Under-Graduate Rural Students' Perception on Soft-Skills Training Workshops to Enhance Employability Opportunities

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ABSTRACT---This study focuses on the effectiveness of training workshops on soft-skills to strengthen required skills for the workplace among rural Under-Graduate students of Virudhunagar and Tirunelveli districts in Tamil Nadu. Most students face the challenge of entering reputed job positions due to the lack of effective communication skills in the workplace. This research is based on the responses of college students from two districts in Tamil Nadu who underwent an intensive training workshop to hone their language skills with specific focus on developing soft skills. While most of the students are strong in their hard-skills, they do not have sufficient training in soft-skills and hence the challenge becomes an impediment in seeking job opportunities. The method used is training workshop and responses from the participants were collected using a Likert scale response sheet to determine the effect of the workshop. The results collected are statistically presented which records the students' perception on the effectiveness of the workshop.

Keywords---Soft-skills, hard-skills, training workshops, rural Under-Graduate students, perception

I. INTRODUCTION

Soft Skills Vs Hard Skills

Traditionally most industries describe the eligibility of their candidate based on what is called the 'hard skills' which is the practical requirement for the profession chosen. What is most often ignored by both the employer and the employee is the need to possess 'soft skills' which are essential in building network within and outside the organization. The need for 'soft skills' is either under-stated or ignored by industries and the academia. While it is essential to train the learners to be able to use their knowledge and skill sets for the job; people skills, self-management skills, team building skills and leadership skills are an essential part of the learning and development of every individual. Jane Andrews and Helen Higson (2008), state that the job requirement and knowledge base of graduates have a gap which requires certain intervention. This study used interview method to identify the graduates' transition from academic space to workspace. While students have indicated that some knowledge received through courses were helpful, what was more helpful were exposure to group tasks, team building, presentation skills and such business-related soft skills. While some students have indicated that their University provided them with such opportunities, some have stated that their Universities could have given them a little more exposure to the soft skills development. Joan Marques (2014) indicates that industries have over emphasized the need for hard skills that most Universities in past have failed to address the need for soft skills. Essentially now it is perceived as an important qualification among graduates. Robert E. Levasseur (2013) uses a three-formula option "Personal skills, Interpersonal skills and Group Skills to identify the various soft skill

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requirements of graduates moving to workplace environment. The research roots its foundation in the theory of 'change management', thereby implying the need for a learner to learn if the environment demands so.

Student Preparedness for Industry Requirement

A study conducted by Damien Joseph, Soon Ang, Roger H. L. Chang, Sandra A. Slaughter (2010) shows how among the IT Professionals, the need for soft skills is highly essential. The study has observed the difference between experienced and newly recruited professionals with particular reference to 'practical intelligence' which in this study focuses on the nuanced use of soft skills which comes with experience based on the IT professional environment. The study consolidates the implications by stating the need to streamline 'soft skills' training in such a way that the employees benefit from the same. This implies that essentially training in soft skills is required and most often it is thought of after an individual is recruited. If soft skills training happens in Universities and students get trained, this gap can be addressed.

In recent years,career advancement supports are offered in Colleges and Universities that try to support the students to be industry ready. Workplaces today do not recruit individuals based only on their job skill competencies. Every candidate is expected to possess the ability to communicate effectively and efficiently. In order for this to materialize, it is necessary for the students to be trained in soft skills along with hard skills. Misra, R., & Mishra, P. (2011), in their study on employability skills use a statistical tool with 6 parameters to derive through factor analysis, the ability of an individual to be considered employable. This study shows the most essential employability skills and highlights communication and interpersonal skills as important and crucial factors. This scale developed for their study could be used by various recruiters to gauge the competencies of their fresh graduates.

Many graduates from rural India miss out on job opportunities in the urban industries primarily due to lack of communication skills and the ability to network and develop work related interpersonal skills. It is also noticeable that many students struggle to process oral and written information while this is not a lack of technical knowledge. Hirsch (2017) in his paper addresses the need for team work and communication skills over knowledge. The paper projects the need for students to possess maturity and ability to communicate, as crucial to being employed. The article also highlights the student perception of training received; wherein students most often did not consider the training received in soft skills as important in workplaces.

Jane Andrews and Helen Higson (2010) through their study have identified what skills graduates state they would have preferred learning while at University. The list includes having a course on Business Communication enabling them to be able to make good presentations, ability to write reports and prepare formal documents and the like.

Theoretical framework

Most research in soft skills for employability or professional development show the need for training and the effect of such training are found to be positive.

Sensitivity and sensibility in People management

Research also provides evidence that people skills is very essential in workplaces and improves the work culture of an organization. Levasseur (1996), emphasizes on the need for developing people skills and in his paper, states the stages in which this could be achieved. One of the most crucial aspects included in this article is conflict management. While it is common to have difference of opinion, the paper shows strategies to deal with such challenges in workplaces.

Training workshops have shown positive results in most of the studies and this approach was chosen as an effective strategy considering that the target group needed sufficient hands-on practice on the said modules. John, Jessy. (2009) in her study shows the effect soft-skills training has had on MBA students with regards to personality development traits and other important sub skills of soft-skills within a workplace. The students show a significant development in essential skills that include, team-work, work place ethics, motivation of self and others, and other inter-personal skills. The article also highlights the fact that employers at the time of recruitment look for candidates with soft-skills and prefer them over the ones who lack the same. The training programme here reflects not just at the inter-personal level but also at the personal level, helping the MBA students to develop honesty, leadership qualities, problem solving and other such crucial skills for the workplace.

Robert E. Levasseur (2013) in his paper shows a model for soft-skills training with regards to change management and the model includes soft-skills with the following four sub-skills; personal skills, interpersonal skills, group and organizational skills. The paper also lists the kind of training that needs to be provided for each of the sub-skills. The study phases the training with modules on self-learning, training, mentoring and coaching. This model is suggested for the managerial level in order to facilitate better management skills among the employees. This model also visualizes the effect of the model in the way the managers will show their ability to interact with colleagues, display visible leadership qualities and many such qualities of the soft-skills.

Rural Student exposure to Urban Job demand

Students coming from rural background in Tamil Nadu most often move to cities within or outside the state for Jobs. We notice that many of these students have excellent hard skills required for the profession chosen but lack proficiency in communication and other soft skills.

Need for the training

The students in the rural background in Tamil Nadu are in need of specific skills training, in order to be able to compete with urban counterparts for better job opportunities. The students were therefore identified on this basis for the workshop to improve soft skills and communication techniques.

Objectives

- To enable rural college going students to improve their ability to communicate effectively in various situations.
- To enable rural college going students to understand the importance of listening and processing information effectively
- To enable rural college going students to formulate and articulate their ideas and/or information effectively in various context effectively
- To enable rural college going students to be sensitive to the listener and pace and modify one's speech and writing accordingly

II. METHODS USED

Model used

The students were exposed to various aspects of spoken and written communication through tasks and activities. The tasks used addressed all aspects of soft-skills beginning with listening and covering a wide range of communication skills. The number of students who were exposed to this training module were hundred and one (101) in total. There were 11 male and 91 female who participated in the two batches of workshop. All the students responded to the survey questionnaire given.

Some of the activities conducted are listed below in the table.

The sessions began with icebreakers and then continued with listening, speaking and writing activities.

Icebreakers
Finding people with similar likes and dislikes list.
Listing 10 common factors of team members.
Using an adjective with the first letter of their names to describe themselves.
Knowing each other by recalling names.
Chain narration.

Listening skills
Following oral instructions and completing a task.
Conversation between two people about something negative- The listener helps in finding the positive aspects.

Presentation skills
1. How can you market the ordinary things to the public
2. Take pictures of the different things and make a story
3. Presentation on funny topics

Written skills
Paragraph writing with a random list of words given.
Paragraph writing with the given opening sentence.
Terribly tiny tale.

Team building activities
Crisis management based on given situation.
Team circle formation with synchronizing hand gestures and actions as a team.
Aligning themselves according to their birthdays without orally communicating.

III. Response

At the end of the training session, the learners were given a questionnaire with a Likert scale listing all the skills that were used as part of the training. The students were required to choose one score ranging from Strongly agree to strongly disagree. The scale had 20 items covering listening, speaking and writing skills within the scope of soft-skills training. The workshop consisted of a range of activities as listed above.

The questions were as follows:

1.   I have understood the need for effective communication
2.   I understand the need to listen before speaking
3.   I have understood the importance of turn taking in communication
4.   It was made clear that to communicate effectively, we need to understand intention
5.   I have understood the significance of team building in order to be able to communicate with others
6.   I have learnt the importance of humour in communication
7.   I am now confident of speaking in various contexts
8.   I am now confident in making presentations
9.   I have understood the need to use body language suitably to enhance communication
10.   I have understood the importance of intonation and stress in communication
11.   I have understood the need to be clear and precise in communication
12.   I have understood the need to develop fluency over accuracy
13.   I now understand that communication is a two-way process and it involves the listener too
14.   I understand the need to suitably modify my pace to suit my audience
15.   The activities done helped me understand the multi axis requirements in communication
16.   I will be able to write with clarity and precision
17.   The tasks done have helped me understand the need to organize ideas before writing
18.   The training has helped me understand the importance of bringing cohesion in writing
19.   It is now clear that writing for various purposes require understanding of the readers
20. Overall, I feel more confident now to use English language in oral and written communication.

Table 1: Student response to questionnaire

Questions	Total	SA(%)	A(%)	N(%)	SD(%)	D(%)
Q1	101	67.33%	32.67%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Q2	101	82.18%	10.89%	5.94%	0.99%	0.00%
Q3	101	47.52%	35.64%	16.83%	0.00%	0.00%

Q4	**101**	51.49%	42.57%	5.94%	0.00%	0.00%
Q5	**101**	50.50%	41.58%	6.93%	0.00%	0.99%
Q6	**101**	33.66%	52.48%	8.91%	0.99%	3.96%
Q7	**101**	44.55%	39.60%	13.86%	0.99%	0.99%
Q8	**101**	43.56%	39.60%	12.87%	0.99%	2.97%
Q9	**101**	53.47%	41.58%	4.95%	0.00%	0.00%
Q10	**101**	33.66%	50.50%	13.86%	0.99%	0.99%
Q11	**101**	44.55%	43.56%	9.90%	0.99%	0.99%
Q12	**101**	59.41%	27.72%	9.90%	0.00%	2.97%
Q13	**101**	60.40%	34.65%	4.95%	0.00%	0.00%
Q14	**101**	33.66%	42.57%	19.80%	0.00%	3.96%
Q15	**101**	52.48%	39.60%	7.92%	0.00%	0.00%
Q16	**101**	43.56%	38.61%	15.84%	0.00%	1.98%
Q17	**101**	51.49%	39.60%	7.92%	0.00%	0.99%
Q18	**101**	52.48%	37.62%	7.92%	0.00%	1.98%
Q19	**100**	58.00%	35.00%	5.00%	0.00%	2.00%
Q20	**101**	66.34%	31.68%	1.98%	0.00%	0.00%

The questions more or less fall into the various categories of tasks conducted. While it is not rigidly possible to split the questions as belonging to only speaking or only writing, the given table shows a general division of the questions. The students were exposed to tasks in combination addressing various soft skills.

Activities	Questions in the questionnaire
Listening skills	2, 3, and 4
Presentation skills	4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14
Writing skills	16, 17, 18 and 19
Team building activities	4, 5, 6, 13,

The percentage table above shows that for most of the questions the students have opted between strongly agree and agree, which highlights the need of the students and their willingness to learn. The most crucial part of the soft skills training workshop has been the revelation that the ability to listen is more important in communication than the ability to speak. Very few students have disagreed with certain aspects of the training workshop.

Implication and Scope

The general student responses clearly indicate a positive result of the workshop. Students appreciate the need for such models in order to equip themselves for the current needs in the job market. It also implies that students have an understanding of what is expected in professional places and therefore their need to hone their soft skills alongside their hard skills is also made evident. This leads us to the larger scope of the study which is the fact that more such training workshops would enhance the learner performance and their ability to communicate confidently and appropriately in

various contexts. While there are cultural connotations to some of the communication strategies, many of the known and expected workplace norms are not popular amongst rural students and hence such exposures would be a sufficient cushioning.

IV. Conclusion

This workshop model for training was conducted to facilitate the improvement of soft skills among under-graduate rural students who would venture outside their home towns for employment. The findings clearly show evidence that such a model is helpful in enhancing the necessary skills required at a workplace. The workshop model allows student participation and interaction which increases the involvement from the learner allowing the teacher to be a facilitator.

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