

The Importance of Teaching Soft Skills to Senior Students: A Case Study of FPT University

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Abstract

Higher education is always a topic that many researchers care about and invest in it. How do students, after graduation, have both professional competence and other soft skills to be ready for the competitive and constantly changing labor market? This must be a big question for many educators of many universities. In this article, the author presents his research on understanding the teaching of soft skills at FPT University, focusing mainly on senior students. From there, discover the importance of these soft skills when they become a part of a specific business. 120 alumni participated in this research by presenting their evaluations of the SSC102 course (Business Communication). The author has carried out this study by applying both qualitative and quantitative methods. The author has found the student satisfaction rate for the course based on the results received from these alumni, along with comparisons and contrasts with many other related documents. This rate is relatively high because it is efficient, and learners can apply it in the workplace. In addition, some limitations have also been explored. From there, the author suggests improving these soft skills to be taught more effectively and practically in the future.

Keywords: Senior students; Soft skills; Workplace.

Introduction

Soft skills have a very important role in education in particular, and in higher education, in particular; they profoundly affect students' outcomes and contribute to building lifelong learning habits of learners (Tang, 2020). At FPT University, soft skills subjects are taught as an

official subject for all students at three stages: as a freshman, when preparing for an On-the-job training (OJT), and when preparing to graduate. In the third stage, senior students will have to complete the SSC102 course (Business Communication course) with the main content shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Summary of the syllabus SSC102 course

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Time Allocation | 30 session, 1 session = 90 minutes. Total: 45 contact hours |
|------------------------|---|

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|---------------------------|--|------|---------------------------|------|-----|----|-------------|------|-----|----|-------------|------|-----|----|---------|------|-----|----|------------|------|-----|-------|-------|--|-----|---------------|--|--|-------------|
| Main objectives | <p>This course addresses the fundamental elements of communication in business environment to equip learners with essential communication tools to ensure success for both individuals and organization. Upon the completion of this course, the learners will be able to:</p> <p>(1) Communication effectively in writing the basic and practical business correspondence including letters, emails, and advanced ones as reports, proposals, business plans, ect</p> <p>(2) communicate effectively face-to-face communication as presenting, listening, feedback, nonverbal messages in different business contexts including socialization, staff meetings, meetings with colleagues, customers and partners, ect</p> <p>(3) successfully in the job search, résumé and interviewing communication including writing application letters, CV, and prepare job interview in variety situations, ect</p> <p>(4) personalize their communication style to enhance communicative effects and leave good impression on readers/audience.</p> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Learning Materials | <p>Main textbook/resources: TextBook: Krizan, et al., Business Communication, 7th ed., Thomson South-Western, 2008. (hard copy)</p> <p>For Instructor: Resources CD, Instructor’s Manuals (.pdf), Slides, Application Exercises and Solutions, Review Questions and Solutions; Practice Exercises (Quizzes) and Solutions, Testbank (.pdf).</p> <p>For students: PPT, Practice Exercises, (Quizzes) and Solutions..</p> <p>Book Support website: http://websites.swlearning.com/cgiwadsworth/course_products_wp.pl?fid=M20bI&product_isbn_issn=9780324374858&discipline_number=401</p> <p>Reference: [1]. Joseph A. Devito, Interpersonal Messages, Pearson Publisher, 2007. [2]. George L. Grice & John F.Skinner, Mastering public speaking, Pearson Publisher, 6th ed. [3]. Business Edge, Giao tiếp trong quản lý, NXB Trẻ, 2007. [4]. Courtland Bovee &John Thill; Business Communication Essentials, Fifth Edition, International Edition, Pearson, 2012 [5]. Business Communication website: http://www.prenhall.com/bp_bc_study_hall/</p> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Assessment scheme | <p>On-going assessment:</p> <table><tr><td>1.</td><td>In class group activities</td><td>(4):</td><td>10%</td></tr><tr><td>2.</td><td>Small Tests</td><td>(3):</td><td>10%</td></tr><tr><td>3.</td><td>Assignments</td><td>(4):</td><td>20%</td></tr><tr><td>4.</td><td>Project</td><td>(1):</td><td>20%</td></tr><tr><td>5.</td><td>Essay Test</td><td>(1):</td><td>10%</td></tr><tr><td>Final</td><td>Exam:</td><td></td><td>30%</td></tr><tr><td>Total:</td><td></td><td></td><td>100%</td></tr></table> <p>Completion Criteria: Every on-going assessment component > 0, Final Result >=5 & Final Exam Score >=4</p> | 1. | In class group activities | (4): | 10% | 2. | Small Tests | (3): | 10% | 3. | Assignments | (4): | 20% | 4. | Project | (1): | 20% | 5. | Essay Test | (1): | 10% | Final | Exam: | | 30% | Total: | | | 100% |
| 1. | In class group activities | (4): | 10% | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. | Small Tests | (3): | 10% | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. | Assignments | (4): | 20% | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. | Project | (1): | 20% | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. | Essay Test | (1): | 10% | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Final | Exam: | | 30% | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Total: | | | 100% | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

The table above shows that this is a rather complicated course with many kinds of soft skills, such as Resume Writing and Interviewing Skills, Presentation Skills, Email Writing Skills, Cross-cultural Communication Skills, etc. These are all skills that the University believes are extremely practical for learners, especially for final-year students preparing to enter the labor market in the next few months. Accordingly,

most main textbooks and reference materials are written in English. As such, students must overcome language barriers to learn and complete small tests, assignments, projects, etc., in a total of 45 contact hours. Finally, students must take a final exam with 50 multiple-choice questions over 60 minutes. Students need to pass this test with a minimum score of 4.0. The form of the final exam with multiple-choice questions

like this is one of the features of training and assessing learners at FPT University. That is, student learning and student examination are two independent stages. In other words, the teacher cannot decide 100% of the learners' results, from which the teaching work will be more objective and effective. Thus, from the perspective of teachers and educational administrators, this course has been built and operated most optimally, at least for the time being. However, whether the above implementation is optimal from the student's perspective and whether the value that students get from the course is as expected, Specifically, when learners have completed their study program, go to work and begin to apply what they have learned to their working environment, the comments about the SSC102 course will give us more or fewer angles; this question will be partially answered in this study.

Literature review

As mentioned above, soft skills play a crucial role in education at many different levels and from different perspectives. According to Tseng & Yeh (2019), learning and applying soft skills help business students to control themselves and adjust their social behaviors. Therefore, it will help students find life exciting and always on the right track, achieving the original goal. Besides, in another study, according to Succi & Canovi (2020), when a person is equipped with soft skills and can apply them, this helps significantly in improving the probability of being admitted, even if it is new just graduated. In the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the important role of soft skills in study, work, and life has also become more apparent, which is clarified in the research of Naamati Schneider et al. (2020). In a more specific context, also studied at FPT University, the author has shown the positive impact of soft skills on learning and experiencing a rich and memorable student life (Hien, 2022).

Thus, the above studies have partly shown the value of soft skills to university students. These skills help learners from studying to living in the present to the future - when students have to leave their school to enter the challenging job market. Here, the role of soft skills will once

again maximize its value, especially the skills that students are good at right before they graduate, because the level of forgetting about what has been learned is the lowest for learners. Moreover, when they study and practice these subjects while standing on the threshold of life, there will be many positive effects; for example, the spirit of learning at that time will be learning to use, not merely to pass a course.

Methodology

In this study, the author used qualitative and quantitative analysis methods to clarify the importance of teaching soft skills to senior students. Specifically, the author has researched and synthesized information from studies and books with topics related to the content being studied. In addition, data from the FPT University Academic Portal (FAP) has been collected only for studying. Besides, the author thoroughly researched and practiced teaching Business Communication (SSC102) for three consecutive semesters at FPT University Ho Chi Minh City. Then, the author discussed this with lecturers in the faculty, who also participated in teaching this course. Then, the author developed questions and interviews and exchanged ideas with 120 students who studied the SSC102 course, graduated and worked as an employee. This part was done within three months, at FPT University Ho Chi Minh City, through Messenger, Zalo, and Gmail. Next, the author analyzes the obtained results and compares and contrasts the results of other related studies. The final purpose is to propose practical solutions in teaching and learning the subject SSC102 so that learners will learn and apply these soft skills more effectively in the working environment.

Results and discussion

From the open data source for all FPT University faculty, we have an overview of the data related to the SSC102 course in the most recent five semesters. At this school, each academic year has three semesters: starting from the Fall semester, then the Spring semester, and ending one academic year in the Summer semester (Nguyen et al., 2020). The data is shown in Figure 1 below.

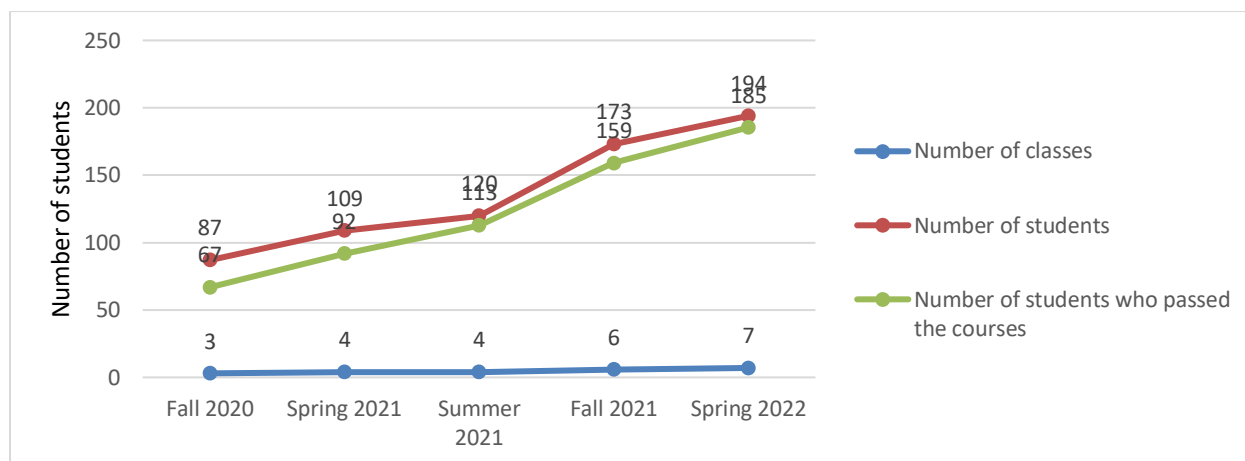


Figure 1. The statistics on the status of senior undergraduate students who studied SSC102 in the period of 5 semesters

The results from the figure above show an increasing number of classes for this subject. The number of students increased from 87 to 194 in less than two academic years (up 228%). This result partly shows that the number of students at FPT University Ho Chi Minh City is

increasing, which means that the number of learners accessing this compulsory subject is increasing. Therefore, we need to review and adjust the program so that it increasingly meets the needs of a large number of learners.

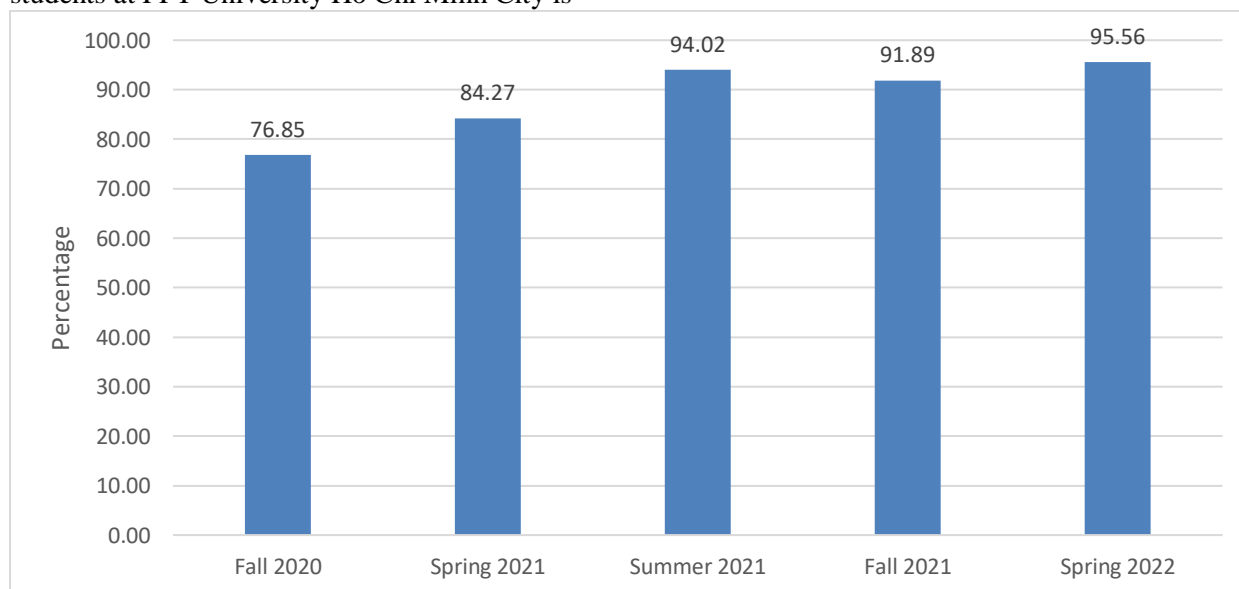


Figure 2. Percentage of students who passed SSC102 course in the period of 5 semesters

Another parameter we also need to consider is the rate of passing this subject during the last five semesters. The figure above shows that this rate is relatively high in general, the lowest is 76.85% (in the Fall semester of 2020), and the highest is 95.56% (in the Spring semester of 2022). Besides, it is easy to see the general trend that this rate increases gradually over time, except for the Fall semester of 2021; this rate is lower than the previous semester. The explanation for the above case is because of the significant impact of learning through the online

form for a whole semester. From here, we realize that passing and completing this course is relatively easy for most students; even this upward trend will quickly reach its peak when 100% of students understand the subject well and can pass through specific ways without difficulty. Thus, from the perspective of educational administrators and instructors of this course, we need to recognize this situation so that students can not only pass the course but also apply the subject most effectively. Details of this will be discussed in the next section.

From another perspective, the school also needs to strengthen the inspection work to implement this course. It will avoid negative consequences in the study and examination of students because negativity in exams in Vietnam has been a painful problem (Hoang and Linh, 2021).

According to Vo and Daniels (2017), more than half of the soft skills taught at Vietnamese universities are academic, dogmatic, or challenging to apply to learners, especially fresh

graduates. In developing and implementing the integrated curriculum, FPT University always focuses on soft skills so learners can maximize their application in industrial environments (Nguyen, 2018). The following result the author discovered when synthesizing and analyzing the data obtained from the responses of 120 former students who completed the SSC102 course not long ago and entered the career path. The summary results are shown in the following table.

Table 2. *The levels of application of soft skills associated with the SSC102 course in the working environment*

| Soft Skills | Total Reply | Percentages | Levels of Application |
|---|-------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| Resume Writing and Interviewing Skills | 112 | 93.33 | I |
| Presentation Skills | 103 | 85.83 | II |
| Email Writing Skills | 90 | 75.00 | III |
| Cross-cultural Communication Skills | 78 | 65.00 | IV |
| Others Business Writing Skills (Writing Negative Messages, Writing Persuasive Messages, etc.) | 68 | 56.67 | V |

From the table above, we see that among all the skills learned in the SSC102 course, Resume Writing and Interviewing Skills has the highest application level, with 93.33% of respondents choosing it as a highly applicable skill. This is understandable because these skills are highly applicable and instantaneous for learners. Next are 103 answers (85.83%) for Presentation Skills, an efficient skill with a very high frequency of use. Similarly, next is Email Writing Skills (75%), a skill that can be said to be applied every day, even every few hours a day. Next, FPT University is an international-standard university, and students are trained mainly in English (Vo, 2022). In addition, each student is equipped with a second foreign language, new and advanced knowledge updated from developed countries, and an alumnus works in an international environment with cultural diversity is possible. That is why

Cross-cultural Communication Skills got 78 choices with a high rate of 65%. Finally, no matter what major a student is in, other writing-related skills in the workplace is essential for students to be trained. Specifically, in this study, 56.67% answered that writing skills such as Writing Negative Messages, Writing Persuasive Messages, etc., are needed by will be used when going to work.

With the above results, the learners were generally satisfied with the soft skills training course for students preparing to graduate. However, to get a more specific direction in the coming period, the author has examined in detail the main contents of SSC102. Specifically, after reviewing the course, learners answered the question, "How much do you agree with the SSC102 course precisely?" The results are shown in Figure 3.

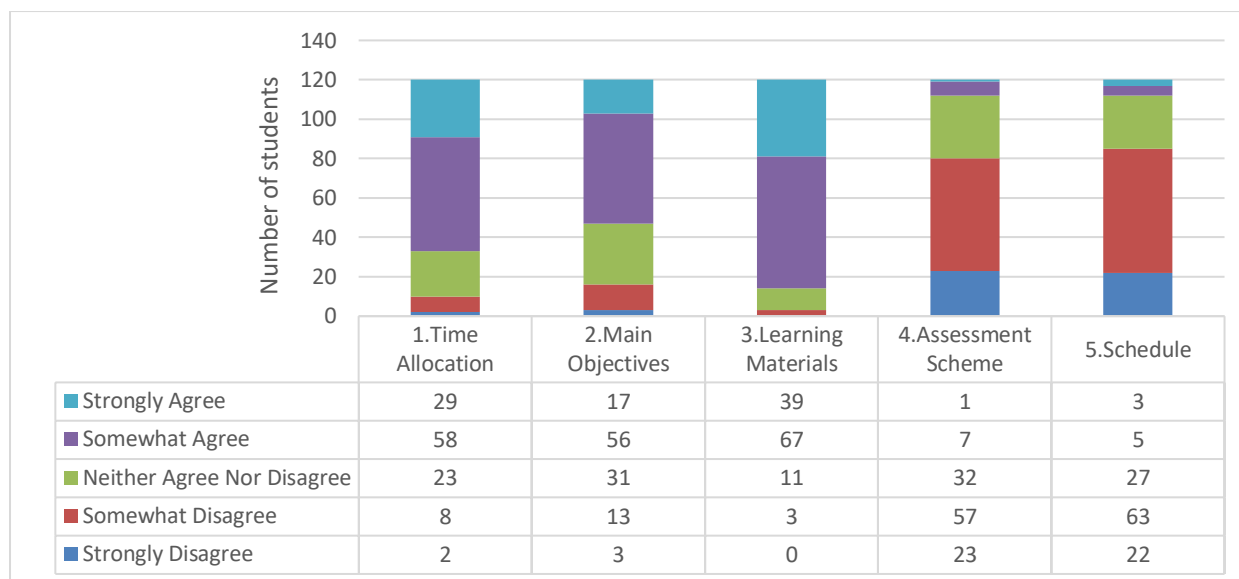


Figure 3. The students' levels of agreement on the SSC102 course

Most prominently, we find that (1) Time Allocation – 58 answers, (2) Main Objectives - 56 answers, and (3) Learning Materials - 67 answers, are factors that receive high agreement from learners (Somewhat Agree - purple column). Explaining the above two overall results, we can understand that it is the result of the careful study of the compilers, then the syllabus. The course has been built so that in a period of 45 contact hours, with sufficient materials provided, learners can access, absorb and practice the soft skills in the course, that is, achieve essential objectives.

In contrast, (4) Assessment Scheme and (5) Schedule faced the most disagreement (Somewhat Disagree - orange column, 57 and 63 answers respectively). As described in the Introduction, the way to assess the score of this subject includes many parts, but the part considered to be the most difficult for learners is to complete a final exam with multiple choice. Many students think it should be changed to

another format such as a project report, presentation, or doing an enormous exercise in groups or individuals. Because the multiple-choice exam is unsuitable for soft skills courses, they are applied and practical. In addition, the schedule factor has the highest rate of disagreement because the total time to learn this course is 45 contact hours but only in ten weeks; students study this subject every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, or Tuesday and Thursday. Such a tight schedule makes it difficult for learners to absorb and apply their learned skills and acquire new skills. On the other hand, the rush of time also makes students face implementing individual or group assignments carelessly and carelessly.

In addition to the rather detailed analysis presented above, the author also synthesized the answers to conclude the satisfaction level of the SSC102 course from an overall perspective; details are presented in the following Figure 4.

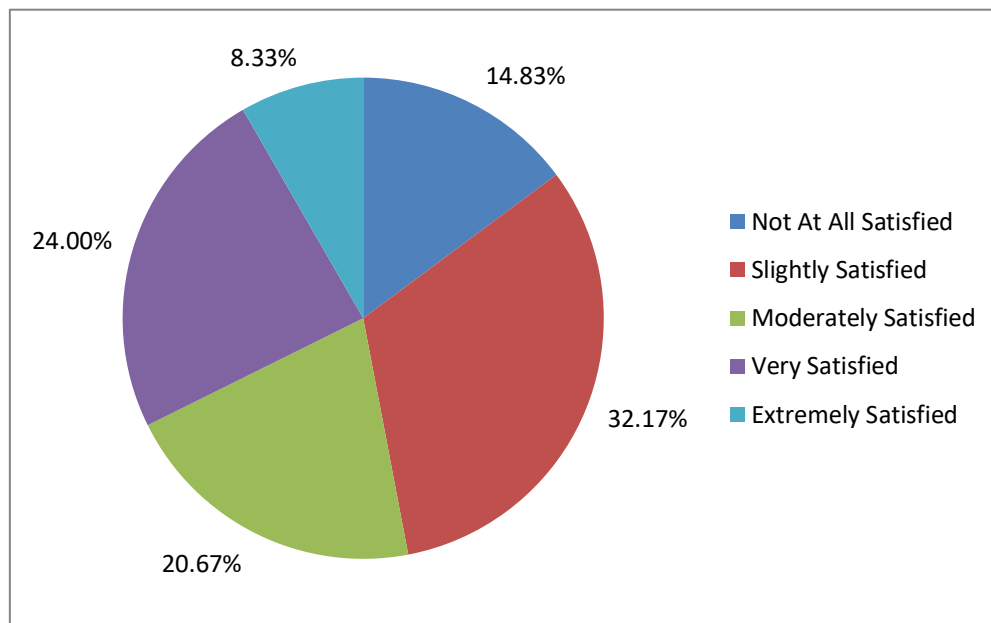


Figure 4. Level of satisfaction associated with the SSC102 course from the general perspective

The figure above shows that the difference between the levels is not too high; the difference between the highest and the lowest is only 23.84%. This raises a big question about whether the SSC102 course has met learners' satisfaction or depends on different perspectives and contexts. First, almost a quarter of respondents are very satisfied with the soft skills learned as senior students, 24%, and at the extremely satisfying level, this number is relatively modest, 8.33%. This is indeed quite positive feedback for the school and those who directly train these skills. However, there are also backlogs that we need to recognize and adjust to being more appropriate. Next, the satisfied and slightly satisfied levels reached 20.67% and 32.17%, respectively. The level of slightly satisfied accounted for the highest proportion. Meanwhile, up to 14.83% of the answer is not satisfactory. The explanation for this question can be based on the analysis presented above, which is inadequate in this course's assessment and implementation schedule.

Recommendations

Firstly, from a practical perspective, the soft skills included in the SSC102 course have very high practical value. Many groups or individual

practice exercises are performed. Through this, students can apply the theories they learn right away. This makes the other theories no longer academic or confusing (Charoensap-Kelly et al., 2016). Furthermore, at FPT University, soft skills have been deployed in that spirit. However, those exercises or projects are mostly still assumptions that the trainer sets for the trainees; it is not valuable in their own right and is not intuitive. Thus, the school needs to carefully consider this issue and implement the subject in a more progressive direction. For example, in a current way, after instructing students on how to write a report, the teacher assumes a particular case and assigns tasks for students to write accordingly. We can renew it with a Company Tour, after which students will write a report for their trip. This will be much more interesting; from there, the things that students learn and practice will also be remembered more deeply. As another example, all students learn and practice presentation skills in this course. So why don't we organize an actual event where the presenters will be the most typical students of the class. This both stimulates the learners of this course and creates an exciting environment for many other learners.

Secondly, we discuss the Assessment Scheme, an essential factor that almost every learner is interested in. Therefore, in this course, it is inappropriate for students to pass a multiple-

choice exam at the end of the semester. The school should make adjustments so that, on the one hand, it still maintains the objectivity of teaching and learning and, on the other hand, still appropriately assesses the students' capabilities. The author proposes other options, such as instead of taking a multiple-choice exam, students need to pass an exam in the form of a presentation of a product or project. Moreover, to ensure objectivity, lecturers can cross-review each other, meaning that the person who teaches a particular class will not be the one to mark the final exam. In addition, related to the proposal presented in the previous paragraph, real projects with the participation of enterprises. People from the enterprise can also assess students. Of course, the school also needs to develop a specific set of standards for this assessment so that it can most closely match the learning outcomes of the course and ensure its correctness.

Thirdly, when considering the schedule element of the SSC102 course, we see that many students face difficulties as described above. Thus, the school also needs to make appropriate adjustments. It can be mentioned as adjusting the total time of this course from 10 weeks to 16 weeks, which is an entire semester at FPT University. This will give learners more time to absorb and apply what they have learned effectively. Of course, adjusting the academic calendar at a university is quite tricky. However, we also need to consider exceptional cases, and this is one of those cases.

Finally, at FPT University, all students learn these skills. This means that there are many different majors to study together. Thus, the school needs to adjust the program to suit each group of students. For example, for students majoring in information technology, the common feature is that they do not have many opportunities to practice presentation skills, especially presentations in English, so it is necessary to increase the time for these skills. On the other hand, for students majoring in economics, we need to focus more on other skills, such as crisis communication skills, business writing skills, etc. The diversification of the syllabus will undoubtedly bring more efficiency to learners; thereby, alumni satisfaction will also be increased.

Conclusion

In conclusion, teaching soft skills to senior students is extremely important, contributing to creating comprehensive employees in the future. At FPT University, this work has been done quite well. Some limitations were also presented, along with suggestions from the author to the school. These outputs are not all, but they will certainly improve a lot in teaching and learning soft skills, in general, and the SSC102 course, in particular. By implementing the above suggestions, the quality of human resources that the school provides to the labor market will increase significantly. In addition, alumni's trust in their school will increase because the skills they are equipped with while sitting in school are practical and very useful for their careers.

Limitation of research

The paper still has some limitations; however, it would be improved in the near future.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest is noted in the paper.

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