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Back to the future: Business workplace competencies revisited

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Higher education has a responsibility to consider the development of generic competencies in students to enable them to transfer tertiary learning to meet the changing demands of the workplace when they graduate (Quek, 2005). According to Kay (2017) these cognitive, personal and interpersonal competencies should be co-created with key stakeholders and set the direction and shared vision of a programme of study. To ensure the best possible match between graduate competencies and employer needs, graduate competencies need to be regularly refreshed to ensure students have a relevant and useful curriculum.

Work-integrated learning (WIL) courses in New Zealand are often taken by students in their final year of study, and involve students undertaking work and/or a project in an organization related to their major. WIL courses are typically used as a barometer in gauging the effectiveness of both a programme of study and the graduate profile in terms of developing "employability" and "graduateness" (Jackson, Sibson & Riebe, 2013; Oliver, 2011).

Several substantive New Zealand studies identifying competencies in business education were last undertaken nearly 20 years ago (Burchell, Hodges & Rainsbury, 2000, Hodges, & Burchell, 2003). Graduate competencies, informed by the literature at the time, were ranked by employers as follows: ability and willingness to learn; energy and passion; teamwork and cooperation; interpersonal communication; customer service orientation; order, quality and accuracy; flexibility; problem solving; achievement orientation and initiative. Rainsbury, Hodges and Burchell (2002) explored the same set of competencies with business students and graduates and ranked the following as the most important: computer literacy, customer service orientation, teamwork and cooperation, self-confidence, and willingness to learn.

Hebblethwaite and Ayling (2018) investigated the development of employability skills, as advocated by the New Zealand Employability Skills Framework, during a WIL experience to inform future WIL curriculum development. The study determined that employability skills are developed by students in WIL courses at variable levels. Thus, the challenge for business programmes is two-fold; first, to ensure graduate outcome statements promote graduate "employability" and "graduateness" and second, that the prescribed graduate outcome statements occur in the programme of study.

In this paper we discuss the challenge of developing "employability" and "graduateness" in business programmes and WIL courses.

EMPLOYABILITY AND GRADUATENESS

Literature gives two distinct views of "employability". In the first view employers are more likely to view employability as a particular set of skills and dispositions that make a graduate attractive. This

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view of employability focuses on short-term graduate employment outcomes. Employer organisations sometimes adopt this approach in their policy and bring it with them to programme development processes (Bridgestock, 2009). The second, much wider, view of employability is captured in the Kirby Report (2000) and describes employability as a construct which:

> Involve[s] self-belief and an ability to secure and retain employment. It also means being able to improve … [the worker's] productivity and income-earning prospects. This often requires competing effectively in the job market and being able to move between occupations as necessary. It requires 'learning to learn' for new job opportunities. (p. 37)

Rust and Froud (2016) believe "employability" is the accumulated outcome from all the graduate attributes of a programme of study being achieved. They advocate for an assurance process to select and present appropriate evidence of student achievement. This applies to both the students' awareness of the attributes and their understanding of their own personal development of the attributes. The authors acknowledge that this process of assurance and self-knowledge requires the development of critical self-awareness and personal literacy. They present the example of Shuvo Saha, Director of Google's Digital Academy, who argues that "self-awareness is of fundamental importance, since successful students 'learn consciously about how they lead – and how they don't'. They continuously reflect on their own development and actively seek feedback".

"Graduateness" on the other hand is a newer concept. According to Steur, Jansen and Hofman (2016), "Graduateness" is a transformative set of knowledge, skills and attributes that are beyond training for employment. The graduateness set includes students integrating theories on reflective thinking, scholarship, moral reasoning and lifelong learning.

Steur et al. (2016) consider 'employability' and 'graduateness' to be two separate concepts in higher education, and suggest they should be treated as such when investigating the generic learning outcomes of higher education. While they acknowledge employability as an important aspect of university education, they do not include it in their interpretation of graduateness because there are some indications that focusing on employability in university education can occur at the expense of students' intellectual development.

The concept of graduateness is supported by the New Zealand Productivity Commission (2017) who state:

> "For students, education develops knowledge and skills that allow them to live an enriched life. It helps people to understand and navigate the world around them, as well as question and challenge the way things are. It creates access to opportunities, forges identity and culture, and frequently leads to lifelong benefits in terms of health, wealth and life satisfaction. "New Zealand Productivity Commission (2017, p.1)

In New Zealand there seems to be a significant shift in the understanding of the role of tertiary education, from 'employment' to 'life-long competences' to 'manage self in a complex world' (New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2017). The New Zealand Qualifications Association (NZQA) recognises that employers are looking for "lifelong learners who have critical thinking and problem solving skills, and character qualities such as adaptability, resilience and cultural skills" and seek to equip learners with the skills and knowledge to be successful within rapidly changing global and digital contexts (NZQA Statement of Intent 2016, p.8.).

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BUSINESS PERSPECTIVES

The world of business has undergone massive change over the last 20 years. While some business practices remain the same, others are radically different. Rapid technological change and globalisation has placed a premium on skills such as flexibility, openness and receptiveness to new technology (Conway, 2017). The business challenge of lifting productivity is requiring new management approaches such as "Agile" and "Lean" (Drury-Grogan, 2014, Moreira, 2017, Crabtree, 2018) and according to Purdy and Daugherty (2017), higher investment in artificial intelligence (AI). In order to succeed, management need to focus on the skill needs of their workforce, particularly in the area of agile skills development (Purdy & Daugherty, 2017).

The agile workforce is difficult to define as it originally referred to the structures, processes and timelines of project management in software development. Work structures, now defined as tribes, squads and pods, have moved beyond standard project management and been adopted by mainstream workplaces (Drury-Grogan, 2014). Moreira (2017) discusses key skills emerging specifically from agile work: speed and efficiency, freedom to experiment, and communication and collaboration. Organisational culture must support creativity and empowerment as sharing relevant knowledge and expertise across teams, is essential for agility. Employees also need to be skilled in cross-team coordination and information-sharing (Crabtree, 2018).

Lean is an organisational practice that considers the expenditure of resources for any goal other than the creation of value for the end customer to be wasteful (Holweg, 2007). A lean business creates a high quality process that connects with higher organisational performance and the ability to provide competitive advantage (Ward & Zhou 2006, Zhou, 2016). Key competencies that emerge for Lean include: attention to quality, responsiveness, productivity, performance, sustainability and being customer centric.

Embracing AI will also require new workforce skills that prioritise human abilities over technical expertise. Skills that complement the new technology such as judgement, communication and creative thinking will be favoured in the workforce (Purdy & Daugherty, 2017). Similarly, the roll-out of 5G technologies in New Zealand over the next five years will require the development of new skills and ways of learning. This significant advance in broadband connectivity will potentially revolutionise "the way we live and work" (Palattella et al., 2016, p.1.).

According to Conway (2017), benefiting from information and communication technology (ICT) depends on organisations having sufficient capability to adapt organisational processes and structures to make the most of this technology. Conway considers an appropriate skills system is critical for winning the race between education and technology while investment in higher education and partnerships between research institutes and private companies is required to determine organisational management capability and how skills are deployed and used.

GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVES

As business organisations make the most of new opportunities from ITC, a reform agenda emerges. The key directions of workforce reform proposed (Conway, 2018) include:

- prioritising trade in services and digital products in New Zealand's trade strategy;

- improving the matching of skills to jobs, including the encouragement of the education system to be more adaptive and responsive to labour market demands

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In response the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (2018) has changed generic competency requirements for bachelor's degrees. The recent graduate profile calls for graduates that:

- demonstrate intellectual independence, critical thinking and analytic rigour
- engage in self-directed learning
- demonstrate knowledge and skills related to the ideas, principles, concepts, chief research methods and problem-solving techniques of a recognised major subject
- demonstrate the skills needed to acquire, understand and assess information from a range of sources
- demonstrate communication and collaborative skills.

Careers New Zealand, part of the Tertiary Education Commission(TEC), have also sought stakeholder advice and advocate the following seven employability skills: "positive attitude, communication, teamwork, self-management, willingness to learn, thinking skills and resilience" (Careers New Zealand, n.d.).

SUMMARY

Changes in the business world over the past twenty years include the impact of information communication technologies, the changing nature and structure of organisations, ways of working together and adoption by management of new practices to encourage innovation and improve performance.

The literature reveals a new and more targeted set of graduate competencies. These competencies are strongly focused on collaboration and communication in a variety of contexts, and environments. Customer focus, organisational performance and productivity are key cognitive skill sets. In addition, graduates are expected to have problem solving skills, to think creatively and the abilities to manage and share information. Self-awareness or "personal literacy" is another important disposition of business graduates.

These changes have led to a need to return to the exploration of graduate competencies for business graduates. The authors believe that key competencies include appropriate cognitive, personal, and social skills to ensure "employability" and "graduateness". Processes to assure student competency achievement will result in improved WIL courses, and the development of true "capstone" experiences for students.

IMPLICATIONS AND ISSUES

Business education has a responsibility to regularly refresh graduate competencies to reflect the needs of business, and the wider community. The next stage of this research is to co-design a graduate profile reflecting the needs of all stakeholders which will inform the business curriculum. The WIL course should reflect the new cognitive, personal and social skills and play a vital role in informing and assuring the graduate profile.

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