Defining Graduate Attributes as Prerequisite for Incorporating Activity Based Learning in Commerce Education

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Abstract
The need to incorporate graduate attributes as a pre requisite for incorporating activity based learning in commerce education is stressed in this report. Incorporating activity based learning is mainly intended to equip the graduates with specified attributes, derived from the expectation of various stakeholders. In higher education globally, graduate attributes are recognized as a critical outcome of a modern university education. The major universities and accreditation bodies have given prominent importance to graduate attributes, while designing program curriculum. Program curriculum is revised often to accomodate to suit industry expectations. The level of activity based learning in commerce education is based on its attainment of graduate attributes. This report reviews literature on graduate attributes and its importance in developing quality education. We summarize the report indicating the need for continuous industry-academia interaction, to decide on the level of activity based learning in commerce education.

Keywords:
Graduate Attributes, Activity Based Learning, Commerce Education.

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Introduction

The debate on imparting activity based learning in commerce education often took a narrow approach, without focusing on the issue in depth. It is said narrow, since the debate is not focused on the level of activity based learning and its relationship with graduate attributes. Commerce education often incorporate more theoretical learning without imparting practical knowledge required for different stakeholders, in particular the industry. The purpose behind University education as explained by McIntrye, et al (1999) is “about acquiring and appreciating theoretical, disciplinary formal foundational and generalizable knowledge in learning environment that is independent of the demands of the economy or the workplace. Another view proposed by McIntyre et al (1999) who noted that the objective of university education should be to prepare graduates in response to the demands of the workplace, and as a cornerstone of economic growth. It is argued by Hager, et al (2002) that universities have always had a commitment to ensure graduates develop broad based, generic skills such as “critical thinking”, “problem solving”, “analytic capacity” and so forth. The skills and capability that a graduate require is often benchmarked with the industry expectation or graduate attributes. Hence graduate attributes should be the focus point while defining and revising programs and aligning it with activity based learning.

Now the debate should concentrate whether the university education should focus their education on the expectations and demands of the industry at large. Often, industry complains that the graduates coming out of university education normally does not fit to their expectations. The curriculum and programs are designed by academicians without any feedback from industry. At present, various accreditation bodies in commerce education stressed the need to integrate commerce education with graduate attributes. The conflict between university’s goals while imparting education and the industry’s requirements while recruiting graduates is often prevalent in many economies. Students also are confused on what the course/program provides for their career. The debate on activity based learning in commerce education hence should start with a focus on graduate attributes and the ways in which it can be imparted in commerce education. Management education, a subset of...
Defining Graduate Attributes as Prerequisite for Incorporating....
Siraj K.K., P. Sudarsanan PILLAI

commerce education gained popularity since it addressed industry requirements, better than commerce education.

The post liberalization era saw a drastic change in the educational system globally. A graduate in an educational institution in India has to compete with another graduate coming out of a university or institution in another country for an employment opportunity. Thereby the quality of manpower produced by a country is evaluated globally. So it is important the educational system should result in producing graduates with certain skills and expertise.

The authors, hence, undertook this study to explore the need for commerce education to focus on graduate attributes and develop activity based learning. The study reviews literature on importance of graduate attributes in commerce education. The report is divided into three sections. The first section explains graduate attributes in general. The second section explains the need to align graduate attributes in commerce education. The last section explains the graduate attributes and activity based learning in commerce education.

Graduate attributes

Bowden et al (2000) defined graduate attributes as the qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students should develop during their time with the institution. These attributes include but go beyond the disciplinary expertise or technical knowledge that has traditionally formed the core of most university courses. They are qualities that also prepare graduates as agents of social good in an unknown future.

The stakeholders’ of educational system that includes government, industry, etc, expects certain knowledge, skills and expertise from graduates who come out of the different programs or courses. These expectations in general can be termed as graduate attributes. The employment prospects of the candidate to a great extent depend on the alignment of these attributes. All university programs should be clearly focused on its graduate attributes. In short, the program should spell out what it expects to deliver to the industry. Such an understanding improves the employability of its graduates. It is observed that many university programs did not specify its graduate attributes. This often makes confusion in the minds of students about their learning, in the minds of
faculties on what to teach and how much to teach, and on industry when the graduate’s quality mismatch with their expectations.

- It is mentioned that a proper definition of graduate attributes in academic programs enable;
- Defines what type of practical education to be incorporate to better equip the graduates to meet industry expectations and the graduate attributes.
- Make it clear to the student, both current and prospect, the opportunities that studying the course or program offers them, hence motivates them to capitalize on their time and efforts,
- Helps the Industry to locate graduates who can best fit to their requirements.
- Helps to improve the employability of the graduates.

Graduate Attributes, in other words, include the essential qualities, knowledge, and capabilities that students should develop during the course of their studies. In most cases, graduate attributes is closely linked with the industry expectations. Hence a continuous rapport with the industry determines the level in which graduate attributes are incorporated in the curriculum. For example, a student doing MCom (Master of Commerce) should know what the industry expects from him/her and what qualities he/she should possess by doing the program. Industry experts recruiting MCom graduates can know what skills that he can expect from graduates coming out of MCom program, etc.

Various studies were conducted on graduate attributes in commerce profession. A study conducted in University of Adelaide (2010), revealed that the graduates in commerce education should posses the following attributes.

- An advanced level of knowledge and understanding of the chosen discipline;
- The ability to apply effective, creative and innovative solutions, both independently and cooperatively, to current and future problems;
- A high order of interpersonal understanding, teamwork and communication skills and;
- A proficiency in the use of contemporary technologies.

An exploration into the websites of leading Australian Universities showed the presence of the above major attributes from commerce
Defining Graduate Attributes as Prerequisite for Incorporating...

Siraj K.K., P. Sudarsanan PILLAI

education. It is worthwhile to note the comments of Pukelis et al (2007) that “There is no debating that a major responsibility for the smooth integration of graduates into professional life, and hence into society, lies with higher education institutions (HEIs).’ The curriculum should provide mechanisms to incorporate the graduate attributes. The activity based learning should focus on imparting the graduate attributes. The question whether to incorporate activity based learning in commerce education is irrelevant, since commerce education cannot be fully theory based.

Hence aligning graduates attributes to the course curriculum is of higher importance.

Aligning Graduate Attributes in Commerce Education

The major objective behind education is to impart knowledge, skills and expertise in a field of study. Commerce education is not an exception. There are various commerce courses offered by universities in India. There is no debate whether commerce education should be centered on activity based learning. The authors find it necessary that activity based learning system for commerce education should be based on graduate attributes. For example, a BCom student is expected to certain skills which should be the basis in deciding the course outcomes and the extent of activity based learning. An overview of many universities in Western countries shows the presence of graduate attributes while framing a program or course. Such a practice enhances the quality of education, teaching and learning practices.

The current education system in general has certain limitations. Most of the institutions or universities still focus their attention on “student memorizing” as the key indicator of student learning and teaching effectiveness. The conventional method of “lecture” is still dominant form of teaching. This is mostly true for commerce education. With specific reference to commerce education, more concentration is focused on assessing student’s understanding of commerce policies, principles etc, with little focus on practical applications.

The result is a gap between university expectation from graduates and the industry expectations. The issue is not only exists in India, but in many other countries as well. Chang and Lee (2007) noted that an executive at the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, a professional trade organization, has called for “to move away from testing
that kind of memorization and more toward evaluating a higher order of skills.” The skills are, namely, written and oral communication skills, critical analysis, sound judgment of the common body of knowledge, and use of modern technology.

Griesel and Parket (2007) noted that the higher education and the work-place share a common misunderstanding about the role of each other. Employers sometimes voice concern over the quality of graduates exiting from universities while higher education feels that employers are not fully appreciative of what qualities and skills these graduates do possess.

Jones, A (2001) stressed the importance of incorporate graduate attributes in education. The author argued that the term 'graduate attributes' has been used in an un-theorized and rather loosely defined way. The study explored the situated nature of graduate attributes and the implications this has for research, teaching and higher education policy. It argues that contextual and individual factors have a significant influence upon the ways in which graduate attributes are conceptualized and taught. Further, it suggests that a serious examination of graduate attributes requires a commensurate examination of the role of the university.

Yong, J et al (2011) addressed the issue of incorporating graduate attributes in professional education. The tensions between institution’s desire for revenue, accreditation requirements for technical knowledge and employer needs for behavioral and higher order cognitive skills are explored through an Australian postgraduate commerce program. Content analysis of program documents is combined with a student survey to find that program and course outcomes align closely with students’ perceived outcomes but largely ignore the graduate attributes required by the profession and more recently, government. The analysis provides a platform for faculty and their institutions to decide on the future directions of such programs.

Litchfield et al (2008) noted that the learning of graduate attributes remains predominately haphazard and incidental rather than designed and deliberate. The curriculum status is no longer adequate and the contemporary workspace increasingly demand better developed professional attributes in university graduates. To incorporate graduate attributes, it is essential to design activity based learning that attention of classroom based theoretical teaching and learning. Interaction with
Defining Graduate Attributes as Prerequisite for Incorporating Activity Based Learning in Commerce Education

Siraj K.K., P. Sudarsanan PILLAI

industries, continuous revision of the program curriculum etc is needed so that the universities can assure the graduate attributes matches with the industry requirements or expectations.

It is noted in various studies that graduates in commerce education should possess the following skills.

- Technical Commerce Competency
- Problem solving skills.
- Communication Skills
- Interpersonal skills, and
- Skills to integrate latest information and internet technology at workplace.

A review of commerce education in olden days showed the lack of many skills in commerce graduates. The modern commerce education realized the changes in business world that includes globalization, improved business complexity, advances in technology, etc. These changes necessitated evolutionary changes in commerce education. The incorporation activity based learning is one of the impacts of all these developments. De Lange, et al (2006), in their studies, remarked that the changes in business environment led a drastic change in the skills required by commerce professionals. The accountant role improved from a mere book keeper to a decision maker, to add value to their clients.

Graduate Attributes and Activity Based Learning in Commerce Education

Commerce, like other professional courses, is a career which requires more practical expertise. Organizations require commerce professionals at different levels, requiring different levels of expertise. An accountant is expected to serve the company in day to day commerce issues and prepare statement of accountants. A chief accountant or Commerce Officer is expected to develop policies and procedures and to support management in their decision making. Graduate attributes are not a new phenomenon and it is arguable that universities have been teaching attributes for quite some time. What is new is the way in which graduate attributes have been appropriated, and the meanings now attached to them.

The educational system is expected to inculcate a course delivery which best suits the generation of graduates with predefined attributes.
Commerce Education in modern age is relevant not only because of the ever-increasing need for commerce graduates, but also because the field occupies a pivotal position in any industry. Thus, it is essential to incorporate graduate attributes in each commerce program so that proper care can be given in developing an outcome which best suits the graduate attributes.

Thus the activity based learning in commerce should follow the following steps.

There should be a continuous effort to assess graduate attributes for the different program it offers. This should be done through continuous feedback system from the various stakeholders.

The graduate attributes should be translated into outcomes, which should be the basis for determining the activity based learning in commerce education.

Once the list of appropriate graduate attributes has been agreed upon, there is a need to consider where in the program/curriculum the various attributes will be addressed. This is because; a) no single element of a program could hope to be responsible for more than a small part of the total graduate attribution formation; and b) each attribute will, typically, involve staged development across the program, increasing in depth and sophistication as the student progresses through their studies (Hager, Holland & Beckett, 2002).

Thus, the implementation of graduate attributes should be the primary concern while deciding the level of activity based learning in commerce education. Implementing graduate attributes in a program of study is a complex process, and there must be coordination in curriculum design to ensure adequate coverage of the required attributes.

Graduate attributes is a significant factor in delivery quality education. Its role in education is demonstrated in the following figure, taken from the University of Queensland.
Summary and Concluding Remarks

The major objective of commerce education is to prepare students for work places. In higher education, graduate attributes are recognized as critical outcome of a modern university education. Commerce professionals and academicians, for many years, were raised the need to restructure commerce education to meet the requirement of business environment. The current commerce education as a model has failed to focus on developing graduates for successful careers worldwide. Whereas, commerce education should enable students to possess the necessary skills for the work place, it seems that commerce education stakeholders are still debating the nature and level of skills that graduates should possess and how these skills can best be developed.

This report critically explored requirement for aligning graduate attributes in commerce education. The discussion on incorporating activity based learning in commerce education should be centered on equipping the education system to develop graduates, who possess certain specified attributes. There were many studies that indicated the importance of aligning graduate attributes in commerce education. The absence of graduate attributes leads to chaos in the education system,
since the various stakeholders expectations were not incorporate in the curriculum.

References


Defining Graduate Attributes as Prerequisite for Incorporating Activity Based Learning in Commerce Education

Siraj K.K., P. Sudarsanan PILLAI


