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Significance of Generic Skills on Employability: The Case of TNI Students

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ABSTRACT

Generic skills have been used to identify key competencies across a large number of different occupations. They involve little or no interaction with machines, but help individual maintain positive social relationships and contribute to the work environment. The purposes of this study, therefore, aimed on investigating the influence of generic skills on the employability of Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology students. The research samplings were 217 TNI students in the second semester of 2015 academic year, derived through simple random sampling technique. The instruments used for gathering the data were the rating-scale and open-ended questionnaire. The statistics used for analyzing the data were mean and content analysis. The research findings indicated generic skills were key factors on their employability, especially being able to solve a problem. The students, further, suggested that industry involvement as a class activity was essential.

Keywords: Generic skills, Employability, English Teaching-Learning Process.

Introduction

Numerous studies have described the importance for graduates from higher education institutions to possess transferable skills prior to entering the workplace. According to this, one technique that can assist in improving students' employability is known as "generic skills" (Robinson and Garton, 2008). There are a number of terms that have been used to describe generic skills, such as graduate, professional, transferable, work ready and employability (Jones, 2009).

Kearns (2001) defines generic skills as key competencies that can be used across a large number of different occupations and they provide a platform for the development of employability skills needed by young people and adults. Generic skills involve little or no interaction with machines, but help individuals maintain positive social relationships and contribute to the work environment. Key generic skills include communication and interpersonal skills, problem solving skills, using your initiative and being self-motivated, working under pressure and to deadlines, organizational skills, team working, ability to learn and adapt, using mathematical ideas and techniques, using technology, valuing diversity and difference and negotiation skills. These skills are independent of sector, underpin technical skills and draw on personal attributes. However, the extent by which these skills need to be possessed varies from one occupational grouping to another.

Consequently, Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology should consider the significance of generic skills and how to apply these skills with the graduates. There is much debate surrounding generic skills, including practical constraints in its teaching (Jones, 2009), the appropriate mix of generic and technical skills (Asbaugh & Johnstone, 2000; Crebert, 2002) and the integration of generic skills into the curriculum (Barrie et al., 2009).

Purposes of the study

The purposes of this study were
1) To study the most important skill for the students' employability;
2) To determine appropriate strategies in promoting the development of generic skills; and
3) To investigate methods of assessment by language teachers.

Research Methodology

Population and Samples

The population of this study were 500 fourth-year TNI students from three faculties: Engineering, Information Technology and Business Administration, from the second semester, 2015 academic year.

The samplings of this study were 60 fourth-year TNI students from three faculties: Engineering, Information Technology and Business Administration, from the second semester, 2015 academic year, derived through sample random sampling technique. The instruments used for gathering the data was in-depth interview.

Instrumentation and data analysis

The instrument used in this study is an in-depth interview. The interview questions were constructed by the researcher, based on generic skills components and needs of employability. The collected data was analyzed using a computer program. The statistics used for analyzing the data were mean and content analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis from questionnaire both single item and whole questionnaire which presented a form of rating scale. These rating scales were calculated to find out mean and standard deviation and then translated based on criteria developed by Best (1981) as follows:

$1.00 <= \bar{x} < 1.50$ refers to the lowest needs

$1.51 <= \bar{x} < 2.50$ refers to low needs

$2.51 <= \bar{x} < 3.50$ refers to moderate needs

$3.51 <= \bar{x} < 4.50$ refers to high needs

$4.51 <= \bar{x} < 5.00$ refers to the highest needs

Research Findings

Phase 1: The result of the most important generic skills for the student's employability

Table 1
Table of Mean of Identified generic skills

No.	Identified Generic Skills	$\bar{x}$	Rank
1	Communication and interpersonal skills	4.72	2
2	Mathematical ideas and techniques	4.37	8
3	Problem solving	4.64	4
4	Information technology	4.75	1
5	Organizing information	4.42	7
6	Learning and adapting knowledge	4.68	3
7	Team working	4.59	5

| 8 | Creativity and innovation | 4.48 | 6 |

The above table presented that the most important skill for the student's employability was Information Technology ($\bar{x}$=4.75), followed by Communication and interpersonal skills ($\bar{x}$=4.72) and Learning and adapting knowledge ($\bar{x}$=4.68).

Phase 2: The results of appropriate strategies in promoting the development of generic skills

Table 2
Table of Mean of Appropriate Strategies

No.	Appropriate Strategies	$\bar{x}$	Rank
1	Modules for teaching generic skills.	4.41	6
2	Promotion of the importance of generic skills by teachers.	4.53	4
3	Improvement on how generic skills are explained and assessed.	4.59	3
4	Critical analysis and emphasis on the practice of generic skills.	4.71	1
5	Professional/adaptability skills development by teachers.	4.62	2
6	Industry involvement in training.	4.44	5

The above table presented that the highest needs of generic skills strategy derived from TNI students was *"Critical analysis and emphasis on the practice of generic skills"* ($\bar{x}$=4.71), followed by *"Professional/adaptability skills development by teachers"* ($\bar{x}$=4.62) and *"Improvement on how generic skills are explained and assessed"* ($\bar{x}$=4.59).

Phase 3: The results of generic skills assessment

Table 3
Table of Mean of Method Assessment

No.	Method Assessment	$\bar{x}$	Rank
1	Teachers assign the outside classroom project.	4.48	5
2	Students are divided into groups and work as a team during a class activity.	4.81	1
3	Students give feedback on the other students' work.	4.75	2
4	Students are assessed on the spot by teachers after an activity.	4.55	4
5	Outside evaluation from different organizations are essential.	4.59	3

The above table presented that the highest needs of method assessment derived from TNI students was *"Students are divided into groups and work as a team during a class activity"* ($\bar{x}$=4.81), followed by *"Students give feedback on the other students' work"* ($\bar{x}$=4.75) and *"Outside evaluation from different organizations are essential"* ($\bar{x}$=4.59).

Phase 4: The results of suggestions on generic skills

Table 4
Table of frequency and percentage of suggestions

No.	Suggestion	Frequency	Percentage
1	Teachers should address the importance of generic skills to students.	45	43.27
2	Dynamic work environment of the knowledge based economy is concerned.	32	30.77
3	Skill training according to the students' majors are required.	27	25.96
	Total	**1**04	100

The table presented that the majority of the students suggested that teachers should address the importance of generic skills to students (43.27%). Some students highlighted that dynamic work environment of the knowledge based economy is concerned (30.77%). However, the minority of the students pointed out that skill training according to the students' majors are required.

Conclusion

1. The result of the most important generic skill for the student's employability was Information Technology ($\overline{x}$ =4.75), followed by Communication and interpersonal skills ($\overline{x}$ =4.72) and Learning and adapting knowledge ($\overline{x}$=4.68).

2. The highest needs of generic skills strategy was *"Critical analysis and emphasis on the practice of generic skills"* ($\overline{x}$ =4.71), followed by *"Professional/adaptability skills development by teachers"* ($\overline{x}$ =4.62) and *"Improvement on how generic skills are explained and assessed"* ($\overline{x}$=4.59).

3. The highest needs of method assessment was *"Students are divided into groups and work as a team during a class activity"* ($\overline{x}$ =4.81), followed by *"Students give feedback on the other students' work"* ($\overline{x}$ =4.75) and *"Outside evaluation from different organizations are essential"* ($\overline{x}$=4.59).

4. The majority of the students suggested that teachers should address the importance of generic skills to students (43.27%). Some students highlighted that dynamic work environment of the knowledge based economy is concerned (30.77%). However, the minority of the students pointed out that skill training according to the students' majors are required.

Discussion

1. The students had the highest need on Information Technology skill. This might be because Information Technology skills are increasingly demanded by employers and highlighted within the overall higher education discussion (Cory & Pruske, 2012). OECD (2013), further, demonstrates that with manufacturing and other low-skill tasks in the services sector becoming increasingly automated, the need for routine cognitive and craft skills is declining, while the demand for information-processing skills and other high level cognitive and interpersonal skills is growing. In addition to mastering occupation-specific skills, workers in the 21st century must also have a stock of information-processing skills, including literacy, numeracy and problem solving, and "generic" skills, such as interpersonal communication, self-management, and the ability to learn, to help them weather the uncertainties of a rapidly changing labor market.

2. The highest needs of generic skills strategy was "Critical analysis and emphasis on the practice of generic skills". According to the study conducted by Jelas et al. (2006), it shows that students' overall generic skills were at average level. Students also perceived that their communication, IT, numeracy, learning how to learn, problem solving, working with others, and discipline-based skills, as developed at university, were at an average level. The results of employers' interviews conducted in Malaysia further demonstrate that there is a consistent and shared belief that the graduates should have these seven core skills. Similarly, Ambigapathy & Aniswal (2005) report that comments from graduates and employers emphasized the importance of generic skills, particularly teamwork, in the curriculum. These issues have inspired the higher education authorities of Malaysia and Indonesia to help undergraduate students to develop generic skills during their study at university. The education process should emphasize the importance of enhancing students' generic skills, that is, communication, IT, numeracy, problem solving, learning how to learn, working with others, and subject-specific competencies. Therefore, these skills should be integrated into the methodology of teaching and learning, in order to produce graduates with a high self-learning capacity.

3. The highest needs of method assessment was "Students are divided into groups and work as a team during a class activity". This is supported by Cuseo (1992) who highlights that group work or team work is a highly desirable generic skill in both learning and employment contexts. In some educational philosophies learning with and through engagement with others is an essential element of a transformational educational process. Group work is not just a means to an end; it has important outcomes in its own right and requires the explicit development of particular skills.

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