THE statistics are worrying—an article in The Star last year quoted Human Resources Minister Datuk Seri Richard Riot Jaem: between 2010 and 2013, the number of unemployed graduates grew from 42,954 to 53,282.

Another article quoted the Ministry of Higher Education statistics from 2013. Every year, more than 200,000 young people were unemployed. Malaysia 60% of them were youth. But why aren’t graduates getting hired? The struggling economy as well as the type of qualifications they hold has something to do with it, but that’s not the biggest factor.

If you ask most employers today, they’ll say it mostly has to do with soft skills. Or rather, the lack of it.

ARE SOFT SKILLS BEING TAUGHT IN UNIVERSITIES?

Most of us are familiar with the term soft skills, often defined as “personality traits that characterise one’s relationships with other people. These can include social graces, communication abilities, language skills, personal habits, empathy, and leadership traits.”

Here’s a common example of the lack of soft skills:

A colleague once told me a situation where her team members frequently got into work conflicts. The root cause? They relied almost exclusively on chat rooms to convey instructions, as opposed to walking over to mind each other and having a face-to-face conversation. Conflicts inevitably happened because there was a lack of context and familiarity in their communication.

The demand is clear, but how do we really teach soft skills on a grassroots level? If you picked a random student from a college cafeteria, and asked him about his presentation skills—would you expect him to say: “Yes, I’m confident to present in English, but I really need to work on my soft skills.”

Or would you expect a shy smile?

Leadersonomics recently organised a forum between career centre representatives at universities and employers to discuss soft skills implementation. Some attendees remarked that soft skills have traditionally been learned via co-curricular activities by students. For example, a former school board chairman had the council learn public speaking and project management by organising a year-end dinner.

But in recent times, most universities have already taken it further—by introducing their own soft skills initiatives.

CURRENT APPROACHES

During our recent forum, we discovered that universities already offer courses like “Employability Skills,” “English for Business” and “Leadership.”

A colleague from HELP University also shared his personal successes and challenges in integrating soft skills into academic curriculum. While there has been some successful integration, some challenges remain such as traditional styles of teaching, legacy IT infrastructure, and the perception of industries towards soft skills.

Outside our forum, we discovered that Taylor’s College already offers a Second Transcript for their students. Awarded upon completion of the STiR Programme, this supplementary transcript helps certify that students have “life skills,” apart from normal courses on their academic transcript. This approach is modelled after several top universities from around the world.

But it’s not only individual universities that are taking on the challenge. The Malaysian government is getting involved too.

The COMING iCGPA

In August last year, Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh announced a pilot programme that integrates soft skills into students’ cumulative grade point average (CGPA). The new grading scheme is called the iCGPA, and is in line with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Higher Education).

Focus number one in the new blueprint is welcome news for soft skills advocates: “producing holistic, entrepreneurial and balanced graduates.”

In its pilot stage, iCGPA was launched for a group of 300 first-year students in five public universities: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan and Universiti Malaysia Pahang.

An iCGPA transcript will not only list academic results, but will include more skills. The “spider web” matrix in Figure 1 shows a sample iCGPA report. Notice how it includes typically neglected competencies like “social skills and responsibilities,” “communication, leadership and teamwork,” “professional skills, ethics, and values.”

As Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh says, “The integrated CGPA will grade students according to their LEADERSHIP, values, ethics and contributions to the community as well.”

While we have not seen early reports yet on the status of the programme, we expect iCGPA to continue to be implemented in stages over the next decade. We reached out for comments from other universities, and while they are aware the iCGPA is being rolled out—they are still waiting for further direction on how to implement it.

APPROACHES TO PREPARE TODAY—FOR TOMORROW

The wait is frustrating for some. Without comprehensive guidance from the ministry, should universities continue their own efforts like Taylor’s and HELP? Or should they wait for the iCGPA to be completely rolled out, but risk under-training a few batches of students in the meantime?

This leads to the next question: What actions can be implemented on a grassroots level today, that can help solve the problem?

Some of the ideas proposed are below:

- Start soft skills training earli-er—in pre-university.
- Introduce proper methods of documenting soft skills achievements (of students) at an early stage e.g. Year 1.
- Introduce soft skills as part of the current university curriculum.
- Coach and mentor students in their soft skills “portfolio” throughout their university journey—as opposed to one-off training. (Example: Coaching students who are facing difficult times—so they develop resilience.)
- Have more structured discus- sions between industry and academia—to connect the dots between our current situation and our desired outcome.
- Organise further workshops and conferences to educate the general public on soft skills.
- Create and bring more awareness to cross-university-aca- demia peer groups to support each other in practical imple- mentation.

Finally, some of the current challenges were voiced:

- A clear guideline—on how soft skill training is to be conducted at the university level with regards to implementation and assessment—currently does not exist. Without clear guidelines, there will be a lack of standards in soft skills cer- tification—and some universi- ties may not put enough focus on the matter.

- Soft skills training is cur- rently not mandatory for all students. If soft skills are the missing key in producing holistic students, every student needs to be exposed to soft skills training.

- The root of the problem is a lack of awareness from par- ents—on the importance of soft skills. Thus, students still prevail with over-empha- sising academic excellence to the neglect of soft skills development.

PARTING THOUGHTS

The road to a comprehensive soft skills programme nationwide has proven to be a difficult road which will not be solved without massive effort. While there are huge challenges ahead, the good news is that all the key stakeholders—academia, employ- ers, and the government all agree on the pressing need.

If Malaysia is to truly become a developed nation, we cannot allow our next generation to be starved of necessary experience and training. The blueprints and plans are already there. As to how they’re implement- ed—that depends on you and me.

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Aaron is Campus and Digital Marketing Advisor at Leadersonomics. He is also the founder of mr-stingy.com.