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Review

Assessment for employability: Is synoptic assessment the answer?

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Abstract: The production of job ready graduates remains one of the key requests of the business community. The purpose of this paper is to re-examine the importance of assessment in developing employability skills and in making graduates more employable. One criticism often levied at higher education institutions, is that students understand ideas in subject context, but cannot transfer that knowledge into a holistic business context. As such, they have silo ‘mentality’, when to be successful in the modern complex working and business environment they need to understand and command multiplicity. As a conceptual paper, this article seeks to discuss the importance and relevance of assessment and its links to employability. The paper provides a case for the inclusion of synoptic assessment as a tool for developing and demonstrating employability skills. The article emphasises the importance of employability and surrounding issues. The paper provides originality through linking the concepts of education and assessment with the end goals of job-readiness and employability. This paper argues for a new approach to assessment which is employability driven.

Keywords: assessment; synoptic; teaching and learning; student engagement; employability

1. Introduction

If business education is deemed to have a focus of meeting the needs of employers, educators must review the assessment of their programmes. Current business curricula typically assess students in isolated business subject areas (human resource management, marketing etc.), rather than through the integration of skills and knowledge from a holistic perspective. This paper explores an alternative approach for assessment. Business educators generally prepare graduates for management roles in organisations. Compartmentalisation of the curriculum often results in students failing to see the connectivity between subject areas, and fails to facilitate the need for graduates to be able to demonstrate a range of skills within a holistic environment rather than an oversimplified case situation. One issue is that students fail to engage in the broader teaching and learning process, as they fail to make links between different subjects and the assessment. It is therefore contended that, enabling students to see and understand the connections, they will better respond through improvements in field work activity. The paper ultimately suggests for the use of synoptic assessment, defined as “a form of assessment which tests candidates’ understanding of the connections between the different elements of a subject” [1] at the end of the programme or each year.

Calma [2] highlights that there is a failure to address the lack of generic skills issue, and calls for a ‘closing of the loop’. The article suggests that while assessment of learning outcomes has become particularly rigorous in the quality assurance process, the assessment of skills development has not. While the argument suggested

is valid this paper seeks to further that same debate, and aims to include all skills and not just the four (communication, mathematical, critical thinking and information literacy) included in the study. Lang and McNaught [3], for example highlight reflection as a critical skill for employment, while others may include inter-personal skills such as team working and empathy, or skills such as leadership or research skills [4].

2. Assessment

According to the QAA [5], “In higher education, assessment describes any process that appraises an individual’s knowledge, understanding, abilities or skills”. Higher education is synonymous with assessment and cannot be separated from it as judgement must be made about aspects of student work. It is important, however, to consider what is being judged. Certainly, knowledge is, but in terms of skills is it academic or employability skills, that are being judged, or both.

Leathwood [6] argues that “Assessment is pervasive in higher education yet has received comparatively little critical attention”. Constantinou [1] has gone as far as to describe research into “synoptic assessment as scarce”. He noted only being able to find four related resources on a search of key bibliometric databases. This opinion is shared by Fry [7] who suggest that the integration of assessment into the teaching and learning process has caused it to be forgotten as an independent subject. Burkill et al. [8] found that learning and teaching are subject dependent and that vocational courses are different from purely academic ones. While this train of argument is focused on the fact that teaching and learning methods may differ in subjects. It may also differ between vocational and academic courses, for example, honours and sub-degree (e.g., foundation degree) programmes. It would also be possible to make the same judgement between assessment methods. Taras [9] supports this approach by arguing that “Learning and teaching are inseparable in educational discourse, yet it is assessment that has been shown to be the single most important component that influences student learning and education in general”. Assessment can also be distinguished between assessment in the HE sector and in the compulsory sector [9] in that for the most part in the compulsory sector there is a splitting of learning and assessment, while in HE they are inextricably linked and is more integrated into the teaching and learning process. Therefore, in deciding on the part assessment has to play, academics must first decide on the purpose of undertaking the assessment [10]. According to Hargreaves [11] assessment serves a mixture of purposes:

- promote student learning.
- evaluate student knowledge, understanding abilities or skills.
- provide a mark/grade.
- enable the award of achievement that reflects the academic standards set by the awarding institution.

Taylor [12] suggests that a further aim, is to develop students as reflective practitioners. However, Taras [13] emphasises the judgmental element applied to assessment as fundamental. As such, assessment does not only provide a measure of how well a student is doing and a method of making a judgement, it is intrinsically linked the whole process of teaching and learning.

3. Assessment and the curriculum

Armitage et al. [14] contend “both the features of assessment and the particular strategies we use should be determined by the nature and purpose of learning as expressed in our aims and objectives”. From a teaching perspective the teaching and learning process culminates with the assessment, while the student often views it as the beginning. Effective design of the programme of learning (curriculum) will result in improved linkage between the teaching-learning-assessment process and a shared goal between lecturer and student. Therefore, by engaging with the assessment activity, the student will engage in the learning process [10]. Steed [15] proposes the concept of the flipped classroom in delivery of content, by which the student is engaged with the subject matter prior to the formal delivery. Perhaps here we develop the concept of the flipped assessment in which we assist the students in engaging with the assessment task prior to delivery. Perhaps engagement with the subject content will then develop at an earlier stage.

One crucial issue is the need for constructive alignment. We need to match performance against the criteria. According to Biggs [16], it is not a case of adding up marks rather making a holistic judgement on the quality of the work. It is crucial therefore to assess against the Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) which should not be merely outlined in a mark scheme. They are sought for qualities of performance and therefore assessment needs to be judged against them. Therefore, in the process of developing and delivering a module we go through a system of processes which link the ILOs to the assessment. Stage one often requires the interpretation and understanding of the ILOs. Often if the tutor has written the module specification (or descriptor) they are at an advantage at this stage. From this, two alternative routes can be taken, which should bring us to the same position. We could decide from this point what content should we deliver to allow the learning outcomes to be assessed or alternatively we can take the view of how are we going to assess this module and therefore what content needs to be delivered. The route taken does not really matter so long as the link between the ILOs and the assessment is fundamental [17].

Ramsden [18] links assessment and curriculum as one and the same in the minds of students: “They will learn what they think they will be assessed on”. Thus, by flipping the assessment and making it the focal point of the programme, it is possible to change their view of the content. By making the assessment synoptic to cover a broader spectrum a wider range of skills and the links between subject content can be better assessed, but more importantly better contextualised. This concept shall be returned to later in the paper.

4. Assessment methods

As participation in higher education has widened, the types of learners recruited often ensure that different methods of assessment are required [11]. Experience suggests that business and management-based qualifications over rely on assessment by the written word. On vocational courses this often relates to business style reports. When it isn't written, it gravitates towards a presentation. This can result in learners struggling to achieve and or frightening them off. Different methods of assessments are required for different types of learners, for example those from non-traditional

backgrounds. The use of Viva Voce as an alternative method should be encouraged, alongside other methods such as portfolios of tasks completed, use of discussion boards, seminar work and observation to name a few. This often requires the tutor to be far more creative in their thinking, which surrounds the assessment process and far more subsequently more flexible in their approach to designing the assessment. Hargreaves [11] highlights the growing need for diversity in assessment. He focuses on the changes to learner cohorts created by widening participation. He suggests that more innovation and greater creativity are required in the assessment process. This is further supported by Constantinou [1]. A key argument is to ensure an inclusive approach is taken to the assessment activity, allowing the use of flexibility in the range of assessment methods, allowing opportunity to meet the learning outcomes in various ways [19]. It is imperative however to remember that in all cases academic rigour must be retained at all stages. Compromise (reducing rigour to be more inclusive, is not an option but instead students have the opportunity highlight their academic prowess and higher-level skills. Taylor [12] in her analysis of the FdA in educational studies for teaching assistants highlights that 50% of assessment are done through alternative methods.

5. Synoptic assessment

Synoptic assessment requires a student to fuse and combine learning from a combination of module ideas and content allowing them to take a more holistic view of business problems and scenarios. As such Constantinou [1] adopts the 2004 definition by the qualifications and curriculum authority as “a form of assessment which tests candidates’ understanding of the connections between the different elements of the subject”. While discussions around this approach to assessment have become more prevalent within compulsory education over the last 20 years, it is less true of post-compulsory education and higher education in particular [1]. As such Southall and Wason [17] contend that synoptic assessment leads to improved student engagement and helps students to develop greater appreciation of the subject area, by considering the inter-connectivity between differing areas. As such this reduction in the ‘silo’ mentality will aid their job-readiness and employability opportunities.

The traditional concept of the dissertation, has often been identified as the culminating piece of work of any academic study, and more recently the adoption of the term capstone project has become a more widely used concept, particularly at postgraduate level. However, this has predominantly been identified as a mere name change and not necessarily the adoption of a different philosophy. The concept of a capstone project is “a multifaceted assignment that serves as a culminating academic and intellectual experience for students, typically during their final year ... or at the end of an academic program” [20]. The nature and expectation of a capstone project is to bring together differing ingredients from a package of learning which will allow students to provide a holistic overview of a solution to a business issue, drawing on learning across a spectrum of disciplines. Hence this gives, a broader, skills base than a traditional dissertation approach.

6. Assessment and employability

No article regarding assessment is complete without discussion of reliability and validity [21–23]. According to Reece and Walter [23], “Reliability is concerned with getting the assessment right, while validity is concerned with getting the right assessment”. That is, reliability is about ensuring that the right grades or marks are awarded, while validity is about doing what it is meant to do. In this case we can identify two forms of validity, content validity which asks if the assessment assesses what it is meant to assess and construct validity which asks if it is the appropriate way of assessing it. However increasingly we need to be concerned with the relevance to the workplace and the development of workplace skills. Bennis and O’Toole [24] are critical of the level of engagement with business practice that occurs in delivery Business Schools, and this follows through to the assessment.

Gallagher [25] makes the link between skills and knowledge, and it is important that students can show both skills and knowledge through the assessment activity. This gives appropriateness to the assessment method [17]. However, he further highlights the importance of information and communication skills, digital skills, reading and writing skills and collecting and presenting data skills in both academic and work contexts. Thus, assessment which develops these range of skills as well as the knowledge alongside them develops the employability skills required and employers. However, Stinson and Milter [26] supported by Tochon [27] emphasise that there is need to ensure that there is both academic rigour and practical engagement in the assessment.

Wang et al. [28] highlight a range of skills which are important in an academic context. They are critical thinking, problem solving communication, teamworking, creativity, ability to organise, ability to make use of technology and a high work ethic. Interestingly these fit with the requirement of employers [29]. Weber and Englehart [30] further highlight reflection as a key skill which needs to be developed. If it is, recognised then there is commonality between the skills that are assessed as part of academic outputs and the same skills that employers require, then assessment and employability can be inextricably linked. Collins [31] suggests that it is the way to apply these skills in a work context which is the core problem. One of the initial issues is that individual assignments are usually designed to assess a single set of subject content and does not often the require the student to draw on content from another subject. For example, a HR assignment would not usually require the student to demonstrate their knowledge of, or the importance of financial consideration or take into account strategic issues. Weber and Englehart [30] therefore highlight the use of a holistic project, which can bring together the different aspects of the curricula enabling students to demonstrate a more rounded approach, thus requiring a synoptic assessment to bring together the course as a whole. Critics may argue that this is role of the dissertation, however all too often the dissertation is subject specific and narrow and does not necessarily offer the breadth that occurs in the ‘real world’.

As stated earlier in the paper, it is now necessary to return to the idea of the synoptic assessment. The synoptic assessment would allow students to mirror the ‘real world’ and demonstrate the skills and attributes developed throughout the course in the context of the employment situation, requiring students to demonstrate skills

developed through the assessment task, while at the same time testing learning and application of knowledge. In doing this student would be required to draw on their experience of the three years (or the duration) of their programme demonstrating a more linear rather than compartmentalised approach to learning. Students would effectively become more ready to face up to the challenges that are posed in organisational settings, and become more adapt at responding and making decisions. Of course, there are the questions of student workload and form of the assessment that would take place. These need to be responded to through effective curriculum design. There are potential alternative strategies that could be adopted. A synoptic assessment could be undertaken at the end of each year, with subsequent years building on the previous, or alternatively a single synoptic assessment at the end of the final year. Workload could be managed through reduced assessment requirements for individual modules, a feasible suggestion as some of the content for assessment is being moved to the synoptic activity. This would move some way to reducing student workload, and lecturer assessment time. The nature of the assessment also requires the ability to assess and demonstrate the full range of skills and knowledge that have been developed through the programme. This could effectively be a 'live' case study which involves the students undertaking decisions based on sets of information, in changing conditions. Decisions being made by other students or groups of students ultimately impact on the situation, thus ensuring that no two students will be faced with exactly the same scenario. Responses could be observed, monitored and reported on, and effectively mirroring the workplace. The hope is that students will become more engaged with the subject content and more tuned into the links between subject matter. To return to Ramsden [18] if students believe in the relevance of all the subject content linking to the assessment, they will learn it.

7. Developing a research agenda

The purpose of this paper is to generate a discussion as to the role of assessment as a means to allow students to bring the cognate disciplines of business together. As such allowing students' better development as managers and that this will allow for better understanding of how business' work, it is clear we must set a research agenda to achieve this. We have the dual purpose within higher education to both develop the skills to allow students to develop and achieve 'good' qualifications, while at the same time preparing them for employment. In doing this we need to teach and assess in a wider scope. As educators we often teach students in modular format, yet the business world is not made up of silos, and students need appreciate the linkages between differing cognate areas. As such the paper calls on further research to be undertaken to consider how this may work in practice.

Although there have been several discussions about the movement away from module level learning outcomes to programme level, the argument that having module level learning outcomes and the continuation of modularisation will consistently drive silo mentality will remain. The consideration that by moving to programme level outcomes with no need to articulate to individual module needs will allow for programme designers to move away from thinking at the module level to thinking at the programme level. This in turn will allow designers to think about assessing at

programme level which will allow them to think holistically as opposed to thinking modular. This will therefore allow for greater thinking about the use of synoptic assessment, which will allow for students to create the links between each of the disciplines.

As educators we therefore need to target the development of programmes which make use of synoptic assessment and consider how synoptic assessment better prepares students for the workplace.

8. Conclusion

An integral part of a modern university's role is to prepare students for employment. This comes through the delivery of the curriculum, and through the assessment, which is crucial within the teaching and learning process and it is difficult to separate from it. It is a fundamental part of the process of allowing learners to develop knowledge and skills required by employers. Feedback is crucial in enabling the learning to take place, so long as the learner engages with the process, otherwise the feedback becomes irrelevant. From this viewpoint it is impossible to separate the curriculum and assessment in the eyes of the student as for many they see them as one and the same. Therefore, if the programme requires a longer-term strategy in understanding and relating to a synoptic and final assessment then learning hopefully becomes deeper and more relevant to the student—employment divide.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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