

Islamic Perspectives on Instilling Generic Skills for Students of Higher Learning Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Generic skills can be defined as “core skills”, “key competencies”, “underpinning skills” as well as “capabilities”. More recently, generic skills also include personal attributes that are linked with values and identity. The commonly accepted definition of generic skills is “those transferable skills which are essential for employability at some level for most” and the phrase “generic skills for employability” is now emerging as a common usage in public policy and research. This paper will discuss generic skills acquired by the students of one selected private university after they have undergone courses related in developing those skills. The findings from the research will be cross-related to generic skills from the Islamic perspectives. This is in line with views from Islamic scholars such as Imam as-Shafi’i whom had proposed that interpersonal skills will develop generic skills that could inculcate a holistic individual comprising of Self Concept and Personality, Communication, Conflict resolution and Leadership. These skills are vital in carving human capital to be an important asset for an organization to achieve its goal. The paper will also discuss the findings and its relation from Islamic perspectives in fulfilling every individual’s attributes and values so as to be compatible with Islamic values.

Keywords: *Generic Skills, Self Concept and Personality, Communication, Conflict resolution, Leadership and Islamic Perspectives*

INTRODUCTION

What are ‘generic skills’? Generic skills used to be known as ‘core skills’, ‘key competencies’, ‘underpinning skills’ or ‘capabilities’ (Mayer,1992). More recently, ‘skills’ have come to include ‘personal attributes’ and to be linked with values and identity. The commonly accepted definition is that generic skills are “those transferable skills which are essential for employability at some level for most” (Kearns, 2001), and the phrase ‘generic skills for employability’ is now in common usage in policy and research. The term ‘generic skills for employability’ invites generic skills for employability that contribute to industry and business interests (such as flexibility, adaptability and ‘self-managed skill currency’ (Curtis and McKenzie, 2001).

Generic skills or now popularly known as personality skills, has much been discussed by academicians and researchers world wide. Generic skills is a skill which is necessary for a person to function effectively at a minimal rate while on the job according to his own specific skills. Generic skills has expanded going through the stages of growth, maturity and ageing. Generic skills has also been discussed in all levels of education from primary, secondary to higher learning institutions. As stated by Lukman (2005), HLIs that are of quality are those which are capable of bringing out good quality graduates not only academically but also in other skilled areas including leadership, communication skills, and moral values.

As stated by Sharifah Hapsah (2005), the assurance of quality in universities is to ensure that the graduates produced have the practical

and technical skills, professional, technical thinking management, communication skills and information management skills and also life long learning abilities. The Department of Higher education (2003) requires that the curriculum design of all curriculums in Higher education in Malaysia should include the following generic skills:

- interpersonal and communication skills
- ICT skills, multimedia and information management skills
- leadership skills
- entrepreneurship skills
- thinking skills, adaptation, problem solving and decision making

Generic skills include “effective reading, writing, analytical, conceptual thinking and critical thinking skills, an ability to solve problems in an unstructured setting, an understanding of organisations, international and multicultural knowledge and the ability to resolve ethical dilemmas” (Nathan & Dunn, 1997).

These views of generic skills are generally based on a western concept framework. This paper also presents generic skills based on an Islamic perspective. Generic skills discussed are those proposed by Imam Shafi’i.

IMAM SHAFI’E’S APPROACH IN GENERIC SKILLS

Imam Shafi’I has proposed various ideas on developing a person’s generic skills. His ideas are still relevant as a guide in our daily lives especially for students. It comprises of the development of personality(ethics, morals and professionalism), communication, leadership, problem solving skills, conflict resolution and time management.

Personality (Ethics, Morals and Professionalism)

In developing a person’s personality, Imam Shafi’i stresses on the importance of knowledge to ensure that the objective of developing the person’s ethics , moral and professionalism occurs effectively. This is because when one has the in-depth knowledge it would definately benefit to others; as a

person with knowledge will communicate and convey his message in a professional and ethical manner. Unlike those who lack the knowledge, would converse in a less effective manner, leading to an unethical an un professional attitude. ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

Thus in the effort to develop an ethical, moral and professional personality, Imam Shafi’i proes that man try to refrain themselves from associating with those who do not lack knowledge and those who are unethical and repentant of oneself. ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

Imam Shafi’i stresses on the important need for one to know himself in for him to be able to develop an ethical moral and professional personality. This however is a matter which should be personal and private which need not be known to others. Imam Shafi’i further stresses that one is highly ethical in manner when he is able to hide his poverty to the extent that others assume he is wealthy. One who does not show his anger to the extent that others see him consenting to a particular matter is also highly ethical in manner. An also when one is able to hide his extremisms to show to others that he is a calm person.(‘Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

Imam Shafi’i placed the measurement of creadibility, satisfaction and trust towards someone based on the number of people who desires to be with him or have many friends. In realizing those objectives, an individual must work toward developing relationships and friendships among each other and try to improve oneself from the in terms of understanding each other. In other words, one needs have an ethical, moral and professional personality ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*; al-Bayhaqi. 1391H).

Imam Shafi’also presents several guidelines when searching for sincere individuals as friends who are ethical so as in developing interpersonal relationships. This is because according to him, a sincere friendship is hard to achieve. Only those with moral and ethics would be sincere and honest and know the meaning of a sincere friendship. ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

According to Imam Shafi'i a true friend would not do anything that would hurt or offend a person's feelings. Thus friends who are not helpful in hard times may be one's enemy far be it from being a friend. Nothing is eternal and there is no real true friends as those who help in times of need. Thus Imam Shafi'i always hope that a true and ethical friend is one who is committed in the friendship regardless of good or bad times. These feelings are expressed in his poetry translated as ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*):

"I have yet to meet in this world a friend who is faithful in times of need. Such is my life is like the wheel turning good and bad. In times of bad often I would ask" who would be my willing friend? When in times of good many would be jealous, though when I am sad they clap their hands".

Imam Shafi'i stated that the characteristics of a friend who is ethical and of moral is a person who is always beside him, upholds his friend's good name and honour not only during his lifetime but also after he is gone. This particular skill is often desired by everyone and definitely the relationship would last long and loyalty among each other would last ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

In making the effort to sustain an ethical, moral and professional attitude the steps that one needs to take is to be respectful, avoid any negative perceptions, never criticize and hate each other. This is because according to him those who disdain others, he would not be respected by others. Thus those who do good to others, Allah would reward him justly. Likewise those who do bad to others Allah would punish him accordingly. ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

Imam Shafi'i also reminds the society of the ups and downs of friendship among individuals. As there are individuals who show an attitude of being unloyal and unethical in a

relationship whereas interacting in a positive manner is a must in a friendship. People nowadays have friends but their friends are only with them when they are at the top or provide certain advantages to them, but would leave their friends when they are in trouble or face hardship. Thus it is necessary for man to find friends of quality. This suggestion is clearly stated in his poetry translated as ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*):

"I am able to mingle freely with others when I am in good fortune. But when I am in trouble, I could feel as if the wheels of time do not want to be friends with the situation."

A good friend or a real friend is one who able to give assistance calming a person's emotions and relieving stress when faced with difficulties or sadness. This is because friendship is the effect of skills which lacks attention be it by a teenager of the society. According to Imam Shafi'i a person's personality shines through from depth of his soul. In him there are two potentials, deceit and clemency. Imam Shafi'i makes an analogy that deceit is like a thorn if held and clemency is like a flower looked upon. When someone needs help be like a fire that would burn the thorn or deceit ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

Imam Shafi'i described the characteristics of dishonest and unethical individuals whom we need to stay away from are those who like to condemn and does not care if his friend is ill; individuals who are malignant of his friends' happiness and are in joy when his friends are in pain. It is sad if a friend wants good of his friend whereas the friend wishes bad for him ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

Thus among the suggestions by Imam Shafi'i is to visit a friend when he is ill. Visiting those who are sick is a practice encouraged by Islam as it would strengthen interpersonal relationships and built upon the humane factor. This is practiced by Prophet Muhammad (pbuth) towards his family members, the elders and young and the rest of his people ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

Communication

In developing one's generic skills, communication is an aspect which is stressed upon by Imam Shafi'i. This is because according to him one even the Prophet is not free or safe from verbal threats and the harsh words of man. Thus he states that man should refrain his tongue from useless words and disgracing people. One who talks too much and too often would cause him to have a low personality. The habit of one communicating with good or bad manners is due to the fact that he is accustomed to that particular type of communication. One's attitude is hidden behind his tongue. Thus those who searches for his own wrongs is better than searching for the wrong of others ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

According to Imam Shafi'i, sometimes verbal communication does not bring any good if it is not in accordance with the needs of those being communicated to. This is because good verbal communication will be good if it is suitable with the needs of communication than one's verbal words ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

When communicating, Imam Shafi'i provided several ways and steps which needs to be taken when one is in a discussion or debate. Among them is that the one who proposes his opinion should not be proud of himself. He should discuss with correct manners especially when in public. Apart from that, advice should be given at a suitable time and place. Never criticise in public as it brings shame to the person. It is better to criticise in private with the person in the name of Allah so as not to shame him ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

Apart from that Imam Shafi'i presented ideas that would be useful for Muslims on the ethics of discussion and giving advice to others ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*):

“If you have an advantage and knowledge of a dispute of those before you and and the present, debate with those you invite to debate in a calm

manner full of honour, and a friendly attitude and respect the opinion of your friend and do not be arrogant. Take what is good and right from those against you be they arrogant or friendly. And show you earnestness to those around you to show that they are true and arrogant. This is because being emotional in these situations would only create a divide among you.”

In communication, Imam Shafi'i. proposed that one should not be influenced by emotions that would reveal himself. Therefore when in a discussion or a debate, he proposed that one does not show anger and say any bad of others as the objective of communication or debate is to find the truth not status (Muhammad Abu Zuhrah. 1978).

When one communicates with one in an improper manner due to his lack of mentality, among the steps suggested by him is to not respond or answer those words or unjust claims. Imam Shafi'i. makes an analogy of this in his poem translated as ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*):

“Say as you like to deprive my honour. My silence from those who insult me is an answer. It is not that I do not have an answer but it is beneath a lion to fight with dogs”

Imam Shafi'i stated that one not only can reveal one's anger through verbal but also non-verbal communication. He states that when an academician or royalty feels angry they would show it through their behavior. But when a fool is angry they would portray it in their words ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

In conveying a message through communication be it in verbal or written form, Imam Shafi'i, in his poetry proposes several guidelines to be applied when communicating (Hikmah Salleh. 1984):

- 1) A poet should not be accepted when in his poetry exists elements which would lead one to desire, lust, worship of women, elements of baseless worship that does not reveal the truth because of hypocrisy, for reasons of profit be it monetary or morally and such, elements of poetry that bring enemies and slander in society and poetry ridiculing of others.
- 2) A poet who is accepted is one who in his poetry and work portrays elements that do not lead to vice. Words of his poetry are from his honest emotions and describe the beauty of the soul and perfect morals.

As such among the ideas and approach suggested by Imam Shafi'i in communication is what is said and being said by one without looking at who is saying those words ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

Leadership

In the context of leadership, there have been many debates proposed by Imam Shafi'i either based on his credibility and attitude as a leader, and leadership styles. Many of the ideas and experiences showed by Imam Shafi'i regarding leadership is in accordance with Islam. The ideas and style of leadership introduced by him comprises of education, creativity, and the highest management in leadership should be of example to leaders of the Muslim society so as all activities and planning carried out by leaders would be blessed by Allah (Wan Zulkifli. 2009).

He has once stated that one who lusts power or so desires to be a leader, those wishes may not be fulfilled due to his own ego. Thus he made an analogy that sometimes man manages their lives like politics and such leadership is much worse if compared to an animal ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

There are five instruments proposed by Imam Shafi'i so as a leader would have a high level of credibility, truthful in communication with the people, able to keep secrets, accomplishes his responsibility as a leader, always give advice to the people and ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005).

Imam Shafi'i stated that among the preparations need for a leader is to always ensure not neglect his religious duties. This is because those who are elected as a leader sometimes may deter him from performing his religious duties towards Allah ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005).

According to Imam al-Shafi'i (1400H) the function of a creative leader is to be intelligent in creating a win-win situation so as all parties involved are satisfied. Although it is difficult to achieve, but with a leader who is just in making decisions and actions, the intentions would be achieved. However, anyone including leaders often are unable to satisfy everyone. Thus what is needed is to improve on his relationship with Allah. Thus a leader would not need to worry what is said and questioned by others ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

In a situation when one interacts with a leader, among the advice given by Imam Shafi'i is to avoid being a sychophant or always trying to be near the leader as this does not bring one towards what Allah condones. This statement can be seen through his poetry translated as below ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*):

“Wherever a king is,
do not be near his
door. What do you
desire from a king?
When wrath is upon
him he will chase
you, when he is
pleased he will be
bored of you. Take
shelter only from
Allah and stay away
from the doors of
kings. Such as
standing by a king's
door is an insult”

Problem Solving and Conflict Resolution

Imam Shafi'i presented several ideas and guideline in solving various problems. His book *al-Risalahs* the best reference as a source looking at his ideas and ways in which he explains methods of solving conflicts and

disputes. He (1309H) classifies conflicts into two: conflicts which are prohibited and conflicts which are allowed. This classification can be understood from his view as translated below : (1309H).

" I find ulama of before and now are of different opinions(in conflict) in certain matters Is it acceptable for such to occur? Said (Imam Shafi'i) to him: Conflicts are of two types, the first conflicts that are prohibited (*al-ikhtilaf al-muharram*), and i do not say as so to the other type (second type of conflict) Conflicts which are *haram* are those prohibited by Allah as already been stated in the Quran, through the words of his Prophet with clear explanations. For those who are aware, it is not allowed of them to dispute on these. "

Conflicts which are acceptable according to The Quran and can be interpreted openly and be understood through analogies. As during those times those who wishes to interpret and make analogies holds steadfastly to the meaning available either in the interpretation or analogy despite different opinions of others. The ideas of Imam Shafi'i (1309H) is clearly stated in his book *al-Risalah*.

Imam Shafi'i also proposed several steps which should be taken when one is faced with various types of behaviours and conflicts among each other be it conflicts of ideas, or importance Among them is to be patient of any mistakes of their friends. Be forgiving as by doing so it would douse any feelings of hatred and towards the fire. This step proposed by Imam Shafi'i is clearly portrayed in his poem translated as ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*):

"When I am forgiving and am not malignant, my heart and soul is free from the fires of hatred. When my enemy is before me, I always respect him".
"These I do to protect myself from vice. I show politeness, courtesy and emotions of friendship to those I detest, as I show the same to those whom I love. "

Imam Shafi'i also urges one to control his emotion and be polite to even those who he despises as if his heart is full of love and to not have any negative perceptions of anyone and not to repeat the attitude. Thus being calm in facing these situation, one would be able to reap the benefits ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

Among the theories Imam Shafi'i proposed in facing conflict which are difficult to handle is to stay away from them and avoid being involved in these situation. This is much better than being a part of the conflicts and associating oneself with those with unpure intentions. Thus, Imam Shafi'i urges man to find a devout friend. If not possible, the next step is to live alone and avoid from being in contact with evil people and those who cannot differentiate bad from good. ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

In the struggle for success in life, man would not have a good relationship with bad individuals who would lead him to destruction in life. It would bring about such a bad effect on him to the extent of Imam Shafi'i making such a powerful analogy. He would rather be with dogs than man who are evil and who destroy people's lives. This is as lowly as a dog can be, it would still show the right path to its master who is lost, unlike a man who will forever be unwilling to guide the right way. Thus he urges man to save themselves from these people, control their tongues as it would bring them to a happy live eventhough if one

has to live alone ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

Imam Shafi'i explains that the reasons to detereof from those who are not of good is to protect one's good name. This is because when one does not take care of his friend's good name except when forced to, thus leave and nad do not show any mercy on him. Find another who can replace him. Parting with him means to rest. As not everyone who are loved by one would return the love and friendliness are sometimes returned with rudeness. ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

According to Imam Shafi'i if honest love does not grow from his own habits, thus forced love is worthless. Thus it is neccessary form who to be friends with a betrayer as he will bring love when being loved. He will betray the love and reveal what was once secrets among them both ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

Time Management

Among the generic skills that need to be inculcated into daily life is time management. Imam Shafi'i proposed several ideas which one carry out in terms of time management. Among them is by preparing a certain schedule for example by dividing the night of an academician into three parts, the first part of the night for writing, the second for prayers and the final part for rest and sleep (Hafiz Abu Na'im al-Asbahani Ahmad b. 'Abd Allah al-. t.t).

Imam Shafi'i urges the society to use time wisely with activities that are meaningful and beneficial instead of unworthy activities. This is because time gome cannot be replaced. Time that is used for evilness would not last as all fun and sadness are (Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad al-Razi. t.t).

In handling time, Imam Shafi'i proposed that one should be strong and control any

emotional stress when facing with any challenges. He said through his poem ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*):

“There is no time and day like the present (as you see it now) Thus be patient of any challenges on your wealth and the loss of any loved ones.”

To obtain a good guideline on time management, Imam Shafi'i proposed an idea in which the society would be able to see the past and evaluate what they have do to identify whether it is beneficial or not to the future generation ('Abd al-Rahman, 2005. *Diwan al-Shafi'i*).

Research related to the correlation between Western and Islamic Framework

The current emphasis on generic skills has also moved local universities in Malaysia to prepare their students with generic skills so as they would be ready for the job market. To assess the effectiveness of the implementation of generic skills, the researcher conducted a study a public university in the Klang Valley , Malaysia. 237 respondents, 70 male and 167 female students, were those who took the university's compulsory elective course. The generic skills which were inculcated into the course as part of the course's components were Interpersonal skills, thinking skills, leadership, emotional management, decision-making skills, and time management. The iinclusion of these generic skills for these courses are based on the job market's needs and industries and is guided by by the western framework.

The findings of the study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Mean score pre and post U2 courses

	Generic skills	Pre course Mean Score	Post course Mean Score
1	Interpersonal Skills	3.47	4.31
2	Thinking Skills	3.59	4.20
3	Leardership Skills	3.48	4.02

4	Emotions Management	3.60	4.24
5	Decision Making Skills	3.66	4.27
6	Time Management	3.54	4.17

Findings of the research showed that the students' mean score of generic skills increased for each skills measured; Interpersonal skills, thinking skills, leadership, emotional management, decision-making skills, and time management respectively. (Table 1)

With reference to the discussion by Imam Shafi'i regarding generic skills based on the Islamic framework, it is clear that all the generic skills in the research is already placed in Islam. This is evidence that Islam stresses on the individual's development in a holistic manner so as to be able to contribute to the organisation, society and country effectively. Imam Shafi'i discussed aspects which are emphasised in improving generic skills from an Islamic perspective such as personality (ethics, moral, and professionalism), communication, leadership, conflict and problem solving management and time management. University courses also places an importance on these aspects in developing students' generic skills. This shows Islam as a way of life *-Ad-din*. The research involved interpersonal skills (personality development, ethics, moral, communication and professionalism) and thinking skills. Also leadership skills, emotional management (as in conflict resolution) decision-making skills and time management. When it is viewed with the Islamic framework in mind, the enhancement of skills from the interpersonal skills aspect have an impact to other generic skills. Individuals with good personality would thus act in an ethical and professional manner. They would communicate with proper conduct and effectively, to suit the situation at hand, be it in an organisation or in their personal lives. This type of personality developed in the individuals would also influence his style of leadership. It would thus develop a leader who is not only task oriented but also places an importance on human relationship. Both methods of leadership would create a two way relationship between the leader and his subordinates. This is stressed by Imam Shafi'i on the need of a leader with trust to uphold his responsibility as a leader and carry out his task with subservience to Allah.

Thus this would lead to the achievement of the organisation's objectives. If this is achieved, the organisation would reap the benefits and success by having individuals with holistic generic skills. It is clear here that both the Western and Islamic framework share the same objective of gearing towards developing individuals with holistic skills so as they would be able to steer the organization towards achieving its objectives. However it must be emphasised the Western framework is guided by the the generic skills framework as already stated in the Holy Quran.

Conclusion

Generic skills or self-concept and personality is a skill which emphasises the development of an individual in a holistic manner so as to enable the individual to contribute effectively to the organization. Be it the Western or Islamic approach, both provide the same objective of ensuring that the individual would be able to contribute to the organisation. Imam Shafi'i is not only well-known as a scholar but he also has vast experience in generic skills. With his expertise and knowledge, vast ideas and advice which were contributed to field of generic skills. This is further supported by the fact that those characteristics were clearly evident in him as an Islamic leader and scholar respected by the people and leaders of his time. Most of the ideas projected by Imam Shafi'i on generic skills are in accordance with Islam as preached by Prophet Muhammad pbuth. Thus those ideas of various levels in generic skills would be of a good example and guide for Muslims and specifically for students so as generic skills developed by them would be blessed by Allah.

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