

Generic Skills Conflict of Graduate Employability Competencies

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Abstract

This research highlighted the conflicts in implementing generic skills. The conflicts circle on different terms or concept on various stakeholders. Through literature review, the researcher identified skills associates to employability amongst graduate engineers. The integration of multi-disciplinary theories from interpersonal studies, marketing and psychology theory are utilized for a better understanding of perspective and approach. This research has integrated the skills relevant for a clearer perspective for learners and educators in higher education institutions. Research Methodology – The quantitative survey methods was used in carrying out this research. The researcher employed cross-sectional designs in this study are to obtain a representative random sample of males and females to respond to a number of questions about generic skill development during their program under School of Engineering, Coventry University towards employability. Sample/Sampling: under probability sample designs, researcher use stratified sampling primarily to ensure that different groups of population are adequately represented in the sample so as to increase their level of accuracy when estimating parameters. The instrument used in this study is a set of questionnaires that specially constructed for the purpose of this study. The questionnaires constructed to be able to measure the 3 main variables, i.e.: interpersonal skills, enterprise skills, and employability competency among undergraduates in School of Engineering, Coventry University. The factual questions in the first section are designed to elicit objective information from the respondents regarding their background. The second section, researcher used closed-ended and open-ended questions. In a closed-ended question, respondents are offered a set of answers and asked to choose the one that most closely represents their views. The Likert scale was used for measuring attitudes. These scales comprise six levels of agreement/disagreement. In this research number one is strongly disagree to the sixth, strongly agree. There are 11 questions about attitude which is skills development (generic skills) during the learning program. 4 questions are set as open-ended questions. Findings shows that Coventry University engineering graduate achievement after leaving their courses, almost 90 per cent of graduates and diplomats are employed or have gone on to further education. In terms of employers, they can contribute more to the benefit of their new recruit by identified the specific generic skills they needed. Almost 90 percent respondents showed the engineering program has increased their generic skills ability. Although there are limitations in generic skills implementation, suggestions are given to the implementation of generic skills.

Keywords: Generic skill; Conflict; Interpersonal; Employability; Competencies

1. Introduction

A degree certificate today does not guarantee a person to be recruited. Employers today are looking at other skills; generic skills as important in recruitment. Undergraduates are requested to do more than their subject knowledge skills.

1.1 Definition

Generic skills are a set of personal attributes i.e: communication skills, problem solving, team working, IT literacy and interpersonal skill. John Brennan and colleagues (2001) found that UK graduates considered the top ten competencies required in current employment to be: working under pressure; oral communication skills; accuracy, attention to detail; working in a team; time management; adaptability; initiative; working independently; taking responsibility and decisions; planning coordinating and organizing.

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Conflict – is “the process which begins when one party perceives that the other has frustrated or is about to frustrate, some concern of his or hers” (Thomas, 1983, p. 891). This definition covers a broad range of phenomena from minor disagreements to war. There are several sources of conflict (Roloff, 1987). There are conflict of misinterpret behavior, perceptions of incompatibilities with strangers and disagreement.

Employability is taken as “a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.

Interpersonal communication is face-to-face interaction between two people (King, 1979; Smith & Williamson, 1977); face-to-face interaction involving from three to some relatively small number of people was defined as small group communication. All the communications components including communicators, message, medium, channel, noise, feedback and context are involve during the interactions.

According to Miller and Steinberg (1975) interpersonal communication occurs when knowledge of individuals’ beliefs, attitudes and personalities, or what they termed psychological level information, is used as the basis on which to communicate. When such information is employed, messages can be tailored to people as unique individuals rather than as members of ostensibly homogeneous cultural or sociological groupings based on such attributes as ethnicity, sex and age.

Ridge (1993) defined competence as the ability ‘to choose a strategy, then select among skills appropriate to that context that determines these skills’ (p.1), given that ‘a strategy is a plan derived from a context that determines which skills to apply’ (p. 8). Skills involve the ability to pragmatically apply, consciously or even unconsciously, our knowledge’. The Chamber’s English Dictionary defines skill as ‘aptitudes and competencies appropriate for a particular job’.

2. Why generic skills important?

Pressuring from market globalization and international competition has drive for competitiveness. Organization has to compete in global market, lead to traditional management and hierarchy changes.

The drive for productivity growth has emphasis on an individual’s ability to work effectively and maximize output. This requires higher levels of problem solving abilities and the willingness to take responsibility for life long learning.

Several industries are working towards specialization and subcontracting. Large industries outsourcing to small and manager own enterprises. The pressure for effective work organization and team working, has drive the used of contractors and consultants in self-employed companies.

The widespread used of IT means the basic computer skills knowledge and adaptability to technology is the criteria to be recruited. Trend in UK and global scale on consumer demand and market driven shows communication skills are becoming priority in improving customer service and trying to meet the customer pressuring needs.

3. Conflicts in generic skills

3.1 Concept or terms conflict

There are several synonyms terms including personal transferable, key, generic process, common, work or employment related and even soft skills. For some it was common skills, for others, common learning outcomes, general skills or personal transferable skills. To add to this semantic confusion, these skills are also referred to as competences (including such variants as generic and meta-competences), capabilities, elements or attributes. Similarly, the various lists of such skills derived from surveys of employers and those contained in government reports, are diverse in terminology, size and purpose, reflecting differences in definitions and interpretations of their significance. According to Neville Bennett (2000), the favoured skill label has shifted from personal transferable, to core, to employability and most recently to key – a shift not paralleled by and theoretical or conceptual development or justification. Neville Bennett (2000) added, confusion over labels is matched by confusion over definitions. There are no definitive definitions that may be applied in all situations. Neither is there a single, universally accepted terminology (Stephen Fallows and Christine Steven, pg. 8: 2000).

3.2 Employer needs

Employers in situations could not specific their needs in detail. They expected their recruitment to have communication skills but in what area i.e; persuading skill, or presentation skills, or interpersonal skills, team

working or listening or follow instructions. So, which is which? Therefore, it is hard for the educators to cater to the unspecific employers needs.

3.3 Policy Implication

Government policy should integrate the differences between the employers, the higher institutions and other stakeholders. Unfortunately, the Dearing Report has added more confusion because of the use of mixed vocabulary, such as key, transferable and generic, but also exemplify the lack of theoretical justification, containing a mixture of technical skills such as IT, interpersonal skills such as communication and cognitive skills such as problem solving. Therefore, the government should look seriously on this matter before it growing bigger and causing the implementations of generic skill transfer harder.

3.4 Embedding Versus Stand-Alone or Purpose-Built Module Controversy

Steps should be taken to either formally embed transferable skills into the curriculum or stand-alone module or purpose-built module for every student. This decision fully accords with the declared mission of the university that makes reference both 'high quality education' and 'vocational relevance'. In implementing the agenda, there are debates, brainstorming and lots of meetings on the 'how' questions involve. Approaches should take account of their own academic or professional discipline, student population, ethos and need. Therefore, there is no ideal way of implementing it but it is through flexibility, according to the needs of the universities and departments related. On the other hand there should be a monitoring system to measures, assess the development and successful of the approach chosen.

4. Theories

The theories are the Maslow Theory from psychology, instructional theory from interpersonal communication, and Kelman's model of source from marketing. The researcher will apply the theories into interactions, and relationships in engineers working life.

4.1 Pragmatic View Theory

The Interactional View is also known as the theory of pragmatics because of the dependence on the particular situation at hand. Miscommunication occurs because people are not "speaking the same language." These languages contrast because people have different points of view from which they are speaking. When people's

content and relationship component do not match up, miscommunication is likely to occur.

This theory has many implications for everyday life. Since families or any working individual such as engineers often suffer from miscommunication, this theory is able to explain why such things take place. The theory's suggestion to reframe problems in order to gain a better understanding of what is going on seems like sound and practical advice.

Communication is a social system composed not of individuals, but of the ongoing flow of their behaviors. In pragmatic view, behavior is appreciated as important in its own right. According to Bavelas (1988), behavior goes to other people (it does not just drop off into space). It connects people and thereby creates a new phenomenon.

This pragmatic view of interpersonal communication is the conceptualization of interpersonal communication as a social system. Social systems occur any time individuals' actions become interconnected (see e.g., Parsons, 1951). A social system is as small as a social grouping of two people, that is, a dyad (see Simmel, 1902) or as large as an entire society. It may include a small group, such as twelve people on jury assigned the task of deciding the guilt or innocence of an accused person on trial. A social system may include an entire organization, such as college or university with its many members engaged in instructional, service, maintenance, and research activities. Interpersonal communication as a system is embedded within a hierarchy of systems.

4.2 The Maslow Theory

Human behavior is directed or driven by his/her needs. There is goal-directed or intentional nature sought by the individual and the related motivation to achieve it. Carlson (1990, p. 404) described motivation as 'a driving force that moves us to a particular action. Motivation can affect the nature of an organism's behavior, the strength of its behavior and the persistence of its behavior'.

The most important, are the physiological needs which are essential for the survival of the individual, including the need for water, food, heat and so on. Once these have been met, the next most important needs are those connected with the safety and security of the individual, including protection from physical harm and freedom from fear. Maslow argued that only when the more basic needs have been achieved does the individual seek higher needs.

4.3 Kelman's Model of source characteristics

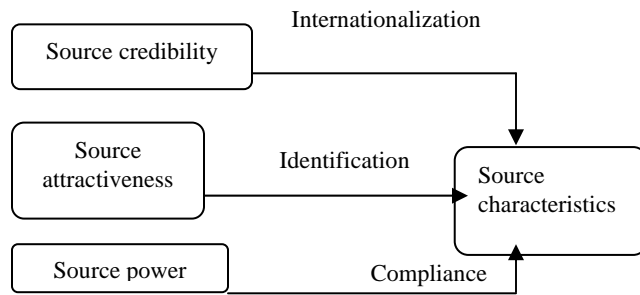


Figure 1. Kelman's model of source characteristics.

Kelman (1961) developed a simple scheme for examining the characteristics of a source. Figure 1 indicates that these are source credibility, source attractiveness and the degree of compliance required by the source. Each characteristic involves a different process by which the source influences attitudinal or behavioral change in the receiver.

Source credibility refers to the extent that receivers perceive the source, or a participant in the communication process, as able and willing to give an objective opinion and as having sufficient relevant expertise. A high level of perceived expertise in a source is often more persuasive than if the expertise is perceived as low. Trustworthiness is important, as the impact of the source will be reduced if receivers perceive the source to be biased.

A high level of source credibility is not always an asset, nor is a low-credibility source always a liability. Eagly and Chaiken (1975) found high and low credibility sources to be of equal effectiveness when the source is arguing for a position opposing their own best interest. The use of a high-credibility source is of less importance when the receivers have a neutral position.

While a great deal of empirical work indicates that the credibility of a message source correlates strongly with a message's ability to induce attitude change there are a number of factors that can moderate this change (Newell and Shemwell, 1995). Factors such as involvement, product type, message type, experience and expectations are some of the more notable influences.

Source attractiveness develops when a source is perceived as attractive and persuasion, according to Kelman, occurs through a process known as identification. This is apparent when the receiver is

motivated to seek some type of relationship with the source and so adopts a similar position. The receiver may only maintain the attitude or behavior as long as it is supported by the source or as long as the source remains attractive. Example, organizations often select sales staff whose characteristics have a strong correlation with their customers or who have similar backgrounds to those of the target audience. This is thought to be an appropriate way to help build a bond or area of common interest between the two parties.

Source power is said to be present when the source of a message is able reward or punish. When the receiver perceives source power, the influence process occurs through compliance. In an attempt to be rewarded and to avoid punishment, the receiver complies with the request of the source. Such power is identifiable in personal selling, where sales staff, through use of a lavish expense account for example, may exert power over a buyer.

4.4 Applications of multi- disciplinary theory to the study of Engineering Employability Competency

As mentioned earlier, engineers involve in the process to make all stages of research, development, design and production as efficient and effective as possible. It is important to possess a clear understanding of how engineers determine their information needs, fill them, use the information, and share their own resulting information. By discovering these patterns and systematizing that knowledge, communication can be improved and communication at all stages of engineering work can be made more effective.

Forces by the needs for product development planning, engineers must have certain information. Therefore, principle 5 of pragmatic view of human communication involves asking different questions in order to acquire knowledge or understanding is required, besides other principles are applied in respectively. In this event, both of Maslow and Pragmatic View theories are applied.

The information source, relate to Kelman's model of source, whereby, the source credibility is reliable to the extent able to give an objective opinion and as having sufficient relevant expertise. The source of a message is able to be rewarded or punish in an attempt of success or failure the information received or share. But in this situation, researcher believed that any queries with a harsh manner will end to bad relationship in future. Therefore, the approach should be in respective manner, and the source will appreciate and no hard feeling is involved. So, in future, any queries will be easier, based

on the mind recorded event on the first attempt. In an organization, continuity of relationship will affect work either easier to get good respond from colleagues or passive reaction, or colleagues try to avoid.

5. Coventry University Policy Toward Generic Skill and Enterprise

The School of Engineering offered has taken a serious action towards the generic skills issues. The university policy has clearly identified the specific personal attributes should the student acquire while access into higher education, with various courses from Foundation Programmes to MDes as well as Phd. Method of learning is problem based learning as key teaching method. Student will have opportunity to have one year industrial exposure with the helps of Industrial Placements Office in finding a suitable position. The School of Engineering have recorded graduate achievement after leaving their courses, almost 90 per cent of graduates and diplomats are employed or have gone on to further education.

Survey done by Coventry University's School of Engineering students are invited some six months after they complete their course of study, to share what they have gone onto in terms of employment and or further study activities. Of the 487 engineering students who were completed a course in the academic year 2003, and who were contacted, 58.1% responded. 153 graduates were employed. 21 graduates are employed and studying, 67 are studying only, 22 are seeking and 9 are not seeking. Therefore, majority of 56.9% the undergraduate are employed, 8.2% are employed and studying, about 23.8% prefer to study full time and 7.8% are seeking and 3.2 % are not seeking. So, from this statistics shows that School of Engineering graduate are needed by the work industries, thus proved the quality and learning outcome of the programmes offered by the Engineering School are recognized by the industries.

6. Presentation of Data

6.1 Demographic Analysis

Questionnaires distributed received 18 feedbacks. On the demographic session, shows there are variety of nationality background; one from Welsh, three respondents from French, nine are from Malaysian, three from British, and one New Zealand. There are one respondent did not fill in the nationality question. In terms of age, five respondents are in 18-20 categories and thirteen are in 21-25 age groups. Therefore, there are combinations of background of undergraduate students in engineering courses.

Stage of course are mainly, from year 3 which is ten while seven in year 1 and one have not answered the question (left the question blank). The researcher received feedback from 10 male respondents and 8 female respondents. Fifty per cent of the respondents have working experienced below than one year. While 38.8 per cent have no working experience and 20.6 per cent admitted have working experience above 3 and 4 years, respectively. So, the combination of experience and no experience respondent should be more advantage to the no experience undergraduates if they applied study groups or team work to understand the engineering modules or during presentation.

In terms of gender, in this survey the number of respondent is not too far or difference from the male undergraduates. Based on previous research, female student usually shows so much difference (less number of enrolment) compare to male student in engineering school programme, as male dominated programme (refer Coventry Survey on Figure 9, pg 81).

In terms of funding, there are various mode of funding which are parents fund, loans, state funding, LEA and some stated others; defees. The researcher found in this study, about 27.77 per cent undergraduates had their funding from parents. This demonstrates that some of them are from wealthy family. Ten or 55.55 per cent are supported by loans. One stated received fund from LEA, another one undergraduate stated from state funding and one being defees.

88.88 per cent stated the course has met the requirement of the job market. While 5.55per cent stated the course has not meet the job market requirement. There are one undergraduate didn't answer the question-left blank. Therefore, majority agreed that the course have fulfilled their job requirement, it is a good news for the engineering school.

6.2 Development of Generic Skills Through Engineering Courses/Programme

In the generic skills session, researcher have coated University of Central England on skills contributed to undergraduates being jobless (2003). The attention of this skills are being exposed to undergraduates during their modules lessen. There are ten generic skills items identified; knowledge and intellectual capability, commercial consciousness, self-control and motivation, self confidence, communication skill formal/informal oral, communication skill formal/informal written, socialize at all level and maintaining relationship through change, work effectively with different groups, ability to

complete any project given and ability to identify problems, analyze and solve them. Respondent are given six choice of range which is one- strongly disagree, two-disagree, three-undecided, four- average, five- agree and six-strongly agree.

Through the survey, the expectation feedback is to know either the modules offered in the engineering School have increased or have not increase the undergraduate ability in generic skills given(refer to Appendix 3). For knowledge and intellectual capability; two respondents have chosen undecided, six mentioned average and ten agree the modules offered have increased their ability in knowledge and intellectual capability.

In terms of commercial consciousness, two respondents stated disagree, another two respondent stated undecided, four respondents mentioned average and ten of the respondent agree the school of engineering modules have increased their commercial consciousness.

Majority of eleven respondents have chosen average on the self-control and motivation, six respondents agreed on the skills, and one respondent disagreed with it.

Self confidence skills rated with one respondent disagree, one respondent can't decide about the matter, seven respondent rated average, eight respondents rated agree and one rated strongly agree.

One respondent disagree with the modules offered in the engineering school have increased the undergraduate ability in generic skills given for communication skills-formal/informal oral communication. Nine respondent rated average, seven rated agree the modules offered have increased their oral formal/informal communication skills and one respondent strongly agree with it.

As for written formal/informal communication skills, one rated disagree, two respondent rate undecided, eight rate average and seven rate agree the modules offered have increased their generic skills ability. Ability to socialize at all level and maintaining relationship through change, one respondent rate disagree, two respondent undecided about it, six respondent rated average and nine agreed the modules offered have increased their ability in the skills required.

Ability to work effectively with different groups, one respondent rated undecided, eight rated average and nine respondents agreed the modules have increased their ability. The ability to complete any project given, one

rated disagreed, seven rated average and ten agreed their ability have increased through the modules offered.

The ability to identify problems, analyze and solve them, nine respondents rated average, eight respondents rated agree and strongly agree have one respondent.

Therefore, this demonstrate a positive sign of the modules offered in Engineering School have increased the undergraduate ability in generic skills. But, there are spaces for improvement for modules offered in the Engineering School in the lower rated scales. As a dynamic higher education institution, Coventry University is always particular about the on going improvement.

7. Implementation

7.1 Establishing a committee

Working party to be established to act as either the decision-making group or a body charged with providing advice to senior decision makers.

7.2 Focused skills module or embedded into general curriculum

There are options on approaches to generic skills. There are also cost and other implications constitute with the approach chosen.

7.3 Assessment and recording

To be meaningful any skills assessment must have wide recognition and consistency- at present there is no universal system able to provide this (Fallows, S., 2000).

7.4 Communication with teaching staff and students

There should be various communication channels for question and answer question for the development of the skills programme.

7.5 Staff development

Staff development will be needed for both new and established members of teaching staff. They should have the knowledge of how the implementation will take.

8. Conclusion

The issue or how to implement generic skills is not exhaustive. There are other issues that can be add such as communication conflict, how to maintain a

relationship, language, and etc. Therefore, this is not simple and straightforward matter.

References (refer to author)