

THE CURRENT PRACTICE OF STUDENT' SOFT SKILL TRAINING AT DONG THAP UNIVERSITY: FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS AND LECTURERS, EDUCATIONAL MANAGERS

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Abstract

The article is aimed at assessing the current situation of soft skills training of students at Dong Thap University. The sample was composed of 600 students from eleven departments; 180 managers, lecturers and employees of Dong Thap University. At the same time, we also designed in-depth interviews with 15 students, 10 lecturers and 5 managers about the present situation of soft skills training at Dong Thap University in the 1st semester of the school year 2021-2022 who were chosen to complete a 27-item questionnaire on a Likert scale to measure their soft skill. The results of the assessment of the current state of soft skills training show an overview of students' soft skills. Based on the results, we could have some proposals to improve soft skills for students at Dong Thap University in order to help each student self-train necessary soft skills to meet the conditions of the realities, social requirements and employers' expectations.

Keywords: *Dong Thap University, soft skills, students, soft skills assessment.*

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THỰC TRẠNG KỸ NĂNG MỀM CỦA SINH VIÊN TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC ĐỒNG THÁP: ĐÁNH GIÁ TỪ PHÍA NHÀ QUẢN LÝ GIÁO DỤC, GIẢNG VIÊN VÀ SINH VIÊN

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Tóm tắt

Bài báo đánh giá thực trạng rèn luyện kỹ năng mềm của sinh viên Trường Đại học Đồng Tháp. Mẫu gồm 600 sinh viên từ mười một khoa; 180 người là cán bộ quản lý, giảng viên và người lao động của Trường Đại học Đồng Tháp. Đồng thời, chúng tôi cũng thiết kế phỏng vấn sâu 15 sinh viên, 10 giảng viên và 5 cán bộ quản lý về thực trạng đào tạo kỹ năng mềm tại Trường Đại học Đồng Tháp trong học kỳ 1 năm học 2021-2022, những người được chọn hoàn thành bảng câu hỏi 27 mục theo thang điểm Likert để đo lường kỹ năng mềm của họ. Kết quả đánh giá thực trạng đào tạo kỹ năng mềm cho thấy một cách tổng quan về kỹ năng mềm của sinh viên. Dựa trên kết quả đạt được, chúng tôi có thể đưa ra một số đề xuất nhằm nâng cao kỹ năng mềm cho sinh viên Trường Đại học Đồng Tháp nhằm giúp mỗi sinh viên hình thành các kỹ năng mềm cần thiết và biết cách tự rèn luyện kỹ năng mềm đáp ứng điều kiện thực tế, yêu cầu xã hội và kỳ vọng của nhà tuyển dụng.

Từ khóa: *Đại học Đồng Tháp, đánh giá kỹ năng mềm, kỹ năng mềm, sinh viên,*

1. Introduction

In the era of integration and globalization, the strength of a country depends heavily on human resources with high intellectual capacity and soft skills of its citizens. Therefore, human development is very important and necessary because it motivates the country to realize its goals, vision and tasks. If there is no high-quality human resource to meet the requirements, each individual, each organization, and a country in general will find it difficult to integrate into the world and to have more opportunities at work and the labor market. It is important that high quality human resources come from a good quality of educational process. A carefully designed, structured and well-planned educational program is crucial to develop the human resources. Therefore, higher education institutions play a very important role to create the human resources that have both knowledge and high soft skills to meet the expectations of domestic and international employers. The teaching and learning process in higher education institutions should be able to provide knowledge and soft skills that are relevant to the reality of globalization. The inclusion of soft skills in the training program for students at university is the need of the profession, contributing to the success of students after graduation.

According to Wats & Wats (2009), due to many factors of the living environment today, work becomes increasingly complex, uncertain and highly competitive. All organizations always consider human resources as an important asset which is playing an important role in the operation of an organization and its success. Most employers have the right to hire, retain, and motivate people who are trustworthy, resourceful, moral, communicative, self-directed, responsible, creative, willing to work and learn, and have positive thinking.

According to Mitchell et al. (2010), employers often prefer to see a smooth cooperation of their staffs. In addition to discipline-based knowledge and skills, an adequate level of soft skills is considered desirable for advancement up in one's career. Mitchell, Skinner, and White feel that technical and professional skills cannot fail to achieve organizational goals. It is because their employees will also be involved in leadership levels and decision-making activities. Employees also need to communicate effectively within the organization, with their customers, and

other involved parties. Thus, communication skills of business students, particularly for writing persuasive business letters, can be improved by designing exercises using organizations and scenarios in real life.

On the other hand, the increase of globalization and the growth of the knowledge-based economy have led to a greater need to broaden knowledge, awareness and cultural empathy, and also to consider a wide range of techniques, different perspectives and attitudes (Gilbert, 2005).

In Ashita & Ritu research (2018), it has shown that soft skills training imparted to students is helpful in training graduates in a valuable professional manner. Wats & Wats (2009) argue that: Pursuing a professional degree requires adding value to hard skills by enhancing soft skills, a prerequisite for getting a job in the labor market.

Top recruiters tend to pick candidates who fit the company culture, even when they have to spend more time for retraining. Employers believe that employees will work together effectively to achieve common goals because they can cooperate with colleagues in accordance with the company culture. In any case, this provides significant benefits to the organization (UNESCO, 2003). Yuval (2018), in his research, said that, at present, many pedagogical experts believe that schools should switch to teaching the four letters "C": Critical thinking, Communication, Collaboration and Creativity.

In Vietnam, soft skills have also been interested by researchers, educational managers, and employers in recent years. Universities have also noticed the need of adding soft skills in their curricula. However, soft skills training programs are still not taken seriously but only included in knowledge modules or only as elective courses with very little duration. Therefore, soft skills of students are difficult to be formed if students do not plan to self-study, self-train, seek out soft skill training centers outside, or join soft skill clubs inside the university.

There is a need to realize the importance of developing soft skills for students and the school's training of soft skills for students as a basis for proposing measures to develop and to improve teaching quality and soft skills training for students of Dong Thap University. It is very necessary in the current situation.

2. Research methods

2.1. Theoretical research methods

In order to have a solid theoretical base, we have searched domestic and foreign documents related to education, soft skills training for students and the importance of soft skills of students, from which we based on to build questionnaires and the actual situation survey.

2.2. Methods of survey, investigation, interview

To conduct the survey, we designed a system of 27 closed and open questions based on the “google forms” application, with 600 surveyed participants who were students; 180 were managers, lecturers and employees of Dong Thap University. At the

same time, we also designed in-depth interviews with 15 students, 10 lecturers and 5 managers about the present situation of soft skills training at Dong Thap University in the 1st semester of the school year 2021-2022.

2.3. Statistical methods and data analysis

On the basis of theoretical research on soft skills of university students, studying and situation investigation, we have processed the survey results and investigated the situation using software SPSS 20.0 to calculate the average value, standard deviation, percentage of variables surveyed.

Survey data of students, staffs, and lecturers are listed in Table 1 and 2.

Table 1. Survey data of students at Dong Thap University

Gender	Total number of students surveyed N = 600							
	First year		Second year		Third year		Fourth year	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male (159)	41	6.83	57	9.5	87	14.5	66	11.0
Female (441)	69	11.50	95	15.83	116	19.33	69	11.5
Total	110	18.33	152	25.33	203	38.83	135	22.5

Table 2. Survey data of managers, lecturers and employees of Dong Thap University

Managers, lecturers and employees	Male managers, lecturers and employees (N = 102)		Female managers, lecturers and employees (N = 78)	
	N	%	N	%
		102	56.7	78

3. Research results

3.1. Current state of soft skills of students at Dong Thap University

3.1.1. Reality of students' perception of soft skills at Dong Thap University

Reality shows that, for decades, employers as well as educators regularly discuss and complain about students' lack of soft skills after graduating from higher education institutions. Students mainly lack soft skills such as: communication skills, teamwork skills, problem solving skills.

Soft skills are important because they allow students to adapt to work and life contexts and the challenges they will face in adult life, as well as the demands of the job. Mastering soft skills helps students learn, live and work better.

Meanwhile, soft skills are factors that help improve an individual's communication, interaction, work performance and career. We can say that soft skills refer to personality traits, social amiability, verbal dexterity, positive personal habits, friendliness and optimism, positive thinking at different levels. Soft skills will complement professional skills. The reorientation of the educational program, which is one of the factors that respond to the context and trend of education for sustainable development, is also related to the importance of soft skills.

Therefore, students' awareness of the importance of soft skills is essential. To find out more about this situation, we conducted a survey of 600 students at Dong Thap University with academic year 2021-2022. After the survey, we analyzed and processed the data using software SPSS 20.0 in Table 3.

Table 3. Assessment on Dong Thap University students' perception of the importance of soft skills

No.	Awareness on Dong Thap University students' perception of the importance of soft skills	Students (N=600)		Managers, lecturers, staff N = 180	
		N	%	N	%
1	Very important	401	66.84	137	76.11
2	Important	195	32.50	43	23.89
3	Slightly important	2	0.33	0	0
4	Not important	2	0.33	0	0

The results of the survey data in Table 3 show that students, administrators and lecturers of Dong Thap University highly appreciate the importance of soft skills. 99.34% of students think that students' soft skills are "Important" and "Very important" and only 0.66% of students think that students' soft skills are "Slightly important" and "Not important". Meanwhile, 100% of administrators, lecturers and staff think that soft skills are "Important" and "Very important", of

which 76.11% rate as "Very important". This result shows that students and administrators, lecturers and staffs have realized the importance of students' soft skills today, this will be very convenient in training skills for students of the school.

To find out more about the soft skills of students at Dong Thap University, we also conducted a survey of students and school administrators, faculty, and staff about the importance of 15 soft skills in Table 4.

Table 4. Assessment of the importance of students' soft skills

Degrees of importance: 1. Not important; 2.Slightly important; 3.Important; 4. Very important

No.	Soft skills	Administrators, lecturers (N=180)		Students (N=600)	
		Degree of importance			
		Average value	Standard deviation	Average value	Standard deviation
1	Self-study skills	3.50	0.554	3.34	0.473
2	Communication skills	3.60	0.491	3.59	0.493
3	Teamwork skills	3.56	0.618	3.39	0.487
4	Problem-solving skills	3.63	0.483	3.53	0.499
5	Listening skills in communication	3.46	0.553	3.42	0.493
6	Presentation skills	3.52	0.583	3.46	0.499
7	Creative thinking skills	3.51	0.554	3.47	0.500
8	Self-management skills	3.48	0.720	3.49	0.500
9	Goal setting/ motivation making skills	3.40	0.491	3.41	0.493
10	Time management skills	3.43	0.718	3.43	0.495
11	Effective work organization skills	3.49	0.647	3.28	0.740
12	Job search skills	3.47	0.553	3.32	0.468
13	Leadership and motivation skills	3.38	0.792	3.34	0.473
14	Persuasion and negotiation skills	3.54	0.572	3.42	0.493
15	Critical thinking skills	3.59	0.683	3.45	0.498

The results of SPSS data processing show that students rated 15 soft skills in Table 4 with average values from (3.28) to (3.59). Compared to the scale, this result is mainly at the "Very important" level. The soft skills highly appreciated by students in the order

are: Communication skills (3.59) at rank 1; Problem solving skills (3.53) at the 2nd level; Self-management skills (3.49) at the 3rd level; Creative thinking skills (3.47) at rank 4; Presentation skills (3.46) at rank 5; Critical thinking skills (3.45) at level 6.

Table 4 also shows the evaluation results of managers, lecturers and staff on the importance of 15 soft skills that students need, the average values are from (3.38) to (3.63). This result compared with the scale is mainly at "Very important". There are five soft skills that are highly appreciated by managers, lecturers and staff in order: Problem-solving skills (3.63) at rank 1; Communication skills (3.60) at rank 2; Critical thinking skills (3.59) at the 3rd level; Teamwork skills (3.56) at rank 4; Persuasion and negotiation skills (3.54) at rank 5.

By comparing the assessment results on the

importance of 15 soft skills based on students, administrators and lecturers' perception, we can see that the soft skills surveyed are highly valued for their importance. The average values of administrators and lecturers are higher than that of students, but the difference is not significant. Although the results of the assessment of the top 5 soft skills have different ranking, the top important soft skills highly valued by both students, administrators, and lecturers are: Problem-solving skills; Communication skills; Critical thinking skills.

3.1.2. *Current state of goals and meaning of students' learning and soft skills training*

Table 5. Evaluation of the meaningful goals of studying and practicing soft skills of students today

Dergees of agreement: 1. Disagree; 2. Somewhat agree; 3. Agree; 4. Strongly agree

No.	Evaluation of meaningful goals of learning and practicing soft skills of students today	Administrators, lecturers (N=180)		Student (N=600)	
		Degree of agreement			
		Average value	Standard deviation	Average value	Standard deviation
1	Soft skills training to develop yourself	3.56	0.618	3.59	0.493
2	Soft skills training to improve learning results	3.38	0.792	3.32	0.468
3	Soft skills training to develop social relationships	3.65	0.478	3.53	0.499
4	Soft skills training is very important for career advancement	3.48	0.720	3.51	0.500
5	Soft skills training to get the job done better	3.59	0.683	3.38	0.485
6	Soft skills training to get success at work	3.47	0.553	3.39	0.487
7	Soft skills are required by employers	3.57	0.497	3.46	0.499
8	Soft skills training to find jobs	3.57	0.497	3.46	0.499

From Table 5, it can be seen that the average value of students' agreement in 08 goals, the meaning of studying and soft skills training of students is currently quite high, from (3.32) to (3.59). Compared with the scale, these values are at level 4, the level of "Strongly agree" ($3.25 \leq \text{Average score} \leq 4.00$). We also see that students' priority of the soft skills training are in order: "Soft skills training to develop yourself" (3.59) is on the top; "Soft skills training to develop social relationships" (3.53) at rank 2; "Soft skills training is very important for career advancement" (3.51) rank 3; "Soft skills are required by employers" (3.46) and "Soft skills to find jobs" (3.46) at rank 4; followed by "Soft skills to succeed at work" (3.39); "Soft skills to get the job done better" (3.38); "Soft skills training to improve learning outcomes" (3.32).

The results of the evaluation of soft skills training goals in Table 5 according to managers and lecturers are also highly appreciated with an average value from (3.38) to (3.65). Compared with the scale, this result is at rank 4, the level of "Strongly agree".

Thus, from the evaluation results of administrators, lecturers and students perception of the meaningful goals of studying and training soft skills for students today is very high, the standard deviation is low, the average value of the assessment has no significant difference. The evaluation results are all at level 4 which is "Strongly agree" about the meaningful goals of soft skills training for students that we provide. This shows the reliability of the assessment results. From this reality together with theoretical research, we have a basis to build soft skills training goals for students to be more effective

and accurate when proposing soft skills training models for students.

3.1.3. Assessing the current state of students' ability of soft skills

Table 6. Self-assessment of students' ability of soft skills by levels

1. Poor; 2. Fair; 3. Average; 4. Good

No.	Soft skills	Managers, Lecturers (N=180)		Students (N=600)	
		Average rating value			
		Average value	Standard deviation	Average value	Standard deviation
1	Self-study skills	1.97	0.838	2.16	0.801
2	Communication skills	1.76	0.795	2.18	1.048
3	Teamwork skills	2.17	0.989	2.45	0.784
4	Problem-solving skills	1.92	0.924	2.12	0.892
5	Listening skills	2.02	0.945	2.46	0.818
6	Presentation skills	1.93	0.856	2.06	0.922
7	Creative thinking skills	1.72	0.702	2.07	0.829
8	Self-management skills	1.96	1.138	2.30	0.888
9	Goal setting/ motivation making skills	1.74	0.710	2.26	1.126
10	Time management skills	1.59	0.746	2.23	0.964
11	Effective work organization skills	1.89	0.890	2.22	0.901
12	Job seeking skills	1.98	0.732	0.0	0.0
13	Leadership and motivation skills	1.71	0.994	2.09	1.014
14	Persuasion and negotiation skills	1.73	0.788	2.21	0.773
15	Critical thinking skills	1.58	0.732	2.11	0.971

The results of Table 6 show that the average score of students who self-assessed 15 soft skills are from (2.07) to (2.46). It can be seen that "Listening skill" is rated at the highest rank at (2.46), followed by "Teamwork skills" (2.45), "Self-management skills" (2.30) at rank 3; "Goal setting/motivation making skills" (2.26) at rank 4; "Time management skills" (2.23) at rank 5. We also notice that "Job seeking skills" (0.0) wasn't evaluated by students because while having been studied and interviewed, students thought that they are studying at home, they do not care about this skill, but in fact, many studies show that job search skills are very important for students, especially in the current integration context. Having job-seeking skills will help students have more opportunities to find jobs that match their abilities and strength. Thus, the results of the self-assessment of 15 soft skills that we surveyed, compared with the scale, are mainly at level 2, the "Fair" level ($1.75 \leq \text{average} < 2.50$).

To see more clearly the reality of 15 soft skills of students through the assessment of school

administrators and teachers in Table 6, the average values obtained are from (1.58) to (2.17). Compared to the scale, this result is at level 1 "weak" ($1.0 \leq \text{Average value} < 1.75$) and level 2, "fair" ($1.75 \leq \text{CI} < 2.50$). "Teamwork skill" has the highest average value of (2.17); followed at rank 2 is "Listening skills" (2.02); "Job-seeking skills" (1.98) at rank 3; "Self-study skills" (1.97) at rank 4; "Self-management skills" (1.96) at rank 5.

From the soft skills survey results in Table 6, we can draw that, most of the soft skills of students at Dong Thap University are limited. It is worth noting that the soft skills are very necessary for studying at university such as: "Self-study skills"; "Communication skills"; "Teamwork skill"; "Problem-solving skills"; "Listening skills"; "Presentation skills"; "Creative thinking skills"; "Self-management skills"; "Skills of goal setting/motivation making"; "Time management skills"; "Critical thinking skills". This result has properly reflected the current situation of soft skills of the school's students, which should be paid more

attention to develop proper educational programs and soft skills training.

3.1.4. Assess the current level of self-training in soft skills of students

Table 7. Assessment of students' current self-training in soft skills

1. Never; 2. Rarely; 3. Often 4. Very often

No.	Soft skills	Managers, Lecturers (N=180)		Students (N=600)	
		Average rating value			
		Average value	Standard deviation	Average value	Standard deviation
1	Self-study skills	2.10	0.792	2.30	0.961
2	Communication skills	2.02	0.945	2.54	0.818
3	Teamwork skills	2.46	0.874	2.68	0.800
4	Problem-solving skills	1.92	0.924	2.22	0.901
5	Listening skills	1.74	0.710	3.46	0.499
6	Presentation skills	1.96	1.138	2.11	0.971
7	Creative thinking skills	1.72	0.702	2.19	0.933
8	Self-management skills	1.93	0.856	3.09	0.804
9	Goal setting/ motivation making skills	1.73	0.788	2.67	1.017
10	Time management skills	1.71	0.994	2.81	0.933
11	Effective work organization skills	1.76	0.795	2.23	0.903
12	Job search skills	1.89	0.890	2.12	0.892
13	Leadership and motivation skills	1.58	0.732	2.06	0.852
14	Persuasion and negotiation skills	1.54	0.735	2.18	1.048
15	Critical thinking skills	1.59	0.746	2.10	0.792

The results of Table 7 show that the average values that students self-assess the level of self-training of 15 soft skills are from (2.06) to (3.46). The average values of students' self-training in soft skills compared with the main scale are at level 2 "Rarely" ($1.75 \leq \text{average} < 2.50$) including 09 soft skills; at level 3 "Often" ($2.5 \leq \text{average} < 3.25$) including 05 soft skills and 01 soft skill is assessed at level 4, "Very often" is "Listening skill" (3.46).

Also from Table 7, the evaluation results of managers and lecturers on the level of soft skills training of students have an average value from (1.54) to (2.46). Compared to the scale, this result is mainly at level 1 "Never" ($1.0 \leq \text{CI} < 1.75$) with 07 soft skills and 08 skills are at level 2 "Rarely" ($1.75 \leq \text{average} < 2.50$).

Thus, from the results of the students' self-assessments and the evaluations of administrators and lecturers about the levels of soft skills training of students at Dong Thap University in Table 6, it shows a fairly clear picture regarding the current situation

that there are still many students who have not paid much attention to learning and practicing soft skills although most students have highly appreciated the importance of soft skills.

4. Conclusion

From the current situation of soft skills of students at Dong Thap University, we have conducted a survey with questionnaires consisting of 600 subjects who are university students; 30 administrators at the school faculty, school department, and 150 lecturers and experts of the school. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 students representing faculties and 05 managers, lecturers and experts to clarify the situation. Through the survey and interview results, we processed the statistical data and analyzed the discussion. It can be drawn that: the importance, goals, and meaning of soft skills for students have been highly appreciated by administrators, lecturers, staff and students. However, the reality of students' soft skills capacity and students' spending time to learn and

practice soft skills is still limited which is discussed in Table 5; table 6; Table 7. The results of that situation show that there is an urgent need for solutions to improve the training of soft skills for students at Dong Thap University because the current training programs as well as the changes in the programs still cannot meet the need of training and development of soft skills for students to achieve a good level which is the expectation of school, lecturers, students and employers in the present context of educational innovation, globalization and integration.

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