

IMPACT OF WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING ON MASTERS OF BUSINESS

ADMINISTRATION STUDENTS: EMPLOYERS' PERSPETIVE

Dr.vijay kumar, Dr.K.Padmaja, Dr. Arifa

Department of MBA

vijaymbaislec@gmail.com, kasturipadmajambaislec@gmail.com, arifambaislec@gmail.com

[ISL Engineering College.](#)

International Airport Road, Bandlaguda, Chandrayangutta Hyderabad - 500005 Telangana, India

ABSTRACT

The current study empirically investigates the extent to which the private universities in Pakistan prepare work-ready students at Masters of Business Administration level. Mixed method approach was applied to collection of data. Stratified sampling technique was employed for selecting 30 human resource managers from the tertiary sector. In all, questionnaires were administered to collect quantitative data from 30 human resource managers and sixty five employees. For qualitative measure interviews of 5 manager operation were conducted. Significant result ($p < 0.031$) for the measure of "relevant degree" revealed that employers considered degree to be an important factor for recruitment; employability skills were considered necessary by the employers and employees for sustaining a job. Employees regarded employability skills to be crucial for sustaining a job. Qualitative results also indicated that personal attributes were considered more important by the employers. The study recommends the provision of a database monitored by universities and organizations to facilitate the process of preparing future employees in accordance with the need of the industry.

Key words: Work-integrated learning, Employability Skills, Compatibility, University-Industry partnership

Introduction

Universities and industries constitute two basic components of society and respectively take up the responsibility for social development (Powell, Tindal, & Millwood, 2008). Being inherent parts of society, both pursue the common goal of enhancing socio-economic development but despite all the claims made by the educational institutions, there is a growing concern among employers that masters of business administration (MBA, henceforth) graduates lack adequate employability skills that are preferred in the global market. Woods and King (2002) comment on the practice of successful managers who respond to the need of a global market and prefer employability skills in employees: industry requires skills of leadership (Brown and Fritz, 1993), conflict management (Andelt, Barrett & Bosshamer 1997), teamwork (Kay & Russette, 2000), motivation (Rainbird, 2000), adaptability (Schmidt, 1999), and creativity (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998).

Similarly, communication skills are essentials tools for the smooth functioning of administrative tasks (Coplin, 2003); students may learn to transfer their academic skills into workplace setting (Atkins, 1999); personal attributes (Martin and Stains, 1994). Additionally, critical thinking prepares students to analyze situations from a variety of angles before making their judgment (Billing, 2003) and is considered integral for service related

workplaces.

The study intends to focus on the utilization of time spent in academic institutions in accordance with the future need of the industry and make this experience more productive and beneficial by enhancing employability skills in students (Hewitt, 2005). In order to implement this, the current curriculum in Pakistan requires a radical shift to translate these conceptual objectives into a concrete reality by preparing students as a readily available work-force.

Statement of the Problem

Educational institutions in Pakistan tend to become inward looking units (Ranis et al. 2000) whereas the economic climate in Pakistan places demands on the educators to take practical steps to connect students to the wider market and make the best use of intellectual capital: Sampson (2013) demonstrates a similar situation insists on utilizing human capital and other resources to their fullest:

“At the current reckless rate of exploitation and manhandling, we face the threat of waking up one day to find that our economies have been debased beyond recognition and our social and institutional structures have been gruesomely mismanaged at the detriment of this and future generations.”

Masters of business Administrations is regarded as a successful career option for many university graduates (Hay & Hodgkinson, 1996), due to which the Pakistan has witnessed mushroom growth of universities offering this program; this particular discipline offers several benefits to individuals and organizations alike. Despite acquiring a degree in their respective area of expertise, the most intimidating question faced by all graduates might very well be some relevant job experience; in view of this situation it is hypothesized that work-integrated learning may offer practical solution to students by incorporating employability skills on-campus thus preparing work- students; the cultivation of these skills as well as developing the right aptitude can help integrate theory with practice (Little and Harvey, 2006). Such practice may be broadly categorized as work-integrated learning (WIL) - it is a systematic educational framework that aims to blend theoretical knowledge and employability skills in students for better job placements in future (Martin, Fleming, Ferkins, Wiersma & Coll, 2010).

The purpose of the current study is to find out the efficiency level of the educational industry in fulfilling the need of the tertiary industry by gathering employers' perceptions; the study also intends to purpose the need for establishing coordinating units between educational institutions and tertiary sector. In view of this perception, educational industry is required to match its learning-teaching techniques to readily provide a workforce that is able to handle service related tasks efficiently (Green, 2011). In order to examine the effectiveness of programs taught at Masters of Business Administration level, employers' perspectives is deemed essential. The employers' perspective may be measured in terms of their preference for recruiting candidates who possess certain skills and attributes. The current study intends to explore the selection criteria of candidates for the tertiary sector from employers' point of view.

Significance of the study

The primary aim of this study is to contribute to the body of scientific knowledge about WIL and its effectiveness from employers' point of view. The study is crucial in assessing the role of educational institutions in capacity building of human capital in the tertiary sector. The study offers a rich possibility for students, teachers, policy makers and educational institutions to be able to anticipate future trends and adapt learning to comply with the local global market. The study is also significant in directing stake holders to save time and resources by coordinating with the educational institutions for cultivating required human capital.

It is conceptualized that this data may facilitate educational process by identifying market preferences which can be translated into the curriculum; the study also identifies that WIL may offer better prospects for work ready graduates by inculcating skills at classroom level; developing orientation of the market situation by placing more

emphasis on experiential learning and field work; it stresses on requisite attributes and employability skills to be more rigorously inculcated at university level as by developing university-industry collaboration.

Review of the Related Literature

Literature review of several relevant studies has suggested that WIL produces enhanced skills, knowledge, competence, and experience that increases employability and leads to more satisfying careers (Bates, 2008); employability skills are essential for acquiring and retaining a job (Saterfield & McLarty, 1995). According to Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (2012):

“The MBA program aims at developing a student's intellectual ability, executive personality and managerial skills through an appropriate blending of business and general education”.

Very sparse literature with regards to WIL with its implications for employers is available in the context of Pakistan; one noteworthy attempt, in Pakistan has been made by country wide University Industry Partnership (henceforth UIP) symposia series funded by Pakistan Science Foundation that aims at “building effective coordination between R&D and industry for enhancing innovations, competitiveness and productivity of indigenous technologies” UIP, (2011, p.3); another research by Gul and Ahmad (2012) is significant in highlighting academia and industrial linkage; Saba et al (2010) demonstrates the effect of MBA qualification on professional development and asserted that MBA degree has positive link to skill development. Ulrich (2005) demonstrated that students prefer major in marketing because it offers opportunities for experiential learning. Interestingly, research evidence gathered by

Robson (2007) demonstrated the expectations of employers to be as simplistic as the employees to “be enthusiastic” and “expected the students to be willing to learn”.

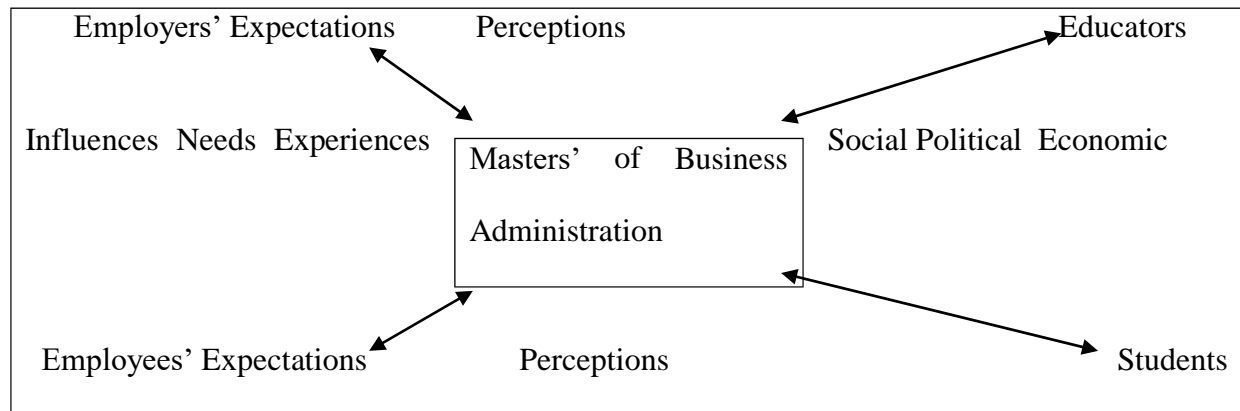
In the same vein, Fallows and Steven (2000) have also demonstrated that employability skills are highly valued by the employers. Asheim and Coenen (2005) argue that the rationality of interdependence between university and industry; Davies and Pillay (2000) argue that curricula need to meet “the ever changing employer market requirements, to ensure relevancy” (p.1). In similar vein, trend toward hybrid industry is gaining popularity (Owen-Smith 2003). In addition Dunn, 1991, recommended that for the higher education sector to achieve acceptable levels of competitiveness by bringing about collaboration between Industry and university.

Tyler (1949), argues “Since the real purpose of education is not to have the instructor perform certain activities but to bring about significant changes in the students' pattern of behavior, it becomes important to recognize that any statements of objectives of the school should be a statement of changes to take place in the students” (Tyler, 1949: 44).

Conceptual Framework

According to Cassidy (2006) “employers consider it the responsibility of educational institutions “to teach the requisite skills to students (p.508). In order to meet the ever changing demands placed on Masters of Business Administration program, the study employs a conceptual framework based on Haywood and Maki (1991) model in which they postulate that quality exists when expectations match perception. Thus the research has focused on the educational competence against the employees’ performance. The model offered by Haywood and Maki (1991) has been incorporated in the current study to maximize the utility of academic programs for better job placement for Masters of Business Administration students (Table1). Since education and tertiary industries are dynamic and complex frameworks thus the adapted framework offered by the current research intends to benefit the employers in general and future employees in particular by creating cyclic movement and making it permanently receptive to newer approaches.

Table 1: Conceptual framework of MBA and needs and practices



Adapted from Haywood and Maki (1991: 106)

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the research are:

- To investigate the current practice related to the recruitment policy;
- To facilitate the process of preparing students for better job placement;
- To encourage employers' involvement in the educational process.

Research Question

To what extent personal attributes and employability skills prove to be more beneficial than a relevant degree?

Hypothesis

Employers and employees mutually agree on the importance of a relevant degree.

Participants of the Study

Five manager operations were selected for the interviews for generating qualitative data. For the quantitative analysis thirty participants -Human Resource Managers (HRMs) were selected through stratified random sampling: the experience in dealing with recruitment policy and at least 5 years of relevant experience in this field (n=30). Sixty five employees were selected who had an MBA degree (n=65). A similar questionnaire was administered to gather employees' perception about the employability skills, which have been useful for them during their job experience.

Instruments of the study

In order to collect data for quantitative analysis a questionnaire (measure of employability skills) was designed. Employers and employees were administered the same questionnaire that was used to gather employers and employees perception of with regards to employability skills. The instructions in both the questionnaires were different whereas the 15 items were the same. The questionnaire was comprised of 15 items (Relevant degree: 1;

Department specific skills: 2; Communication skills: 3; Adaptability: 4; Critical thinking: 5; Enthusiasm: 6; Language skills: 7; Acquaintance with technology: 8; Leadership qualities: 9;

Motivation: 10; Teamwork: 11; Self-regulation: 12; Reflective Skills: 13; Problem solving Skills:14; and Crisis Management Skills: 15).

For example, Communication Skills-item; Problem-solving Skills- item; Crisis-management-item Due to the time constraint it was deemed necessary to simply name the skill in each item that respondents were asked to measure it in terms of its importance on a forced choice four point likert scale-ranging from not at important:1- very important: 4.

The qualitative data was drawn upon by employing a semi-structured interview of the manager operations. The interview was designed for approximately 15-20 minutes. However, the duration of the interview varied in each case.

Procedure of the Study

The data was collected at 30 diverse organizations from Defence, Shon Circle and I.I Chundrigar Road. These locations were chosen as this area has several business organizations. Five manager operations and 24 HRMs were approached for the meeting and questionnaire via emails. Due the time constraint 6 HRMs were sent the questionnaire through email. HRMs also granted permission on behalf of the employees who also filled out the questionnaires in the presence of the researcher. The information was obtained from the sampling frame with the help of the concerned departments.

Informed consent was obtained by all participants and they were assured of the confidentiality of the information obtained.

A pilot study was conducted with the one head of the department to identify any ambiguity. Some questions were rephrased due to ambiguity or ethical constraints.

The responses were assigned numerical values categorized as interpreted and connected to consistent numerical codes. The coded data were tabulated and edited for computer analysis using scientific package for social sciences (SPSS) version 20.0 was used.

A face to face interview was conducted with manager operations to inquire about the importance of employees' performance with regards to a relevant degree and employability skills. Employers' and employees' questionnaire was used to collect data in relation to the practicality of a relevant degree and employability skills.

Data analysis and Interpretation

Research Question

To what extent personal attributes and employability skills prove to be more beneficial than a relevant degree?

The qualitative analysis of the question carried out with the help of a face to face semi structured interview; 5 manager operations were asked about the relevance of the degree for MBAs while performing routine work. Four of the them were of agreed to the relevance of "right attitude", "ability to meet deadlines", "respect for authority", "pleasant manner" and "ability to understand the nature of the task" to be far important attributes than a degree and even employability skills. One manager operations, however, insisted on the relevance of the degree more the than the personal attributes and employability skills. Thus there was 80% agreement among the manager operations.

Hypothesis

Employers and employees mutually agree on the importance of a relevant degree.

The hypothesis was designed to make a comparison between the preference of employers for hiring graduates and employees' experience of the relevance of their degree was made. Non-parametric test was conducted because the data did not follow a normal distribution. Independentsample Mann-Whitney U test was employed which showed significant result with $p < 0.031$ Thus null hypothesis stands rejected and there is difference between the perception of a relevant degree. According to the employers a degree is essential at the time of recruitment whereas employees perceived that the relevance of a degree is not much significant to carry out routine tasks at the workplaces. However the mean score of all other 14 items indicate a closer proximity on the level of agreement between employers and employees (Table2).

Table2: Difference shown between the mean scores for employers and employees

Participants	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Employers	3.5	3.0	3.3	3.2	2.9	3.3	2.7	3.1	2.9	2.8	3.0	3.1	3.1	3.0	2.7
Employees	3.1	3.2	3.0	3.1	2.7	3.1	2.8	3.0	2.8	2.6	3.1	3.2	3.0	2.9	2.8

Discussion and Conclusion

The current highlights the three facets of workplaces: relevance of the degree for recruitment for the employers; employees' perception related to job-performance and employers' perception with regards to importance personal attributes and employability skills for sustaining and retaining a job. Thus degree is although the primary concern for the employers has its validity for selection but the sustainability of the job is more dependent on personal attributes and employability skills. The findings of the study reiterate the assumptions that employability skills require more focus in the educational institutions for future placements of employees at workplaces.

Limitations and delimitations of the study

Due to the extensive nature of the research an effort was made to employ purposive sampling technique, if employers' perception was included. The study has is comprised of 30 HRMs and 5 manger operations, since tertiary sector is a large enterprise and for the sake of generalizability more data may be necessary. Employees' perception regarding their job placement may offer prospect for future research.

The major concern of the research was that it was presumed that HRMs and manager operations were employers. Since recruitment is essentially made by individuals who themselves are employees of the same organization because it is a rare practice for the entire board of directors to be directly involved with recruitment process- a duty which these days is performed the by senior employees. The current study did not make any effort to measure its influence on the selection process- this is a delimitation of the research which was not addressed, but provides avenues for future research in this area.

The sampling frame was restricted to posh area of Karachi owing to law and order situation, a multi-phase sampling technique that would involve different areas of Karachi to generate more generalizable findings. The questionnaire included straight forward aspects of employability skills, some open ended questions which require employers view might have provided more insightful information about the need of the market. Due to time constraints, interviews were conducted using a wide range of questions to generate more data, and none of the

HRMs was asked all questions. However, an effort was made to ask critical questions from all HRMs. Since the study is an individual endeavor provides a starting point for a complex and dynamic issue which requires funding and sponsorship of government funded project; the involvement of education industry, corporate sector, educational policy makers and finance sector has implication for

Restatement of the Problem

The research attempted to show that WIL may present a better solution to prepare students according to the need of their future placement at workplaces. A better collaboration between industry and education may bridge the gap for enhancing social and economic development. Employers' perspectives offer insightful findings which may question the conventional ways of imparting knowledge in view of the fact that employers are concentrating not only on potential but application of skills. This research has identified the probable path that needs to be followed to make this collaboration a reality, and WIL is just a beginning.

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