

# A Qualitative Research Study on the Importance of Life Skills on Undergraduate Students' Personal and Social Competencies

Professor Dr. Pradeep Kumar Nair<sup>1</sup> & Mehrnaz Fahimirad<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Taylor's University Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Postdoctoral Fellowship, School of Hospitality, Tourism and Events, Faculty of Social Sciences & Leisure Management, Taylor's University Malaysia.

Correspondence: Mehrnaz Fahimirad, School of Hospitality, Tourism and Events, Faculty of Social Sciences & Leisure Management, Taylor's University Malaysia. E-mail: Mehrnaz.Fahimirad@taylors.edu.my

Received: July 8, 2019

Accepted: August 11, 2019

Online Published: August 19, 2019

doi:10.5430/ijhe.v8n5p71

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v8n5p71>

## Abstract

Recently, it is more demanding to enter job market since current employers hire staff with some life skills such as leadership, communication skills, time management, problem solving skills, and teamwork. The current study aimed to identify the relationship between life skills program, student's personal efficacy and competencies. Moreover, this study investigated eight students' perceptions of their personal efficacy after understanding life skills program. This study employs a qualitative research approach using an in-depth interview and self-reporting of the life skills module. The participants were randomly selected among freshman undergraduate students who have passed the life skill modules at Taylor's University, Malaysia. This study aimed to identify students' perceptions, competencies after completing life skills modules. It also elaborates on how life skills considered as a technical requirement for hard skills and employees' future. The results of thematic analysis indicated that embedding the life-skills program in the university curriculum plays a key role in shaping students' personal and social competencies. This finding has important implications for educators and educational policy makers to integrate students' life skills into curriculum so as to influence students' professional and interpersonal skills such as team working, communication, leadership, time management, decision making and problem-solving.

**Keywords:** life skills, social competencies, training and development, students' introduction to life skills to first year, higher education

## 1. Introduction

Life skills enable individuals to be adaptive and connect with the environment and foster self-management. Core competencies or personal and social competencies are a range of intellectual, social, personal, and emotional competences that are necessary to the development of deep learning and life-long learning. World Health Organization (WHO) offers different types of skills including life skills, efficient communication skills, interpersonal relationships, empathy, decision making, problem solving skills, critical thinking skills and self-awareness; the ability to manage emotions such as failure, anxiety, depression, and stress. It has been reported that individuals can attain and manage these abilities. They help individuals to control such problems as depression, anxiety, loneliness, rejection, anger, and conflict in social relationships (Greco, Baer, & Smith, 2011). These problems have been the topic of investigation for several studies (Sobhi-gharamaleki & Rajabi, 2010). Smith (2004) conducted a study using 500 participants to identify the effect of life skills training on students. The finding indicated that training life skills enhanced participants' mental and physical health and had significant effects on the management and leadership skills of young people. Moreover, the training also decreased their behavioral and social problems. In a study by Smith (2011), training life skills significantly decreased the use of alcohol and drugs among students. Based on Sukhodolsky's study, (2004) the training of coping skills or soft skills positively influenced interpersonal relationships and behavioral problems; aggression also reduced considerably among participants (Sukhodolsky, Kassinove, & Gorman, 2017). Furthermore, Mishara and Ystgaard (2006) reported that after training, students who learnt how to deal with controlling stress were more satisfied, and consequently felt less amount of pressure during their study (Naseri & Babakhani, 2014).

In this regards, Taylor's University took a pioneering leap into holistic education by integrating life skills program into the academic curriculum in 2018. 'Life skills' or soft skills programs have emerged worldwide as a branch of holistic education to help youth deal with challenges. However, technical academic or "hard skills," fail to provide such trainings within the curriculum. Taylor's University is a Malaysian-based private university with a mission to educate the students so as to produce balanced and experiential learners in the global community. In an agreement with this mission, a university-wide initiative was conceived to recognize and endorse the 'three pillars' of what Taylor's university defines as holistic education: academic excellence, lifelong learning, and well-being (Fleming, Haggerty, Catalano, Harachi, Mazza, 2009). In order to maximize this opportunity for students, more than just the academic base should be addressed in its curriculum since research indicates that academic and professional success are not only based on academic excellence (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). In the light of this, a full-credit, 2-part modular called "Life skills" was introduced to further institutionalize holistic education at Taylor's University. The decision for founding the entire Life Skills course is based on an E.I quadrant (Emotional Intelligence) since most traits that define "Life Skills" are mapped onto the E.I quadrant. Such traits are interpersonal skills such as (communication, leadership, and relationship management) as well as advanced intrapersonal skills (mindfulness, reflection, and self-management). In this case, emotional intelligence could possibly be seen as a specific category of soft skills definition and EI often enhances one's success and well-being in both personal and professional sectors (Baloch, Saleem, Zaman, & Fida, 2014). With the intention of enhancing students' emotional intelligence, Taylor's Life skills program was designed in 2017, and implemented in early 2018. The aim of the current research is to study the effectiveness of training life skills on students' social competence and improve their academic development through encouraging them to actively involved in the learning process, and to develop their intellectual well-being through critical thinking (Parker, Saklofske, Wood, & Collin, 2009). As mentioned earlier, another objective of the Life skills program was to teach students' life skills and enhance their emotional intelligence as an integral skillset for both personal development and employability (Goleman, 1995).

In the design and implementation process of life skills program, the key objective of Life Skill program was as follows: to design and teach a course that improves interpersonal skills (social awareness/ relationship management) and intrapersonal skills (self-awareness/ self-management) so that they can regulate their emotion's and stress to increase their personal and social competency. First Module of life skills deals with success and well-being to manage the relationships and increase their networking, communication, and leadership skills. Second Module is called Millennials in Malaysia. The result would produce graduates with higher emotional intelligence capacities that make them more "future-ready" or "future-proof", so that they can manage the "VUCA" (volatile, uncertain complex, and ambiguous) world characteristic of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

### *1.1 Personal and Social Competencies*

The personal-social competency (PSC) deals with self-confidence, socially acceptable behavior as well as maintaining friendship for the bachelors' students. The primary goals of instruction were to achieve self-awareness, to build self-confidence, to attain socially responsible behavior, to maintain decent interpersonal communication, and to learn problem-solving skills (Prajapati, Sharma, & Sharma, 2016).

Also, PSC aimed to address students' social and personal competencies to make sure their success in higher education and in daily life. Thus, developing PSC improves students' ability to involve themselves in the challenges of academic learning, and to prepare them for university and job. To meet these standards, students acquire the ability to control their emotions, to team up with their peers, and to share their ideas (Yoder, 2015).

1. Self-awareness refers to an individual ability to identify his/her own strengths, limitations, emotions, and interests.
2. Self-management is the persons' ability to control their own daily stress and emotions.
3. Social awareness means the ability to take other's viewpoint and to respect similarities and differences.
4. Relationship management refers to situation in which individuals demonstrate a range of positive "prosocial" behavior and social skills to maintain and to develop meaningful relationships.

Table 1. DANIEL GOLEMAN'S EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES

<i><b>DANIEL GOLEMAN'S EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES</b></i>	<i><b>Self (Personal Competence)</b></i>	<i><b>Other (Social Competence)</b></i>
<b>Recognition</b>	<u>Self-Awareness</u> Emotional Self-awareness Accurate Self-assessment Self confidence	<u>Social Awareness</u> Organizational awareness Service orientation Empathy
<b>Regulation</b>	<u>Self-Management</u> Emotional Self-control Achievement drive Trustworthiness Adaptability Initiative	<u>Relationship Management</u> Teamwork and collaboration Communication Developing others Conflict management Influence

The Life-Skills Program at Taylor's University consists of two modules that are mandatory for all first-year undergraduates starting from August 2018. The first module is called Life Skills for Success and Well-being which focuses on the set of skills; Self-Management and Self-awareness. The second module is Millennial's in Malaysia which focuses on Relationship Management, Team Dynamics and social awareness. The students would experience skillsets such as critical thinking, decision making, emotional intelligence, people management, empathy, resolving conflict, and resilience. Therefore, Life Skills modules would be experienced by students for 14 weeks. For both modules, the assessments were designed in such a way to assess students' participation levels and the subjective experiential value that they have gained from participating in the course. Even though it is possible to measure emotional intelligence, its nature is highly subjective. For example, it can be challenging and often inaccurate to critique and to offer feedback on someone's levels of empathy, mindfulness, etc., although some psychometrics assessments have been developed to assess such things. The designers of this program aim to encourage students to develop the E.I traits in a pace that is conducive for them, without overly-critiquing students as they develop. Thus, it is more likely to offer the opportunity to develop and to measure how much that opportunity is taken up. As such, the level of effort they are putting into developing the traits is mostly measured and not the trait itself. In the near future, however, acquiring and designing highly developed psychometrics may be introduced into the program to measure E.I traits as well.

## 2. Literature Review

The major objective of the present research was to provide an overview of the life skills program on students' 'personal competencies'. Thereafter, personal and social competency was considered from a student's point of view, and some key factors that might influence the student's ability in coping with and understanding life skills with respect to personal and social competence. In the same line with Willingham (2007), though from a psychological viewpoint, it is suggested that life skills are basically intertwined with domain knowledge; hence, they are highly discipline-specific (Lai, 2011). Yet this suggests the need for a different skill set for different disciplines with different life skill.

While the literature emphasizes a philosophical and theoretical view of life skills, empirical studies have been investigated how life skills are understood and operationalized in the context of the university. Although, there are few studies that aim at investigating empirical conceptualization of life skills among school students (Zacharkow, 2015), there has been even less focus on the academia and university students. Duro et al. (2013) is an exception in this area that is highly relevant to the present research. In their study, the authors investigate 26 undergraduate students of psychology at a university in England to find out how they understand life skills. They used focus-group discussions to collect data regarding participants' view of life skills and found out how they implemented their view points in their daily life and work. It is worth noting here that the study by Duro et al. (2013) only focused on the participants' general views and rather than discussing concrete samples of students' works. Therefore, it might not be easy or possible for interested researchers to capture more in-depth and reliable insights into the actual participants' performance. Matsuda and Uchiyama (2006) showed that providing students with skills to cope with stressful situations significantly improved students' personal and social abilities. Since they were trained the problem solving

technique through participating in group activities and group treatment conditions; the training provided students with how to deal with problems such as distortion of perception, insufficient emotional response, communication failure, and stereotype behaviors. In this program, most students are exposed to life skills training in their universities, this life skill program can be employed universally so as to enhance the students' universal information (Duro, 2013). Therefore, this study aims to identify the impact of life skill training program on students' improvement in academic achievement and social competency skills.

### *2.1. Why Life Skills Training Program are Necessary in University Curricula*

Incorporating Life skills into university curricula is a viable solution to bridging a wide gap between the graduate students' skills and the demands of the work environment" (Andrews & Higson, 2008). Firstly, it begins with the notion that modern tertiary education is a training ground for building skillsets that make students capable, efficient and successful in the work place. Evidently, those capabilities are lacking - despite heavy emphasis within institutions on technical training of "hard" skills - due to this so-called "gap" existing "between educators' requirement in assessing tasks and the requirement of the job market". Furthermore, the findings of "employers' surveys have revealed their dissatisfaction with the degree to which these soft skills are nurtured in higher education". In 2007, the British Association Graduate Recruiters demonstrated that "employers reported the majority of graduates require 'soft skills', for instance team working and communication" (Schulz, 2008) despite being academically proficient.

Because the usefulness of soft skills has been overlooked within universities; after all, institutions aim to provide students with academic excellence; hence, non-academic life skills may appear a low priority on the hierarchy of knowledge and learning in academia. This is conveyed in Chamorro-Premuzic's claim that "academics traditionally decline to recognize significance of soft skills and considered them as a distraction from other academic priorities. But the evidence is supportive that these skills shape and enhance one's personality and behavioral traits by enhancing social competencies, which are "incredibly useful." (Andrews & Higson, 2008). Such competencies greatly impact one's job capability and proficiency, thus, results in one's personal efficacy in the working world. One main reason that why graduates are not fulfilling employers' needs, is that the skills being tested and measured within university courses do not assess, nor cultivate, many skillsets needed to succeed in the workplace. For example, the soft skill of oral communication is "highly valued in the industry sector; however, seldom developed or evaluated in university context". Although often touched upon through presentation work, as a means to an end (conveying technical data), the soft skill itself is not trained sufficiently. This is a likely contributor to the "gap" between what is required of students at university environments versus the professional. Further reasoning for this gap is that the majority of university assessment focuses mostly on achievement through "IQ, grades, and standardized achievement tests" (Heckman, Humphries, Kautz, Heckman, & Kautz, 2015), whilst neglecting to cultivate and assess the more social and personality traits. This shortcoming exists in the university assessment structure, which creates assessment goals based on cognitive achievement. Such assessment goals, measured through achievement tests, are prone to "missing or mis-measuring" the other skills that matter in life, which are "valuable in the labor market" (Chau, Politeknik, Abdul, & Mu 'adzam Shah, 2012).

As a result, an incongruence develops between the goals of assessment and skillsets "employers expect from them after graduating". There are numerous reasons as to why life skills are essential complements to hard skills to help graduates succeed professionally. In an increasingly competitive job market, more developed life skills, can be the factor a "competitive edge" that separates them from job candidates with "similar qualifications" (Schulz, 2008). Skillsets such as superior communication skills, emotional intelligence, and creativity, may showcase to a prospective employer additional knowledge and skills, personal traits, and habits" (Mishal, 2016). However, the benefits of developing students' life skills do not solely play into their professional efficacy upon graduation. Some studies suggest that the development of life skills within one's University term can improve academic efficacy. The study conducted by Chamorro-Premuzic, et al, (2010) provided evidence that when soft skills are taught in conjunction with "hard" academic skills, enhance academic achievement.

One key point is that life skills are not only important in enhancing professional development of graduates, but also in boosting a more general "self-efficacy" in academic life. While self-efficacy (or personal efficacy) also pertains to a professional setting, generally speaking is one's conduct in the world. This includes one's ability to self-manage emotional regulation and relationship management. Such skills exist under the soft skills subset of emotional intelligence, characterized by one's ability to "manage and regulate their emotions" (Baloch et al., 2014). This particular subset of life skills is most notably summarized by Daniel Goleman's E.I quadrant: self-awareness, relationship management, social awareness and self-management. The increasing stress and competitiveness of

modern life can create confusion and student's emotional regulation. A university's technical training in hard skills rarely provides answers to the more existential aspects of how students should manage their emotions and overall well-being. Nonetheless, these are key factors in determining one's overall ability to perform effectively and positively in academics and later on in professional environment. Self-efficacy is largely linked to emotional intelligence, and both aspects have been proven to be a "significant predictor of one's academic achievement" (Weiss et al., 2013). Moreover, cultivating the life skills of emotional intelligence extends out beyond academics, and into the realm of "psychological wellbeing" by training students skillset of interpersonal relationships, resiliency and stress management. Emotional intelligence, therefore, could be viewed as a skillset of primary importance within the life skill competencies, as it covers both factors of success and personal development including "academic achievement, employment, and relationships". Thus, emotional intelligence assists individuals in tackling the adversity and challenges in numerous life spheres and plays an important role in any life skills program. Conclusively, including an emotional intelligence element to any life skills program would be highly advisable.

While the major responsibility of university education is preparing students for a professional role, it is argued that educators have a responsibility in helping students develop personal efficacy in relation to their daily life and their individual personality traits. From the evidence stated, this enhances students' preparation for the professional sphere. It does so by firstly, bridging the gap between skillsets required in the workplace and in academia; and secondly, by providing a platform for a student to broaden their own personal efficacy on how they manage their emotional intelligence to further their personal and social competency, a factor that leads to academic and professional (Behroz-Sarcheshmeh, Karimi, Mahmoudi, Shaghaghi, & Jalil-Abkenar, 2017).

Incorporating life skills subjects into the syllabus might be a formal approach to the problem. For lower levels, teachers can ask students to conduct a simple research and present the results to the class. This method is proven to be effective. This approach does not work; however, programs are filled with hard skill courses which does not let the teacher substitute or add to the course. Moreover, those teachers who do not pay attention to life skills are not interested to add such topics to their courses. An efficient way to overcome this problem is to include life skills as a part of students' training, in this way, it is not necessary to change the program; instead the methodology of teaching will be changed (Kawalekar, 2017). The more group discussions, class presentations as well as neurolinguistics programming (NLP) and methods like De Bono can be applied to improve the program. As an example, in a mathematics class, the teacher can first plan a lecture determining what types of life skills should be enhanced on that day, secondly the instructor considers how the mathematics content can be organized to support this objective. If life skills appropriately taught and applied by instructors, such an approach to teaching will be attractive and effective since hard skills and life skills are being taught simultaneously. During the last decades, the perceived importance of life skills or acquiring adequate skills beyond technical knowledge has been increasingly recognized. When there is a shortcoming in a particular area of soft skills, numerous ways are suggested to resolve such a deficiency. Lecturers play an active role in teaching life skills through including soft skills into teaching hard skills. Since during students' university time, lecturers can raise awareness regarding the significance of life skills and encourage them to practice and to improve their life skills (Bruer, 1993). Consequently, the lessons presented along with soft skills will be more attractive and enhance the learners' success rate.

Teaching life skills shape an individual's personality through supplementing his/her hard skills. Though, over-emphasizing hard skills, i.e. expert knowledge in particular fields should not downgrade the importance of life skills to secondary importance.

### **3. Research Question**

An evaluation of the research explored above led to the current qualitative study, which explores the relationship between life skills program, student's personal efficacy, and competencies?

### **4. Mapping Process of Life Skills Program**

Taylor's University Malaysia with a professional team of Life skills specialists and Student Development department, set out to design a fully-credited life skills program, composed of two complementary modules: Module 1 is called Life skills for Success and Well-being Module and second module is Millennials in Malaysia which refers to Team Dynamics & Relationship Management. The modules were designed in such a way that their content maps are overlapped directly onto the two halves of the emotional intelligence quadrant. (Figure.1)



Figure 1. Emotional intelligence quadrant

First module which deals with Life Skills for Success and Well-being, teaches topics based on the intrapersonal skillset of E.I: self-awareness and self-management skills. Second module, Millennials in Malaysia, teaches an interpersonal skillset: social awareness and relationship management. This research was conducted through lengthy consultation with three experts in the field: world renowned holistic educators, with their approval and revisions of various versions of curriculum. The intended outcome was that knowing oneself would increase personal, social competencies and efficacy; both aspects are proven to be key contributing factors towards one’s academic and professional success. This module involves practical classroom activities and assessments that aim to develop students’ personal competencies, another label for intrapersonal E.I skillsets. Personal competencies in Taylor’s ‘Life Skills’ are composed of: self-understanding, reflection, mindfulness, communication, intrinsic motivation (core purpose/career vision), emotional regulation, and stress management.

The objective is not only to enhance a student’s self-awareness skillset, but also to discover one’s unique attributes and intrinsic motivations as a key entry point into the personal development journey of students (Bush, 2011). Therefore, to end the module, the students put their self-reflection skills by writing a final reflection essay which functions both as a final assessment to gauge the student’s learnings, but also, as a course summary for the student, which reflects on their key takeaways from the module. All of these topics throughout the module, are taught through experiential exercises designed to help students leverage on their unique strengths and to improve their weaknesses (Bush, 2011).

Table 2. Life Skills for Success

<i>E.I Quadrant</i>	<i>Personal Competency</i>	<i>Curriculum Content</i>	<i>Delivery</i>	<i>Assessment</i>
Self-Awareness	Self-understanding (one’s purpose/reflection)	Mindfulness Reflection	Meditation Journaling Reflective writing	Mid-term essay Final essay
Self-Management	Mindful Communication	Legacy speech Non-violent communication	Presentation Pair activities	Presentation
Self-Awareness & Self-Management	Intrinsic motivation	Core Purpose statement Career Vision Statement SMART goal setting	Personal Development Plan Presentation	Portfolio
Self-Management	Stress management	MBSR Emotional Intelligence	Meditation E.I games (board race, test, etc.)	None

In the interpersonal context, social awareness and relationship management through understanding and leading others is the primary objective. This module was designed to provide students with an experimental journey into the discovery of their own inner leadership qualities, and also, how to manage others through team dynamics and

conflict resolution. This involves practical classroom activities that aim to develop students' social competencies, in order to improve their interpersonal skillsets. The program begins with students gaining knowledge into the real-life challenges and changes in 21st century world, and how these are influencing the modern day working environment.

### **5. Life Skills Assessment**

The assessment of Life skills can be made using three approaches; the first approach of assessment is carried out through a self-report measurement, the second approach to assessment of interpersonal skills is informant measures; for instance, how others identify an individual; the final approach is called ability or performance measures which are favored by some researchers. It worth mentioning that life skills, as a subject at university, has recently gained global attention; hence, assessments are still in an early stage of development. Even though, there are some effective and reliable tools to assess life skills, much more research is required to be carried out to develop new assessments methods for measuring life skills (Singh, 2016). The data in this research was collected through semi-structured interview to measure the personal competencies and efficiency of undergraduate students in the academic environment of Taylor's University, Malaysia. Interview questions were developed specifically for this research to evaluated effectiveness of life skill program on students' social and personal competencies (Dhingra & Chauhan, 2017).

### **6. Methodology of the Research**

The major objective of the present study was to gain an in-depth understanding of students' conceptualizations of life skills; therefore, semi-structured interviews were considered more appropriate. Each interview session lasted 20-30 minutes for each participant. The interview was conducted based on Daniel Goleman (2013) model, and the primary aim of the interview was to elicit students' views about life skills. Students were supposed to reflect on their personal experiences, personal development, perceptions of life skills program, acquired capabilities, any difficulties they face during program and they could express any criticism they face.

Therefore, the researcher collected the data through semi-structured interviews from various faculties such as the school of medicine, design and building, architecture, hospitality and management, education, psychology and many others. Whereby students' perceptions of the importance of their development in the 28 skillsets was correlated with how well they developed in those areas.

### **7. Data Analysis**

As mentioned earlier, semi-structured interviews with students who have attended life skills course have been employed as method of data collection. Each interview was recorded, key words were extracted and analyzed as indicators of meaning. These words were then coded and grouped together to form categories of similar meaning and these groups were then formed larger groups indicating new themes. Thematic analysis of data was conducted to ensure interpretation was accurate at the stage of initial coding and final theming. To determine the effectiveness of life skill training on students' personal and social competencies semi-structured interview was employed (Shah, 2016).

The participants of this study were 8 first-semester bachelor's students who represent a range of backgrounds and courses in the 2017/18 academic year. As such, this is qualitative research, which aims to focus on several instances of a particular phenomenon. Due to the limited number of participants, the present research aims to have a close look at the way participants understand life skills, and how they can best improve these skills.

As described above, the researcher interviewed 8 students in life skills program after each session of training. Small study will reach saturation more rapidly than a larger study, when it comes to saturation point. Data saturation is reached when there is enough information to replicate the study when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained, and when further coding is no longer feasible.

Data saturation involves bringing new respondents continually into the study until the data set was complete, as specified by data replication or redundancy. As it had been explained completely in the data analysis section, the researcher used the constant comparative method to analyse the data derived from this study. After getting familiar with the data, the coding process was commenced. Keeping the research questions in his mind, he went through the whole transcript and coded the data. Whenever needed, he wrote memos to get her thoughts as they emerged. After the end of the coding process for the first transcript, he constructed the themes by grouping those codes that seemed could go together. Afterwards, she repeated precisely the same process for the next set of data while keeping in her mind the list of groupings that extracted from the first set of data. Then, he compared the second list with the first list to establish a primitive sketch or classification system that points out the recurring patterns in the study. These

patterns made the categories or themes and this process was continued with the other transcripts. When additional data and further analysis did not reveal any new idea in relation to the emerging themes, he ceased sampling.

As stated by different researchers, thematic coding is used to provide researchers with a means of summarizing key features of data through a principled approach. The objective and direction of interview analysis was to identify the depth of students' understanding and awareness of the lessons that facilitated in these modules. Hence, the interview analysis has implemented to identify the effectiveness of life skills lessons on the students. This paper argues that lack of life skills may be a significant factor in supporting student's personal and social competences. From students' point of view, this experience allowed them to develop important life skills, such as self-management, self-appraisal, and effective communication (De Hoyos, 2012).

The results of this study suggested three dimensions of life skills in relation to personal and social competencies of first year bachelor's students. Emotional intelligence can be developed through personal and social competencies. Personal competency refers to self-awareness and self-management. Self-awareness refers to the capability to identify your own emotions and the effects of your emotions on yourself and other people. However, self-management is based on self-awareness utilizing your self-control to make sure your emotions don't control you irrespective of the situation.

Three themes and key dimensions of life skills in relation to personal and social competencies of students who has passed life skills program were identified from interviews analysis.

1. **Self-efficacy:** refers to an individual's beliefs about his or her capability to complete a given goal or task (Bandura, 1999). Self-efficacy acts as a suitable scientific lens to assess individuals' beliefs about their ability to achieve professional goals. Moreover, Bandura (1999) maintained that individuals' ability to complete a task or achieve a goal not only requires skills, but also the belief in oneself play a key role to build the confidence and create motivation to do a task (Kolb, 2011). In this regards, one of the students maintained that:

*"First when I joined university, I was totally unprepared, about coping with my student life and I knew that it's no-one else's responsibility to help me. Well, I didn't know that to what extent, this program can be effective on my personal and social life. So, I was advised to develop some of my skills before embarking on the course, like to learn how to live alone and concentrate on my study. So, no matter how much support I had through my parents but I wanted to manage my life independently."*

*"Life skills program enabled me to learn interpersonal skills and increase my confidence in social life".*

2. **Academic adjustment:** Refers to a student's degree of confidence in his or her capabilities to accomplish a university-related task successfully. In other words, how well students cope with the educational demands such as dividing chores among roommates, taking class notes and participating in class discussions). To achieve a high level of academic adjustment, we encourage students to strengthen their self-management skills. The skill of effectively managing self is included all the dimensions of organizing and managing a social life as well as the demands of a study program (Jeans, 2012). These included skills such as time management and juggling conflicting priorities to enable efficiency and stress-free progress through the day, week and the study year (Steyn & Van Staden, 2018).

*"Well when I was with my family, everything was organized for me, but here I have to manage my time, arrange to eat, do laundry, negotiate a relationship with my classmate and manage the life expenses. Since I'm not used to taking responsibility for coordinating everything; life skills program have increased my management skills" (Student's sample interview)*

*"So, Life skills practices helps us to understand that there are many things in life which we need to handle although we have some limited capabilities but we need to improve them. It helps me to understand how to manage my time as well as other skills".*

3. **Effective social communication:** How well undergraduates cope with interpersonal experiences for instance making friends, meeting people, and joining groups. Reducing prejudice and promoting social relation (Boundaries, 2012).

*"It's hard to understand what a difficulty is, I think because some of us we came from a different culture and English is my second language. But when I was younger, because of my father job, we moved to another country so this condition helps me to settle down in a new environment more quickly and I manage to concentrate on my study and I think I performed stronger."*

*“Mindfulness was very helpful to manage my stress and anger, I have learned how to be open and non-judgmental person with friends and family”.*

Table 3. Themes and sub-themes outlined in relation to life skills and students' personal and social competencies.

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Sub- theme</i>
Self-efficacy	Self-belief, self-esteem, Self-efficacy refers to an individual’s beliefs about his or her capability to complete a given goal or task.
Academic adjustment	Self-management refers to a student’s degree of confidence in his or her capabilities to accomplish a university-related task successfully.  Students need high level of academic adjustment and strong self-management skills.
Effective social communication	Relationship management, internal and external communication. How well undergraduates cope with interpersonal experiences for instance making friends, meeting people, and joining groups.  (Awareness and understanding of cultural diversity. Openness and acceptance of different ideas and views.)

According to Bandura (1982), self-efficacy has the potential to affect student’s performance and learning in the following ways:

Self-efficacy influences learning and the attempt that students do in their education. For example, a student with high self-efficacy is more likely to work harder to learn because of his higher confidence in his abilities than other students with lower self-efficacy (Kolb, 2011). Self-efficacy influences the persistence of learning, especially in learning new things. Students who are high in self-efficacy are thought to be more confident even when encountering a difficult situation. As a matter of fact, research has shown that the relationship between personal, social competence, and academic success is not considered a simple relationship. It has been investigated that there is a reciprocal relationship between competences and student’s academic achievement (Shaikhina, 2017). Students learn much about positive communication skills, critical thinking through self-management skills, and problem-solving through life skills program.

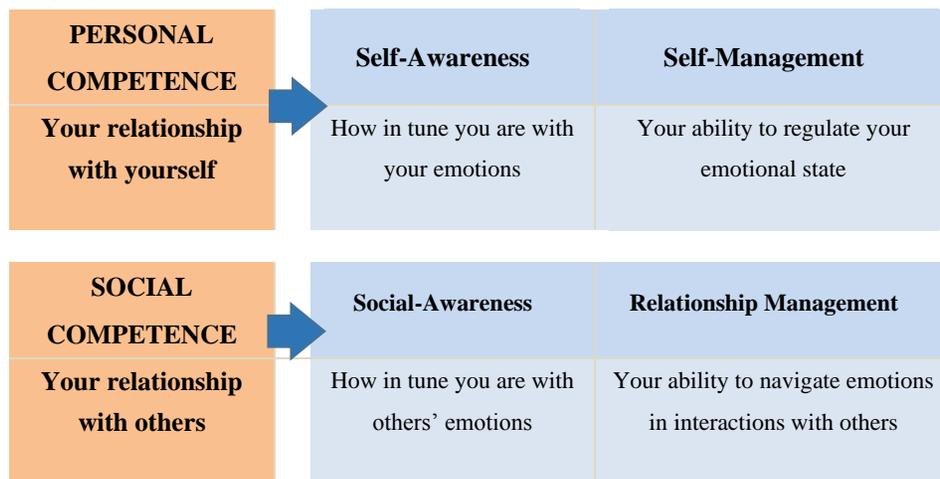


Figure 2. Social and Personal Competences

Durlak (2011) reviewed a major amount of the literature to evaluate life skills programs in higher education. He found that students who attended life skills programs demonstrated with following attributes compared with students who did not: High level of academic achievement, improvement in social and emotional skills, positive attitude toward self and environment, reduce behavioral problems and emotional distress. Consequently, a number of different studies suggested that life skills program is crucial for all students to provide coping skills that will be useful for their future career (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

The results indicated that students perceived that the development of their soft skills is important, and subsequently developed those skills, typically performed better on their academic activities and were overall more engaged in their degree. According to the previous studies, results suggest a positive correlation between academic achievement, degree engagement, and soft skills development; hence, it is concluded that “students’ level of engagement in program was significantly predicted by life skills”. Those findings, affirm that students appreciate life skills program because it improves their personal growth. Generally, students like practicing life skills: teammates described their teams with positive impression, since it was a place where they could experience a mutual listening and a collaborative atmosphere. Some scholars have criticized the higher education, since it fails to develop the necessary competencies on university curriculum for students’ professional development. The importance of life skills (Self-management, problem-solving, effective communication, self-appraisal, stress management and working in a group or teamwork) has been considerably increasing. It is essential to include these kinds of methods to allow students to develop those skills.

## 8. Discussion and Conclusion

The results were used to identify the gap or the area of life skills improvement. Upon identifying the Life Skills, a team took an action plan accordingly by evaluating this program on students’ personal and social competences. The overall gaps were identified and multiple experiential learning activities per lesson were added. The length of the breaks was taken into consideration, outdoor activities were included and students were encouraged to go deeper during the reflection and they were interviewed after every lesson.

The finding of the present study showed the efficiency of life skill instruction on student’s social and personal competences. Key findings highlight that students strongly believe in the importance of developing life skills. In general, students reported that life skills program was effective for them after experiencing it for the past 14 weeks. Surprisingly, most students would like to continue mindfulness after completing their Life Skills modules. The findings of this study were consistent with the findings of other studies conducted on students with various characteristics. Students were identified as having extra needs or had faced a more normative social development, even some students who perceived themselves as confident in their coping skills or with high self -efficacy or self-esteem, reported that they gained new experiences in coping skills. Surprisingly, most students would like to continue mindfulness after completing their Life Skills modules. The following skills such as expression of feelings, problem solving, setting goals, decision making, identification, planning, avoiding the negative thoughts and substituting them with the positive ones, positive imaging, mental relation, use of supported systems, being dominated, and not being avoider were taught to individuals to learn how to deal with the challenges of life. Typically, the ability to get on with others; this concept of life skill acquisition is very interrelated to the theory of Emotional Intelligence proposed by Daniel Goleman (1997). Furthermore, the results of life skills training of undergraduate students are more compatible with Albert Bandura’s Social Learning theory which explains that human behavior is defined as continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences. This theory focuses on social interactions which play a key role in developing cognition. Moreover, the important role of the observation, attitudes, modeling of behaviors, and emotional reactions are also emphasized (Tungpunkom & Nicol, 2008). In addition, Bandura’s theory also establishes the theoretical framework for modifying behavior through applying several techniques so as to achieve desired behaviors. Hence, life skills training at university curriculum, is grounded in the social learning theory. This program emphasizes on training social interactions through combining academics, personal-social daily living, and occupational skills in instructional settings (Roessler, Loyd, & Brolin, 2008).

The findings of this study support social cognitive theory which emphasizes that a strong sense of efficacy can be instilled to enhance human performance in different aspects of life (Schwarzer & Renner, 2013). Thus, people with high level of perceived self-efficacy, focus on how to achieve success rather than to disrupt personal concerns as they face problems. The findings revealed that students’ self-efficacy play an important role in managing life skills and higher education should address these skills and incorporate courses into educational social skills curricula. Instructors should design activities to further enhance feelings, thoughts, and personal perceptions of one’s self-efficacy (Kane, Marks, Zaccaro, & Blair, 2016). Self-efficacy learning should take a priority in higher educational process; hence, lecturers can contribute to incorporating self-efficacy components in curriculum programs (Kolb, 2011). Developing self-efficacy is a lifelong effort; the more self-efficacy individual has, the better able he/she tolerates the life challenges. Based on Bandura’s work (1986) self-efficacy is the power to create an effect (Botvin, Baker, Renick, Filazzola, & Botvin, 1984) and successfully produce a desired effect (Andanson, Pourre, Maffre, & Raynaud, 2011).

This has also been explored in prior studies by Matsuda and Uchiyama (2006) who implemented life skills program on university students; life skills helped them to use their own self-control to make sure their emotions don't control their behavior through self-management building on their self-awareness (Pasha, Gorjian, & Azad, 2010). Ramesht and Farshad (2009) showed that life skills instruction led to a growth in student's academic achievement and those trainings positively affected student's personal and social competencies (Sobhi-gharamaleki & Rajabi, 2010). Phuphaibul and colleagues (2005) revealed that after students were trained on coping skills, the experimental group obtained higher rate on showing their personal competencies skills. Moreover, experimental group performed better in coping behaviors than control group. In the same line, Matsuda and Uchiyama (2006) reported that students who followed instruction of coping skills, expressed less educational weakness and consequently those skills led to significant growth on their educational achievement (Sobhi-gharamaleki & Rajabi, 2010).

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Professor Dr. Pradeep Kumar Nair, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Taylor's University Malaysia for providing the research opportunity.

### References

- Andanson, J., Pourre, F., Maffre, T. & Raynaud, J. P. (2011). Social skills training groups for children and adolescents with Asperger syndrome: A review. *Archives de Pédiatrie: Organe Officiel de La Société Française de Pédiatrie*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.arcped.2011.02.019>
- Andrews, J. & Higson, H. (2008). Graduate employability, "soft skills" versus "hard" business knowledge: A european study. *Higher Education in Europe*, 33(4), 411-422. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03797720802522627>
- Baloch, B. Q., Saleem, M., Zaman, G. & Fida, A. (2014). The impact of emotional intelligence on employees' performance. *Journal of Managerial Sciences*, 8(2), 208-227. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026142940702300203>
- Bandura, A. (1999). Social Cognitive Theory of Personality: Theory and research. *Handbook of personality*, 154-196. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978\(91\)90022-L](https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90022-L)
- Behroz-Sarcheshmeh, S., Karimi, M., Mahmoudi, F., Shaghaghi, P. & Jalil-Abkenar, S. S. (2017). Effect of Training of Life Skills on Social Skills of High School Students With Intellectual Disabilities. *Practice in Clinical Psychology*, 5(3), 177-186. <https://doi.org/10.18869/acadpub.jpcp.5.3.177>
- Botvin, G. J., Baker, E., Renick, N. L., Filazzola, A. D. & Botvin, E. M. (1984). A cognitive-behavioral approach to substance abuse prevention. *Addictive Behaviors*. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0306-4603\(84\)90051-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0306-4603(84)90051-0)
- Bruer, J. T. (1993). Curriculum & Leadership Journal \_ Skills for the 21st Century\_ teaching higher-order thinking. *CBE- Life Sciences Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.06>
- Bush, M. (2011). *MINDFULNESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/14639947.2011.564838>
- Chau, R., Politeknik, M., Abdul, S. & Mu 'adzam Shah, H. (2012). *Asian Journal of Management Sciences and Education Developing Soft Skills in Malaysian Polytechnic Students: Perspectives of Employers and Students*, 1(2), 44-51. Retrieved from [http://www.ajmse.leena-luna.co.jp/AJMSEPDFs/Vol.1\(2\)/AJMSE2012\(1.2-05\).pdf](http://www.ajmse.leena-luna.co.jp/AJMSEPDFs/Vol.1(2)/AJMSE2012(1.2-05).pdf)
- De, Hoyos. B. (2012). Analysing Interview Data. *Warwick Institute for Employment Research*, (February). Retrieved [https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\\_fac/esrcdtc/researchandtraining/ct201314/quals/analysing\\_interview\\_data](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/esrcdtc/researchandtraining/ct201314/quals/analysing_interview_data)
- Dhingra, R. & Chauhan, K. S. (2017). Assessment of life-skills of adolescents in relation to selected variables. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 7(8), 201-212. <https://doi.org/10.29322>
- Durette, B., Fournier, M. & Lafon, M. (2016). The core competencies of PhDs. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(8), 1355-1370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.968540>
- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D. & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405-432. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x>
- Goleman, D. D. (1995). Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ for character, health and lifelong achievement. In *Bantam Books, 1995*. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-1849\(05\)80058-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-1849(05)80058-7)
- Greco, L. A., Baer, R. A. & Smith, G. T. (2011). Assessing Mindfulness in Children and Adolescents: Development and Validation of the Child and Adolescent Mindfulness Measure (CAMM). *Psychological Assessment*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022819>

- Heckman, J. J., Humphries, J. E., Kautz, T., Heckman, J. J. & Kautz, T. (2015). Fostering and Measuring Skills Interventions That Improve Character and Cognition. *The Myth of Achievement Tests*, 341-430. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226100128.003.0009>
- Heckman, J. J. & Kautz, T. (2012). Hard evidence on soft skills. *Labour Economics*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2012.05.014>
- Jeans, B. (2012). *Social Competency and Relationship Management*, 1-4. Retrieved from [www.hr.ufl.edu/training](http://www.hr.ufl.edu/training)
- Kane, T. D., Marks, M. A., Zaccaro, S. J. & Blair, V. (2016). Self-Efficacy, Personal Goals, and Wrestlers' Self-Regulation. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.18.1.36>
- Kawalekar, D. (Smt) J. S. (2017). The Value of Life Skills in Higher Education. *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education (IOSRJRME)*, 07(03), 43-46. <https://doi.org/10.9790/7388-0703054346>
- Kolb, S. M. (2011). Self-efficacy: a necessary social skills curricula component. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, 2(4), 206, <https://doi.org/Report>
- Lai, E. R. (2011). Critical thinking: A literature review (Research report). *Pearson Research Report*, (June), 1-49. Retrieved from <http://images.pearsonassessments.com/images/tmrs/CriticalThinkingReviewFINAL.pdf>
- Mishal, A. H. (2016). *A Study of Effectiveness of Life Skill Training of Training Programme on Self-Esteem of Teacher Trainees at B . Ed . Level - Pilot Study*, 7(2), 9-17.
- Naseri, A. & Babakhani, N. (2014). The Effect of Life Skills Training on Physical and Verbal Aggression Male Delinquent Adolescents Marginalized in Karaj. *Procedia- Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 116(8), 4875-4879. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.01.1041>
- Parker, J. D. A., Saklofske, D. H., Wood, L. M. & Collin, T. (2009). *The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Education*. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-88370-0\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-88370-0_13)
- Pasha, G., Gorjian, P. D. B. & Azad, I. (2010). *The Effect of Training Social Skills on Increase Social Development and Decrease Behavioral Disorders in Mild Retarded Children Assistant Professor of Islamic Azad University-Ahvaz Branch*, 4(8), 4011-4019. <https://doi.org/4011-4019>
- Prajapati, R., Sharma, B. & Sharma, D. (2016). Significance Of Life Skills Education. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research (CIER)*. <https://doi.org/10.19030/cier.v10i1.9875>
- Roessler, R. T., Loyd, R. J. & Broolin, D. E. (2008). Implementing Life-Centered Career Education. *Academic Therapy*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105345129002500414>
- Schulz, B. (2008). *The Importance of Soft Skills : Education beyond academic knowledge*, (June), 146-155. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jacedu.2019.07.002>
- Schwarzer, R. & Renner, B. (2013). *Health-Specific Self-Efficacy Scales*, (January 2009). <http://www.ralfschwarzer.de/>
- Shah, S. (2016). *A Qualitative Analysis of Life Skills needed for Independence in Adulthood Perspectives from Young People with Moderate Learning Difficulties, their Parents and their Teachers*. 1-185. Retrieved from <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/A-Qualitative-Analysis-of-Life-Skills-needed-for-in-Shah/>
- Shaikhina, D. (2017). *The Relationship between Students' Social Competence, Emotional Intelligence and their Academic Achievement at Nazarbayev Intellectual School of Aktobe*. 121.
- Singh, B. (2016). *Life Skills Education: Needs and Strategies*, 3, 3800-3806. <https://doi.org/N/A>
- Sobhi-gharamaleki, N. & Rajabi, S. (2010). *Efficacy of life skills training on increase of mental health and self esteem of the students*, 5(2), 1818-1822. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.07.370>
- Steyn, Z. & Van Staden, L. J. (2018). Investigating selected self-management competencies of managers. *Acta Commercii*, 18(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ac.v18i1.530>
- Sukhodolsky, D. G., Kassinove, H. & Gorman, B. S. (2017). *Cognitive-behavioral therapy for anger in children and adolescents : A meta-analysis*, 1789(May 2004). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2003.08.005>
- Tungpunkom, P. & Nicol, M. (2008). Life skills programmes for chronic mental illnesses. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD000381.pub2>
- Weiss, M. R., Stuntz, C. P., Bhalla, J. A., Bolter, N. D., Price, M. S., Weiss, M. R. & Bolter, N. D. (2013). 'More than a game ': impact of The First Tee life skills programme on positive youth development : project

*introduction and Year 1 findings, 6778.* <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2012.712997>

Yoder, N. (2015). Social and emotional skills for life and career: Policy levers that focus on the whole child. *American Institute for Research*, (March), 1-14. <https://doi.org/N/A>

Zacharkow, M. (2015). Effects of point-of-view modeling to teach life skills to students with cognitive impairments. *Thesis*.