

# Impact of defining *ikigai* in developing future-ready university graduates with self-leadership skills: A whole university mixed-methods study during Covid-19

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## Purpose of the study

The goal of this mixed-methods study was to evaluate student and staff coaches' perceptions of the effectiveness of web-based delivery of future skills training on self-leadership. The value in answering this question is to ensure that the teaching of future skills is resilient and able to withstand unforeseen changes in the teaching environment.

## Future skills coaching at Heriot-Watt University Malaysia

A major part of the "Self-empowerment and social responsibility" course is a series of workshops over 4 weeks with 2 hours of contact time, plus self-reflective homework exercises. The output is a personal impact statement, such as

"I am an innovator. My purpose is to seek solutions to provide a better environment for future generations. I will use my skills and knowledge to promote additive manufacturing which can reduce wastage of materials and pollution."

Weekly workshops:

1. Sets the scene by providing an overview of the process. Small groups of 6-10 students, each led by a dedicated coach, then work on activities to get to know one another, build rapport and to create a conducive safe environment for students to interact and share their thoughts and opinions.
2. Encourages self-reflection in two activities; one identifying one's personal values and fundamental beliefs and another recalling memorable and meaningful life moments that have shaped personal growth. These two activities lead the students towards completing the sentence "I am ..." by choosing a phrase that conveys a unique quality or talent.
3. Introduces the components of *ikigai* as the purpose at the heart of four themes: i) what you love to do, ii) what you're good at, iii) what the world needs (inspired by the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals) and iv) what you can be paid for. Students are encouraged to mentally time travel to their ideal 50 year-old self. This culminates in students completing the sentence "My purpose is ..." which defines their unique *ikigai*.
4. Guides students to develop a SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely) plan on how to mobilise this purpose into actions that could achieve a positive impact. From this, they craft a call to action starting with "I will..."



Source: [www.japan.go.jp/kizuna/2022/03/ikigai\\_japanese\\_secret\\_to\\_a\\_joyful\\_life.html](http://www.japan.go.jp/kizuna/2022/03/ikigai_japanese_secret_to_a_joyful_life.html)

## Quantitative findings

A student survey asked about the perceived effectiveness of the self-leadership training. The feedback from students was really positive. Scores in the table represent % across the group.

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
The workshops have confirmed core values that I embody in my life	90.4	9.0	0.6
Attending the workshops has helped me to understand myself better	90.0	9.2	0.8
Thanks to the workshops, I know my personal strengths and I'll be able to use them regularly at university	84.1	15.3	0.6
The workshops have clarified my sense of purpose	84.7	14.7	0.6
The workshops have enabled me to participate in activities which mobilise my purpose into impact	84.3	15.3	0.4
Attending the workshops has improved my ability to notice my thoughts and track my emotions	83.1	16.1	0.8
The workshops have helped me to enhance my ability in dealing with life's challenges	78.4	20.8	0.8

The qualitative findings presented in the poster offer rich insights into why there was such a positive endorsement of the future skills training course delivered online.

## Conclusions

The current study demonstrates benefit in defining *ikigai* since students reported they had learned key skills in self-leadership, even when delivered as emergency remote learning. Our teaching of future skills seems to be able to withstand unforeseen changes in the teaching environment, switching between face-to-face and online delivery.

The challenge remains on how to effectively build competency in those skills. An important unanswered question remains whether feeling prepared for what is yet to come actually predicts how well young people make the most of their university experience to hone their 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, sufficient to achieve their goals in the future.