

The generic skills gap in curricula: Are Thai accounting graduates ready for the contemporary workplace?

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Abstract

The impact of globalization and technology on business brought an enormous change in contemporary accounting activities and the role of accounting professionals. Such a major shift in their regular activities demands more generic/soft skills along with core accounting knowledge to perform professional tasks in today's competitive market. Keeping that in mind, this study identifies core generic skills for accounting graduates and readiness of the bachelor of accountancy programs to fulfill the market demand. This study has conducted in two phases, firstly, through a rigorous literature review five major generic skills are identified; secondly, by analyzing five universities' accounting curricula, the presence of those skills is investigated. Findings of this study indicate that major generic skills such as communication techniques, leadership skill, IT literacy, analytical and decision-making skills and ethical and moral values are still not sufficient in the curriculum of the accounting programs of most of the educational institutes in Thailand which eventually devalue the quality of the graduates in the job market. Besides, exploring the gap in the curriculum, this study also recommends that educational institutions in Thailand offering accounting programs should review their programs to match the generic skill requirement of the job market.

Keywords: generic skills; accounting education; curriculum; Thai university

1. Introduction

The role of university education is believed to prepare the students for the workforce as well as to make them ready for lifelong learning and professional development (West, 1998). But there has always been a claim that universities are not performing as required in terms of preparing the students for the workplace, this topic also brought a huge debate among academics and practitioners (Albin and Crockett, 1991). The situation became worse due to the changing global business environment that eventually changed the contemporary accounting activities and accountants' role in the organization. Above mentioned changes require more effort from the managers in decision making, more intense work from human resource management, adjusting and reporting newer regulatory standards, and so on (Tempone et al., 2012). Accounting graduates are also suffering due to the above-mentioned issues. For more than the last three decades education institutes all over the world have been criticized by accounting practitioners for not integrating enough generic skills in their teaching (Bui & Porter, 2010; Webb & Chaffer, 2016). High-profile accounting corruption and mismanagement, as well as confusion created by the accounting standard and activities due to globalization, brought that issue forth again (Albrecht and Sack, 2000).

Although many countries lacking the workforce in the area of accounting, employers are requiring a new set of skills in accounting graduates to fulfill the demand of changing the business world and to provide a competitive advantage to the organization (Birrell, 2006). Business operations and the role of the accounting department, as well as the accountant in the business, have been changed significantly for globalization. Besides accounting expertise, a bunch of generic skills suitable for the current business world and commitment to life-long learning and professional development has become a new criterion for choosing accounting graduates for the contemporary workplace (Cooper, 2002; Howieson, 2003). The role of the accounting professionals have been changed dramatically; from merely a calculating and compliance maintaining staff to knowledge specialist (Howieson, 2003), an advisor and consultant (Jones and Abraham, 2007), a business partner (Tempone et al., 2012) and so on.

By considering the importance of generic skill in accounting professions this study investigates the need for generic skill development in the Thai curriculum. In other words, this study confirms whether Thai accounting graduates are efficient enough to compete at the global level in terms of generic skills. Therefore, this study is divided

into two parts; at first, through literature review, generic skills required for the accounting profession are compiled, and then by reviewing the accounting curriculum of five higher education institutes in Thailand a comparison has been made to check whether Thai syllabus is compatible with the generic skills required.

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2. Literature review

The duties and responsibilities of positions in the organizations have changed due to the changing nature of the business world. There are different sets of skills required for accounting graduates. Different authors termed them in different ways to fit the context, to name some vocational skills, soft skills, pervasive skills, meta-skills, and so on (Montano, Anes, Hassall & Joyce, 2001; Barac, 2009; Gammie et al. 2002). Besides the core professional expertise, employees nowadays need extra skills to compete. In general terms, those skills are called generic skills. But the definition of generic skills has been evolved in many ways throughout time and defined in a slightly different manner in different contexts (Wellington, 2005).

2.1 Defining Generic skills/attributes

Core professional skill or “hard skill” is defined as the necessary subject-specific knowledge or technical skill including data processing as well as application and administrative activities (Villiers, 2010). On the contrary generic skills or “soft skills” are more “human” skill such as interpersonal and behavioral skills (Weber et al. 2009), ethical and lifelong learning skills (Elliot and Jacobson, 2002; Howieson, 2003), general writing and communication skills (Jackling and Lange, 2009) and so on.

2.2 Soft/generic Skills in Accounting Profession

The generic skills required in the job are increasing, the accounting profession is no exception. Gallivan, Truex, and Kvasny (2004) showed in their study conducted by reviewing job advertisements that 26 percent of the required skills for accounting and MIS professionals are generic or soft skills. Several authors and different organizations worked on this issue and determine the number of soft skills required for accounting

graduates. From through literature review soft skills required for the accounting profession are categorized as follows:

2.2.1 Communication Skill

Communication is an important element of a successful business. Communication skills include communication in all forms such as oral, writing, and non-verbal. Skills include, but not limited to speaking and listening skills, oral and written presentation skills (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008; Gray & Murray 2011), negotiating, ability to providing feedback (Tempone et. al., 2012), report writing skills, questioning techniques, persuasion, rapport building (de Villiers, 2010), intercultural as well as gaining and showing respect (Coetzee, 2010) and so on. International accounting bodies such as IFAC and CMA recorded communication skills as one of the core skills for accounting graduates (IFAC, 2003; CMA, 2006). Besides basic language skills, other technical communication skills have also become important criteria to be a successful accounting professional.

2.2.2 Leadership and Teamwork

Most of the accounting activities are team-work based; accounting graduates have to demonstrate both leadership and good team member characteristics to maintain team dynamics as well as personal development (Montano et al., 2001). Teamwork is defined as a good interpersonal skill that enables the ability to lead or manage a team as well as to be a team member like a member of a big family (Tempone et al., 2012). Skills included in this category are negotiation skill, different types of leadership styles, persuasion and conflict resolution, group work, motivation (Tempone et al., 2012), decision making, Project management (Carr et al., 2006), risk analysis, entrepreneurship (Kavanagh & Drennan 2008) and so on.

2.2.3 Ethical and Moral Values

Ethical and moral values have always been an important selection criterion for employers, accounting scandals of the last 2-3 decades just made this “skill” quintessential for the accounting profession (Ferguson, Collison, Power, & Stevenson, 2005; McPhail, 2001; Sikka, Haslam, Kyriacou, & Agrizzi, 2007). Some authors opine

that curriculum should aim to grow moral commitment in students so that they feel responsible for the consequences of their actions towards society (such as McPhail, 2001). Many authors strongly suggest including both personal and professional ethics into the curriculum (Adkins & Radtke, 2004, Petrecca, 2002; Wells et al., 2009). Areas included in this skill are professional ethics (COC), work ethics, integrity, diversity management, cultural awareness, and so on.

2.2.4 Personal Management

Employers are always looking for a good combination of grades, life and work skills, and self-management capability. The term "personal management" or "self-management" is defined differently by the employers of different sectors. Common Skills included in this category are the ability to take responsibility, ambition, dealing with pressure and uncertainty, time and other personal resource management (Tempone et al., 2012), self-awareness, self-motivation, self-assessment and regulation, flexibility and adaptability (Villiers, 2010), workload management (Hassall et al, 2003), continuous learning (Kavanagh and Drennan, 2008) and so on.

2.2.5 Analytical and Decision-making Skill

Accounting graduates should be able to solve issues intelligently and provide proper judgment during making a decision in complex business world activities (IFAC, 2003). This skill includes characteristics such as probing complexities by asking proper questions (Sin & Reid, 2006), critical thinking (Barac, 2009), evaluating risk factors, making logical inferences and proposing alternative solutions (CMA, 2006), professional judgment and stakeholder analysis (SAICA, 2008) and so on.

2.2.6 Accounting Curriculum of Thai Universities

Researchers of this study compiled the bachelor of accounting curriculum of five renowned universities of Thailand and explored the existence of necessary generic skills in the curriculum. Three of the discussed universities offered the Bachelor of Accountancy (BAcc) program in English the other two offered in the Thai language. For confidentiality purposes, the names of the universities are withdrawn and replaced by five letters A, B, C, D, and E. By reviewing the curriculum and course description

of the related subjects following table is made to compare the presence of generic skills in different universities.

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	A (Thai)	B (English)	C (Thai)	D (English)	E (Thai)
Communication	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Basic English courses 2. Business English conversation and writing 3. English for effective business communication 4. Information System 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Basic English courses 2. Business Communication 3. Computer Literacy 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Basic English Courses 2. Reading for information 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Basic English Courses 2. Computer and Information Technology 3. Thai Culture & Basic Conversation 4. Business Communication 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Basic English Courses 2. Introduction to information systems 3. Information Technology and Applications
Leadership and teamwork	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Management and Organization 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Managerial Psychology 2. Operations Management 3. International Business Environment 4. Entrepreneurship 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strategic management 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Organizational Behavior 2. Project Management 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Organization and Management 2. Operations management 3. Strategic management
Ethical and Moral values	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Business Concepts and Ethics 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ethics 2. Environmental Science 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Civic Education 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ethical Models 2. Business Ethics 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Righteousness

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Personal Management		1. Physical Education	1. Business Quantitative Analysis	1. Health and Fitness 2. General Psychology 3. Marriage & Family	1. Physical Education
Analytical and decision-making skill	1. Business quantitative analysis 2. Business strategy Analysis and design of accounting databases 3. Control and inspection of information systems	1. Quantitative Analysis Tools	1. Data Analysis for decision making 2. Internal Control and enterprise risk management		1. Governance and risk management

3. Findings

After reviewing the bachelor curriculum of accountancy program of five Thai higher education institutes following findings revealed:

University A

Although the Bachelor of accountancy program of this university is offered in the Thai language, it includes a significant amount of English language courses comprising all four areas of communication (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). Besides this university includes a special course named English for effective business communication. Furthermore, it has a course on Information System that focuses on electronic information gathering and communication.

There is only one course found that is directly related to organizational activities named Management and Organization. Similarly, only one course related to (business) ethics and moral values found named Business Concepts and Ethics. Few analytical thinking subjects are included in the syllabus such as Business Quantitative analysis, Business Strategy Analysis, and Control and inspection of information systems.

University B

This university offers a program in English. For communication skill, it includes basic English courses from all four communication skill. Like the previous university, this institute includes business communication and computer literacy courses for specific communication skills.

There are three courses found in the syllabus of this university directly related to leadership and teamwork skill, especially in the organization settings, named Managerial Psychology, Operation Management, and Entrepreneurship. For ethical and moral values, one subject is found in the curriculum named Ethics. Only Physical Education is included in the personal management realm. For analytical skill development, Quantitative Analysis Tools is found as an effective course of this university.

University C

This university offers a program in Thai; regardless of the language of the program, it offers English courses for basic English communication skills. Besides, this

university includes Reading for Information as a communication skill development tool in the curriculum. Only one course found which might teach leadership and teamwork skills named Strategic Management. Similarly, the course titled Civic Education is included in the curriculum that enhances ethical and moral values. No course directly related to personal management is found in the four-year syllabus of this university. Data analysis for decision making and Enterprise risk management is found to be effective courses for analytical and decision-making skill development.

University D

Like the first two universities, this one also offers basic English skills, Business Communication, and Computer Literacy. Besides, this university emphasizes Thai Culture in its curriculum. To enhance leadership and teamwork skills Organizational behavior and Project management are included in the curriculum. Ethical model and Business ethics are present in the syllabus as a sign of ethical and moral values improvement process. Physical and psychological wellbeing is emphasized in the curriculum to develop personal management skills. Interestingly, a subject named Marriage and Family is included which contributes significantly to maintain the work-life balance of the individuals. No trace of analytical and decision-making skill development course is found in the curriculum.

University E

This university offers its accounting program in the Thai language and like other universities, regardless of the language of the program, includes all basic English communication skill courses. Besides two courses are included in the syllabus to facilitate the IT skills of the students. There are three courses found that might contribute to the development of leadership and teamwork skills such as; Organization and management, Operation management, and Strategic management. To develop an ethical and moral values course titled Righteousness is included in the curriculum. Physical education is included in the syllabus of the program to enhance personal management skills and Governance and risk management added as an effort to improve analytical and decision-making skills.

4. Discussion

From the above findings, we, the authors, identified some limitations in the

curriculum of the discussed programs. All the universities emphasize basic English communication skills, an important criterion for today's globalized business, but ignored some specific communication techniques such as persuasion, rapport building, negotiating, and so on. Some of them could be taught by specific subjects like business communication offered by two universities out of five. Moreover, cultural orientation is required to communicate effectively with global stakeholders.

A major gap is visible in leadership skill development. Universities offering courses on management but no direct “Leadership” course is found on the curriculum of the universities. Leadership skill is required to be a leader as well as to be a good follower. This is one area universities might pay attention to develop through curriculum or extra-curricular activities.

Different universities offer different courses on ethics ranging from personal to organizational ethics. For accounting professionals, ethics is more important than some other business fields as management, investors and other stakeholders need to trust those employees regarding financial matters. They have to demonstrate personal integrity and maintain professional ethical standard in the workplace for the benefit of the business and society.

Except for physical education, no other personal management subject is visible on the curriculum. The reason might be either this skill development is merged with other courses or this skill is aimed to develop through different activities.

Finally, three universities found developing decision-making skills by the course quantitative analysis which is mostly a data analysis technique and might not be helpful in the non-numerical situation. Two universities have risk management, an effective tool for decision making, in their programs' syllabus, and one university includes Business strategy analysis. This quality of an accountant is crucial for climbing the ladder in their professional career. As the accounting profession is no more a mere data recording and processing job, graduates from this field have to develop the skill to analyze the critical situations and make decisions based on that.

5. Conclusion

In this globalized business era accountants are key persons to keep business running and flourish. Unless the professionals of this role demonstrate world-class skills beyond only recording the numbers, the economy cannot compete with others at this age. Universities and accounting bodies of Thailand should work together to generate

qualified accounting graduates to boost up the business of the country as well to develop the nation. Moreover, generic skill development might help the accounting graduates to compete with other professionals in securing a job and might make this program (BAcc) to the potential students.

6. Limitations

This study is not beyond the limitations, we listed them below for the convenience of implication and further research:

Firstly, this study considers the syllabus of one group of students from year 1 to year 4, some elective courses change regularly as a regular process of curriculum development which was not considered here.

Secondly, some of the skills, for instance, presentation skills, are developed through the continuous learning process of other courses and that cannot be found in the curriculum.

Thirdly, different universities added different courses for soft skill development. Unlike core accounting skills there is no unified curriculum found for the generic skills, so, it is very difficult to generalize the result of this study.

And finally, many generic skills are believed to be developed through the course named "Cooperative education" which is an internship program in a related business or other organization. For the vague nature of the course it was not considered as a generic skill development course and that is a major limitation of this research.

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