Leadership and Student Engagement Excellence for Success in University Graduates

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Objective

The purpose of this paper is to outline the critical success factors for effective student leadership and engagement and at the same time, elaborate on the key avenues for soft skills development leading towards the success of university graduates.

Abstract

Student Leadership and engagement has been the prime focus of all top universities and has been the differentiator in the quality of graduates it produces.

In an article published by Forbes in 2013, the top 7 skills employers seek in graduates are the ability to work in a team, decision making and problem solving, planning, organizational and prioritization skills, communication, critical thinking, analytical skills and finally the technical ability related to the job.

The Student Development Hub of Taylor's University specializes in student event management and how this can be an effective channel to prepare students for active leadership development through the emphasis of experiential learning. The concept of experiential learning is pillared by 3 core areas – for students to cultivate the interest to discover a problem area; to think-out-of-the box for opportunities to improve the current situation; and to reflect upon the action taken for continuous improvement.

Innovative and out–of-the-box avenues were created to equip students with the tools and know-how on the mastery of leadership and to instill character building elements into various student activities and programmes. These avenues include student leadership roles in student organizations, conferences, workshops and training as well as, and most importantly, via a hands-on approach with the students themselves leading projects and events.

Additionally, as the demographics of students change over time, one component remains constant across multiple generations; the need for a sense of belonging among the students in their communities. This need can be satisfied in some measure through the students' involvement in their areas of passion.

This paper outlines an effective approach toward student leadership and engagement, and its critical success factors, not limited to talent acquisition, character development, empowerment, affirmative support and positive reflection.

Our History and Growth

Taylor's College started out in 1969, in a small building in Jalan Pantai, Kuala Lumpur, offering the Victorian High School Certificate (VHSC) programme for a student population of 345. Since then, it has expanded to include Taylor's College Subang Jaya (launched in 1989), Taylor's College Petaling Jaya (launched in 1992), Taylor's College Sri Hartamas (launched in 2008) and Taylor's University at the brand new Lakeside Campus (launched in 2010), with regional offices covering different parts of Malaysia – in the state of Penang (north), Johor (south), Pahang (east coast), Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia).

The most significant milestone in Taylor's history so far arrived on 29 September 2010, when it was officially upgraded to University status. This recognition is a boost for Taylor's to continue upholding the quality of its teaching and learning environment to fulfill the holistic needs of its students and meet Malaysia's agenda of a world-class, high income economy.

From a small college with only 345 students and running only one programme in 1969, Taylor's has expanded to have over 5,000 students at Taylor's College and over 13,000 students at Taylor's University, as of 2013.

An Overview of Taylor's University

Taylor's University is a member of the Taylor's Education Group which also includes Taylor's College, Garden International School, Taylor's International School, Sri Garden International, Australian International School Malaysia Nexus International School Putrajaya and Nexus International School Singapore. Officially upgraded to University in September 2010, Taylor's is one of Malaysia's most successful and reputable private higher education institutions.

Since its inception in 1969, Taylor's has continuously provided excellent services for its students in terms of diverse study options, relevant curriculum and teaching methods, on-going partnerships with leading universities worldwide, strong industry linkages, up-to-date facilities and a well-equipped campus. Set on 27-acres of tropical greenery, the integrated purpose built campus surrounds a 5.5 acre man-made lake, as well as a landscape of water plants, trees, and flowering shrubs that provides a rich and stimulating natural environment.

Taylor's University offers a myriad of courses in tertiary education, from foundation and diploma, to degree, post-graduate and professional programmes. Students can choose to enrol in courses encompassing fields such as Architecture, Computer Science, Education, Engineering, Quantity Surveying, Law, Business, Accounting and Finance, Communications, Design, Hospitality Management, Tourism & Culinary Arts, Biosciences, Medicine and Pharmacy.

The quest to ensure graduates are equipped with the necessary capabilities for the current global economic landscape has motivated Taylor's to introduce the Taylor's Graduate Capabilities (TGC) initiative. In line with a worldwide drive to revamp university level education in keeping with privatisation and globalisation trends, this student-centred curricula aims to produce globally competitive graduates, who are able to compete internationally and stay ahead in the working world.

Taylor's Graduate Capabilities (TGC)

Taylor's Graduate Capabilities (TGC) was created in 2007 to enhance university-level education to meet the ever-changing demands of industry, community and globalization. TGC outlines the core knowledge, skills, abilities and qualities that students will develop at Taylor's University regardless of their programme of study.

In a highly competitive and challenging 21st century workplace, graduates who are skilled will be relevant, responsive and work-ready to start ahead and stay ahead in the global marketplace.

A Taylor's graduate who is equipped with TGC is not only readily adaptable to the changing workplace environment, but he/she also has the ability to take on new tasks and jobs successfully.
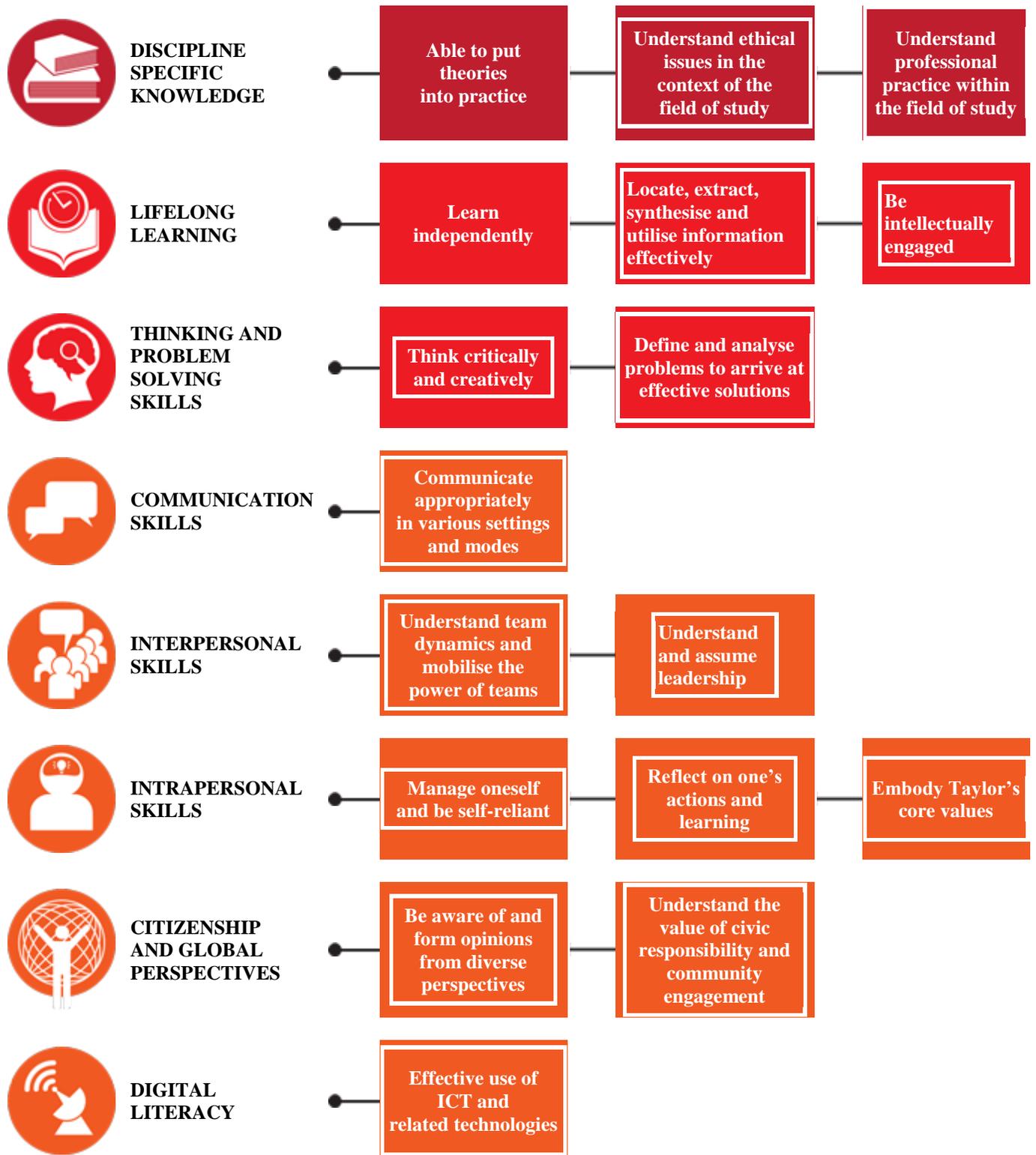
Impact on students

Every effort to instill TGC, whether in academics or extra-curricular activities, is significant in helping our students cultivate the competencies they need to be competitive in the working world upon graduation.

Academics in each school are responsible for embedding TGC in their teaching and learning activities. This is implemented at the module and programme levels through curricular design that involves mapping learning outcomes in relation to TGC, assessing TGC achievement and tracking student development. Evaluation and review mechanisms will be enhanced through regular audits and curricular review processes.

The university's Student Support Services instills TGC in students at the co-curricular and extra-curricular levels. There are many opportunities for development university-wide such as international collaborations, fairs, community service initiatives, sports and recreational activities, competitions, internships and other personal and professional development activities.

The 8 Taylor's Graduate Capabilities

DISCIPLINE SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE
- Able to put theories into practice
- Understand ethical issues in the context of the field of study
- Understand professional practice within the field of study

LIFELONG LEARNING
- Learn independently
- Locate, extract, synthesise and utilise information effectively
- Be intellectually engaged

THINKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS
- Think critically and creatively
- Define and analyse problems to arrive at effective solutions

COMMUNICATION SKILLS
- Communicate appropriately in various settings and modes

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS
- Understand team dynamics and mobilise the power of teams
- Understand and assume leadership

INTRAPERSONAL SKILLS
- Manage oneself and be self-reliant
- Reflect on one's actions and learning
- Embody Taylor's core values

CITIZENSHIP AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES
- Be aware of and form opinions from diverse perspectives
- Understand the value of civic responsibility and community engagement

DIGITAL LITERACY
- Effective use of ICT and related technologies

Student Development Hub

To support the realization of Taylor's Graduate Capabilities, the Student Development Hub was established in 2010 to provide opportunities for students to be an all-rounder through leadership, creative thinking, character building and community service initiatives.

From 2013 onwards, the mission of Student Development has been redefined to provide opportunities for students to develop their interpersonal and intrapersonal skills by pioneering a variety of initiatives that promotes experiential learning;

Benefits of Experiential Learning

Awareness	Action	Assessment
Cause, Objective, Goal, Issues	Campaign, Programme, Project, Initiative, Activity	Evaluation, Reflection, Learning Outcome, Improvement
To have a clear vision, purpose and motivation towards a particular areas of interest / improvement.	To be able to provide SMART solutions towards resolving an issues and in achieving a goal or objective.	To be able to celebrate the points of success and achievement, reflection toward the journey and areas of strength and improvement.

In 2010, Student Development Hub embarked on a **5-year strategic plan on student leadership and engagement excellence in Taylor's University Lakeside Campus;**

5-Year	Opportunity	Strategy	Milestones
2010	New setup in Taylor's University Lakeside Campus	Reestablish ECA and ignite campus activities	1. To encourage students to pioneer new Clubs and Societies via the I-Pioneer Campaign. Through the Campaign, 23 new Clubs were established, increasing from 11 to 34 within the same year and with breakthrough into new and creative areas such as Food and Travelling, Culinary Arts, Fashion and Performing Arts. 2. To strengthen the foundational setup of Clubs and Societies through online support services for membership sign-up and events management. At the same time, on ground opportunities for students to be involved in Clubs and Societies is activated through the inaugural Clubs and Societies Recruitment Drive.

5-Year	Opportunity	Strategy	Milestones
2011	Engagement of Undergraduates in Leadership and Community Services	Capability Building for Undergraduates	1. To create a solid leadership and community service engagement pathway for undergraduates via module-based programme focusing into experiential learning. 2. To anchor a national level leadership conference for all varsities in Malaysia thus enhancing the brand positioning for Taylor's within the student communities' network.
2012	Motivation and Characteristic of Student Leaders	Capability Building for Student Leaders	1. Enhanced the quality and impact of student events via a series of equipping workshop in communication, project management, leadership and team building. 2. Cluster Development for Clubs and Societies; to maximize resources and opportunity for smaller clubs to grow through collaborative efforts.
2013	Realignment towards the focus of Ministry of Education	Soft Skills Development Framework	1. In-line with the direction of the Ministry of Education Malaysia, the Student Development Soft Skills Framework is established to guide students in the development avenues of 7 Co-Curriculum Key Thrust Areas namely Leadership, Community Service, Volunteerism, Entrepreneurship, Culture, Public Speaking and Efforts and Innovation. 2. The Student Development Soft Skills Framework comprises of soft skills programme, essential and enriching soft skills development avenues, with new focus on debates and cultural performing arts.

5-Year	Opportunity	Strategy	Milestones
2014	University-Wide Endorsement in ECA	Structural Soft Skills Development Programme	1. Conceptualize the framework for 2nd Transcript in ECA – Personal Development, People and Leadership, Professional Development and Global Engagement. 2. Develop the modules for People and Leadership, equipping the facilitators with relevant tools for success and managing the transition of all Student Organizations toward the standard of 2nd Transcript and Shine Award.

The breakthrough in 2014 is that, the avenues made available in Student Development Hub are adopted into a university-level implementation via the 2nd Transcript. 2nd Transcript is a structured platform that will enable students to acquire life-long skills through purposeful involvement in ECA leading towards the Shine Award. These experiences will transform students into a self-aware, self-directed professionals and leaders with global perspectives.

Purpose-focus learning packages that supports the wholesome development in ECA:

- **Personal Development**: Focusing into self-management skills to enable students to be value-driven, emotionally resilient, life-long learners.
- **People and Leadership** development for students to lead, be inspired and realize their fullest potential as engaged leaders.
- **Professional Development** aiming at work-ready skills to boost career readiness and sustainable employability.
- **Global Engagement** focuses on global perspective, global trends and issues and cross cultural awareness to broaden horizons.

Students will be able to acquire points and systematic records of their involvement in the learning packages via 2nd Transcript, and reflect on their journey through the Shine Award which has a mandatory component on portfolio development.

Leadership and Student Engagement Excellence via 2nd Transcript and Shine Award

The leadership development for students will be anchored through the Student Organizations encapsulating the avenues in the **Soft Skills Development Framework.**

Core Development	Soft Skills Programme & Workshops	Student Bodies (Essential Avenues)	Clubs and Societies (Enriching Avenues)
Leadership **Community Service and Volunteerism** **Entrepreneurship** **Public Speaking and Debates** **Culture**	LEAD @ Taylor's CSI @ Taylor's Teamwork Project Management Student Organization Governance	Student Council Orientation Leaders CSI Volunteers Debaters Cultural Arts Performers (TRADISI)	Community Centric Business and Entrepreneurship Public Speaking Cultural Spiritual Connectivity Media and Arts Special Interest Performing Arts

With the implementation of the 2nd Transcript and Shine Award, students will be able to track their experiential learning journey in leadership development through a structured and outcome based process focusing on;

1. Commitment and dedication of students to be involved for a 1-year journey in the Student Organizations
2. Demonstrate effective leadership roles with clear accountability on their responsibility
3. Management of Student Organizations with clarity of vision, focus and goals
4. Opportunity to lead and manage significant projects within the Student Organizations and beyond
5. Achievement and milestone of the team and Student Organizations is vital as point of celebration and recognition of success

Critical Success Factors for Leadership and Student Engagement Excellence

1. **Build Internal**
   - Attract the interest of highly motivated students and transitioning the right talents into the student organizations to pioneer projects and initiatives.

   - Talents are equipped with skills-based workshop, and relevant training for emerging leaders.

2. **Establish External**
   - Create linkage and external network support for Student Organizations to work with the industries, across chapters and inter-varsities for collaborative partnership.

   - Encourage sharing of best practices and opportunities for involvement in competitions to build the dynamics of the Student Organizations and added value experience for the student leaders.

3. **Big Impact**
   - Significant projects which are able to add value into the lives of other students, with meaningful intention and outcome.

4. **Wide Outreach**
   - A campus-wide reach out through membership retention, and participation across disciplinary involving local and international students.
   - To nurture student leaders into organizing signature projects that has potential to be enhanced into national and international settings involving student leaders from within the country and globally.

5. **Showcase and Skills Assessment**
   - Provide recognition for the student leaders' achievement and milestones of the Student Organizations through structured journaling and tracking via 2nd Transcript and Shine Award.

Importance of a Structured and Outcome Based Leadership and Student Engagement Model:

1. Consolidated efforts across all faculties and student centric departments, translated into one cohesive effort in ECA.
2. A defined learning outcome contributing to the success of university graduates
3. A well rounded approach towards soft skills development
4. Alignment of system and processes across all faculties and student centric departments
5. Enhance employability of graduates, both in technical and soft skills leading towards the mission of Taylor's University which is Top Employers' Top Choice University by 2016.

Conclusion and Future Development

The 2nd Transcript for students to obtain recognition in ECA and CCA will be implemented in September 2014. Further findings on the outcome of the project, success and challenges particularly on leadership and student engagement excellence can be access through a knowledge sharing forum.

In the pipeline, the Student Development Hub is enhancing the system and processes to support the growth of Student Organizations and capabilities building for the Advisors and Student Leaders gearing towards the realization and implementation of the 2nd Transcript and Shine Award.

For more information on Taylor's University Student Development avenues, please contact Ms Jayvien Lau, Student Development Hub Manager, at Email: jayvien.lau@taylors.edu.my