Experiential Learning for Soft Skills Integration in Malaysian Vocational Education: A Qualitative Model Development Study

Ahzan Noraini Ahmad*, Hashima Hamid, Noor Azura Jafferi

Faculty of Technical and Vocational Education, University Tun Hussein Onn, Malaysia.

***Corresponding author**

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ABSTRACT

In the context of vocational education in Malaysia, the integration of soft skills has now become an urgent necessity to ensure that students are prepared to face the increasingly challenging demands of the workforce, especially in the post-pandemic era and industrial automation. Despite widespread acknowledgement of their importance, soft skills are often insufficiently addressed in vocational curricula, particularly in practical classroom implementation. This study explores the development of a pedagogical model grounded in experiential learning to systematically embed soft skills into vocational teaching practices. Using a qualitative exploratory design, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with twelve experts, including PVMA teachers, curriculum officers, and vocational education researchers. Thematic analysis revealed three key themes: (1) the presence of experiential learning practices, though fragmented and informal; (2) the pivotal role of teachers in facilitating soft skills through contextualized instruction; and (3) the institutional challenges in scaling experiential learning, such as limited resources, lack of structured models, and inadequate assessment tools. These findings informed the construction of a teaching and learning model tailored to the Malaysian vocational context. The study contributes to the growing discourse on vocational pedagogy by providing a grounded framework for enhancing soft skills through structured experiential strategies. Implications for teacher training, curriculum design, and policy alignment are also discussed.

Keywords - Vocational education, soft skills, experiential learning, instructional model, qualitative research.

INTRODUCTION

The vocational education in Malaysia is now facing an urgent need to produce graduates who are not only technically skilled but also possess the human skills required by both local and global industries. This is evidenced by continuous feedback from employers as well as research findings reported by Robles (2012) and OECD (2021). Soft skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving are increasingly recognized as critical for enhancing graduate employability and for fostering productive workplace engagement. The demand for well-rounded individuals who can navigate complex social environments in the workplace has intensified, especially in the post-pandemic era that has exposed gaps in students' adaptability and resilience.

In Malaysia, the upper secondary vocational programme (Program Vokasional Menengah Atas, PVMA) aims to provide students with both academic knowledge and practical vocational training. However, numerous studies have identified a persistent imbalance in its implementation with significant emphasis placed on technical competencies, while soft skills development remains under-prioritized. This gap has raised concerns among educators and policymakers about the long-term effectiveness of the current pedagogical approaches in equipping students with holistic competencies.

Experiential learning has been proposed as a promising pedagogical framework to address these shortcomings. Rooted in constructivist theory, experiential learning emphasizes learning through doing, reflection, and real-life engagement, thus aligning well with the nature of vocational education. Experiential approaches allow

students to internalize values and skills through hands-on activities, problem-solving, teamwork tasks, and situational learning that reflect actual workplace scenarios.

Although the experiential learning approach is often mentioned in policies and literature, its implementation in the PVMA program remains incomplete and relies on individual teacher initiatives. Teachers often rely on conventional, teacher-centered approaches due to curriculum constraints, time limitations, or lack of pedagogical support. Consequently, students miss valuable opportunities to develop the soft skills that are vital for their personal and professional growth.

This study addresses the identified gap by aiming to develop and validate a teaching and learning model based on experiential learning to enhance soft skills among PVMA students in Malaysia. Specifically, the study pursues the following objectives:

1. To explore the core elements of teaching and learning that contribute to soft skills development through experiential learning approaches.
2. To construct a model of teaching and learning that integrates experiential learning principles tailored to the PVMA context.

By proposing a structured, research-informed pedagogical model, this study contributes to the discourse on improving instructional practices in vocational education and aligning them with 21st-century skill requirements. The outcomes are expected to inform educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers on how experiential learning can be effectively harnessed to foster holistic student development in vocational settings. This paper is structured as follows: literatures on experiential learning and soft skills in vocational education, research methodology, followed by findings and discussion, and concludes with implications and future research directions.

Experiential Learning Theory

Experiential learning, as conceptualized by Kolb (1984), provides a theoretical foundation for bridging the pedagogical gap in soft skills development. The model operates on a four-stage learning cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This cycle encourages learners to construct knowledge through active engagement and reflection, allowing deep internalization of concepts and behaviors.

In the TVET context, experiential learning has been used to strengthen students' engagement, foster critical thinking, and simulate real-world challenges. Studies by Kolb and Kolb (2009), and Beard and Wilson (2018) highlight that experiential learning enhances not only content retention but also emotional and social intelligence. Activities such as simulations, internships, service learning, and project-based assignments are aligned with this pedagogy and have proven effective in promoting holistic learning outcomes.

In Malaysia, the use of experiential learning in vocational education is still emerging. Some institutions have experimented with collaborative projects and work-based learning, but the lack of a standardized model or teaching framework often limits their scalability and effectiveness (Yaacob et al., 2020). Therefore, the need for a pedagogical model that embeds experiential learning principles and is contextualized for the PVMA environment is both timely and necessary.

Experiential learning has emerged as a pedagogical strategy that addresses the limitations of conventional teaching methods, particularly in contexts that demand both technical proficiency and interpersonal competence. Grounded in the constructivist philosophy, experiential learning emphasizes the role of direct experience, reflection, and critical thinking in shaping knowledge and skill development (Kolb, 1984; Dewey, 1938). Rather than transmitting knowledge passively, this approach encourages students to actively engage with their learning environment, apply concepts in real-life situations, and internalize lessons through reflection and application.
In vocational education, experiential learning aligns naturally with the hands-on and practical orientation of the curriculum. Activities such as project-based learning, industrial visits, simulations, collaborative group work,

and community-based assignments enable students to experience the realities of the workplace while developing essential soft skills such as communication, adaptability, teamwork, and ethical decision-making. These approaches support the development of students' cognitive, emotional, and social capacities in tandem with their technical training.

Moreover, experiential learning promotes student agency and motivation, empowering learners to take ownership of their progress. For students in the Program Vokasional Menengah Atas (PVMA), this approach holds particular promise. Many PVMA students come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and benefit from learning strategies that connect academic content to authentic, lived experiences. By engaging in reflective practice and problem-solving within real-world contexts, students are more likely to develop the critical soft skills required by employers in the 21st-century workforce.

Despite these advantages, the application of experiential learning in Malaysian vocational education remains underdeveloped. Teachers often lack structured models or professional support to implement this pedagogy effectively, and existing curricula may not fully accommodate experiential activities. This underscores the need to design a contextually relevant, research-based teaching and learning model that embeds experiential principles and responds to the specific needs of PVMA students.

Soft Skills in Vocational Education

Soft skills, often described as non-technical and interpersonal competencies, play a vital role in preparing students for employment and lifelong learning. These include communication, teamwork, leadership, adaptability, and problem-solving where these are the skills that employers consistently rank as essential for workplace success (Robles, 2012; OECD, 2021). In the context of vocational education, these competencies are critical as students must not only master technical tasks but also function effectively in collaborative, dynamic, and real-world environments (Majid et al., 2012).

In Malaysia, the education system particularly in technical and vocational streams has increasingly acknowledged the need to embed soft skills within formal curricula. The Ministry of Education Malaysia and relevant agencies such as the Department of Skills Development (JPK) have introduced frameworks that encourage integration of these skills in teaching and learning. However, despite policy efforts, implementation on the ground remains uneven, and the development of soft skills is often sidelined in favor of technical content (Hamzah et al., 2015).

Pedagogical Challenges and Gaps

One of the key challenges in vocational education is the over-reliance on traditional, teacher-centered instructional methods that emphasize rote learning and exam-oriented teaching. These methods are generally ineffective in nurturing higher-order thinking, creativity, or interpersonal competence (Alias et al., 2020). Research by Singh and Gopal (2018) has shown that vocational students often struggle with workplace adaptability due to limited exposure to active learning and soft skills training during their schooling years.

Teachers face multiple barriers in delivering soft skills education, including lack of training, limited classroom time, absence of practical tools or models, and curriculum overload. Consequently, many vocational students graduate with strong technical knowledge but inadequate interpersonal and social abilities, reducing their competitiveness in the labour market.

Model Development in TVET Research

Developing an instructional model involves synthesizing theoretical constructs, empirical findings, and contextual needs into a coherent framework that guides practice (Dick, Carey & Carey, 2014). In educational settings, models serve as blueprints that teachers can adapt and apply based on learner characteristics and institutional goals. Several studies in vocational education have demonstrated the utility of customized teaching models for improving student performance and engagement (Zin et al., 2019; Ismail & Hassan, 2021).

However, few models have focused specifically on the integration of soft skills through experiential methods, particularly in the context of Malaysian secondary-level vocational education. This study seeks to fill that gap by systematically identifying, developing, and validating a teaching and learning model based on experiential learning that directly targets the soft skills needs of PVMA students.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design to investigate the key pedagogical elements needed to develop a teaching and learning model based on experiential learning for soft skills enhancement among vocational students. The qualitative approach was chosen to facilitate in-depth exploration of expert insights grounded in their professional experiences and practical knowledge of the vocational education system in Malaysia. This design is appropriate for constructing context-specific frameworks and generating theory from the field (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Twelve participants were purposively selected based on their expertise in vocational education and involvement in soft skills integration. The participants comprised experienced PVMA (Program Vokasional Menengah Atas) educators, curriculum developers from the Ministry of Education, and academic researchers from teacher training institutions and universities. All had a minimum of five years of professional experience and were directly involved in vocational curriculum development or implementation. The sample size was deemed sufficient based on the principle of data saturation, whereby no new significant themes emerged after the twelfth interview (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2006). The diversity of roles ensured that perspectives from both policy and classroom levels were represented.

Data were collected over a period of eight weeks, from June to August 2023, through semi-structured interviews. An interview protocol was developed based on the study's objectives and was pilot tested with two vocational teachers to refine question clarity and sequencing. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participants' availability. Each session lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed systematically. The data were collected over eight weeks (June-August 2023) through semi-structured interviews conducted either face-to-face or online. Each session lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic framework.

Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. As to aid in organizing and retrieving data, ATLAS.ti software was utilized. Thematic patterns were subsequently synthesized to construct the foundational components of the proposed experiential learning-based teaching model. In ensuring trustworthiness, the study incorporated peer reviewing, member checking, and intercoder reliability procedures. Member checking involved returning interview transcripts to selected participants for confirmation of accuracy. Peer reviewing sessions were conducted with two qualitative research experts to validate coding decisions and theme development. Multiple coders reviewed selected transcripts to strengthen consistency and confirm interpretive reliability.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD), Ministry of Education Malaysia. Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided written informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Participants were also assured of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings derived from thematic analysis of interviews conducted with 12 experts in vocational education, including teachers, curriculum developers, and institutional trainers as shown in Table 1. Three major themes emerged from the data, reflecting how experiential learning is perceived, practiced, and challenged in the context of soft skills development in PVMA settings. The discussion integrates relevant

literature to contextualize and interpret the findings.

TABLE 1 Themes and Experiential Elements from the Interviews

Participant	Key Themes Identified	Notable Experiential Elements
P1	Curriculum alignment with SKM, teacher autonomy, experiential exposure limited in IPG	Limited practical application; emphasis more on theoretical planning
P2	Curriculum standards, importance of skill application, learning by doing	Use of hands-on workshops; learning by doing is central
P3	Need for structured industrial input, soft skills integration through authentic contexts	Project-based modules; authenticity and industry-aligned skills
P4	Student engagement via group work, hands-on dominant, problem-based learning	Problem-solving in workshops, learning through error and guidance
P5	Use of task sheets and real-life simulations, time constraints in experiential delivery	Simulation-based tasks, emphasis on realism of scenario
P6	Teacher as guide or facilitator, lesson adaptation, varied student cognitive levels	Combining theory and practice fluidly, responsive teaching methods
P7	Customization of teaching plans, facilitation in practical sessions, problem-solving emphasis	Use of guided demonstrations, practical skills tested through situational tasks
P8	Teacher expertise crucial, experiential learning beyond school, community/industry MoU	Industry demonstration, community linkages (MoUs), live project exposure
P9	Peer-assisted learning, hands-on and collaboration with institutions, documentation via media	Media and digital documentation of student work; visual-based reflection
P10	Integrated topics for efficiency, creativity in matching modules, soft skills implicit in cooking tasks	Curriculum compression through creative planning, thematic integration
P11	Emphasis on hands-on, integration of reflective journaling, link to everyday context, model clarity needed	Use of journal writing to document learning, real-world application in cooking context, trial-and-error encouraged
P12	Hands-on learning, real-time troubleshooting, peer coaching, strong focus on communication, discipline, collaboration	Demonstration-based teaching, practical work integrated with theory, students exposed to real-world electrical testing tasks

Fragmented Implementation of Experiential Learning

Across all participants, it was evident that experiential learning is widely practiced, albeit inconsistently, within PVMA classrooms. Teachers employed a variety of strategies such as hands-on projects, real-time troubleshooting, collaborative assignments, and reflective documentation. These approaches were often rooted in the teachers' personal experience and intuition rather than based on a standardized pedagogical model. For instance, P12 described how his students were routinely engaged with actual electrical tasks and encouraged to support each other through peer coaching:

"I ask the students to solve the wiring problems directly. If someone is slow, other students should help. This trains them in communication and teamwork." (P12)

Similarly, P10 emphasized the value of documentation and reflective practice:

"I asked the students to take pictures while doing workshop work and include them in their daily journals. From there, they will see their own work progress and learn from their mistakes." (P10)

P9 echoed this sentiment, pointing out that simple collaborative activities, even without a formal structure, can nurture essential soft skills:

"Activities like group projects can indeed enhance students' interpersonal skills, but without a clear guideline, it's difficult to measure their effectiveness." (P9)

Despite these encouraging practices, most of them were teacher-driven and not supported by institutional policies or standardized frameworks. The lack of alignment between classroom-level efforts and curriculum guidelines led to inconsistencies in how soft skills were embedded across different vocational schools. While teachers demonstrated initiative and creativity, there was no structured mechanism to ensure experiential learning was used systematically to develop soft skills across all PVMA settings.

This finding reinforces the argument by Yaacob et al. (2020), who concluded that Malaysian vocational institutions show strong individual practices but lack systemic, scalable models for experiential learning. As a result, the impact of these efforts on soft skills development remains variable and dependent on the teacher's capacity, commitment, and available resources.

The theme highlights the urgent need for a unified, contextualized teaching model that not only provides pedagogical clarity for integrating experiential strategies but also supports the intentional development of soft skills. Without such a model, the full potential of experiential learning to foster 21st-century competencies in vocational learners may remain underutilized and fragmented.

Teachers as Central Agents of Soft Skills

The role of the teacher as both a facilitator of learning and a role model emerged strongly across the interviews. Participants consistently emphasized that the effectiveness of experiential learning hinged upon the teacher's initiative, creativity, and reflective engagement. Teachers are not just conveyors of knowledge, but play an active role in devising teaching strategies that meaningfully integrate human skills.

P6 who is an educator highlighted the importance of teacher adaptability and reflection in guiding soft skill development:

"Teachers need to know when to stop the activity and make students reflect on what they have done. Reflection is important to strengthen values and understanding." (P6)

Similarly, P7 illustrated how teacher presence and encouragement influence student confidence and self-awareness:

"When we give students the opportunity to manage activities themselves, we need to be observers and guides. But if the teacher is passive, the students will also be less motivated to put in more effort." (P7)

These findings align with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which asserts that the instructor plays a crucial role in enabling learners to transition through the learning cycle from concrete experiences to reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Teachers who actively scaffold this process help students make meaning from their hands-on experiences and internalize soft skills such as communication, collaboration, and self-management.

Another recurring theme was curriculum autonomy. P1 and P2 explained that while the official curriculum emphasized technical competencies in alignment with the Sijil Kemahiran Malaysia (SKM), many teachers

exercised creative discretion to embed soft skills through non-standardized activities such as community engagement, team-based simulations, and student-led projects:

"The curriculum does indeed provide space for implementation according to the teacher's creativity. If the teacher is active and innovative, various methods can be used to develop interpersonal skills." (P2)

However, despite such autonomy, most educators acknowledged that they lacked formal and structured tools to assess soft skills development. While some used reflective journals, peer evaluations, and performance-based observations, these methods were largely informal and not institutionally reinforced. This finding echoes the concerns raised by Alias et al. (2020) and Singh & Gopal (2018), who argue that the under-assessment of soft skills in vocational education stems from both the absence of validated instruments and insufficient institutional focus.

In summary, this theme underscores that teachers are not only central to delivering experiential instruction, but also instrumental in shaping students' soft skill acquisition. Their agency, however, must be supported by clearer guidelines, professional training, and institutional mechanisms for assessment if experiential learning is to meaningfully enhance vocational learners' holistic competencies.

Institutional Constraints and Support Gaps

Although the value of experiential learning is well-recognized among PVMA educators, scaling its systematic implementation remains a considerable challenge. A recurring issue raised by participants was the lack of institutional structures that support the design, delivery, and assessment of experiential soft skill development.

P11 highlighted how time constraints and administrative burdens often forced her to sacrifice deeper student engagement:

"We want to conduct activities that involve real student experiences, but the schedule is too tight. There's too much chasing the syllabus and reports, so there's no time to evaluate soft skills in depth." (P11)

Similarly, P8 reflected on the absence of professional development or formal guidance in adopting experiential pedagogies:

"Most teachers just use their own experience. There is no specific training or official module that shows how to integrate soft skills into workshop-based teaching and learning." (P8)

In many cases, teachers had to rely on their personal networks or initiative to establish real-world linkages. For example, through memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with local industries or by integrating community-based projects into their teaching. While these efforts were commendable, they were isolated and unsystematic, often not supported by broader institutional planning or policy frameworks.

This situation has led to a growing call from educators for a research-informed, contextualized teaching model which is one that offers structured yet adaptable strategies for integrating soft skills within vocational instruction. Teachers expressed the need for tools that guide the sequencing of experiential activities, link them to specific soft skill outcomes, and allow for meaningful student assessment. Competencies such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, though frequently emphasized in national education policies, were reported to be under-evaluated in actual classroom practice due to the absence of proper assessment mechanisms.

As one curriculum officer put it:

"If we really want to make soft skills an important part of TVET, there must be clearer guidelines; from teacher training to the assessment system." (P3)

These observations reinforce findings by Alias et al. (2020) and Othman et al. (2019), who also argue that

systemic limitations in teacher training, curriculum integration, and assessment hinder the widespread adoption of soft skill-oriented pedagogies in vocational education.

In essence, while individual teachers demonstrate strong commitment and creativity, the lack of institutional support mechanisms including time allocation, pedagogical resources, training, and assessment tools will prevent experiential learning from achieving its full potential. Addressing these gaps requires multi-level interventions, including policy alignment, curriculum redesign, and capacity-building for educators at all levels.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored the integration of soft skills into vocational education through experiential learning approaches, based on insights gathered from twelve expert participants including teachers, curriculum developers, and institutional leaders. The findings revealed that while experiential practices such as hands-on activities, reflective journaling, peer coaching, and community-based learning are already employed in PVMA classrooms, their application remains fragmented and unstandardized.

Educators were found to play a central role as facilitators, often designing and executing experiential strategies on their own initiative. However, the absence of a structured model, institutional guidelines, and consistent assessment tools significantly limits the systematic integration of soft skills into vocational teaching. The findings underscore the importance of developing a context-specific experiential teaching model that is grounded in practice, yet adaptable to the realities of the Malaysian PVMA ecosystem.

By synthesizing the experiential elements currently in use and identifying the barriers to their full implementation, this study contributes foundational knowledge for constructing a pedagogical model aimed at enhancing soft skills among vocational students. The findings from this study carry several practical implications for stakeholders in vocational education:

1. Model Development: There is a pressing need to develop and disseminate a structured experiential teaching model that explicitly targets soft skill development in PVMA contexts. Such a model should be flexible enough to accommodate diverse classroom settings and student abilities.
2. Teacher Training and Support: Professional development programs should be tailored to equip vocational educators with the skills and confidence to implement experiential learning strategies, including how to assess soft skills effectively.
3. Curriculum and Policy Alignment: Policymakers and curriculum developers should consider embedding experiential and soft skill objectives more explicitly into PVMA syllabi, supported by appropriate assessment rubrics and teaching guides.
4. Assessment Innovation: Soft skill evaluation mechanisms, such as reflective journals, peer assessments, and performance-based tasks, should be standardized and integrated into the broader assessment system.

While this study focuses on the initial development of an experiential learning model for soft skills integration, future research should aim to validate its effectiveness through expert reviews and classroom-based trials. Quantitative approaches such as the Rasch model or quasi-experimental design could be employed to test the model's reliability and impact on student outcomes. Comparative studies across different vocational tracks or institutional types may also offer valuable insights into how experiential learning can be tailored to diverse educational contexts. As this study relied solely on qualitative data from a purposively selected expert sample, future studies should consider expanding the participant base to enhance generalizability.

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