Learn Soft Skills During College Years

IN TODAY’S COMPETITIVE employment market, employers look for more than an excellent academic track record. They seek candidates with a diverse extracurricular background and strong personal or ‘soft’ skills – qualities which make a candidate stand that bit taller than the rest and make him a desirable presence in the office.

“The 21st century workplace has become so complex that merely getting the job done efficiently is not enough,” says Justin Yap Yee Aun, lecturer in the CAREErSense department at HELP University. “Having interpersonal or leadership skills means the individual can get along with other colleagues and harness the creative potential that every member brings to the team.”

Raj Kumar Paramanathan, director of executive placements with outsourcing, search and selection company CnetG Asia agrees that the ability to build and grow relationships and work in collaboration with peers tops the list of soft skills required by employers. “Individuals need to have empathy and be able to understand the strengths and capabilities of team members.”

Opportunities to learn
Soo Ee Sarn, advisor in the PrePARE career services unit at Sunway Education Group, says the best way to learn these skills is through participation in extracurricular activities at university, part-time work, internships and community projects.

Many institutions include soft skills as an integral part of their programme offerings. “Soft skills are either embedded into the curriculum or offered as standalone skills,” explains Dr Rusli Ahmad, dean of the student development centre of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. “All our students must register for and pass their soft skills courses before they can graduate,” he says, adding that students are encouraged to sign up for at least one association or club.

“The irony is that soft skills are actually the hardest skills to impart,” notes Dr Roland Xavier, acting dean of Universiti Tun Abdul Razak’s Bank Rakyat School of Business and Entrepreneurship. “We teach students several skills: to choose, analyse and judge information; to adapt, collaborate and lead; to think critically and show curiosity; and to develop initiative and a sense of entrepreneurship. But most importantly, we imbue in them a sense of urgency in their undertakings.”

A spokesperson for Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin says the university’s dedicated training, leadership and spirituality unit conducts 23 soft skills programmes, often in concert with government ministries and industry. “The teaching of soft skills is an important contribution to developing quality graduates who are able to compete internationally,” he says.