“Competency auditing: Is there an ‘ideal’ human resource management graduate?”

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Abstract

Expectations of what constitutes competent and capable graduates were reported in a number of significant reports in Australia throughout the 1990’s, such as Mayer, Finn and Karpin. This paper reports the development of a process for conducting a micro-competency audit on human resource management subjects that are undertaken as part of an under-graduate business degree program. It proposes a graduate attribute framework to audit the content, teaching processes and assessments used to deliver the subjects.

Introduction

Although this paper does not propose to consider and evaluate the relative issues and merits of the respective enquiries and investigations that have been undertaken on competency profiling in Australia, there are some assumptions and points that need to be mentioned at the outset. Firstly, there is a regular flow of media about the ‘needs of employers’ and the ‘deficiencies of graduates’. For example, The Australian reported, “Employers want creative and critical thinkers but find that graduates lack creativity and flair…” (Illing 2000, p.33). Secondly, there are a significant number of university courses that are accredited by the respective professional bodies and associations. For example, the course which accountants, doctors, lawyers, architects etc. are usually vetted and accredited by their respective professional associations. Thirdly, there appears to be considerable uniformity in the expectations of both students and potential employers that universities will turn out graduates who are ‘close to operating temperature’. Finally, the usage of competency profiling continues to be a contentious issue in Universities, not the least because competency development is often associated with training and skills development.

* The author acknowledges the work and assistance of Dr Lesley Willcoxson, Prof Ronel Erwee and colleagues in the Department of HRM & Employment Relations, University of Southern Queensland, for their respective inputs and collegial contributions to the discussions and work which has been carried out on the project which is the basis for this paper.
Background

The basis for this paper centres on an endeavour to profile the desirable competencies for an under-graduate with a major in Human Resource Management. Although the professional body, the Australian Human Resource Management Institute (AHRI), has an accreditation process in place it is voluntary and there is no requirement for human resource practitioners to either register with or to complete an Institute accredited program.

In the Australian context, the most often referred to set of graduate competencies are arguably those which were proposed in the 1992 Mayer Report (cited in Ryan http://www.det.nsw.edu.au/publications/pilot/index.html accessed 6/2/2000), viz.

- Collecting, analysing and organising information
- Communicating ideas and information
- Planning and organising activities
- Working with others and in teams
- Using mathematical ideas and techniques
- Solving problems, and
- Using technology.

A deficiency with the Mayer competencies, when trying to apply them to specialised professions, is that they are generic competencies rather than specific competencies for graduates. An example of specific competencies for human resources are those that were developed by the Hong Kong Institute of Human Resource Management, shown in figure 1. However, these are also deficient when applied to graduates because they do not adequately cover the non-professional competencies and capabilities that many employers expect.

Figure 1.

![Conceptual Framework of Human Resource Competencies](image)

Source: Pickett, 1999:23.
The micro-level: developing a ‘draft’ set of HRM under-graduate competences

In the absence of an identifiable existing set of Human Resource Management Graduate competences, the following ‘draft’ set was developed by Pedersen, based on Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) recommendations (1998):

- Self-Management - including self directed learning, and time management.
- Interpersonal Skills - including writing, communication, presentation, and conflict handling.
- Problem Solving - including creative thinking, holistic thinking, diagnosis of problems, and information management.
- Teamwork
- Leadership
- Professional Ethos - including ethics.
- Acquisition of Discipline Knowledge - including concepts and techniques.

There was considerable scope within each of these competences to accommodate the needs of the academic program and University rules, student perceptions, employer expectations and the overall ethos of the Australian Human Resource Management Institute. However, none of these prospective stakeholders had a direct contribution to the formulation of the ‘draft’ competences developed by Pedersen.

This ‘draft’ set of eight competences was to be used to conduct an exploratory audit (refer to Appendix 1) of the eleven specialised HRM subjects from the double major available as part of the Bachelor of Business at the University of Southern Queensland to determine if the competences were being developed, at what level (first, second or third year), and whether there were any significant gaps. The underpinning structure for this activity was to chart the competences in terms of Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes and Experiences (KSEA’s).

The macro level: overtaken by a bigger wheel

Before the exploratory audit could be conducted, the University, through the Deputy-Vice Chancellor (Academic), sought feedback in May 2000 about what the respective Faculties were doing to attain the ‘Attributes of a USQ Graduate’ (USQ, 1999:32) (refer to Appendix 2). This process is part of the changes that are being implemented as a consequence of reforms to tertiary education (funding) by Federal Minister Kemp.

A cursory examination of this document by Willecoxon and Pedersen from the Department of HRM & Employment Relations raised their concerns that many of the attributes could not be attained because they were neither ‘teachable nor developable’. Further, there appeared to be significant repetition.

They undertook a redraft (refer to Appendix 3) which structured the attributes into three key categories: Learning and thinking capabilities; Workplace capabilities; and
Social and ethical responsibilities. This redraft only refined the original attributes—no new attributes were added. The intention was that the wording should be capable of being applied to all discipline areas within the University without the need for specific refinements. This potential need was addressed by Willcoxson’s redevelopment of the initial ‘draft’ audit form (refer to Appendix 1) into a two phased document: Firstly, the ‘USQ Graduate Attribute Development Grid’, and secondly, ‘Strategies for developing USQ Graduate Attributes’ (refer to Appendix 4). The ‘Strategies…’ form has since been further refined to include a third column for ‘assessment strategies’.

**Back to the micro-level: working in the dust.**

At the time this paper was prepared, all under-graduate specialist HRM subjects had been self-audited by the respective unit leaders using the ‘USQ Graduate Attribute Development Grid’, and ‘Strategies for developing USQ Graduate Attributes’. Each had been explained and then discussed at departmental level. These documents are being analysed, put into consistent terminology and condensed into a single document. This will enable analysis to be done to determine which attributes are not being adequately met, which are being overdone and for strategies to be derived to address these. It will also enable identification of any content deficiencies and for these to be addressed in an objective manner.

**Adding value by thinking outside the square.**

In terms of implementing and extracting value from the redefined graduate attributes and grids developed by Willcoxson and Pedersen, there are several compliance processes that USQ could use. Firstly, every course accreditation and re-accreditation proposal could have an explanation of how the graduate attributes will be attained by that particular course. Secondly, standards could be encapsulated by ensuring that objectives in every subject specification addressed the attributes and that the learning objectives for all distance learning study modules also addressed the attributes. Thirdly, all course-marketing materials could contain the attributes statement. Fourthly, the quality assurance programs could have the attributes as key objectives to be attained. Finally, USQ could provide quality certification of their graduates to potential employers. The question is whether we actually have the conviction to do it.

**Keywords**

Competency profiling; Competency audit; Graduate attributes; Potential employers; Graduate Attribute Development Grid; Learning and thinking capabilities; Workplace capabilities; Social and ethical responsibilities; Human Resource Management Graduate competences.
References


Illing, D., 2000, ‘Lack of flair and creativity hurts job aspirants’ in The Australian, Wednesday January 12, p.33


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Appendix 1. ‘Draft’ Competency Audit of HRM major subjects – USQ.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit Title: Description</th>
<th>Lec</th>
<th>Tutors</th>
<th>Assign 1</th>
<th>Assign 2</th>
<th>Assign 3</th>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Seminar</th>
<th>Group Work</th>
<th>Other (specify)</th>
<th>Exam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Management Skills</td>
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<td>Teamwork</td>
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<td>Leadership</td>
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<td>Professional Ethics</td>
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<td>Application of Discipline Concepts</td>
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</table>
Appendix 2. Attributes of a USQ Graduate

Education can be viewed as the formation of human capital. Hence, the attributes desired of a USQ graduate have been articulated as a means of focussing the University community and informing key processes.

'USQ aims to maintain a learning environment that provides the basis for developing a graduate who is a self-starting and independent learner with an inquiring mind; who possesses practical and relevant skills; who displays creativity, innovation and sound problem solving ability, and who is able to function effectively in a dynamic environment either in a team or independently.'

USQ will strive to ensure that its graduates possess:

- Sound generic skills - including appropriate literacy and computer skills, the acquisition, organisation and presentation of information, high level oral and written communication skills, sound presentation and interpersonal skills and a well-rounded general knowledge.
- In non-generalist awards, extensive knowledge and skill in a chosen discipline and, where appropriate, the demonstration of defined practical professional skills.
- A basic understanding of appropriate business and work practices and a practical knowledge of the chosen discipline.
- A willingness for application to the task with the ability to adapt to changing circumstances.
- Time management skills and the ability to work efficiently and effectively under stress.
- Sound research and analytical skills, with a practical and flexible approach to problem solving and the capacity to be critical.
- An ability to be discriminating in the use of information, a willingness to assess information inputs objectively, and an ability to apply knowledge effectively.
- Self-reliance but with a capacity for, and appreciation of, teamwork and cooperation.
- A capacity for leadership and sound decision-making based on open-mindedness, objectivity and reasoned analysis.
- Self-esteem and self-confidence.
- The motivation to pursue and achieve high goals.
- A commitment to lifelong learning, continual self-improvement and the capacity to learn new skills.
- An appreciation of the value of diversity.
- An observance of high professional and ethical standards.
- An acknowledgment and acceptance of individual responsibility and accountability; an understanding of professional ethics, and a willingness to contribute in a positive way to society.

Source: USQ, 1999:32
Appendix 3. Redrafted Attributes of a USQ Graduate.

This document is a re-worked version of the ‘Attributes of a USQ Graduate’ document circulated for comment by Prof. Susan Bambrick. It has been prepared by the Department of HRM & ER with the aim of 1) making the document more useable for teaching and publicity purposes by grouping attributes and linking related skills and 2) ensuring that the attributes which the University is committing to develop are attributes which can be taught and for which it is possible to develop specific teaching strategies.

Attributes of a USQ Graduate

‘USQ aims to create and maintain a learning environment that provides the basis for developing graduates who are independent learners with inquiring minds; who possess practical and relevant skills; who are creative, innovative and effective problem solvers, and who can function effectively both independently and in a team.’

To this end, USQ will strive to ensure that its graduates possess:

Learning & Thinking Capabilities

- extensive knowledge and skill in a chosen discipline
- defined practical professional skills, where appropriate
- sound research, analytical and critical thinking skills
- problem solving skills, including creativity and flexibility
- lifelong learning skills and an awareness of the need for continual self-improvement.

Workplace Capabilities

- high level written, oral and computer based communication skills
- information acquisition, organisation and presentation skills
- well developed teamwork and interpersonal skills
- an awareness of relevant business and work practices
- time management skills, including task application and strategies for working efficiently and effectively
- a capacity for leadership and decision making based on open-mindedness, objectivity and reasoned analysis

Social & Ethical Responsibilities

- the capacity to define, pursue and achieve goals
- an awareness of the value of diversity
- high professional standards and ethical behaviour
- the capacity for individual responsibility and accountability
- an awareness of the need to contribute in a positive way to society

Prepared by Cec Pedersen & Lesley Willcoxson, Dept. of HRM & ER
Appendix 4. USQ Graduate Attribute Development Grid and Strategies for developing USQ Graduate Attributes

Please note: This grid is illustrative only. It has been especially constructed within the Department of HRM & ER to demonstrate how the sequential development of graduate attributes can be defined or tracked throughout a degree or Department

1) USQ Graduate Attribute Development Grid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Learning and Thinking Capabilities</th>
<th>Workplace Capabilities</th>
<th>Social &amp; Ethical Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>51004</td>
<td>Discipline knowledge</td>
<td>Written skills</td>
<td>Individual responsibility and accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research and analytical skills</td>
<td>Information acquisition, organisation, presentation skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51379</td>
<td>Discipline knowledge</td>
<td>Written and oral skills</td>
<td>Individual responsibility and accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research, analytical and critical thinking skills</td>
<td>Information acquisition, organisation, presentation skills</td>
<td>Awareness of the value of diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teamwork &amp; interpersonal skills</td>
<td>Ethical behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Capacity to define, pursue &amp; achieve goals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Developed by Lesley Willcoxson & Cec Pedersen
Dept of HRM & ER, USQ
Please note: This grid is illustrative only. It has been especially constructed within the Department of HRM & ER to demonstrate how an outline of teaching and assessment strategies can be used to substantiate claims regarding the development of graduate attributes, and also to eliminate repetition, identify gaps in teaching/learning etc.

2) Strategies for developing USQ Graduate Attributes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th><strong>Learning and Thinking Capabilities</strong></th>
<th><strong>Workplace Capabilities</strong></th>
<th><strong>Social &amp; Ethical Responsibility</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attribute Developed</td>
<td>Teaching strategies</td>
<td>Attribute Developed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51004</td>
<td>1. Discipline knowledge</td>
<td>1. Lectures, reading</td>
<td>1. Written skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Research skills</td>
<td>2. Lecture demos → CMA testing database use</td>
<td>2. Info acquisition, organization, presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Analytical skills</td>
<td>Tute practice finding info in text &amp; articles</td>
<td>3. Interpersonal skills</td>
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<td>3. Tute grid: practice relating case details to theory</td>
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<td>1. Discourse knowledge</td>
<td>1. Tute demos of essay construction</td>
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<td>2. Research skills</td>
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<td>3. Analytical skills</td>
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<td>4. Critical thinking skills</td>
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<td>1. Discipline knowledge</td>
<td>1. Lectures, reading</td>
<td>1. Written skills</td>
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<td>2. Research skills</td>
<td>2. Tute practice finding info in articles &amp; newspaper</td>
<td>→ essay assessment task</td>
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<td>3. Analytical skills</td>
<td>3. Tute practice identifying key arguments in articles</td>
<td>CMA on referencing</td>
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<td>4. Critical thinking skills</td>
<td>4. Debate on value of HRM Tute ethical dilemma exercises</td>
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<td>4. Critical thinking skills</td>
<td>4. Debate on value of HRM Tute ethical dilemma exercises</td>
<td>2. Group project – presentation guidelines; peer feedback on presentation</td>
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<td>3. Guided group project research → assessed oral presentation &amp; report</td>
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<td>4. Team project: guided group dynamics; teamwork self &amp; peer assessed</td>
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<td>51…</td>
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<td>1. Written skills</td>
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<td>4. Critical thinking skills</td>
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