ACCOUNTING SKILLS REQUIRED BY GRADUATES IN MEETING THE EXPECTATIONS OF EMPLOYERS

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Abstract
This study investigates the emphasis placed on technical and generic skills developed during undergraduates accounting courses from both graduates and employers perspectives. It is motivated by two issues. Calls by the accounting profession and international education committees regarding the professional adequacy of graduates. The result of the work will bridge the gap between the employer and employee by redirecting the committee necessary for accounting curriculum to refocus, remodel and redirect the syllabus or course of outline given to employee in their undergraduate days in order for them to meet up with the challenges of employment and the employers will find them worthy of being given necessary tasks to be accomplished. The topic of this study is accounting skills required by graduates in meeting the expectations of employers. Research has shown that the skills required of accounting graduates are not possessed and these are making employers to cry loud of the inadequacies and deficiencies observed during the course of their relationship with employees. The accounting graduates cannot perform salient things in the course of work such as data analysis and interpretations, Digital literacy and creativity, Global perception and cultural awareness, emotional intelligence and self-awareness, project management etc. New global business model and the digital age have shifted expectations of the work of accountants. Over 20 years, many accounting graduates felt comfortable claiming job success was largely attributed to the level of specialist knowledge (technical skills) acquired by the accountant in their business roles. With the passage of time, more recent studies have challenged the assertion that technical skills rank above those generic skills to the extent that where many now claim technical skills are presumed and it is the transferable generic skills that are associated with career success. The results revealed that existing undergraduates programme are failing in attempt to provide a broad-based general education together with a specialized professional education to meet the needs of employers of accounting graduates. The finding from this study suggests that employers regard technical skills as presumed in accounting graduates that the more quality for employability and career advancement.

Keywords: Accounting Skills, Employers, Generic Skillls, Digital literacy

Introduction

The context and dynamics of the global business environment has resulted in changes in the skills set required by accountants seeking to add value for their clients. These new business models have meant the horizon and scope of business is no longer limited by national boundaries. As suppliers of business information the international business environment has implications for accountants as 'knowledge professionals' helping to drive businesses forward. Many corporate entities now seek business opportunities in the global market place. Changing markets and advances in technology have manifested themselves in rapid changes for all stakeholders where business practices, markets and capital adjust and/or move as part of a relentless quest for marginal revenue.

In times of such change and development few would deny that the role of the traditional accountant as a mere score keeper is no longer a viable contributor to business. The changing role of the accountant has seen many commentators over the last 20 years from around the world criticise the skills set developed by students as graduates of under- graduate business courses. Some of the most vocal critiques have come from calls by accounting education committees in the USA. These observations in the USA have been mirrored by recommendations in Australia by professional accounting bodies. Collectively, these groups have called for change in the way in which accountants are educated. The need for change is based on a number of deficiencies identified in the skill sets that graduates typically bring to the workplace. see, CPA Australia, 1996; 2005; and other commentators, Henderson, 2001; Mathews, Jackson and Brown, 1990; Birkett, 1993; ICAA, 1998a, 1998b; 2001).

` There is some consensus which suggests that the skills of knowledge professionals cannot be nurtured efficiently in university courses where the curriculum is dominated by a raft of specialised technical skills. Some argue that requisite skills required by tomorrow's business leaders will include transferable technical skills along with generic, professional, ethical, and lifelong learning skills. 'Generic skill' as a label appears to be problematic as its definition has evolved in the literature over time and lacks precision. In the past the term generic skills was broad in that it was usually associated with those skills developed outside of the 'technical curriculum' and included, for example, general writing and interpersonal skills. (Bennett, Dunne and Carre, 2000; Lucas, Cox, Croudace and Milford, 2004; Whitefield and Kloot, 2006).

More recently the scope of the term generic skills has expanded to emphasize relevance to graduate outcomes in terms of the world of work and, more specifically, employability (Barrie, 2004).Articulated the current trends and the use of terms within the discourse when he wrote of more recent developments in the literature which called for professionals to be more generalist with specialist knowledge. He went further to cite examples of job descriptions that seek accountants with specific industry knowledge along with a range of generic skills which enable them to think 'outside the box'. The mixture of skills is seen as being necessary by employers as it helps them solve the diversity of business challenges. This raises the issue of whether there is convergence between accounting graduates' skills and skills sought by employers of graduates. This in turn raises two important questions: first, is there divergence between graduates and employers in terms of the skills developed in accounting courses? Secondly, if this is indeed the case, how do universities provide the accounting profession with suitably qualified graduates.

A review of the literature suggests few studies have undertaken a systematic review of this divergence, to the extent where the skills which employers deem important are compared with those skills which graduate accountants perceive to have been provided in their undergraduate accounting studies. To address this paucity in the literature, this study reports on accounting graduates' perceptions of the level of preparedness for employment of their attribute set acquired in their university studies. This investigation subsequently compares and contrasts the graduates' perceptions of skills developed in undergraduate studies and employers' perceptions of the desired graduate accountant's attribute set, in terms of convergence and divergence of skill sets, (Albrecht and Sack, 2000; Henderson, 2001)

Accounting Skills Required Accounting graduates

New global business models and the digital age have shifted expectations of the work of accountants. Over 20 years ago many accounting graduates felt comfortable claiming job success was largely attributed to the level of specialist knowledge (technical skills) acquired by the accountant in the business role. With the passage of time, more recent studies have challenged the assertion that technical skills rank above those generic skills to the extent where many now claim technical skills are presumed and it is the transferable generic skills that are associated with career success. Collectively the authors of these studies have lamented calls by employers generally, who argue that accounting education has failed to deliver suitably qualified graduates to meet their needs. The extent of the problem is largely manifest in the notion that graduates do not possess important generic skills. This skill set typically includes mastery of communication, teamwork, and leadership qualities.

Following on from the earlier studies which identified the paucity of the generic skills displayed by accounting graduates, a plethora of more recent investigations examined ways in which generic skills are best developed during undergraduate courses. Typically, these commentators have challenged educators to revisit their pedagogy and have questioned the relevance of course content (Tempone and Martin, 2003).

In the light of the preceding discussion it is clear that the general debate centres on the premise of researchers, practitioners and professional bodies that generic skills and job success in accounting are explicitly linked. Furthermore, some influential stakeholders have 'flexed their muscle' to ensure that the actual development of generic skills are clearly articulated in undergraduate course guides and taught within undergraduate accounting courses. One example is that of CPA Australia which, with 110,000 members, requires universities as part of their professional accreditation—to report how they incorporated generic skills into their courses using a generic skills matrix (http://www.cpacareers.com. au/study_options/acc_pol_guide.as). Consistent with this line of thinking, universities have developed policies that attempt to promote educational excellence and deliver business savvy graduates with the intellectual capacity required to make a contribution to society. An example of such a policy is one by Deakin University, Australia. The Deakin Advantage seeks to develop scholarship in technical skills in related disciplines, as well as skills and personal qualities which will serve graduates in their working lives beyond graduation.

The primary qualities identified in the Deakin Advantage aim to promote generic skill development consistent with those required of various stakeholders. Clearly, such directives and policies demonstrate a will to develop a desired skill set for graduates which encompasses inter alia, lifelong learning, technical skills training, along with oral, written and interpersonal communication skills as well as exposure to organisational skills and technology. Further to these skills, some researchers have noted the rise in prominence of ethical behaviour in the desired skill set and reported the importance of professionalism and ethical conduct in a range of discipline areas. (Barrie, 2004). Howieson (2003)

According to Dr. Olaoye 2015,the following are the skills, graduates should further seek for:

- Communication skills
- Team work and collaboration skills
- Problem-Solving and analytical skills
- Time management and organizations skills
- Leadership and motivaton skills
- Adaptability and flexibility
- Critical thinking and creativity
- Digital literacy and technical skills
- Data analysis and interpretations
- Global perception and cultural awareness
- Emotional intelligence and self awareness
- Project management
- Business acumen and commercial awareness

Promoting Ethical Behaviour as Part of Accounting Skills

The spate of high profile corporate collapses in the USA and other parts of the world have seen commentators challenge the role of accountants and their ability to act in the best interest of broader society (Leitsch, 2006). Employers have responded by revisiting their skill preference set to incorporate high standards of ethical conduct on the part of their employees. Practical necessity brought about by changes in legislative pronouncements has meant that unacceptably low standards of ethical behaviour can leave corporate managers exposed to litigation and severe penalties.

In an effort to raise the standard of ethical reasoning by graduates, a suggested a renewed emphasis in teaching ethics in accounting courses has the potential to restore credibility to the accounting profession. Clearly, researchers are of the unified opinion that accounting educators and university curriculum have for too long overlooked the need for heightened ethical conduct as a core graduate skill. Evidence that the employee market place is changing regarding the level of moral reasoning is supported by the findings of the British Columbia Business Council in its biennial employee skills survey. In the 2002 survey results from employers showed 'ethical and honest' behaviour ranked fourth, whereas two years later (2004), honesty and ethics climbed to the highest ranking.

Despite the efforts of various stakeholders within higher education to develop generic skills, some have argued that it is unrealistic for universities to guarantee that graduates will possess the necessary generic skills to meet the demands of employers (Lucas et al., 2004; Cranmer, 2006). More specifically, argued that, at best, universities should only guarantee that students have the opportunity to learn and develop generic skills and abilities during undergraduate study. Studies such as Cranmers (2006), examining the university sector's contribution to the development of generic skills (identified in the UK as employable skills), casts doubt on the assumption that these skills can be effectively developed within the classroom.

Adding to this debate a study by Robley, Whittle and Murdoch-Eaton, (2005), examined alternate pedagogy of 'embedding' and 'in parallel' (generic) skill development within a medical programme of study. They concluded that the embedded approach with appropriate skills development mapping was the superior skill developmental approach. By way of contrast Cranmer (2006) suggests that academic efforts to teach employable skills are at best producing mixed results and therefore resources would be better utilized in increasing employment based training and work experience for recent graduates. Indeed, some universities offer accounting courses that include, as part of their core, a period (up to 12 months) of practical placement. It is envisaged that this exposure to the work environment assists in the development of a range of skills including technical and generic skills. The notion that it is difficult to develop generic skills in a university setting is a view that would seem to be supported by the work of Lucas et al (2004). Who reported the results of a qualitative study in the UK, claimed that generic skill development is a tacit process, developed over life and as such it is best not developed in standalone modules.

They went further to claim that 'consequently the concept of 'skills development' in the sense in which it has been adopted by UK higher education has yet to be fulfilled within the experience of students. Barrie, S. C. (2004) A research-based approach to generic graduate attributes

Stakeholders Expectations

The preceding discussion identifies a diversity of stakeholder needs, where universities for their part 'produce' accounting graduates to the best of their abilities and within resource constraints. Once students have progressed through their course, employers seek 'work ready' graduates who are able to add value to their business. Adding an additional layer of complexity to this relationship is heightened competition by universities for school leavers. Competition for commencing students leaves universities that offer accounting majors struggling to find the best students as some students are drawn to alternative business majors (Albrecht and Sack, 2000). Researchers have noted that reduced demand for accounting courses in some countries is a product of many factors including an accounting curriculum that is outdated and unable to prepare students to be future business leaders.

In recognition of this reality, shared concern over the last 20 years has seen an array of accounting education change initiatives, which have attempted to address the problem. In Australia, for example, the seminal work of Mathews et al. (2010) saw a thorough review of the (then) 49 publicly funded institutions and their ability to deliver competent graduates to a rapidly changing business environment. Using a range of qualitative and quantitative data the findings of the Mathews report recommended, inter alia, additional resources for the cash strapped sector and the need to realign the range of generic skills developed in accounting programmes. Sadly, with the passing of more than 15 years, some commentators are still wondering why many of the Mathews reforms have not made their way into government policy. This is not to say that nothing has been achieved, but rather educators and universities seem to chase an evolution of systematic change where the educational environment remains at least one step behind employment market needs.

As students and employers are key stakeholders in the future of the accounting profession this investigation has a dual focus. First, it seeks to examine which skills recent accounting graduates thought were important to acquire in their undergraduate studies in order to achieve success in the accounting profession. Specifically, the study re-examines some of the issues raised by the Mathews Report, particularly those related to the emphasis placed on technical and generic skill development in undergraduate accounting courses from the perspective of recent graduates. Education for Business, 76(4), pp. 193–198.

Convergence and Divergence Views on Accounting Skills

Most business schools around the world would include somewhere in their mission statement the desire to educate graduates to a level where they meet the requirements of their profession (in this case the accounting profession) and needs of potential employers, that is to be 'work ready'. To understand more fully the implications of this relationship the scope and purpose of this study is to identify and report on accounting graduates' perceptions of the level of preparedness for employment of their skill set, largely acquired during their time at university , Clanchy and Ballard (1995) argued that, at best.

Comparing and contrasting graduates' and employers' perceptions of the desired graduate accountant's inconclusiveness. It is evident that the expectations of employers in terms of the skills required from graduates are not in line with those skills developed in university.

It could be argued that graduates perceived that there was sufficient emphasis placed on these technical skills in their courses. Employer representatives also believed that graduates were sufficiently prepared in terms of these technical skills to commence work as a graduate accountant. These were the only two skill areas of convergence. Although graduates also viewed computer skills as being sufficiently emphasised, employers were not as preoccupied with this technical skill, thus it was labelled as a source of divergence between the two groups. In making this assertion, it should be noted that feedback from some employers indicated that the organisation was prepared to provide training specific to their business needs in terms of computer skills and applications, Clanchy and Ballard (1995)

The generic skills emphasised by employers were team skills, leadership potential, verbal communication and interpersonal skills. Research has also shown a clear gap between graduate perceptions of skills acquired in their university studies and employer expectations. There would appear to be divergence between the development of generic skills in undergraduate courses and the emphasis placed on the acquisition of these skills by employers. Overall, there were no generic skills that provided convergence between accounting course emphasis and employers' expectations.

The previous analysis has demonstrated that graduates perceived that there was an under-emphasis on generic skill development in their degree studies. (Lucas et al., 2004) This is a seemingly problematic finding in this study given that key stakeholders (including, educators, employers and professional accounting bodies) are unified in their call for the greater development of such skills in graduates, (Lucas et al., 2004)

Sills Required for Career Advancement

In an effort to understand more comprehensively the importance of generic skills required by graduates, additional analysis was undertaken to test the importance that recent graduates placed on technical and generic skills to advance their careers. The purpose of this analysis was to test the importance of the generic skills for graduates and, as such, may lend further support to a review of the academic and professional pathways to develop such skills. (Albin and Crockett, 2011)

Interestingly, technical skills in the form of 'key accounting and associated skills' ranked fifth in terms of skills for career progression well below the two more frequently cited skills of 'communication' (ranked first) and 'problem-solving' skill (ranked second) categories. Therefore, it would appear that graduates perceive various generic skills as being amongst the most important qualities required for a successful accounting career. (Albin and Crockett, 2011) This finding concurs with those from other studies which have found that the accounting profession, which was once driven by a body of specialist technical skills, has now moved on, where technical accounting skills have now given way to a broader more generic skills set.

In a similar vein, Opinions of graduates have it that ethical reasoning is ranked relatively low in importance by graduates for desired skills for career progression. This finding is a little bewildering as a number of other studies have reported the rise to prominence of ethical values as a desired skill since the spate of high profile corporate collapses (Earley and Kelly, 2004). Thus, it appears that recent graduates see the value of emphasis on ethical reasoning, relative to the other skills, as being less important. This finding lends some credibility to the findings of Eynon and Stevens (2016) who suggested that the empathy of accounting students toward moral reasoning is lower than those of other graduates. Further, this finding is somewhat disturbing as some of today's graduates may well be tomorrow's business leaders and, in view of recent well documented corporate failures, they need to be made aware of the notion that ethical reasoning is a vital skill for the future of business

Conclusions

The study reveals differences between what graduates feel is taught in their university course and the skills required for career progression when compared with the skills employers are seeking in graduates. The nature of this divergence illustrates that there needs to be greater emphasis on generic skills as preparation for employment in accounting. The results also reveal that existing undergraduate programmes are failing in attempts to provide a broad-based general education together with a specialised professional education to meet the needs of employers of accounting graduates. The findings from this study suggest that employers regard technical skills as presumed in accounting graduates and it is the generic skill development in graduates that are the more veiled quality for employability and career enhancement.

If this were the case, reduced pressure on the curriculum would allow universities to refocus their energies on a more broadly- based course structure that enhances the educational experience and the development of generic skills of accounting graduates. If this approach were adopted accounting education would take on two distinct phases. During the first phase, at university, the primary objective of the course would be to 'educate' and as such develop a range of generic skills. In contrast phase two, largely administered by the professional accounting bodies would be to 'train' graduates. It is during the training phase that students would learn a range of technical skills applicable to the accounting profession. If this holistic model of accounting education were adopted students would be firstly educated and subsequently trained. As a result of the realignment of accounting education between universities and professional bodies, it may well be that accounting graduates educated in this manner would be better equipped to meet the demands of employers and the market place.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

1. People with structured work experience and employer of labour should be involved in degree course design and delivery. This can be done when the committee for curriculum planner is set up and should be included
2. Some Accounting skills for sel\f development and business growth are best developed outside the university setting and nurtured over time. Skills such as data analysis, emotional inteligence and self awareness, business and Project management etc should be sought after at Accounting Professional bodies Centre
3. Other possible ways that should be investigated in a collaborative fashion, to develop further the skills of new graduates.
4. Moving technical accounting skills and some educational requirements to the education brief of the professional accounting bodies is also recommended as solutions to the problems of skills deficiencies in graduates. Professional bodies like ICAN,ICAA,CPA etc will be ready to incorporate it, into their curriculum design

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