

## High Impact Educational Practice through First Year Experience: Case of Undergraduates in UNIMAS

Shafinah Rahim<sup>1\*</sup>, Idawati Ismail<sup>2</sup>, Rohana Sapawi<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Economics and Business, UNIMAS, Malaysia

<sup>2,3</sup>Faculty of Engineering, UNIMAS, Malaysia

Corresponding Author: <sup>1\*</sup>barshafinah@unimas.my

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**Abstract:** A compulsory course known as Soft skills and Basic Volunteerism offered at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) adopted the High Impact Educational Practices (HEIPs) through First Year Experience. This course aims at imparting soft skills among all students in UNIMAS, taken in their first semester of their program. The main course learning outcomes are to develop personal and social skills, academic skills, and conduct volunteerism activities. The course learning units were designed to assist students adapting smoothly to the new university environment while improving academic and people skills. A survey to gauge students' perception about their learning skills was conducted before the course began and another survey was conducted after the course ended. In the assessment, the students reported group activities relating to meeting faculty members and academic advisors as reflections in e-portfolio platforms. In terms of personal gain, the majority admitted to increased self-confidence to communicate in English as a result of participating in public speaking, presentations and a variety of volunteering projects. Suggestions for future include out campus activities, use of high technology digital training materials and diversification of assessment reflective of the complete soft skills course.

**Keywords:** Experience, Learning, Soft skills, Training, Undergraduates

### 1. Introduction

Malaysia is known for persistently initiating major changes to its higher education system, since the turn of century. The national aim is to strengthen and transform higher education to be more progressive and competitive, with one of the agenda for higher learning institutions to improve the quality of student learning experience. This was duly proposed by the World Bank as below:

In order to enhance the learning experience of incoming students as the student population expands, Malaysian universities should consider organizing First Year Experience Seminars which have been found, in other contexts, to greatly facilitate student transition from high school to university as well as quickly integrate the new students into their intellectual community of the university. (World Bank Report, 2007, p. 151)

Subsequently, graduate development continues to be a key national area of concern for all universities, given the upward shift in demand for excellent interpersonal skills in the present-day competitive labour market. In line with the educational goal to improve graduate marketability, the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 specifically requires that exceptional social and thinking skills are successfully transferred to university graduates as part of their preparation to paid employment. Thus, the High-Impact Educational Practices (HIEPs) are implemented for academic program in higher education institutions in Malaysia. HIEPs are techniques and designs for teaching and learning to enhance student participation aimed towards successful learning among students for varied different backgrounds (Guideline for the Implementation of Higher Impact Educational Practices in the Curriculum, 2016).

#### 1.1 Soft Skills

Heckman (2012) in discussion paper for the Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA) defines soft skills to include, personality traits, goals, motivations, and preferences that are valued in the labour market, in school, and in many other domains. Soft skills are expected to incorporate all aspects of generic skills that include the cognitive elements associated with non-academic skills and identified as the most critical set of skills in the current global job market. The reorientation of the national education system aimed at graduate employability and quality sustainability has made the importance of soft skill training more relevant than ever.

However, the pronounced lack of soft skills amongst our fresh graduates in general creates an urgent need to review and restructure the existing soft skills training modules offered at UNIMAS for undergraduate students for the past 15 years. Despite the ongoing collaborative efforts to develop the content and assessment of the course