

Final Year Students' Perception on Generic Skills up on Graduating



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ABSTRACT--- *Soft skills become an important element in national education to achieve global status. This study was conducted to examine the perception of 4th Year School of Education students of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia on soft skills. This study was conducted on 4th year students, Department of Technical Education and Engineering School of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai. A total of 180 students were selected based on random stratified sampling method as respondents in this study. Questionnaire is used as the research instrument. Data collected were analyzed by using SPSS version 25.0, to get the mean value, frequency, percentage and standard deviation in descriptive form. Overall, the results of this study found that the perception of 4th year students of UTM School of Education on soft skills was high. The findings also found that the most dominant element of soft skills dominated by students was communication skills and teamwork skills. Both of these skills are the dominant elements that can be mastered because share the same mean value of 4.37. However, there are some aspects that are seen as weaknesses of students such as the mastery of entrepreneurship skills. Hence, institutions and students need to take note to ensure that quality graduates are born from the aspect of soft skills*

Keywords: *Generic skills, higher education, soft skills, student.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Soft skills or more commonly known as S.S, became an essential element in the national education policy with regard to attaining a global standard. According to Wikipedia, soft skills refer to the sociologic terminology that comprises of personal attributes, social graces, language skills, personal habits, sensibility or concern along with one's optimism.

SS includes a few aspects that prioritise personal qualities such as responsibility, confidence, the ability to interact, self-control, integrity and honesty. Among the characteristics of SS that encompass generic skills are communication ability, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, teamwork skills, lifelong learning and information management, entrepreneurship skills, professional ethics and personal morals, and leadership skills. S.S is also recognised as Soft skills, Generic Skills, or Generic Student Attribute (GSA).

The society often assumes that university graduates did not possess soft skills, and this leads to the failure of the graduates to secure jobs after their graduation. According to the January 2018 Key Statistics of Labour Force in Malaysia from the Department of Statistics Malaysia, published on March 15, 2018, the unemployment rate in January 2018 increased by 0.1 percentage points to 3.4 percentage points compared to the month before that is 3.3 percentage points. Meanwhile, among the graduates, the Graduate Tracking Study by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2015 showed a quarter of 254,161 undergraduates who graduated in the same year were still unemployed after six months completion of their studies [12]. In 2016, the Minister of Higher Education, Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh stated about 54,103 university graduates were unemployed in the period of six months after graduation. This matter clearly shows that the elements of soft skills need to be mastered by the graduates so that it corresponds to the employers' requirements and the market demand. Higher education institutions (HEI) graduates should be provided with soft skills elements to avoid excess of graduates. Various initiatives have been conducted by the HEI. Moreover, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) also provide various methods or activities for the graduates to possess soft skills elements so as to fulfil the market demands.

Research Objectives and Questions

Specifically, this study was conducted to fulfil the following objectives:-

- 1) Identifying the perception of the fourth year students of the School of Education, UTM towards the importance of soft skills.
- 2) Identifying the most dominant soft skills components among the fourth year students of the School of Education, UTM towards soft skills. Generally, the research questions encompass the following matters:-

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- 1) What are the perceptions of the fourth year students of the School of Education, UTM towards soft skills?
- 2) What are the most dominant soft skills components among the fourth year students of the School of Education, UTM towards soft skills?

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was based on the quantitative research that utilised quantity, score, numbers, and frequencies as well as strategy implementation. Education-based research like this could be easily and accurately identified using these methods. The type of study was descriptive, namely a survey by questionnaire aimed at discerning soft skills elements mastered by the respondents. The data gained to answer the research questions is obtainable via the questionnaire method. According to Farawahida [2], the research method exploiting questionnaire is an effective method to obtain information from the respondents besides able to gather data in an easier way.

In this study, a total of 180 respondents comprising of the fourth year JPTK students of the School of Education, FSSK, UTM were chosen. These students were chosen via the layered or stratified probability sampling method (random). The reason for the researcher to conduct the study utilising the mentioned sampling method was to gather a uniformed feedback from the respondents. The calculation of sampling size was carried out based on the Krejcie & Morgan [10] formula. The validity and the trustworthiness of an instrument is important to ensure the acquired findings are trustable and unquestionable.

To determine the trustworthiness of an instrument, a pilot study was performed to test all items chosen to be included in the actual study. A total of 30 sets of questionnaire were distributed to the fourth year JPTK students, School of Education, FSSK, UTM who were not involved in the actual study. The acquired data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) for Windows version 25.0. The results of the analyses enable the determination of item trustworthiness using the Cronbach's Alpha value. The Cronbach's Alpha value obtained for the overall item was 0.951 and regarded as having a very high confidence level. Table 1 lists the values of Cronbach's Alpha for each soft skills elements.

Table.1 Cronbach's Alpha Values for Each Soft Skills Elements

No	Soft Skills Elements	Cronbach's Alpha value
1	Communication	0.893
2	Critical Thinking and Problem-solving Skill	0.904
3	Teamwork	0.944
4	Lifelong Learning and Information Management	0.891
5	Entrepreneurship	0.915
6	Ethics and Professional Moral	0.841

7	Leadership	0.912
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III. DATA ANALYSIS

A number of 180 respondents answered the questionnaire, and they were comprised of 63 male students (35.0%) and 117 female students (65.0%). The background information of the respondents were also recorded involving their field of study. The number of respondents from the SPPJ course amounted to 57 persons (31.7%), respondents from the SPPQ course 45 persons (25.0%), while the respondents from SPPR and SPPH 39 persons (21.7%). Table 2 shows respondents demographics formula criteria.

Table.2 Respondents Demographic Formula Criteria

DEMOGRAPHIC CRITERIA	f	%
• Male	63	35.0
• Female	117	65.0
• Bachelor of Technology with Education (Mechanical Engineering), SPPJ	57	31.7
• Bachelor of Technology with Education (Building Construction), SPPQ	45	25.0
• Bachelor of Technology with Education (Electric and Electronics), SPPR	39	21.7
• Bachelor of Technology with Education (Living Skills), SPPH	39	21.7

Note: N = 30, f = Frequency, % = Percentage

A. Communication Skills Level

The overall mean for the communication level among the fourth year School of Education, FSSK, UTM students is at a high level, i.e. 4.37 (sp = 0.64; Table 3). Most of the respondents have chosen item 2 with the highest mean value of 4.57 (sp = 0.540). Among the items with low mean values for the communication skills level is item 3, which recorded the mean value of 4.13. A total of 67 respondents (37.2%) strongly agree, 75 respondents (41.7%) agree, while 32 respondents (17.8%) slightly agree, followed by 6 respondents (3.3%) disagree with item 3.

Table.3 Respondents' Frequency and Percentage towards Communication Skills.

Respondents		Min	SP
No.	Question statements		
1.	I am able to convey ideas in Bahasa Melayu with confidence verbally.	4.54	0.582
2.	I am able to convey ideas in Bahasa Melayu with confidence in writing.	4.57	0.540
3.	I am able to convey ideas in English with confidence verbally.	4.13	0.819
4.	I am able to convey ideas in English with confidence in writing.	4.14	0.806

5.	I am able to hear the opinion of others and give feedback accordingly.	4.43	0.579
6.	I am able to make a presentation with confidence according to the compatibility of the audience.	4.38	0.571
7.	I am able to use knowledge during presentation.	4.37	0.570
Overall Average		4.37	0.64

B. Critical Thinking and Problem-solving Skills

The overall mean for these skills is at a high level, i.e. 4.2 (sp = 0.59; Table 4). Two items shared the highest mean value that is 4.23 (Table 4). The items are items 10 and 11. For item 10, respondents who strongly agree amounted to 56 respondents (31.1%) followed by 110 respondents (61.1%) who chose agree and 14 respondents (7.8%) chose slightly agree. Meanwhile, for item 11, one respondent (0.6%) chose disagree, followed by 17 respondents (9.4%) who had chosen slightly agree. A total of 102 respondents (56.7%) agree with item 11, and 60 respondents (33.3%) strongly agree with it. The mean value is at a low level for critical thinking and problem-solving skills as shown in item 13, with the mean of 4.12 (sp = 0.637). Two respondents (1.1%) chose to disagree with this item, while 21 respondents (11.7%) chose slightly agree. A number of 111 respondents (61.7%) agreed, while 46 respondents (25.6%) strongly agree.

Table.4 Respondents' Frequency and Percentage towards Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills

Respondents		Min	SP
No.	Question statements		
8.	I am able to identify problems in various situations.	4.20	0.620
9.	I am able to analyse problems in identified issues.	4.19	0.587
10.	I am able to evaluate by justifying rationally.	4.23	0.580
11.	I am able to utilise critical thinking in accordance to the identified problems.	4.23	0.633
12.	I am able to generate ideas in finding the best solution.	4.21	0.459
13.	I am able to think beyond the real context 'think outside the box'.	4.12	0.637
14.	I am able to make a decision based on strong evidence.	4.22	0.555
Overall Average		4.2	0.59

C. Teamwork Skills

Item 21 has the highest mean for teamwork skills, i.e. 4.43 (sp = 0.560; Table 5). On the other hand, item 17 has the lowest mean value for teamwork skills recorded at 4.34 (sp = 0.582).

Table.5 Respondents' Frequency and Percentage towards Teamwork Skills

Respondents		Min	SP
No.	Question statements		
15	I am able to build good rapport with members of the group to attain the same goals.	4.37	0.608
16	I am able to interact effectively with members of the group to attain the same goals.	4.36	0.585
17	I am able to work effectively with members of the group to attain the same goals.	4.34	0.582
18	I am able to comprehend and accept the role as a follower.	4.35	0.602
19	I am able to accept different backgrounds of the group members to attain the same goals.	4.39	0.630
20	I am able to accept the socio-cultural differences of the group members to attain the same goals.	4.35	0.621
21	I am able to participate in the planning and synchronisation of the group's efforts.	4.43	0.650
Overall Average		4.37	0.59

D. Lifelong Learning Skills and Information Management

Item 28 showed a mean value of 4.36 (sp = 0.577; Table 6), which is among the highest. This item recorded 74 respondents (41.1%) as strongly agree, 97 respondents (53.7%) as agree, and 9 respondents (5.0%) as slightly agree. Items 25 and 27 are items with low mean values, and shared the same mean value of 4.29. Item 25, that is the ability to manage relevant information with the assistance of an appropriate technology recorded 62 respondents (34.4%) as strongly agree, 109 respondents (60.6%) as agree, and 9 respondents (5.0%) as slightly agree. Item 27 showed about 60 respondents (33.3%) as strongly agree, while 113 respondents (62.8%) agree, and 7 respondents (3.9%) slightly agree.

Table.6 Respondents' Frequency and Percentage towards Lifelong Learning Skills and Information Management

Respondents		Min	SP
No.	Question statements		
22.	I am able to find relevant information from various sources.	4.31	0.550
23.	I am able to manage information through formal learning.	4.31	0.552
24.	I am able to manage information through informal learning.	4.28	0.591
25.	I am able to manage relevant information using the appropriate technology.	4.29	0.556
26.	I am able to accept new ideas for self-directed learning.	4.33	0.549
27.	I am able to apply acquired information as appropriate.	4.29	0.536
28.	I have an inquisitiveness especially regarding something new.	4.36	0.577
Overall Average		4.31	0.56

E. Entrepreneurship Skills

Feedbacks from the respondents for the soft skill involving entrepreneurship skills showed an average mean value of 3.91 with a standard deviation of 0.80. On the whole, item 29 recorded a mean value of 4.10 (sp = 0.733; Table 7), while item 34 recorded a low mean value for entrepreneurship skills at 3.26 (sp = 0.844; Table 7). Item 34 relates to the ability of the respondents to seize business opportunities. A total of 46 respondents (25.6%) strongly agree with item 34, whereas 92 respondents (51.1%) agree, 32 respondents (17.8%) slightly agree, followed by 8 respondents (4.4%) disagree, and finally, 2 respondents (1.1%) chose strongly disagree.

Table.7: Respondents' Frequency and Percentage towards Entrepreneurship Skills.

Respondents		Min	SP
No.	Question statements		
29	I am able to identify business opportunities.	4.10	0.733
30	I am able to build entrepreneurship network through professional meetings.	3.92	0.790
31	I am able to draft business plans.	3.97	0.818
32	I am able to display entrepreneurship characteristics.	3.98	0.865
33	I am able to explore business opportunities.	4.04	0.775
34	I am able to seize business opportunities.	3.26	0.844
35	I am able to work independently.	4.08	0.797
Overall Average		3.91	0.80

F. Ethics and Professional Moral Skills

The overall mean value for ethics and professional moral skills is 4.19 with a standard deviation of 0.63. Item 42 recorded the highest mean value among other items at 4.31 (sp = 0.661; Table 8). One respondent (0.6%) is recorded as strongly disagree and disagree with item 42. Meanwhile, 11 respondents (6.1%) stated slightly agree, followed by 96 respondents (53.3%) stated as agree, and 71 respondents (39.4%) strongly agree. On the contrary, item 37 recorded the lowest mean value of 4.10, with 2 respondents (1.1%) disagree, 24 respondents (13.3%) slightly agree, 108

respondents (60.0%) agree, and 46 respondents (25.6%) strongly agree.

Table.8: Respondents' Frequency and Percentage towards Ethics and Professional Moral Skills4

Respondents		Min	SP
No.	Question statements		
36	I am able to comprehend the economic impact when maintaining integrity in professional practice.	4.11	0.593
37	I am able to comprehend the socio-cultural impact when maintaining integrity in professional practice.	4.10	0.652
38	I am able to identify my potentials for the purpose of work enhancement and improvement.	4.17	0.603
39	I am able to ensure intellectual property-related publications are preserved.	4.16	0.670
40	I am able to practice ethical behaviour at all times.	4.24	0.611
41	I am able to practice volunteerism when needed by the society.	4.24	0.622
42	I am able to practice being responsible to the society.	4.31	0.661
Overall Average		4.19	0.63

G. Leadership Skills

Item 43 recorded a high mean value of 4.40 (sp = 0.648; Table 9). Among the lower items included in the leadership skills is item 49, which is the ability to become mentor to group members. About 60 respondents (33.3%) stated strongly agree, 100 respondents (55.6%) agree, followed by 18 respondents (18.0%) slightly agree, and 2 respondents (1.1%) disagree.

Table.9: Respondents' Frequency and Percentage towards Leadership Skills

Respondents		Min	SP
No.	Question statements		
43.	I am able to adapt in various situations.	4.40	0.648
44.	I am able to use the knowledge of the basic theories of leadership in group work.	4.31	0.610
45.	I am able to comprehend the responsibilities as a team leader.	4.33	0.652
46.	I am able to lead a group of individuals as required to attain organisational goals.	4.29	0.612
47.	I am able to build trust between members involved in a project.	4.31	0.608
48.	I am able to influence group members to achieve the objectives of a project.	4.26	0.599
49.	I am able to become the mentor to group members.	4.21	0.661
Overall Average		4.30	0.63

IV. DISCUSSION

Soft skills are essential elements for every graduating students especially those in the field of education. Reason is that, educator-to-be graduates are also no exception in the unemployment issues due to the failure to secure places in schools.



Educator-to-be graduates need to master soft skills as a preparation for the psychometric tests besides fulfilling the market demands. Most employers did not only focus on the CGPA results of a graduate, but they also look into other aspects in choosing the appropriate candidate to fulfil the market demands such as the attributes of the soft skills. In the working world that goes hand in hand with the industrial revolution, graduates skilled in either the technical field or soft skills are very much needed by the employers. Having soft skills is a bonus to the graduates in seizing job opportunities in this challenging world.

A. Research Question 1

The perception of the fourth year School of Education, FSSK, UTM students towards communication skills was at a high level with the mean value of 4.37. The students agreed to each item included in the elements of communication skills after undertaking the learning activity. The study is supported by Mary Anne [4] that stated communication skills could be enhanced through various implementation of learning forms such as service learning. This is essential for the students to master communication skills well to allow them to compete in securing job opportunities. High awareness of the importance of communication skills might help the graduates to compete better upon venturing into the work force later [3]. Among the items with a high level of mean value is the ability to convey ideas in Bahasa Melayu either verbally or in writing. This indicated that the fourth year School of Education, FSSK, UTM students have good command of the language either in writing or speaking. This is due to the teaching and learning process being conducted in Bahasa Melayu; thus, becoming a factor of the students' ability to master the language verbally or in writing. Other than that, most HEI conducted teaching and learning in Bahasa Melayu, and it is one of the main entry requirements to the HEI [8]. The results of this study also showed a few items having low mean values in the group of fourth year School of Education, FSSK, UTM students. Despite the overall mean values for the communication skills level are high, some items possessed lower mean values compared to other items. Among the items with low item mastery are the ability to convey ideas in English verbally and the ability to convey ideas in English in writing. English proficiency either verbally or in writing were not fully mastered by the fourth year School of Education, FSSK, UTM students. This finding is in line with the study by Isha and Salmi [8], that stated skills involving writing and speaking in the international language i.e. English are not yet fully mastered by the graduates. In this context, the students should take their own initiative to master English or more than one language. According to study by Farawahida [2], language proficiency especially in English gives a significant impact that enables a person to secure a job.

The survey results found that the perception of the fourth year School of Education, FSSK students towards the critical thinking and problem-solving skills was at a high level. The results depicted good view of the ability of UTM students to master the critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This study was supported by Wilson [13], whereby active involvement of the students in learning and service learning activity enhanced the ability of the students to

identify new information required to think creatively, conclude, and solve actual problems. Critical thinking and problem-solving skills are important skills and became the elements that are actively developed by having the Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) process and restructuring of the form three PMR examination to PT3. A student who are able to master the skills of critical thinking and problem-solving has the advantage of fulfilling the demands of employer and the work market. Quoting the study in Farawahida [2], employers today emphasised on the capability of the graduates to possess generic skills such as the skill to solve problems and other skills that enable the graduate to be an all-rounder. Educator-to-be graduates should also possess this trait to allow them to penetrate the job market in the private sector.

The teamwork skills among the fourth year School of Education, FSSK, UTM students were recorded at a high level. This indicated that the educator-to-be students mastered the teamwork skills well. As stated in the study by Desi and Siti Anisah [1], among the characteristics of the Service Learning Model is to cooperate, i.e. the students are able to cooperate and help each other, work effectively in a group, and have mutual influence towards each other. The early stage of service learning activity normally requires the setting up of an organisation and working in groups. Due to that, the perception of the fourth year students towards teamwork skills was at a high level. Among the items with the highest level are the ability of the students to be engaged in the planning and synchronisation of the group results. In the opinion of the researcher, the results showed the attitude of the fourth year School of Education students that were able to work in groups and able to influence group members, allowing the item to reach the highest mean value. This data is also in agreement with the study by Noorazman [6] that showed the attribute comprising of the ability of students to be involved in the discussion and giving good ideas to be at a high level. Nevertheless, the teamwork skills not only can be determined by the ability of the students to be involved in the planning and synchronisation of the group results. Other items with low mean value were also found among the items in the teamwork skills. Among the items with low mean values compared to other items were to work effectively with group members to attain the same goals.

Lifelong learning skills and information management of the fourth year School of Education, FSSK, UTM students was at a high level. The results are in line with the study by Noraishah Tarni [7] that also recorded a high level of mean value. This showed that the students were able to manage the information obtained and relevant to their learning stages. These results depict something good to the educator-to-be graduates in order to pursue the challenging work environment. Nowadays, information is obtainable through various ways and the learning process is not merely just focused in the lecture hall, which could be the cause of the lack of authenticity of obtained information. In the capability of the students to master the lifelong learning and information management skills, some weaknesses were observed in this skill mastery.

This can be clearly seen in the data involving the management of information through informal learning, whereby it has a low mean value compared to other items. This indicated that the students were unable to manage information regarding informal learning. Informal learning, according to the constructivism theory, refers to the students building their own knowledge as a consequence of the interaction or relationship between their experience and own ideas [9]. According to this theory, students need to plan their own effective learning strategy, assess, and reflect on their own learning strategy. Entrepreneurship skills were depicted as having low mean values compared to other attributes of the soft skills. Although overall it was at a good level, it is worth to note and identify the sources that caused this skill to be among the lowest compared to other soft skill attributes. Among the weaknesses observed were the ability to seize business opportunities. However, the entrepreneurship skills of the fourth year School of Education, FSSK UTM students were at a high level that stated the entrepreneurship skills of public universities students were at a medium level. Both results are parallel to each other because this study was conducted on a small group, and the entrepreneurship skills of the group existed at a good level. The results from this study revealed that the fourth year School of Education, FSSK, UTM students' perception towards ethics and professional moral skills was at a high level. The students who underwent service learning activities were able to practice responsibility to the society besides practicing volunteerism and being ethical at all times. Being ethical should be practiced at all times to maintain the society's trust in an individual. Otherwise, the public will distrust the person if they are unethical. A study by Megat Ayop and Abd Halim [5] reported that if the lack of integrity and being unethical were left to persist, it could eliminate the trust of the community and tarnish someone's image and the country, as well as crippling strong corporate entity. Therefore, it is important for all parties to continue being ethical and professionally moral for the sake of keeping a good reputation. This study revealed that the perception of fourth year School of Education, FSSK UTM students towards leadership skill was at a high level. It indicated that the students' mastery towards soft skills were good. These findings are in line with the study by Suzanah Jumat *et al.* [11] regarding university students' participation in social activities, i.e. the capability to increase leadership motivation. Overall, the mean value for this skill was at a high level. However, despite good student mastery of the skill, some items possessed the lowest mean value compared to other items. The capability of the student to become a mentor to group members was among the items with low mean values. This matter could be resolved with the initiatives of the students and the institution as well, i.e. by helping the students to overcome their weaknesses. If this matter is properly addressed, the students will be able to overcome the weakness.

B. Research Question 2

Based on the analyses of this study, the researcher has identified two most dominant components of soft skills mastered by the students. The components are Communication Skills and Teamwork Skills. These two

components shared the same mean values and became the most dominant components despite other components having high mean values. This is due to the differences in point values.

Communication Skills and Teamwork Skills became among the soft skills that are able to be mastered by the fourth year School of Education, FSSK students. When analysed, communication skills are the most important skills in graduates especially to would-be teachers. This skill is also essential to be mastered well by each graduates because employers stressed on the importance of communication skills. In the opinion of the researcher, this skill is the most easiest to be mastered or perfected and became a dominant component because it involves every individuals on a daily basis. In the study by Salmi and Isha [8], the main constituent in an educational institution is communication because it is the medium in the process of conveying knowledge. Therefore, students are able to master this communication skill well. The results of this study indicated a positive attribute of the students before they commence to the working environment and able to fulfil the requirement of the employers. Countries such as the United Kingdom, United States of America, New Zealand, Australia, and Africa agreed to a consensus that gave a high priority to communication skills. Graduates having these skills besides academic qualifications, possess an advantage to secure job opportunities in an organisation. Indirectly, students who attended service learning activities are capable in mastering this skill in order to face the actual working environment.

Teamwork skills became among the dominant skills where students are exposed to working in a group while being involved in the learning activity such as service learning. To achieve a target, students need to cooperate among themselves in order to accomplish the same goals in an organisation. This skill is important to be mastered well by the students because employers require graduates who are capable of working in groups for the benefit of the organisation and work effectively. Therefore, this component became among the dominant ones compared to other components because the students are able to master them well.

V. CONCLUSION

As an overall, the results of this study implied that the perception of the fourth year School of Education, FSSK, UTM students who are involved in the learning activities towards soft skills showed a good condition. This was observed through the overall mean value that existed at a high level. This high level indicated that the fourth year School of Education, FSSK UTM students implicated in the learning activities in UTM were able to master the elements of soft skills. Students should always strive to ensure that these skills can be mastered well to fulfil the requirements of the employers who prioritise the elements of soft skills. This ability is also an added advantage to the students because it does not only involve technical skills, but also interpersonal skills.

In the study by Farawahida [2], employers do not only require workforce that is able to master technical skills, but also able to communicate well, motivated, able to think critically, and solve problems effectively. Therefore, it is vital for the graduates and HEIs to continue cultivating the soft skills for the requirement to produce holistic graduates.

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