

Student enfranchisement in business undergraduate studies

GARY MARCHIORO¹

MARIA M. RYAN

HELEN CRIPPS

Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia.

Aligning business undergraduate programs with industry skill and work requirements is reshaping higher education. This approach is now an acknowledged and strategic initiative to react to business demands in the education sphere. The framework for learning generic skills has been well developed and documented in reference to employer groups and articulated through many university programs. However, the development, monitoring and evaluation of the uptake of these skills using student views are not well documented. This paper presents university students' perceptions of their personal generic skills capabilities. The literature addresses the need for these skills to be inclusive of personal attributes in conjunction with requisite technical abilities. Clearly defining and understanding these personal attributes has been a challenge for educators. The paper offers student feedback to further develop our understanding of the specific skills required in the work place from students' perspectives.

Focus group discussions using business students were conducted at the completion of a client project that involved creating a strategic business plan. Overall results stressed the pivotal role of client contact and a more realistic learning environment created via work experience. Students stated that traditional assessments did not create a level of enthusiasm and interest to learn when compared to the client work project. In addition, students noted that working in a team, for a real client and with real deadlines highlighted the necessity for personal skills development. The results from this study will be merged with data collected on employability skills to develop a framework to monitor the development of student skills across a defined study period. The framework is designed to assist students to be responsible for their own employability skills development. Students should engage in both academic content requirements and in their own personal development process within a monitored and self managed framework. The transference of personal attributes and skills is reshaping academic practice in course development and has added a new dimension to teaching and learning. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, 2011, 12(2), 103-110*)

Keywords: Student outcomes, employability skills and teamwork.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching a relevant and marketable set of graduate attributes and skills to enhance employability is reshaping academic practice. High levels of youth unemployment and the consequent spotlight on job achievement statistics from individual business schools has resulted in business schools examining the extent of their alignment with industry needs (Jackson & Chapman, 2009). In this study, final year undergraduate students from an Australian university were tasked with completing an industry based client work project. In preparation, the necessary skills (personal and academic) were developed through the curriculum in a progressive fashion to help prepare students for work placements. They were required to develop a strategic business plan for their client, working in small groups. Students were tasked with organising client meetings to obtain information and develop rapport with the client. A variety of target industries, from government agencies through to sole traders, formed the industry placement pool. Students were also expected to share and explore their feelings and experiences as they worked in the client environment using reflective journals and conducting debriefing sessions. The intention was to generate an atmosphere of self-awareness, self efficacy and knowledge of their personal development and growth over the semester. The final results of these experiences were presented as part of their business plan to a panel of judges.

Experiential learning can be defined as the practice of connecting the curriculum and the community (Elyer, 2009). The benefits derived from experiential learning as a result of working in groups carrying out real business projects has been well documented in the literature (Burns, 1978; Dean, 1982; De los Santos & Jensen, 1985; Dommeyer, 1986; Malhotra, Taschian, & Jain, 1989; Thistlewaite & Zimmerley, 1978). Elyer (2009) places considerable emphasis on this style of learning as one in which knowledge is transferred between the curricular context and an outside context: "The challenge for liberal educators is to design learning environments and instruction so that students will be able to use what they learn in appropriate new contexts" (p. 24).

Kuh (2008) has noted the importance of enhancing student engagement as a means of increasing overall student success. Participation in high impact activities such as seminars, learning communities, and service learning are key ingredients. For example, in these programs, field-based experiential learning with community partners is an instructional strategy — and often a required and explicit part of the course. The learning centres on giving students direct experience with issues they are studying in the curriculum and problem-solving in the community (Kuh, 2008). A key element in these programs is the opportunity students have to both apply what

¹ Gary Marchioro: g.marchioro@ecu.edu.au

they are learning in real world settings and reflect on their service experiences in a classroom setting. These programs model the idea that giving something back to the community is an important college outcome, and that working with community partners is preparation for citizenship, work, and life.

The so-called real world environment accelerates learning and skills development, employability skills and produces better equipped and prepared students. Communication, problem-solving, critical thinking skills and developing work ethics are a few of the street smart employability skills needed (Ryan & Ogilvie, 2005). In addition, workplaces are now becoming increasingly culturally diverse. The development of an international perspective and cross cultural sensitivities, particularly within the team environment, is now a requisite skill within university graduate attribute statements (Cranmer, 2006).

Generic graduate attributes have been addressed in various forms at the unit, course and university levels throughout the literature (BHERT, 2003). Student assessment of their skill development according to generic graduate attributes has been covered in the literature. Usually this student assessment has required students to rate the development of their graduate attributes such as communication, problem-solving, ethical and social sensitivity, discipline knowledge and teamwork skills. Most of this student self assessment has been of a quantitative nature, based on the generic attribute labels generated by academics or employers (BHERT, 2003). The purpose of this paper is different. This study examines student's perceptions and reflections on their learning experience in relation to skills development whilst working on a client project. The aim was to ascertain student assessment and feedback on their personal and academic skills level and level of job readiness. A qualitative approach was utilised via focus groups and in-depth discussions, and students were required to reflect on their work experience using their own language and vocabulary.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employers consider the divide between theory and practice needs to be addressed by exposing students to real life business examples and practical experiences while studying in higher education (Jackson & Chapman, 2009). Anecdotal evidence suggests that employers find graduates often lack some of the more personal attributes and skills required in professional employment positions (Institute of Directors, 2007). According to the Business Council of Australia (BCA), industry considers graduates as not being job ready, lacking the skills required to successfully apply disciplinary knowledge and add value in a globalised, knowledge economy (BCA, 2006; BIHECC, 2007). The students' ability to successfully carry out technical tasks is not the issue; rather it is the manner in which they perform these tasks. There is a recognised need for both entry level graduate employees and ongoing employees to exhibit a broader range of personal attributes which traditionally have been learnt in the work environment in both formal and informal situations (Candy & Crebert, 1991). It is often this broad range of skills that traditional practicums seek to develop prior to the student formally entering the work place.

Research within the retail industry (Wright, Cushman, & Nicholson, 2002) found a difference in overall perceptions between industry participants and academic staff in ranking attributes for success. This research clearly states that affective or personal skills are more important than a simple emphasis on cognitive skills. Consequently, the importance of communication skills was fully acknowledged and incorporated into the student survey. Personal attributes such as communication and interpersonal skills, self management, initiative and enterprise help define being job ready, according to the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI, 2002). Research by Muldoon (2009) investigated the relationship between part time work and the attainment of desirable skills and personal attributes. The most frequently cited work skills were people skills and communication skills (Muldoon, 2009). However, the value and importance placed on skills were inversely related between the employers and students. Employers rated interpersonal and personal qualities more highly than students. Students rated academic skills more highly than interpersonal skills because they believe these skills are the prerequisites to gaining employment (Muldoon, 2009).

The most often cited required skill or attribute was the ability to work effectively in a team environment (ACCI, 2002; AIG, 2008; Archer & Davison, 2008; Confederation of Business Industry, 2007; Harvey, 1997; Jackson & Chapman, 2009). Team work is often discussed in the literature in conjunction with other skills such as problem-solving and communication (Confederation of Business Industry, 2007; Jackson & Chapman, 2009). According to the ACCI (2002), team work skills are required for productive working relationships in all facets of industry. Table 1 aims to summarise the various skills and attributes from team and individual perspectives as referenced in the literature. It also lists the so-called real world skills and academic skills as an interesting point of comparison. Real world and personal attributes far outweigh the academic essential skills list.

TABLE 1:
List of essential skills required by employers

Team skills	Personal attributes	Real world skills	Academic skills
Supportive to achieve the results	Honesty and integrity	Punctuality	Basic literacy skills
Support the contribution of others	Enthusiasm	Reliability	Cross-cultural and international outlook
Members share information and ideas	Commitment	Problem-solving	Life-long learning
Are open to the ideas of others	Positive self-esteem	Hardworking	Numeracy and technological skills
Keep the goal and the mission in mind	A positive, 'can do,' attitude	Balanced attitude to work and home life	Basic oral communication skills
Avoid "winning" or looking good at the expense of others	Initiative and enterprise	Ability to meet deadlines	
Team working and co-operation skills	Sense of humour	Ability to deal with pressure	
	Commonsense	Ability to plan and organise	
	Adaptability	Customer Service	
	Motivation	Personal presentation	

(Adapted from: ACCI, 2002; AIG, 2008; Archer & Davison, 2008; Confederation of Business Industry, 2007; Harvey, 1997; McIlveen, 2008; Scott & Fuller, 2009; Witzel, 2007).

Industry demands have prompted universities to formally incorporate skills required and identified by employer groups into the curriculum. However, there have been questions regarding the ability to assess whether these skills have actually been learnt and developed as part of a student's higher education experience (Atkins, 1999). Moreover, there also appears to be a gap between teaching the skills and the actual application of these skills in the workforce (Ladyshewsky, 2006; Scott & Fuller, 2009).

Kolb (1984) refined the concept of experiential learning. According to Kolb, "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 41). Research by Watson (2006) suggests managers are best taught through reflection on their personal experiences. Eyler (2009) continues this theme by stating that experiential learning also needs to involve considerable and deliberate self-reflection in order to work best; she writes "Experiential education also identifies the practices necessary for achieving these outcomes, particularly the use of structured reflection to help students link experience with theory and, thereby, deepen their understanding and ability to use what they know" (p. 26). Kolb supports this stance by stating that knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and then transforming it. Experiential learning is a continuous process, grounded in experience. Importantly, learning also involves transactions between the person and the environment, and creating knowledge from the transaction between social knowledge and personal knowledge (Kolb, 1984).

Therefore, it follows that the skilling of future managers should consider the use of reflection in the classroom to create a greater practical impact in the workplace. It is suggested by Loo (2002) that reflective learning around group work can also help facilitate learning interpersonal skills. Loo's research found that students using reflective learning in group work situations displayed evidence of being able to both identify their shortcomings and then to take steps to change their behaviours to more effectively work within a team. The predominance of this approach was then investigated. Research in student reflection and learning conducted from practicums was found to be predominantly based within the teaching, nursing and counselling sectors. Notably, business-based practicum research is less commonly reported in the literature. This study provides

business students' reflections on their learning experience whilst conducting a client project carried out in a team-based work environment.

METHODOLOGY

Five focus group discussions (10-12 participants per group) were held with business undergraduate students in a third year bachelor of business unit. An additional focus group and five in-depth interviews were also conducted with students in a similar postgraduate unit. A total sample of 69 students was achieved. Students were contacted by one of the researchers (not their lecturer) and were given the opportunity to participate in the focus group discussions. All students contacted were keen to participate.

The focus groups were conducted at the conclusion of the semester. As indicated earlier, students undertook a client project, working in small teams to generate a strategic business plan. It was, therefore, opportunistic at the end of the semester to explore their immediate feelings and overall experiences. As most students had participated in previous client/work experience projects throughout their degree, it allowed students to reflect more fully and critically on their overall university work placement experiences.

Prior to the commencement of each focus group and in-depth interview, each student completed a written reflection on their experiences. Students were encouraged to reflect on their work experience and write their introspections. The following broad prompts were given to assist students:

- What was the best aspect of working on a client project?
- What was the most challenging aspect of working on a client project?
- List the skills that were important to you in carrying out the client project.
- What was the most significant skill you learnt through undertaking the client project?

As a quantitative measure, students were also asked to rate on a scale of 1 – 10 (with 10 being very likely), the likelihood of recommending the client project experience to a friend doing the unit next semester. A final question was posed asking students to rate on a scale of 1 – 10 (with 10 being extremely relevant), 'How relevant to your career do you think your client project participation will be?' General demographic questions such as part/full time student, previous work experience and overseas/ local student were also collected. Students were advised of their rights and were assured anonymity. University ethics clearance was obtained for all data collection methods in this study.

The focus groups were facilitated by two of the researchers. Within each focus group, students were required to break into smaller groups (two or three students) and brainstorm their experiences in working for clients. They then discussed these experiences with the larger group. This enabled the researchers to talk intimately with one or two students within the group as well as within the dynamics of the focus group. Students summarised their thoughts on individual whiteboards and these summaries were transcribed for further analysis. The focus groups discussed students' feelings and experiences during their client work. Students were asked what skills they used to complete the client work. They were prompted to organise these skills in terms of personal skills, skills acquired from previous units and skills they acquired in their current (third year) unit. Finally, the discussion centred on students listing the skills they needed but did not have or found difficult to gain.

Student reflections were transcribed and the quantitative responses were analysed using SPSS software. Notes from the focus group discussions, the whiteboard summaries and researcher notes taken during the discussions were transcribed. A rich source of textual data was obtained. Textual analysis was used to summarise and clarify themes from the data. Three researchers from the team (including one researcher who was not present during data collection) reviewed the transcripts and independently coded the data. Summary tables were established and cross referenced. Codings were then discussed, with differentiating concepts recoded and agreed upon. Finally, all codings were cross referenced for validity and reliability (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The resulting output was substantial. The following results section reports the findings from the two rating questions, and discusses main themes developed from the textual analysis.

RESULTS

The quantitative data consisted of two rating questions. The first question related to the likelihood of recommending the client project work to their friends. The literature on student satisfaction has shown the

measure 'recommending to friends' to be a prime indicator in measuring satisfaction (Marzo-Navarro, Pedraja-Iglesias & Rivera-Torres, 2005). The sample had a mean score of 7.5 (mode 8; median 8) for likelihood of recommending the client project to friends. The result was highly skewed to the right, indicating students were positive toward recommending the client work experience. International students (mean 7.7) were more inclined to recommend the client project than local students (7.1). Part time students (6.4) were not as keen to recommend the group project to friends when compared to full time students (7.9).

Students rated their perception of the relevance of the client project to their future career. The sample mean was 7.6 (mode 8; median 8) again indicating a positive client work experience with a strong perception of future work relevance. Once again, international students tended to be more positive (7.9) than local students (7.3) in the sample. Noteworthy, was the rating of how highly relevant the experience was viewed as being for their future career. The quantitative results reflected a high degree of optimism towards work experience with little differences based on either part or full time studies or work experience. International students, however, were particularly keen on client work, in spite of the difficulty they encountered with cross cultural differences and language barriers. This could be attributed to their positive attitude toward team-based assessment

Student Discussions and Reflections

Four major themes emerged from the combined focus group discussions, reflections, researcher notes and observations. These are discussed in the following paragraphs using quotes to further enhance and illustrate the emergent themes. Themes were categorised under the headings real world learning, teamwork skills, cultural diversity and business protocol.

Real world learning

The reality of the client work experience was clearly identified as an important benefit. Students were enthusiastic to assist a real business and better understand how one operates. They reflected feelings of excitement and interest in dealing with a real client and being able to put theory into practice. Student realisation that their work could be implemented was significant, as illustrated by the following quotes:

Being able to complete a project that had some significance – e.g. industry will use the report - gave the task added value to me...

Knowing results were being used for a real company was the most important part to me...

Having someone appreciative of anything we can find out for them...

Being able to interact with industry clients and help them identify research...

Being able to help a client find the answers to their research objectives and management decision problems...

Learning what are the realistic needs of organisations in the real world...

It was evident that a heightened learning environment was created by the real work experience. Students stated that case studies, real world scenarios and problems did not create the same level of enthusiasm and interest to learn as the client work projects. In addition, students noted that working in a team, for a real client and with real deadlines, highlighted the necessity for personal skills development. Students identified the second most important aspect of the client work as being the ability to improve particular skills. These skills were more often personal rather than academic, and included communication, time and organisational skills:

...the best aspect was to improve my communication skills... team work can share different ideas and opinions with other members to enrich the content of work... I learnt how to effectively work in a team...

...working with different personalities in the group and working with many ideas and making them into reality and learning different skills from different people...

...to experience how to overcome conflicts and think outside the box...

Generic skills such as team work, communication, time management, problem-solving and research and analytical skills discussed in the literature by academics and employers were also mentioned by the students. Students predominantly focused on the development of their own attitudinal skills rather than discipline and cognitive skills. This is contrary to research by Muldoon (2009) that found students rated discipline or work

skills, rather than personal skills, as being most important. In this study, students acknowledged the need to develop interpersonal skills, particularly in a team environment. They described these skills explicitly and showed a high level of awareness of their own needs and personal growth achievements.

Teamwork skills

Teamwork is a skill frequently cited as required by employers. It also rates in the top three soft skills required for innovation - a key factor identified by the Australian Industry Group (AIG, 2006) as an internationally competitive requirement. Team work skills cover a range of competencies. In this sample, students focused strongly on the personal attributes required in the team environment. These skills were identified by students as crucial to the overall success of the client project. Team work skills were mentioned by 57 students as the key skills required in the project. The second most important key skills were personnel attributes, including communication and time management skills.

Client work within the business degree course is often conducted in a team-based environment. Even though most students had previously experienced teamwork, they still noted basic team skills in their list of required skills. For example, students found it challenging in the team environment to listen and accommodate team members' opinions. Students were willing to admit they found it difficult to have the required patience and to "...tolerate the confusion... so I could see where some of the members were coming from." Students also found it difficult to balance other's ideas and to "compromise", "stay calm" and have "poise" within the group setting. The difficulty in accommodating thoughts and merging ideas was one aspect that was continually listed as a problem area. Students listed patience, listening, conflict resolution, and anger management skills as the most useful to complete the work experience project. The need to learn "...how to brainstorm in an effective manner" was also listed. Students' self awareness of their lack of required skills was highlighted by the added pressure of working for a real client with real time frames.

Cultural diversity

Student groups in this sample were self selected. Many groups were a combination of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This proved a significant issue for working coherently in teams. The focus groups reported a high degree of tension within mixed cultural and ethnic groups. Students felt they were not equipped to "...deal with the diversity" inherent in these groups. As stated by a Chinese member of a group:

We would have a meeting and then go off and talk together to work out what we had to do.... We just didn't understand what the others were doing... hard to work with students from different countries -we had Indian, Sri Lankan, Malaysian and Chinese in our group...

Cultural diversity is a growing global phenomenon and one that students need specific skills to manage effectively. Students indicated a need for patience, a skill heightened in mixed cultural situations. Adapting to different cultural work ethics also proved difficult. This cultural gap was evident not only between students but also between the students and the client. Communicating with local companies highlighted the fact that many students did not have the required knowledge or understanding of correct protocols for phone, email communication and dress standards.

Business protocol

A majority of the students interviewed were from the 'Gen Y' age group. Gen Yers are considered to be computer and internet competent and multi-taskers with a global perspective (McCordle & Wolfinger, 2009). This research highlights the lack of required personal skills to effectively integrate this knowledge. Students indicated that they can more easily recognise the dynamics inherent in global business than the required face-to-face skills implicit in communication skills. Often these situations highlighted underlying skills that were unique to the students' own experience and culture. For example, some students noted a lack of self confidence in communicating with clients. In these cases, their own perceived lack of knowledge in correct business language and effective communication techniques were mentioned. Students found mastering verbal communication skills across different facets difficult:

The language to use when talking with industry was a skill I felt I needed...

How to be a consultant... how do I give customer service?

How to give critical advice in a good way when necessary?

Deliver negative information...in a positive manner...so it is easier to deliver to the client.

Students felt their “casual” language was not appropriate for the business setting, despite familiarity with communicating electronically (Young, 2008). Generation Y’s lack the face-to-face communication techniques across a broad range of situations. When prompted, students felt they were not confident about client interaction and needed guidance on how to word questions and the type of questions to ask. Implementing ways to overcome these explicit limitations can assist in building self confidence and producing the required can-do attitude required by employers (Witzel, 2007).

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

These findings indicate that generic skills are more accurately characterised as a suite of skills that ultimately depend on each individual student’s level of personal growth, cultural background and life experiences. As indicated by Kolb (1984), experiential learning is a process that underpins the development of knowledge through the individual’s transformation of experience and self reflection. Therefore, assessment of these skills requires the combination of a qualitative approach with the typical rating assessments already designed by some universities in monitoring skills transference across a degree.

The results from this study will be merged with data collected from industry and structured to develop a framework for monitoring the development of skills from student’s perceptions across their studies. The aim is to help educate students to take responsibility for their own skills development. By allowing students to reflect on their own performance when carrying out client projects, they can more fully engage in academic content and their own personal development process. The change in emphasis from traditional knowledge and cognitive domains to more personal, practical and affective domains is noteworthy. The key is to actively engage students to reflect on how they are developing against employability skills requirements. The literature defines the academic perspective on graduate generic attributes (Barrie, 2006) and industry’s perspective on the make-up of these employability skills. However, the student perspective is the missing link in the process. Students in this sample were keen to participate: “Better to fail and get confused in the class environment – than fail at work.”

The findings of this research indicate that the development of an evaluation and reflection mechanism for business practicums may help improve the final learning outcomes. Hopefully, it will assist in the development of the necessary skills and attributes that will better equip students to participate more effectively in the knowledge economy. On a critical level, students need to be able to assess their own ability as they undertake work placements and fully understand and acknowledge their own growth and development. This will further enhance student confidence, develop self efficacy and create a stronger student voice and driver in their overall development.

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