation of a small, formal group of students, working together and contributing to the success of a mutual mission (Smith, 1996). According to Biggs and Tang (2009), this development refers to two main objectives, which are; the development of interpersonal skills and teamwork-related skills; while the second is to reduce the burden on teachers in the assessment process.

The Islamic education-related courses are among the compulsory courses for students pursuing diploma programs in Universiti Teknologi MARA. There are three courses related to Islamic education, including professional Islamic education courses offered to the third-year students.

The courses are mapped into four domains of soft skills, which are; 1) communication skills, 2) teamwork skills, 3) professional ethics & morals and 4) lifelong learning skills, which are implemented through the preparation of group assignment and presentation. Therefore, in conducting this course, in order to provide fair assessment to the students, the lecturers must ensure that students earn benefit from the developmental training of these four domains of soft skills before their soft skills are assessed (Tucker & Abbasi, 2016). The following Table 1 show the evaluation criteria and weighting of the assignment and the presentation of the professional Islamic education-related courses provided by the syllabus developer. However, as the development of these soft skills is cross-curricular, the development of these domains is not explicitly stated. This requires lecturers to use their own creativity to develop any form of adaptive training to ensure that students are not evaluated for anything they have not been trained on.

**Table 1. Assessment criteria for UiTM professional Islamic education courses**

No.	Items	Criteria	Marks
<b>Workgroup assignment</b>			
1	Introduction	Organized	2
2	Points and elaboration	Good facts & well-mapped elaboration to topic	15
3	Suggestion and conclusion	Well-described overall discussion	3
4	Authentic references	Sufficient and authorized references	2
5	Professional ethics and moral (Plagiarism)	Proactive and creative in completing work	3
<b>Group Presentation</b>			
1	Communication skill	Good and interesting performance	5
2	Teamwork skill	Committed to the group	5
3	Professional ethics and moral	Observing professional attitude and code of conduct	2
4	Lifelong learning	Ability to seek and open to learn new knowledge	3

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

The aim of this study is to propose an appropriate module that faculty can integrate into the teaching and learning process of the course, to ensure that every student receives training before their soft skills are evaluated. Accordingly, this study revolves around two main areas:

- 1- What is the appropriate form of module to train students' soft skills which is suitable to be applied during the preparation of course assignment for the professional Islamic education courses?
- 2- How reliable is the proposed module to meet the needs of the soft skills training involved?

## **SOFT SKILLS ATTRIBUTE**

### **4.1 Information Management and Lifelong Learning Skills**

According to Aspin (2011), for all this while the lifelong learning has been focusing on three essential needs, which are; the economic development, personal development and social inclusion. In the framework of enculturating the lifelong learning by the Ministry of Higher Education 2010-2020, the ministry defines the lifelong learning based on the definition given by Longworth & Davies (1996), which is referred as “the development of human potential through a continuously supportive process that stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply these with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances and environments.”(Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2011). In the workplace climate, for example, continuous change in the job climate requires knowledge seeking and continuous skills development (Field, 2005). Lifelong learning refers to one's openness to new ideas, decisions, skills and behaviours that motivate one to acquire knowledge, process and transfer it using certain skills: 1) locate appropriate information, 2) evaluate its quality, 3) organize it, and 4) use that information effectively (Collins et al., 2009). With regard to the ability to test the source of information, Peterson (2015) proposes five criteria to test before a source of reference is accepted,

and they include;

1) authority of the author and the background of the publisher, 2) objectivity of the author, 3) quality of work, 4) currency of the work, and 5) relevancy of the work. Table 2 below shows the match between the assignment and presentation assessment criteria with the lifelong learning skills criteria from Collins et al. (2009) and Peterson (2015):

**Table 2. Matching assignment and presentation assessment criteria with lifelong learning skills**

No	Lifelong Learning Elements According to Collins et al.(2009) & Peterson (2015)	Assignment or Presentation Assessment Criteria	Rationalized Assessment Elements
1	Locate appropriate information	Using good facts & elaboration	Well answering the research questions
2	Organizing information effectively		Developing original structure of ideas
3	Relevant source of reference	Sufficient references	Sufficient data
4	Authority of the author and & background of the publisher	Trusted references	Trusted references
5	Using information effectively	Openness towards new ideas	Benefiting with new ideas
6	Currency of the work	Ability to seek new knowledge	Using current reference

#### 4.2 Written Communication

Communication is a process that involves the transfer of knowledge and common understanding from one person to another (Keyton, 2011). It begins with the transmission of messages or information from the presenter either verbally or in writing to the recipient via a specific media followed by feedback from the recipient (Sulaiman, 1997). Iksan et al (2012) measured written communication skills from student assignment based on several criteria: 1) clarity of writing, 2) flow of argument, 3) easy-to- understand sentences and 4) academic writing. These criteria served to measure students' ability from their point of view as informants. Meanwhile, their skills as recipients were identified through their feedback on information or facts obtained from the references (Iksan et al, 2012). Table 3 below shows the match between the assignment and presentation assessment criteria with the communication skills criteria from Iksan et al (2012):

**Table 3. Matching assignment and presentation assessment criteria with communication Skills**

No	Communication Skills, Iksan et al (2012) & Sulaiman (1997)	Assignment or Presentation Assessment Criteria	Rationalized Assessment Elements
1	Giving feedback	Well-described conclusion of overall discussion	Well-described conclusion
2	Clarity of writing using easy-to-understand sentences	Well mapped facts & explanations to the topic of discussion	Using easy-to-understand sentences
3	Flow of arguments		Logical connection between sentences
4	Academic writing	Free plagiarism	Using citation

### 4.3 Professional Ethics

According to Devadason et al (2010), among the professional ethics that need to be applied in the development of student soft skills are; 1) time management, especially meeting the deadlines of submitting reports, 2) practicing honesty, trust and integrity, and 3) carrying out tasks professionally. In a professional organisation teamwork leadership is practiced through meetings. Meeting is functions to determine the vision and mission, plan strategies, make decisions, review enhancement or monitor, and so on. An effective implementation of meetings will create a diversity of formal communications within the organization, where tasks delegated among colleagues can be executed efficiently in order to achieve the mission and vision of the organization (Samsuni & Hadi, 2005; Kechot, 2015). Therefore, meetings become the nucleus of a teamwork.

According to Geimer et al. (2015), there are four main elements of meeting effectiveness, including the people (meeting members), meeting management, meeting activities and meeting outcomes. Meeting activities refer to discussions related to the purpose of the meeting. Whereas meeting results refer to decisions made during or after a meeting that will affect the out-of-meeting actions of performing task positively or vice versa

Physically, the results of the meeting are recorded in the form of minutes, the only outcome that can be referred to after the meeting

(Jennings, n.d.). It is a historical record of teamwork, as an evidence of the implementation and achievement of group objectives (Gutmann, 2016), which involves processes such as mission setting, strategy planning, task sharing, reporting and improvement. Thus, the success of a teamwork that involves the above process can be ascertained by the minutes of the meeting. Table 4 below shows the match between the assignment and presentation assessment criteria with Devadason et al (2010)'s professional ethics skills.

**Table 4. Matching assignment and presentation assessment criteria with professional ethics**

No	Professional Ethics, Devadason et al (2010)	Assignment or Presentation Assessment Criteria	Rationalized Assessment Elements
1	Punctual	Proactive and creative in completing tasks	Punctual
2	Trustworthy	Free plagiarism	Free plagiarism
3	Practicing professional management	Professional attitude and observe code of conduct	Practicing professional management code of conduct
4	Truthful and integrity		Using citation

#### 4.4 Teamwork

One of the biggest challenges to develop soft skills is developing teamwork skills. This is because in addition to developing individual teamwork skills, it is also necessary to ensure the involvement of each student in the development of the other skills above, which are; the lifelong learning, written communication, and professional ethics. This is because the successful of team in submitting good report, does not totally reflecting significant teamwork (Huges and Jones, 2011). Therefore, the assignment report is not indicates that each member has undergone the development of all required soft skills. This requires that the aspects of teamwork skills development should be effectively develop to ensure the involvement and contribution of each member in the preparation of the assignments, so that all the required soft skills will also efectively trained. Thus, the task assigned to measure students teamwork skills should be specifically able to explain the development of teamwork elements to each team member (Walvoord & Anderson, 1998). According to Devadason et al (2010), the success of

teamwork depends on the degree of integration among group members, including 1) appropriate group size, 2) efficient task sharing, 3) good work coordination, and 4) participation of the members.

According to Tucker & Abbasi (2016), one of the weaknesses of developing teamwork skills among graduates is that they are not trained on how to work in a team and their skills are assessed simply by referring to the end result and disregard the preparation process. Studies show that students will be more positive about teamwork when they receive proper training and the assessment is carried out individually (Chapman and Auken, 2001). In line with teamwork as one of the desired course outcomes, students must first be given appropriate training before their achievement is evaluated (Bain, 2004). As teamwork refers to each member's involvement in the task preparation process, teamwork assessment can only be trusted by referring to the process and not to the final report (Huges and Jones, 2011). Accordingly, although the purpose of group assignments as an instructional method is to reduce the lecturers burden of individual scoring (Biggs & Tang, 2009), by referring to the process, will allows lecturers to identify which members who failed to make significant contributions towards the team. Accordingly, they can be assessed individually and to ensure fair scoring among group members (Hamdi Rahman et al, 2018). By identifying the contribution of each member in the preparation process, also helps lectures to determine level of involvement of each members of other soft skills development as well as to conduct individual assessment. At that time, lecture can simply refers to the final report. Table 5 below shows the match between the assignment and presentation assessment criteria with teamwork criteria from Devadason et al (2010):

**Table 5. Matching assignment and presentation assessment criteria with teamwork skill**

No	Teamwork, Devadason et al (2010)	Assignment or Presentation Assessment Criteria	Rationalized Assessment Elements
1	Participation of members	Commitment towards Group	Member's commitment
2	Balance task sharing	Good teamwork	Balance task sharing
3	Good work coordination		Good group coordination



## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This group assignment management module was developed based on workgroup report and presentation assessment criteria as required by the courses syllabus. There are four stages of instructions including; 1) learning, 2) practicing, 3) getting feedback from lecturer, and 4) trying again (Bain, 2004; Fink, 2003) by using minutes of meeting as an instrument of teamwork leadership management and as an evident the execution of tasks given (Hamdi Rahman et al, 2018). In general, the contents of the module were divided into three main sections. First, the formation of groups and the selection of title. Second, the process of preparing report. Third, feedback and evaluation of the draft report.

In the first stage, students were asked to form groups of between 4 and 5 (David & Bass, 1993). In order to establish the element of democracy and to encourage communication in the early stage of task preparation, each group was asked to suggest an issue they would like to study based on the general

criteria given. It also aimed to foster positive attitudes toward teamwork by instilling the belief that they have more control over expected outcomes (Pfaff & Huddleston, 2003).

While the second part is the report preparation processes, which involved the achievement of 4 main objectives, which were; 1) to guide students to practice the right attitude in information management by referring to the authentic source of references, where each member asked to contribute two sources of reference to the group. Students were first trained to identify the credibility of the author and also the publisher based on the principles of narration of hadith in Islam; 2) to guide each student to practice trust and transparency in knowledge management through the writing of two paragraphs without plagiarism, based on the two sources of references. In this regard, students were trained first on the concept of trust in Islam and its relationship to plagiarism. In performing this task, students were required to write an essay of 50 words, by practicing American Psychological Association (APA) reference and citation writing style; 3) to guide each group to develop sub topics and distribute them to each group member and to guide them to write a 400-word essay based on previously acquired skills. Each member was required to cite each fact, but not to repeat the same citation continuously more than twice, and to make conclusion at the end

of the essay; 4) to guide coordination of each group to write introduction, suggestions and final conclusions and also to the abstract of the article. Meanwhile, the final stage refers to the stage of receiving feedback from the assessment of a draft report. Actually, feedbacks for improvement were given at the beginning of every following phases in the preparation. For the purpose of teamwork professional management, each group was equipped with eight templates of the minutes of meeting containing generic recommended meeting results as a guidance. For each phase, two templates of the meeting minutes were required. The first for the purpose of holding meetings prior to the execution to ensure that each member has a clear picture of the assignment and also to distribute tasks among members. The second is for the purpose of reporting, as well as to confirm the accuracy of the reported results with the tasks received. Meeting minutes were used to provide feedback for lectures on the preparation process and also to identify the commitments of each group member.

The module was conducted by five lecturers consisting of 138 students from five classes of the students from the third semester and divided into five groups per class. The main objective of the study was to obtain feedback on the application of the module in generating module outcomes which are the expected soft skills criteria that will be assessed from group assignment report and presentation.

Table 6 below show the details of the expected module deliverable outcome from the implementation of the module in the teaching and learning of the courses involved. The reliability and credibility of the module as a student's soft skills training instrument were measured by lecturers through the feedback on the attainment of module outcomes obtained during the discussion session conducted before every next phase of the processes, as well as through the assignment report.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Based on the initial feedback from the discussion session for every beginning of new phase of assignment preparation process, the review on the submitted meeting minutes and also the evaluation on the final report showed that, generally, most students have clearly indicated the attainment of expected module outcomes from the training. Students also have benefited from the initial feedback provided from the discussion and the monitoring of minutes of meeting in the improvement of their final report.

With regard to the lifelong learning skills, 92 percent of students were able to respond to the topic of the study accurately, 87 percent of students were able to contribute at least two references for the group while 84 percent were able to refer their entire writing using authentic sources. 100 percent of submitted assignment have at least one suggestion as an evidence of the ability of the students to use information effectively. However, 30 percent of students have cited the same reference more than twice continuously. This lack of ability to compile facts from multiple sources of reference may be due to moderate level of maturity of thinking, as well as the nature of developing talent and creativity preference need to be conducted in a long-term training. The study has obtained the same result for the ability to identify current information.

**Table 6. Module deliverable outcomes**

A. The lifelong learning skill			
No	Collins et al. (2009) & Peterson (2015)	Rationalized Assessment Elements	Deliverable Outcomes
A1	Locate appropriate information	Well answering the research questions	Every student has successfully answered the research questions.
A2	Organizing information effectively	Developing original structure of ideas	Every student not to repeat the same citation continuously more than twice
A3	Relevant source of reference	Sufficient data	Every student has successfully referred to at least 2 trusted references
A4	Authority of the author and & background of the publisher	Authorized references	Every student has successfully referred the entire writing to the trusted references.
A5	Using information effectively	Benefiting with new ideas	Every groups has successfully giving suggestions based on new information
A6	Currency of the work	Using current reference	Every student has successfully using references published within past 10 years
B. Written communication skill			
No	Iksan et al (2012) & Sulaiman (1997)	Rationalized Assessment Elements	Deliverable Outcomes
B1	Giving feedback	Well-described conclusion	Every student was able to draw conclusion based on the information presented.
B2	Clarity of writing using easy-to-understand sentences	Using easy-to-understand sentences	Every student has successfully conveyed facts using easy-to-understand sentences
B3	Flow of arguments	Logical connection between sentences	Every student has successfully used suitable conjunction
B4	Academic writing	Using citation	Every student stated the citation for every fact delivered.
C. Professional ethics			
No	Devadason et al (2010)	Rationalized Assessment Elements	Deliverable Outcomes
C1	Punctual	Punctual	Every group has submitted the assignment at the time given.
C2	Trustworthy	Free plagiarism	Every student managed to write using his own sentence
C3	Practicing professional management	Practicing professional management code of conduct	Every group has successfully managed group leadership using the meeting minutes
C4	Truthful and integrity	Using citation	Every student stated citations for every facts delivered
D. Teamwork skills			
No	Devadason et al (2010)	Rationalized Assessment Elements	Deliverable Outcomes
D1	Participation of members	Member's commitment	Every member of the group has significantly involved in the preparation of the assignment
D2	Balance task sharing	Balance task sharing	Every group has successfully delegated tasks among members fairly
D3	Good work coordination	Good group coordination	Every group has successfully coordinated the task preparation process

In term of the written communication skills, 90 percent of students were able to provide conclusion using their own perspectives from information obtained, meanwhile only 80 percent have stated citations for every fact

presented including the fact referred from the same source. However, 25 percent of the students continuously repeated citations from the same source more than twice. This included students who did not cite any fact when deriving information from the same source. The instructions not to continuously repeat citations from the same source more than twice aimed to train students not to copy the structure of the thinking from the source of the reference and to train them to come up with creative ideas in developing their own structure. Some students' weaknesses in communicating the facts using the conjunction effectively may be due to the weakness of language proficiency.

The results of the study also found that all groups used the meeting minutes provided. It was hoped that from the use of meeting minutes, each member of the team will have professional project management experience. One of the purposes of using the meeting minutes was to motivate students to meet the deadline and to avoid being recorded as not committed to the group. The findings show that 95 percent of group members have submitted their reports during the meeting of the final draft preparation report. Meanwhile, 85 per cent of students succeeded in writing using their own sentences, while the rest still practiced the 'cut & paste' culture even has been warned beforehand. This may be due the attitude of postponing work which finally led to insufficient time to prepare the report.

With regard to the teamwork, 100 percent of the groups have successfully engaged all members to perform the management tasks particularly as meeting secretary. However, this rate did not include the 5 percent of group members who refused to commit to the group. They were excluded from the group and given individual assignment.

## **CONCLUSION**

Outstanding mastery of soft skills is an important asset for any graduate to cope with the changes brought by the industrial revolution 4.0 and the community 5.0. From the religious point of view, graduates need to have high management and lifelong learning skills to cope with the uncontrolled eruption of information especially to maintain a healthy mindset and faith. Recommendation for the next study is to identify the impact of module implementation on the development of students' soft skills and to explain the rubric of the assessment more objectively.

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