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## Article

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## Improving Working Readiness through Mastering Soft Skills: Empirical Evidence from University Students in Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

The current study aims to examine and analyze the effect of soft skills on working readiness. Respondents of the current study were active students from several universities in Indonesia. The sampling technique used is non-probability sampling, namely convenient sampling. Data analysis were performed using multiple linear regression. The results show that learning throughout life skills, creativity, teamwork skills, and leadership skills significantly influence on working readiness. Meanwhile, problem-solving skills, communication skills, and ethics have no significant effect on working readiness. The results of the current study provide a theoretical contribution regarding the relationship between soft skills and working readiness. Future research is urgent to conduct to provide a clearer picture of the relationship between soft skills and working readiness. The current research gives students awareness to improve their soft skills. The study also provides a managerial contribution for universities to formulate the concept of developing soft skills for their students.

**Keywords:** soft skills; working readiness; university students.

**JEL classification:** I23, J24, J81.

**MSC2010:** 00A99.

## Mejorar la preparación para el trabajo a través del dominio de las habilidades blandas: evidencia empírica de estudiantes universitarios en Indonesia

### RESUMEN

El estudio actual tiene como objetivo examinar y analizar el efecto de las habilidades blandas en la preparación para el trabajo. Los encuestados del estudio actual eran estudiantes activos de varias universidades de Indonesia. La técnica de muestreo utilizada es el muestreo no probabilístico, es decir, el muestreo por conveniencia. El análisis de datos se realizó mediante regresión lineal múltiple. Los resultados muestran que el aprendizaje a lo largo de la vida, la creatividad, las habilidades de trabajo en equipo y las habilidades de liderazgo influyen significativamente en la preparación para el trabajo. Mientras tanto, las habilidades para resolver problemas, las habilidades de comunicación y la ética no tienen un efecto significativo en la preparación para el trabajo. Los resultados del presente estudio proporcionan una contribución teórica sobre la relación entre las habilidades blandas y la preparación para el trabajo. Es urgente realizar investigaciones futuras para proporcionar una imagen más clara de la relación entre las habilidades blandas y la preparación para el trabajo. La investigación actual da a los estudiantes la conciencia para mejorar sus habilidades blandas. El estudio también proporciona una contribución de gestión para que las universidades formulen el concepto de desarrollo de habilidades blandas para sus estudiantes.

**Palabras clave:** habilidades blandas; preparación para el trabajo; estudiantes universitarios.

**Clasificación JEL:** I23, J24, J81.

**MSC2010:** 00A99.



## 1. Introduction

Youth unemployment, aged 15-24, is a global issue. This age segment of the workforce shows three times more than the older age workforce (Ibrahim & Mahyuddin, 2017). One of the reasons for the emergence of the phenomenon is the mismatch between the training obtained by students at the university and the set of skills needed in the world of work. However, university institutions face challenges of competitiveness derived from the demands of society, changes in students preferences, and technological evolution. Adapting with the changes is mandatory for universities to be competitive (Enrique et al., 2022). Unfortunately, most of the curricula in universities do not reflect the skills required today (Shanmugam, 2017). Related to the indication, Clarke (2017) states that one of the most exciting and controversial themes in the higher education management literature is the quality of graduates and the lack of soft skills. The indication is supported by MacDermott and Ortiz (2017) stating that many graduates do not possess the softskills needed to be successful in the workforce. Employers seek softskills, among others, communication, teamwork and critical thinking (Schneider, 2015)

In today's fully automated era, the work readiness skills needed by graduates have changed, from skills that are more technical, to skills that are more social (softer in nature) (Kahn, 2017). In other words, the change in skill focus from hard skills development to soft skills development (Turner & Mulholland, 2017). Hardskill refers to skills related to the technical aspects of doing a job. This includes knowledge acquisition (Page, Wilson & Kolb, 1993). Hard skills are cognitive and are often associated with cognitive skills (Birkett, 1993). At the same time, soft skills refer to skills emphasizing personal behavior in managing interpersonal relationships (interpersonal). According to Clarke (2016), softskills are associated to interacting with other people and demonstrating social skills, including confidence and self-reflection. These skills are more effective or behavioral and are often associated with emotional intelligence.

Furthermore, Jameson et al. (2016) define soft skills as skills, abilities, and traits related to personality, attitude, and behavior. Soft skills are often associated with interacting with others and demonstrating social skills, including self-confidence and self-reflection (Jameson et al., 2016). At the same time, a previous research conducted by Ranjit and Wahab (2008) found that the top 10 soft skills based on user ratings of graduates in Malaysia, are integrity, willingness to learn, communication skills, initiative, achievement orientation, teamwork skills, interpersonal skills, flexibility, high self-esteem, and critical thinking skills. The orders and types of skills required for graduates in other countries will be various. In the U.K., the main attributes of these generic skills include willingness to learn skills, interpersonal skills, personal details such as intellectual skill, problem-solving skill, analytical and critical skills, communication skills, teamwork, flexibility, adaptability, and risk-taking skills.

Although the skills above are essential to master, it does not mean that hard skills are no longer critical ones. In the era of digital disruption, graduates must have multi-skilled, social skills combined with technical skills (Sail & Alavi, 2010). The indication is in line with Tomlinson (2012) that nowadays, graduates cannot solely rely on their higher education qualifications, while graduates do not have good adaptability and flexibility to enter in the labor market. To be competitive, graduates need to develop and master a combination of skills, hard and soft skills (Clarke, 2017). Meanwhile, according to the latest study by Development Economics Ltd (2015), the company indicated a gap in soft skills mastery in the UK workforce. Given the global nature of the problem, similar phenomena are also found in other parts of the world, including Indonesia.

Research on the importance of soft skills on the prospects of graduates' readiness to enter the world of work and academic performance has been carried out previously (Teng et al., 2019; Jameson et al., 2016; Pool & Sewell, 2007; Coetzee & Beukes, 2010). However, these researches are not sufficient yet. It is relevant to Balcar (2016) statement that in the last few decades, most research has focused on technical skills/hard skills. Meanwhile, the investigation of soft skills competence is still minimal (Ciappei & Cinque, 2014). The condition is, of course, surprising. Amid increasing importance of soft skills for graduates (Archer & Davison, 2008; Deloitte, 2017), the focus of research on the subject is still limited.

The study aimed to examine and analyze the effect of soft skills on the readiness of graduates to enter the world of work. The dimensions of soft skills used in the current study include problem-solving skills, learn throughout life skills, creativity, communication, teamwork, ethics, and leadership. The reason for choosing these seven dimensions is that from the findings of previous studies, these seven dimensions of soft skills have a significantly positive effect on working readiness. It is hoped that the results of the current study provide empirical support for the consequences of previous studies. Thus, the theoretical building of the relationship between soft skills and working readiness can be more clearly described.

## 2. Methodology

The current research is an explanatory one. It tests hypotheses to support the proposed model. The results of the current study are to strengthen the theory used. The study uses primary data, namely questionnaires. At the same time, secondary data is data obtained from indirect sources from the object of research. Data collection methods used in the study include primary data collection from questionnaires distributed to selected respondents. The questionnaire in the study used a Likert scale, a score of 1-7.

The population of the study was all university students in Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia. The research sample is part of the existing population. The sample of the research is 185 respondents. Based on the data, the respondents participating in the research are 185 students. Of 185 respondents, 133 (71,4%) are female, and 52 (28,6%) are male. The distribution of questionnaires cover 5 faculties as follows: 72 (38,9%) from business faculty, 65 (35,1%) from computer faculty, 42 (22,7%) from health faculty and 6 (3,3%) from technique faculty. The sampling technique is non-probability sampling, that not all populations have the same opportunity to be sampled. The reason the researcher uses the technique is because of the homogeneous nature of the population. One of the non-probability sampling techniques is convenient sampling, a technique for collecting data that is easy to obtain. The data contained in the study will be processed using multiple linear regression.

**Table 1. Inter-Item Correlation Matrix.**

	PSSkill	LnSkill	Creativity	ComSkill	TWSkill	Ethics	LeadSkill	WR
PSSkill	1.000	.357	.343	.513	.202	.228	.403	.328
LnSkill	.357	1.000	.446	.452	.470	.383	.573	.495
Creativity	.343	.446	1.000	.545	.327	.330	.441	.428
ComSkill	.513	.452	.545	1.000	.368	.315	.572	.450
TWSkill	.202	.470	.327	.368	1.000	.377	.468	.440
Ethics	.228	.383	.330	.315	.377	1.000	.317	.336
LeadSkill	.403	.573	.441	.572	.468	.317	1.000	.537
WR	.328	.495	.428	.450	.440	.336	.537	1.000

Note: The table value is 0.1222.

WR: Working Readiness

ComSkill: Communication skill

PSSkill: Problems Solving Skill

TWSkill: Teams Work Skill

LnSkill: Learn throughout life Skill

Ethics: Ethics

Creativity: Creativity

LeadSkill : Leadership Skill

Source: Own elaboration.

Based on all the data in the WR (working readiness) column or WR row, it is known that the value in the WR column or row is less than the table value of 0.1222. This means that all independent variable items are valid.

**Table 2. Reliability Statistics.**

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items
.839	.847

Source: Own elaboration.

For reliability test, it is indicated that the value of Cronbach's alpha is 0.839 which is greater than 0.7. Thus, the research questionnaire is reliable.

### 3. Results and discussion

**Table 3. Model Summary.**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. An Error of the Estimate
1	.630 <sup>a</sup>	.397	.373	.26429

a. Predictors: (Constant), LeadSkill, Ethics, PSSkill, Creativity, TWSkill, LnSkill, ComSkill

Source: Own elaboration.

Based on the table data, it is known that the adjusted R Square value is 0.373. It indicates that the independent variables (var. PSSkill, LnSkill, Creativity, ComSkill, TWSkill, Ethics, LeadSkill) can explain the dependent variable (WR) of only 37.3%. The rest 62.7% is influenced by other variables not studied in the research.

Based on the ANOVA table data, it is known that the Sig value is 0.000 less than 0.05. It means that the variables PSSkill, LnSkill, Creativity, ComSkill, TWSkill, Ethics, and LeadSkill together affect the WR variable. Thus the model fits and can be used for further analysis.

**Table 4. ANOVA<sup>a</sup>.**

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	8.135	7	1.162	16.638	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	12.363	177	.070		
	Total	20.499	184			

a. Dependent Variable: WR.

b. Predictors: (Constant), LeadSkill, Ethics, PSSkill, Creativity, TWSkill, LnSkill, ComSkill.

Source: Own elaboration.

**Table 5. Coefficients<sup>a</sup>.**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	T
1	(Constant)	1.751	.214		8.180
	PSSkill (PS)	.027	.037	.050	.722
	LnSkill (Ln)	.107	.054	.154	1.978
	Creativity (Cr)	.090	.053	.125	1.701
	ComSkill (Com)	.041	.047	.072	.870
	TWSkill (TW)	.104	.048	.152	2.148
	Ethics (Et)	.047	.046	.069	1.038
	LeadSkill (Ld)	.145	.049	.239	2.944

a. Dependent Variable: WR.

Source: Own elaboration.

Based on the coefficients table data, especially in the eta column, the regression equation is:

$$Y = 1.751 + 0.027PS + 0.107Ln + 0.090Cr + 0.041Com + 0.104TW + 0.047Et + 0.145Ld \quad [1]$$

H<sub>1</sub>: X<sub>1</sub> → WR, sign. value 0.471 is greater than 0.05 then hypothesis 1 is rejected

H<sub>2</sub>: X<sub>2</sub> → WR, sign. value 0.049 is less than 0.05 then hypothesis 2 is accepted

H<sub>3</sub>: X<sub>3</sub> → WR, sign. value 0.091 is less than 0.10 then hypothesis 3 is accepted

H<sub>4</sub>: X<sub>4</sub> → WR, sign. value 0.368 is greater than 0.05 then hypothesis 4 is rejected

H<sub>5</sub>: X<sub>5</sub> → WR, sign. value 0.033 is less than 0.05 then hypothesis 5 is accepted

H<sub>6</sub>: X<sub>6</sub> → WR, sign. value 0.301 is greater than 0.05 then hypothesis 6 is rejected

H<sub>7</sub>: X<sub>7</sub> → WR, sign. value 0.004 is less than 0.05 then hypothesis 7 is accepted

The study examines and analyzes the effect of soft skills with seven dimensions: problem solving skills, learn throughout life skills, creativity, communication, team work, ethics and leadership on working readiness. From results of the study, it is known that of the seven hypotheses proposed in the study, four hypotheses were accepted and the other three were rejected. The four accepted hypotheses include: learn throughout life skills, creativity, teamwork and leadership. Notes for the creativity variable are accepted with a significance number below 0.10. Meanwhile, the three rejected variables include: problem solving, communication and ethics.

The problem solving variable has no significant effect on working readiness. Respondents who are students do not perceive problem solving skills as one of the important skills to be prepared in entering the job market. It can be caused by respondents who incidentally are students who have not been directly involved in the world of work. Students don't have real experience working in the business organization. In fact, daily life of work organizations, employees will be faced with many problems that must be solved. In the context, employee problem solving skills are important. The effectivity of organizational performance will be influenced by the capability of employees of organization in solving each problem of organization. From users perspective, mastering problem solving skills will be pivotal condition in recruiting the candidates. The indication is empowered by many previous research findings

The research findings of Adnan et al. (2012) regarding the importance of soft skills for graduates of real estate programs in Malaysia showed that problem solving skills are important skills to be mastered. The other research finding showing that problem solving skills are very important for entering world of work is Ranjit and Wahab (2008) research. Problem solving skill are in the top rank of level of importance. The difference research findings about the effect of problem solving skills and working readiness are caused by different respondents perspective. Researches with students as respondents indicate that problem solving skills have no effect to working readiness. While researches with users as respondents show that problem solving skills have significant effect to working readiness. The findings will give important input for higher education institutions, users, as well as students. Students should change their paradigm to cope the matter.

While the second hypothesis regarding the effect of learn throughout life skills on working readiness is accepted. It indicates that respondents perceive that learning throughout life skills is an important skill to master. By mastering these skills, graduates will be better prepared to enter the job market. Life skills constitutes a group of psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills helping people to cope with the life problems. Essentially the life of business organization and the daily life of human being commonly will be similar. The competencies needed to be successful in both will not be really different. The employee performance will be okay if he has good life skill. He quickly learns life skill from the environment. He has good flexibility in coping with the problems appearing in organization. Such figure will be more ready to enter world of work.

For the third hypothesis, the result showed that creativity has significant effect to working readiness. The finding indicates that the respondents suppose creativity as an important skill that must be mastered by graduates to be successful in entering the world of work. Having good creativity, an employee will be able to overcome organizational problems from many perspectives. He always thinks out of the box. There are always many ways to cope with organizational problems. Such competency will be needed by organization. From users's perspective, they tend to recruit the candidates having high creativity skills.

The result of the study is in line with the research findings of Azmi et al. (2018) which examined work readiness of students in Malaysia. Respondents were 300 students. The research is motivated by the phenomenon of low absorption of university graduates in the first six months of graduation. The results showed that respondents perceive creativity as one of the variables that have an important role in preparing graduates to enter the world of work. The other research concerning creativity and working readiness is conducted by Teng, Ma, Pahlevansharif and Turner (2018). Respondents were 361 students in two universities, one in China and the other in Malaysia. Goldsmiths soft skills inventory is used. Creativity is one of soft skill in Goldsmiths inventory. The result shows that there is significant relationship between creativity and working readiness for students. Higher education institutions need to set their curricula to accommodate creativity skill. At the same time, students should be aware about the importance of the skill for them to master.

The fourth hypothesis is the influence of communication skills on working readiness. The results show that communication has no effect on working readiness. Respondents do not think that communication skill is as an important skill to enter the world of work. The finding is rather surprising amid the previous research findings showing that communication skill has significant effect to working readiness. The finding can be explained that most of the respondents are accounting students. Commonly accounting students tend showing calm performance. They don't prioritize communication skill. It is logical that everyday they will be related with numbers. It needs seriousness and concentration. From their daily habit, it will influence their paradigm in ranking the soft skills inventories. The indication is proved by many empirical findings. However, the finding is not in line with the research finding of Ting et al. (2017) that communication skills can increase employability and opportunities for career advancement.

Research findings of Teng et al. (2019), Adnan et al. (2012) show that communication skill is one of the important skills to be mastered. While the findings of other studies (Majid et al., 2012) that



certain skills that are important to master will also depend on certain types of respondents. Based on the existing literature, the level of use of soft skills required by job category is the highest for marketing executives and the lowest for accountants. However, it does not mean that accounting graduate scope of jobs is just limited to back office. There are so many accounting graduates filling strategic position within organizations.

The fifth hypothesis is about the effect of teamwork on working readiness. The fifth hypothesis is accepted. It means that respondents perceive teamwork skills as important skills. They believe that teamwork skills will make it easier for them to enter the world of work. By having good teamwork, one can cooperate with others without any conflict. An organization will get much benefit when recruiting the candidates with good teamwork. In fact, almost all kinds of works in the organization need cooperation among the members of team. From users's perspective, he will tend recruiting graduates with good teamwork.

The results of the study support the research findings of Azmi et al. (2018) which examined the work readiness of students in Malaysia. The research findings also indicate that female students perceive teamwork as an important skill. The indication is in line with the current study that the majority of respondents are female students. The finding supports the results of Ang's (2015) research that female students in general tend to be more informed about the skills needed by the industry.

The results of the research by Majid et al. (2012) also support the finding. With 188 respondents from 4 universities in Singapore, the results indicate that the majority of respondents feel that soft skills are useful for social interaction and also for career development. One of the important skills to be mastered according to the results of the study is teamwork and collaboration. It is a fact that most of jobs in the organizations need teamworking. Though certain job can be accomplished individually, commonly they need teamworking. Based on the finding, higher education institutions and university students should be aware of the importance of teamworking. Higher education institutions can facilitate teamworking improvement through class management. Students are trained to work in team in finishing assignment in group, discussing topics of lecture through group presentation. Students can also improve their teamworking skill through joining extra campus activities. They are trained to plan, manage dan implement programs fixed. The success of teamworking will support the success of the programs.

The sixth hypothesis is about the effect of ethics on working readiness. The research finding indicates that ethics has no effect on working readiness. It means that students perceive ethics as an attitude that has no effect on working readiness. Like other skills, for instance: problem solving skills, ethics will not be seen as skill that is urgent to master by students. It is really different with users' perspective that ethics will be very important skill to master. It will make organizational life conducive to perform better. The indication is supported by many previous research findings.

The findings of research by Ranjit and Wahab (2008) indicate that ethics & professionalism and critical thinking and problem solving are the top skills sought by companies in Malaysia. Similar results were found in the research of Adnan et al. (2012) regarding the importance of soft skills for graduates of real estate programs in Malaysia. The results showed that ethics and professionalism were ranked the highest and problem solving was the next. From the findings, it can be concluded that the respondents' points of view are different, in this case students and graduate users will have different, even contradictory, perceptions.

The seventh hypothesis is about the influence of leadership on working readiness. The research finding shows that leadership skills have a significant influence on working readiness. Respondents perceive leadership skills as a skill that helps them enter the world of work. Good leadership will guarantee the candidates to be able to cope with organizational problems. One can affect others to follow his opinion. He can motivate others to gain their top performance. Students can learn leadership skill through many campus activities as well as extra campus activities. By having good leadership, candidates will have more opportunities to develop their best career in an organization.

The finding is in line with the research results of Majid et al. (2012) that leadership skills are important skills to be mastered. Another finding shows that the majority of respondents agree that soft skills are very important for career advancement, it is very important to find a better job.

Meanwhile, Teng et al. (2019) conducted research on the readiness of graduates to enter the workforce in the 4:0 industrial revolution era. The research respondents were 361 students from two universities, one in China and the other in Malaysia. For soft skills, the research uses Goldsmiths soft skills inventory. According to him, soft skills include: self-management, communication, teamwork, interpersonal, working under pressure, imagination/creativity, critical thinking, readiness to learn, attention to detail, planning, responsibility, insight, professionalism, maturity and emotional intelligence. The findings show that there is a significant relationship between the 15 soft skills above on student readiness to enter the workforce.

Succi and Canovi (2019) researched soft skills to increase graduate uptake in the job market, from the perceptions of students and graduate users. The results showed that communication skills, commitment to work and teamwork were the three highest skills perceived by students to increase absorption into the job market. Meanwhile, Andrews and Higson (2008) who researched the job readiness of graduates in four European countries found that teamwork skills, innovative thinking, as well as oral communication skills are an important part of the graduate portfolio. Meanwhile, for life balance skills, leadership and management are at the bottom. It may be that these skills were not considered important early in their career. This is relevant to the literature review that some research results distinguish between soft skills needed in early career, managerial and executive positions (Manpower Group, 2014). While the soft skills ranked by HRD managers first are professional ethics, adaptation to change, creativity and innovation, customer orientation and teamwork. Other findings also show that the top five soft skills that are considered the most important are communication skills, commitment to work, teamwork, learning, and stress tolerance. Top five according to students are: communication skills, commitment to work, teamwork, analytical, and stress tolerance. Meanwhile, top five according to the company are: teamwork, commitment to work, communication, learning and professional ethics and adaptation to change. From the findings of a number of researches regarding the dimensions of soft skills which are still varied, it indicates the need for further research to be conducted. It is hoped that further research can provide a clearer picture of the reasons for the variation in research results.

## **4. Conclusions**

### **4.1. Theoretical Implications**

The research has several theoretical and managerial implications. The results of the study contribute to building the theory of the relationship between soft skills and working readiness. Findings that are still varied indicate that further research is important to do. Future research findings are expected to be able to explain the various variations of existing findings.

### **4.2. Limitations and Future Directions**

The study examines and analyzes the effect of various dimensions of soft skills on working readiness. The study succeeded in proving that learn throughout life skills, creativity, team work and leadership have a significant influence on working readiness. Meanwhile, the study failed to proving the effect of problem solving skills, communication and ethics on working readiness. The findings give indication concerning the importance of certainly mediating variable dealt with soft skills and working readiness relationship, such as: emotional intelligence variable as suggested by Ritter (2018).

The study has several limitations. The coefficient of termination of this study was 37.3%. It means that the ability of the independent variable in explaining the variation of the dependent variable

is very limited, around 37%. While more than 63% is explained by variables outside the study. Another limitation is that for the creativity variable the significance used is at the 10% level.

### 4.3. Practical Implications

Meanwhile, for managerial implications, the results of the study can be used as higher education management to formulate concepts on how to improve students' soft skills. The findings highlight the softskills that higher education need to emphasize so that their graduates have necessary skills to perform well in employment interviews and in their work. In the context, higher educations are important to embed soft skills into the curriculum in order to develop graduate work readiness. From the student's perspective, research findings can provide awareness to them to not only pursue hard skills but also soft skills.

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