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Soft Skills Assessment: Exploring Lecturers Practices using Rubrics in Teacher Training Institute (IPG)

Rusmawatibinti Othman*, Mohd. Isha Bin Awang

University Utara Malaysia, Malaysia

***Corresponding Author:** Rusmawatibinti Othman, University Utara Malaysia, Malaysia, Email: rusma987@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

Soft Skills (SS) are the generic skills that every individual needs as a prerequisite for the ever increasing complexity of everyday life. In line with current transition, the education system has also changed to ensure that graduates from the Institute of Higher Education are not just knowledgeable but also competent in soft skills. This study is a preliminary survey to see how far the lecturers in Teacher Training Institute practised the soft skills assessment according to the rubric criteria proposed. This study employed a survey method. The type of survey in this study was cross-sectional and the method used was a mixed method. Instruments used were close-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Data from the questionnaire in this study was analyzed descriptively using Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS Version 20.0) while the participants' response from the interview were videotaped and were later transcribed and thematically analyzed. Quantitative data indicated the practices of lecturers in rubric usage during the soft skills assessment was at moderate level (mean = 3.166). The result of the interviewhas yielded three resulting themesnamely, the method of assessment, the method to ensure the scoring reliability and problems during assessment. This findings has providedevidence to strengthen the validity and reliability of the lecturers scoring practice.

Keywords: *practice, soft skills assessment, rubrics, validity, reliability.*

INTRODUCTION

Soft Skills (SS) are among the elements identified as critical in the world of workespecially within the 21st century society (IPGM, 2016). Employers and industry associations often relate the lack of soft skills such as positive work ethics, communication skills, teamworks and decision-making capabilities as well as leadership as a major factor affecting graduate marketability (World Bank, 2012). In line with the current changes, the education system has also beenrestructured to ensure the students from the Higher LearningInstitute (HL) are not only knowledgeable and highly skilled, but also marketable and employable. For example, Julliard and Schwab (2000) stated that social skill aspects can be a strength to the behavior of the employees, especially in relation to one's loyalty to the career and organization in which he works.

Many studies (Moskal & Leydens, 2000; Oakleaf, 2006; Stellmack, Konheim-Kalskstein, Manor, Massey, & Schmitz, 2009) have reported the importance of implementing SS in education system. Therefore, the aforementioned researchers suggested the use of rubrics to facilitate the assessment of SS components. The rubrics acts as a standard in laying a clear level of students' excellencies or achievements. The quality in rubrics is defined and clearly delineated in the sentence detailing the expected behavior to be assessed. The rubrics also help to elaborate fairly rules or measures which leads to categorizing the scores (Popham, 1997). Rubrics also serve as a tool to further guide aligning the learning objectives and mapping with assessment (Tractenberg, Umans, & McCarter, 2010).

Cranmer (2006) discussed the pedagogical practices by means of various activities to develop SS by mentioning applied and independent methods. Hence, the same method was proposed in the module published by the KPTM (2006). Changes in the curriculum will also revamp the assessment system in the education system (Biggs, 1996). Correspondingly, the IPG assessment system has also changed from assessing the transfer of knowledge within isolated skills to a complex and more competent knowledge acquisition as suggested by

Baartman, Bastiaens, Kirschner and Van der Vleuten (2007).

Basically, the nature of SS requires a paradigm shift in terms of readiness and practices of lecturers for authentic assessment. The changes hence, indicated the need for teachers to equip themselves with the necessary skills to assess behavior (Birenbaum, 1996). In other words, conventional assessments through written tests in the classroom at a given time should shift to evaluate processesthat requireslecturers to become observers until the final productsare produced. On the other hand, previous researchers revealed the skills assessment through observation poses a new issue of reliability as the lecturers see the behavior with different justification (Wan Sofiah, 2016). Inconsistence in the scoring setting takes place here. This study is expected to add input to the existing study from the perspective of lecturerson assessing SS in the Malaysia teacher training institute (IPG).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study is to:

- Identify the level of rubrics practices during soft skills assessment among lecturers in teacher training institute.
- Explore the method pertaining soft skill assessment using rubrics among lecturers in teacher training institute.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed the survey method. The approach applied was a mixed method with sequential explanatory design. The instrument used was a questionnaire (Likert scale 5 points) and semi-structured interview protocol. Data triangulation through interviews was also taken into account in this study to better understand the method of construction and evaluation using the rubrics in the real context of IPG. Data from the questionnaire in this study was analyzed descriptively using Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS Version 20.0). The statistical method computed in the form of descriptive mean and standard deviation. The interview data was gathered in three stages, namely rewriting the interview record and subsequently the construction of the code and the theme and finally the presentation of the data in the form of table.

Population and Sample

The population of this study involved lecturers of the Teacher Training Institute (IPG). A pilot study was conducted at an IPG in the Northern Zone. The sample of this study consisted of a total of 100 lecturers. For interview data, six lecturers were selected voluntarily. All of these respondents were referred to as R1, R2, R3, R4, R5 and R6.

Criteria for interviewing respondents were:

- Voluntary involvement without coercion.
- Lecturers who taught and assessed the element of soft skills.
- Experience of teaching over 10 years in IPG.

INSTRUMENTATION

The items in the questionnaire were aimed at exploring the extent to which lecturers practiced procedures to ensure the validity and reliability of the scoring. The questionnaire in this study was adapted from William Irvin Sauser, Jr. (1978). *The Cronbach Alpha* value obtained in the study was 0.81. This value showed a strong coefficient of overall item consistency of the item. Likert scale was also set out from 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Always, 4 = Frequently, and 5 = Very Frequently. The questionnaire was administered to identify lecturer's practice in constructing a rubric and giving a score of soft skills components.

This instrument contains two parts (Table 1.0):

Part 1: Demographic of the lecturer.

Part 11: The lecturer's practice in assessing soft skills using rubrics.

Table1.0: *The details of the questionnaire*

Part	Domain	No of items	Scale
A	Respondent Background (gender, age, years of service, academic qualification and frequency of attending courses)	5	Nominal/Ordinal
B	Lecturers' practice in assessing soft skills using rubrics	7	Likert 5-points

FINDINGS

The findings are presented in the objective sequence of the study. Response to each item of the questionnaire was given a new rangeas indicated byNoraza and Aminah Bibi (2012) and Nik MohdRahimi, ZamriandKamarulzaman (2008) to identify three categories of the practice levelswhich are weak (1.00 - 2.33), moderate (2.34 - 3.67) and high (3.68 - 5.00).

The results of the interview has also emerged the three-theme naming the method of assessment, the method to ensure the scoring reliability and problems during assessment.

Quantitative Data

To Identify the Level of Rubrics Practices in Soft Skills Assessment

The lecturers' practices with regard to soft skills assessment was measured and operated basely on a 5-point Likert Scale. Table 2.0 shows the mean and standard deviation for lecturers' practice in rubric usage during soft skills assessment. Overall, the item means was in a range of (2.56-3.91). The lowest standard deviation was 0.977 while the highest standard deviation was 1.367. Based on the categorization of weak level scales (1.00 - 2.33), moderate (2.34 - 3.67) and high (3.68 - 5.00), the average mean of lecturers' practice was at moderate level (mean = 3.166).

The item "comparing the student's assignment as a guide to the "minimum achievement" quality and "excellent achievement" quality revealed a high level practice with the highest score of min 3.91. "Inviting other lecturers in evaluation to ensure the reliability of the given scores also showed a high level with a relatively high mean of 3.79. "Could not focus on the assessment because i need to record simultaneous marks with the occurrence of the action" and the item "using the marking method on the mid-scale to avoid giving too high scores" showing a moderate level of practice with the mean of 3.07 and 3.05 respectively.

For dimension of bias in awarding scores, however, data showed a relatively low scores in this construct but still in the moderate level of overall performance (mean = 2.56-2.99). The item was "using the check list for the frequency of behavior to grade the subjective criteria" (min = 2.56) and "giving high marks for students except for those who are very weak" (min = 2.99). "Using the method of scoring on the middle scale to avoid too high in giving scores" exhibited quite frequent practice with a fairly high score of mean 3.07. Finally, the lecturers showed a moderate level on the item "encountering problem in marking because the sentence on the rubric is too long" with a mean score of 2.79.

Table2.0. *Means and standard deviations of lecturers' practices in the rubric usage during soft skills assessment. (N = 100)*

Item When evaluating using rubrics, how often are you	Mean	Standard deviation
comparing the student's assignment as a guide to the "minimum achievement" and "excellent achievement" Quality	3.91	1.016
Could not focus on the assessment because you need to record markssimultaneously with the occurrence of the action	3.07	1.208
Inviting other lecturers in evaluation to ensure the reliability of the given scores	3.79	0.977
giving high marks for students except for those who are very weak	2.99	1.367
Using the method of scoring on the middle scale to avoid too high in giving scores	3.05	1.329
using the checklist for the frequency of behavior to grade the subjective criteria	2.56	1.131
encountering problem in marking because the sentence on the rubric is too long	2.79	1.157

Overall mean = 3.1657; Standard deviation = 0.697; Level of practice = Moderate

Qualitative Data

To Explore the Method Pertaining Soft Skills Assessment Using Rubrics

The triangulation of data through interview was made to understand further how the construction and evaluation of the rubrics was implemented in the real context of the IPG. Three themes was identified from the interview transcription analysis namely method of assessment, reliability of scoring using rubrics and problems during assessment.

Method of Assessment

The interview findings showed SS assessments were made by their own lecturers using various methods depending on the type of skills assessed and guided by the rubrics.

The following quote illustrates the transcription of the theme under category the assessment method:

Assessment of SS are made by lecturers who teach their courses. Assessment method in addition, depends on the form of skills to be evaluated. For instance, written work is preferable to evaluate thinking skills such as reports, articles, essaysby means ofproject based assignments. Evaluations are also made through observations by the lecturers guided by rubrics. Checklist is also commonly used to

evaluate the subjective quality such as the frequency of mentioning "thank you" to signify value of appreciation to teammates. (R1)

Assessmentis conducted by lecturers using rubrics instrument. The appropriate method for evaluating SS is presentation. Therefore, observations are made and assessments are based on the constructed rubrics. (R2)

SS is assessed based on the task in the coursework.

Evaluation is made based on the constructed rubrics. (R3)

SS is still new in IPG.Hence, the evaluation method is still "loose". SS is a new element in assessment in IPG. Starting Jan 2017, SS needs to be evaluated in student work. Training was only made by the end of 2016. I'm not sure how, among lecturers, ensure the consistency of the assessment . (R5)

Since I am in the IPG, only once a formal course was held. The course is notably focused on the construction of course work to align with the RMK (course information handbook). (R6)

The respondents came to a consensus that the lecturers themselves assessed SS to the students in their own classes. All the six respondents also mentioned various methods were practiced to assess SS and most of the time through the coursework. R1 pointed out that the method of assessment applied by lecturers depends on the element of skills to be evaluated. For example, most commonly written work was preferable to evaluate thinking skills such as reports, articles, essays by means of project based assignments. All respondents also mentioned the method of presentation was also performed through observation and guided by rubrics which was constructed by the the lecturers themselves. However, R5 admitted that the evaluation of the lecturers was still at a probation stage.This is due to the fact, SS wasdistinctively new in IPG and lecturers were still in learning process to assess SS. RI shared her experience using checklist to evaluate the subjective quality such as the frequency of mentioning "thank you" to signify value of appreciation to teammates. According to R5 again, no matter the stage of lecturers readiness, starting in January 2017, SS were made compulsory to be assessed in student work. Interestingly, exposure in formal training was only made at the end of 2016. It was also acknowledged by R6 who stated that he only attended once the formal course of KI assessment using rubrics since he was in IPG. However, the coursewas more likely to focus on the construction of coursework that are in line with the RMK rather than using rubrics to ensure the reliability of the score marks. In most cases, six respondents has confirmed the training was given almosttoevery lecturer as an introductory step towards SS assessment.

Ensuring the Scoring Reliability Using Rubrics

The next findings emerged was the reliability of the score awarded by lecturers in accordance to students performance. Initially, reliability of the scoreswasdetermined by the corresponding rubrics in which the performance is evaluatedsolely on the learning objectives stated in the coursesinformation handbook (RMK). In supporting the theme, there were several issues in the assessment were highlighted from interviews findings. However, some standard of procedure have been practised by lecturers within the construction and use of rubrics to ensure the consistency of marks given to the students.

Evaluation among lecturers across the same course is consistent because they refer to the same rubrics. Moderation process is also made after evaluation. Lecturers measure the element of skills which stated in the rubrics only. Briefly, a measured behavior is markedonly if shown when the assessment is made. (R1)

I think there was not any problem with my evaluation because SME and IEE agreed with my evaluation. After all, I refer to the rubric that has been endorsed by SME. The task specification table is also distributed to students so that students know what to do in their assignment. (R2)

I always refer to the handbook "Coursework Evaluation document". Assessment was made with other counterpart lecturers. There is no issues of unfair mark because moderation took place and monitored by the chief examiner. (R6)

It is well accepted, a clear understanding and proper delivery of the soft skills as well as evaluation provides a basis for making the assessment of learning outcomes more meaningful.This statement is acknowledged by all respondents as they were asked about their experience when assessing SS. For R1, evaluation among lecturers across the same course is consistent as lecturers use the same rubric. For R2, there was no problem in SS assessment as he claimed SME and IEE had agreed with his evaluation. This was particularly

true for R2 who agreed lecturers refered tothe rubrics that has been validated by SME. Similarly, the same situation was repeated by R4. R6, in addition, acknowledged to always referring the handbook for Assessment of Coursework issued by the Malaysian Teacher Institute. R6 also supported the fairness of the score marks given among lecturers was ensured since the assessments were made collaboratively with other lecturers and moderation was also enacted by the chief examiner to ensure the consistency of scores between lecturers for the same course even the assessments were conducted in different class. To allow fairness towards students, R2 also shared his experience distributing the task specification table to students and helpthe students to apprehend what to do in their assignments. R1 asserted fair evaluation was also ensured through rubrics because students are measured solely on the skills stated in the rubrics and moderation among lecturers were also made after the evaluation.

Problems in Assessment

SS is new in the system of IPG. The lecturers are still at a novice stage in building rubrics and they also wonder the consistent status of scoring among lecturers. This is due to the lack of training given by the institute to strengthen the assessment skills. The last theme in the findings was the problems in evaluation. Among the problems identified during the transcription were:

This SS is a bit subjective to measure. Usually, lecturers face problems in assessing group work. (R3)

Sometimes problems arise when too many students need to be evaluated by observation. Lecturers need to simultaneously mark the group at a time once the project is implemented. Element of cooperation is also a subjective value to be judged by observation. (R1)

There is no "pair" assessment during scoring (during evaluation). There is no study or assessment to measure the level of ability lecturers in assessing soft skills. (R1)

I've never seen the way other lecturers conducting assessment. Short training should not be enough for lecturers to master this KI assessment .Since I was in IPG, only once 1 attended a formal course. It's difficult to measure consistency of scoring among lecturers as we often give a medium score assessment. (R4).

On the whole, all respondents admitted that there was no problem in evaluating the SS element because rubrics were consistently used as the scoring guide.When asked about the problems faced by lecturers for the same course but in different classes, there were various issues raised. According to R3, SS was quite subjective to be evaluated, for example, the element of maturity in decision-making within members in a team work. R1 shared the same view as R3 when mentioning collaboration was also a subjective value to be evaluated by observation. Still in teamwork as well, R3 expressed problems in evaluating the group's work. R1 and R5 also recognized the same situation. R3's response was supported by R1 who felt sometimes problems arised when too many students need to be evaluated by observation. Lecturers also need to give marks simultaneously in groups when a project wastaking place.In response to the question consistency of the score among lecturers further, all respondents except R6 admitted they never saw the way other lecturers evaluated SS. According to R4, short training should not be enough for lecturers to master this SS assessment. To R1 again, the consistency among lecturers in SS scores were difficult to conclude because no such studies were made to measure the level of ability among lecturers in assessing soft skills. R4, however took a simple marking approach to students namely "middle score" award.

DISCUSSION

The pilot study was conducted to explore the preliminary information on IPG lecturers' practices pertaining SS assessment particularly in rubrics constructions as well as awarding score to students. Further confirmation the quantitative findingswas made through interviews to get the real picture of the lecturers in their practice. It is important to note, lecturers must assess the SS element using rubrics since 2017. Within the IPG system, this study could be seen as building a knowledge base for further researchers in seeking more accurate information resulted from the changes in the program to foster SS. Initially, the findings from quantitative results showed that the level of grading practice using rubric is at moderate level. Data qualitative further strengthened the results found from questionnaires. From the viewpoints of the sample, the transcribed data were distinctively categorized into three main themes, namely, the method of assessment, the

method to ensure the scoring reliability and the problems during assessment.

In general, formal teaching and learning soft skills can be planned and implemented through two models namely the Stand Alone Subject and the Embedded Model (KPTM, 2006, IPGM, 2016). Generally, quantitative data in the study indicated the practice of lecturers in rubric usage during assessing soft skills was at a moderate level. All the six respondents come to a consensus that various methods were practiced to assess SS and most commonly through the coursework. The method of assessment applied by lecturers also depends on the element of skills to be evaluated. For example, in order to assess the acquisition of thinking skills, written work such as reports, articles, essays are the most been chosen. Evaluations were also made through observations and guided by rubrics which was constructed by the the lecturers themselves.

On the whole, lecturers were also new to the SS and had limited exposure to the correspond assessment.The view was supported from interview findings that mention the lack of training at institute level. Hence, the weaknesses are also identified due to the lack of guidance and lecturers' knowledge within the concept of validity and reliability of the scoring process. These findings suggested the importance of training to strengthen the literacy and skills of SS assessment using rubrics among lecturers. In fact, using rubrics would facilitate measuring the mastery of subjects or activities performed by students. Andrade, Du, and Wang (2008) stated that rubrics also means a form of communication tool that embodies the quality that is expected from students' particularly to assess ongoing task response and final product grading. Rubric should have facilitated the scoring as suggested by Andrade, Du, and Wang but lecturers in the study seemed to experience difficulty in measuring and scoring. This was signified by a high mean score on the item "the sentence in the rubric is too long". The lecturers also agreed that it was difficult to focus on the assessment because they have to "record marks simultaneously with the occurrence of students respond" and ultimately "using checklists to calculate the frequency of behavior to give score on a subjective criterion".

Rubrics have many advantages. Mueller (2011) suggested using rubrics to overcome obscurity in making justification for the achievement of subjective performance. In other word, rubrics could enhance the value of fairness and the use of a transparent rubrics can represent a strong evidence that the criteria recorded in the rubric could actually measure objectives although it perceived as subjective among different assessors (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007). R2 mentioned sharing the task specification table with students along with respective rubrics. R2's practice showing the initiation of implementing value of fairness towards students. Empirical studies have also consistently highlighted that students of higher learning institutions were very appreciate rubrics (Reddy & Andrade, 2010). This findings would undoubtedly suggests that students got clear information about the targets for their work from the rubrics. As for lecturers as well, the rubric became a document representing the value of transparency and fairness in grading (Reddy & Andrade, 2010). However, apart from reliably using rubrics, the bias element in evaluation was identified from this quantitative study when there were few lecturers who "gave high marks except for those who were really weak" and "using the method of scoring middle scale to avoid giving scores too high marks to the students".

Rubrics can be used consistently and could represent what the students are capable of doing the respective skills (Lawson, Taylor, Thompson, Simpson, Freeman, Treleaven, & Rohde, 2012). Respondents in this study asserted fair evaluation was also ensured through rubrics because students are measured solely on the skills stated in the rubrics and moderation among lecturers were also made after the evaluation. With respect to the construction rubrics as well, the value of fairness was guaranted by lecturers always referring to the couses handbooks to make sure the exact alignment of learning outcomes and respective tasks and marks given followed by practicing the process of validation by subject matter expert and internal examiner. From another aspect, fairness was also depicted in the agreement among different assessors to score on the product or behavior shown by the same students. Lecturers seems to practice this aspect when getting high scores on item "comparing student assignments to find consensus guidelines which distinctively categorized into "moderate achievements" and "excellent achievements" and "allowing other lecturers to make observations to ensure the reliability of the given scores". This practice is in line with Wan Sofiah (2016) opinion on the need for a standard

SS assessment format by incorporating the collaborative concept of assessors to ensure the consistency of the scoring among assessors.

In fact, the complex nature of soft skills contributes to the difficulty to evaluate the skills (Baartman et al., 2007). The same view was expressed by R1 and R3 by mentioning difficulty to mark the elements of team work and cooperation among team members. RI also shared her experience using checklist to evaluate the subjective quality such as the frequency of mentioning "thank you" to signify value of appreciation to teammates. The subjectivity to measure expected learning outcomes in the classroom situation has also been mentioned by Hampson and Junor (2009) and Linda and Denise (2014). Moreover, Hampson and Junorargued, a weak guideline in relation to the soft skills framework, especially in their standard performance hasalso expected to arise difficulty which eventually leads to the inconsistency of scoring during assessment.

This study also suggested that the consistency of scores among lecturers in different classes is quite alarming. Five out of six respondents in the interview admitted that they never saw the way other lecturers evaluated and had never joint assessment within the same course. Arter and McTighe (2001) claimed, lacking experience of lecturers and limitation of courses attended by lecturers could serve a constrains to the inconsistency of scores among lecturers which could ultimately weaken the reliability of the grading. As an assessors, lecturers who hold the authority in the class, they should be able to properly coordinate scoring through observations by referring to the rubric so the scores given really represents the actual quality of the student performance (De la Harpe & David (2012).In supporting the issue, Hafner and Hafner (2003) asserted the importance of assessors to be adequately trained as the disagreement of assessors below 70% would invalidate the scores' reliability. Thelow value of reliability, obviously, indicated a reflection on discrepancy of understandings and interpretations among assessors.

According to Wan Sofiah (2016), eduacators have less exposure towards instrument to assess the characteristics of SS particularly to evaluate individual student. On a tone smilar to the Wan Sofiahviews, the interview findings revealed lecturers having difficulty to conduct assessment resulted from lacking of training and more likely, courses attended were more focused on the construction of coursework to align with the syllabus called The Courses Information Handbook (RMK) instead of awarding scores using rubrics. This might be the answer why the level of lecturers practices during assessment was only at moderate. The lecturers received inadequate literacy about SS and rubrics resulted from inappropriate training focus. The findings were consistent with Albon and Jewels (2014) and Lawson et al. (2011) who claimed the situation would be worsen if educators themselves had never experienced the concept of soft skills in their former higher institutions.

In summary, the study has provided further support for the claim that educators have weaknesses on SS with respect to knowledge and skills in assessment. The findings were consistent with Wibrow (2011) who highlighted the sample in his study lacked the knowledge and suggested the importance of training and experience in the context of SS assessment. These assumptions were fairly similar to Wan Sofiah (2016) who reported that higher institution lecturers in Malaysia were also facing the same situation as discussed in other countries.Besides, validity and reliability of the data might be disputed due to inappropriately administered the rubrics.Therefore,the findings in this study provide evidence of a Malaysian situated phenomenon, hence, could enable a decision made by the relevant authorities related to the Malaysian Institute of Teachers Education in planning the best suited course.

CONCLUSION

Within the context of soft skills in teacher's training, it is generally viewed that lecturers' practices in rubric usage is at a moderate level. Some weaknesses are identified in the actual implementation of observation and scoring. Based on the analysis of the qualitative data, we came to the consensus to situate the findings within three main themes, namely method of assessment, method to ensure the scoring reliability and problems during assessment. Data triangulate in the study confirms the consistency of questionnaires and interview findings. It is hoped that the findings may contribute a useful insights to improve the professional training and development of the soft skills assessment.This findings would also enlighten lecturers on how to support issues related to strengthen the validity and reliability of the lecturer's scoring and could serve as a reference to improve the existing practices among lecturers in the Malaysia teacher training institute.

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