



The analysis of postgraduate students' soft skills and their learning participation amidst Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze students' soft skills and their participation in learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. This research was conducted in the Master of Education Study Program, Postgraduate Program of the Christian University of Indonesia. As for the research method used, the findings show that both student involvement and soft skills are moderately high. There is a significant strong positive relationship between student engagement and soft skills. It shows that student involvement through classroom learning activities, social activities, and extracurricular activities can improve students' soft skills. Students need to be more actively involved in learning activities to master soft skills, including high-level thinking, social-interpersonal, leadership, and problem-solving skills, so that they can improve knowledge mastery and understanding and strengthen their learning.

Keywords: learning participation; soft skills; postgraduate students, Covid-19

Introduction

Student involvement is an aspect of learning that needs to be paid attention to by teachers and school management for the development of students. Students will engage actively through learning activities inside or outside the classroom ^[1, 2]. Student involvement is important to increase motivation, self-confidence, and interest in academic, co-academic, and co-curricular fields. Students who actively participate in various school activities will indirectly excel academically. If a student has a low level of involvement, the student will easily drop out and not excel academically ^[3, 4]. Students' involvement in various activities will equip them with knowledge and skills aligned with current educational developments. Student involvement is related to soft skills in student self-development. Students should be equipped with critical, creative thinking skills, problem-solving skills, communication skills, initiative, and ethics and be instilled with a lifelong learning culture. The soft skills approach emphasizes the holistic development of human capital to produce skilled students. The school needs to implement soft skills in students during the session, and students should complete the soft skills. It allows them to become versatile students, think critically and innovatively, and have moral excellence in real life after stepping out of school ^[5]. Student engagement in school is linked to student environmental support, such as teacher support, peer support, and parental support. Environmental support is a mediator to mobilize students' enthusiasm to participate in learning activities that will increase student involvement ^[6, 7]. In addition, environmental support can influence the personality of students. If the student lacks environmental support, it will affect the student's life. Emotional changes that harm students include low self-esteem, being alone or not liking to socialize, often feeling bored, being quiet, being easily offended, low motivation, and having a less suitable personality. Students who do not want to engage in various activities at school will affect their soft skills in students ^[8]. Therefore, the school needs to be proactive in overcoming this phenomenon. The failure of students to

master soft skills is a major issue in the world of national education today ^[9]. Students' ability to think, give opinions, and present thoughtful suggestions to solve a problem will not reach the level of excellence it should ^[10]. Students who lack mastery of skills such as communication, interpersonal social, problem-solving, and leadership skills are the basis for employers to consider when choosing employees. In addition, it is also an important criterion used by the registrar to accept applications for further education to the highest level. For that reason, school graduates who do not master soft skills will cause them to fail to get a job or continue their education after finishing school. It is because students are not provided with various skills making it difficult to get a job ^[11]. Therefore, it is very appropriate if these soft skills are applied at the secondary school level. This study was conducted to identify students' level of involvement and soft skills. This study also looked at the relationship between student involvement in improving soft skills. Student involvement is studied based on aspects of classroom teaching and learning, social activities at school, and student activities. In contrast, soft skills have four components: high-level thinking, social-interpersonal, leadership, and problem-solving. The following are the research questions and research hypotheses: a) What is the level of student involvement in classroom teaching and learning, social activities at school, and student activities?; b) What is the level of students' soft skills that include high-level thinking, social-interpersonal, leading, and problem-solving skills?; c) Is there a significant relationship between student engagement and students' soft skills?

Literature Review

Affective, behavioral, and cognitive involvement are three aspects or domains that are the most critical dimensions to measure student involvement in school ^[12]. The domain can explain the behavior, feelings, and way of thinking of students at school. Affective involvement refers to students' emotions and feelings towards something, such as during learning sessions or school attendance ^[13]. At school,

students' sense of belonging is described as a sense of togetherness towards teachers and peers. It gives an impression of happiness and seriousness for students to carry out school assignments and other tasks entrusted to them. Students' feelings about their involvement in learning activities reflect self-motivation. At the same time, the feeling towards school is an attitude of togetherness towards school. Students who show high affective involvement will enjoy learning or be happy to attend school ^[14]. Behavioral engagement refers to student participation through classroom learning and co-curricular activities reflecting student effort and diligence. Behavioral engagement refers to student participation through curricular and co-curricular activities that reflect student effort and diligence. Next, cognitive engagement refers to cognitive strategies that involve the student's intellect and mastery in planning, evaluating learned content, understanding ideas, and mastering complex skills. Students who are willing to accept challenges, be rational when solving problems, and evaluate the importance of learning at school will prepare for life in the future ^[15]. Soft skills are skills that focus on the formation of personal skills, humanity, and relationships with people ^[16]. It is not academic. Soft skills are related to the fitness of the mind that is adapted from the surrounding situation, the will, and the emotional and spiritual strength of the student to appropriate actions ^[17]. Students with high soft skills reflect their personality, behavior, communication, problem-solving, and making a firm hold and trust in God. Students are the main asset contributing to human capital development and the country's well-being. Thus, teaching and learning activities focus on four main domains, namely cognitive (knowledge), psychomotor (physical skills), affective and social, to see the achievement of student learning outcomes. The Education Development Plan in Indonesia's education system is considered successful because it focuses on cognitive and psychomotor skills ^[18]. The affective and social domains are necessary for determining the future of a country or society to form students into balanced, complete human beings. The role of the education system is important in providing the country with quality human capital, having commendable personalities, being highly skilled in various fields, and being able to think creatively and critically, especially to fill the current national modernization ^[19]. A decision, teamwork, leadership, and continuous learning. Soft skills in students are a set of human capital development skills so that they become balanced and harmonious people based on the National Education Philosophy and firm adherence to the Rukun Negara principles ^[20]. Students' soft skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication, have been found to affect students' academic achievement. Past studies show that students' low academic achievement is related to a lack of skills in communication and writing ^[21, 22]. The findings of the study found that there is a significant relationship between communication skills and student academic achievement ^[23]. Students who master communication skills will be able to communicate well between teachers and friends during group discussions, give ideas or opinions, and answer exam questions well. In addition, students can make a good presentation of the results of the assignment when they have completed the assignment given by the teacher throughout their schooling. Based on the National Education Philosophy, the main goal of the national education system is to produce balanced and

harmonious individuals in terms of physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of this study. It shows the variables studied in this study: the student's level of involvement and soft skills. Behavioral involvement refers to student participation through classroom learning and co-curricular activities reflecting students' effort and diligence. At the same time, soft skills focus on forming personal skills, humanity, and relationships with people. This study tested the relationship between the level of student involvement and the student's soft skills, which was found to have a relationship based on the findings of previous studies.

Research Method

This study is a cross-sectional survey. This design was chosen because it is very suitable for obtaining information regarding attitudes, opinions, behaviors, and characteristics in a population, in addition to saving time, energy, and money. This study involved 196 randomly selected students who became the research sample. The research instrument is a questionnaire constructed and adapted based on theory, literature, and previous studies. The constructed questionnaire contains three main parts: Part A: Student Demographics, Part B: Level of Student Engagement, and Part C: Student Soft Skills. This questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert scale (1: Strongly Disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Not Sure; 4: Agree; 5: Strongly Agree). For face and content validity, researchers use the services of experts in sociology, assessment testing, and language. The feedback of experts in the field on relevant aspects is taken into account in the further refinement of the instrument items. A pilot study was conducted involving 200 Form Four students from four schools in Negeri Sembilan. The student engagement construct obtained an overall Cronbach's Alpha reliability index of 0.926. At the same time, the construct of students' soft skills obtained an overall Cronbach's Alpha reliability index value of 0.965. The data analysis of this study uses the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive analysis is used to analyze the level of student engagement and students' soft skills, which involves mean and standard deviation. The Pearson Correlation Test was also used to test the relationship between student engagement and students' soft skills at the $p=0.05$ level.

Result and Discussion

Table 1 shows student involvement in teaching and learning in the classroom, social activities at school, and student activities. If viewed as a whole, the analysis shows that student engagement is at a moderately high level (mean=3.559, s.p.=0.538). The dimension of classroom teaching and learning is moderately high (mean=3.639, s.p.=0.570). The second dimension, social activities at school, is moderately high (mean=3.567, s.p.=0.514). Finally, the dimension of student activity is also at a moderately high level (mean=3.471, s.p.=0.538). For aspects of classroom teaching and learning, the study's findings stated that student involvement in group activities allows students to contribute ideas and opinions in group discussions in addition to improving students' social and interpersonal skills ^[24]. The study's conclusions, when it comes to the social activities in schools based on social networks, are consistent with other research showing that networks and social interactions in the school environment are crucial for enabling each student to have a cooperative

attitude, mutual understanding, and further information sharing with each other [25]. Next, for student activities, this study is in line with studies that show that student activities can strengthen relationships with each other better, improve social-interpersonal skills and leadership skills, and strengthen interactions between students of multiple races [26]. Table 2 shows the level of inasniah skills from the aspects of high-level thinking skills, social-interpersonal skills, leadership skills, and problem-solving skills. The findings show that students' soft skills are moderately high (mean=3.597, s. p.=0.518). By referring to Table 5, students' soft skills from the aspect of social-interpersonal skills have the highest mean value (mean=3.717, s. p.=0.610). Next, followed by high-level thinking skills (mean=3.559, s. p.=0.618), problem-solving skills (min=3.557, s. p.=0.594), and leadership skills (mean=3.552, s. p.=0.585) each have a mean value at a medium level height. The involvement of students in various activities allows them to give opinions and arguments rationally based on relevant facts. This study is in line with a study that shows a moderately high level of soft skills among technical stream students at a Vocational High School [27]. The findings of this study are consistent with studies that state that student engagement through learning activities will improve their skills in making interpretations, identifying information, making formulations, analyzing sources, and making evaluations effectively to solve a problem [28].

Table 1: Level of Student Engagement.

Student Engagement	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
Classroom teaching and learning	3.640	0.570	Medium-high
Social activities at school	3.567	0.514	Medium-high
Student Activities	3.471	0.531	Medium-high
Overall	3.559	0.538	Medium-high

Table 2: Level of students' soft skills

Student's Soft Skills	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
Higher-order thinking skills	3.559	0.618	Medium-high
Social-interpersonal skills	3.715	0.600	Medium-high
Leadership skills	3.552	0.585	Medium-high
Problem-solving skills	3.557	0.594	Medium-high
All the soft skills of students	3.596	0.517	Medium-high

Table 3 shows the results of the correlation analysis to test the relationship between student engagement and students' soft skills. It shows a significant relationship between student involvement and secondary school students' soft skills ($r=0.722$, $p<0.01$). The interpretation of the relationship is strongly positive. In conclusion, the null hypothesis is rejected. This finding shows that students have mastered soft skills at a high level. The findings of this study match and support the findings of studies that explain that student involvement in various activities can foster interest and provide early training, which will then improve leadership, decision-making, communication, and social-

interpersonal skills [29]. In addition, the involvement of students in various learning activities can shape the personality and character of students and have a significant relationship with their self-development and skills. Therefore, student involvement in various activities impacts soft skills and student excellence.

Table 3: Correlation analysis results between student engagement and students' soft skills

Domain	Soft skills		Interpretation
	R	Sig	
Student Engagement	0.722	0.000	strong

** $p<0.01$

Conclusion

This study identifies the level and relationship of student engagement with secondary school students' soft skills. Findings show that both student involvement and soft skills are moderately high. There is a significant strong positive relationship between student engagement and soft skills. It shows that student involvement through classroom learning activities, social activities, and extracurricular activities can improve students' soft skills. Students need to be more actively involved in learning activities to master soft skills that consist of high-level thinking, social-interpersonal, leadership, and problem-solving skills to increase knowledge mastery, improve understanding and strengthen their learning. The implications of this study show that when doing learning activities, students need to have a high level of readiness in terms of involvement, behavior, and emotions. In the meantime, teachers need to play a role as guides, give motivation, and be able to influence students' attitudes to increase student involvement in learning activities. In addition, teachers need to cultivate soft skills during the student's schooling period. This quantitative study involves students from four types of secondary schools. Further studies can be done qualitatively for improvement and to obtain detailed information related to the issues discussed.

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