

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS REQUIRED BY BA ACCOUNTING GRADUATES

A Comparison of University of Westshire Student and Local Employer Perspectives

Research Proposal

Date

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation will look into the current employability of BA Accounting graduates. It will consider the skills that are perceived to be most and least important for employability from the perspectives of Westshire students and local employers. The researcher will analyse whether the current BA Accounting qualification provides students with the employability skills they require in order to meet employers' needs.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

The Higher Education Academy defines employability as, "A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes-that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce , the community and the economy." (Gallagher, 2013, p. xvii).

In the book, *Employability Skills*, Frances Trought states that, "Employability is forever". It is a continuous thing, something that is learnt. It can be carried from job to job, career move to career move. It is, "learnt, honed and practised" (2012, p. x). She suggests that a degree is merely the first point of entry and it is the, "demonstration of employability skills that is used to differentiate between the candidates." (2012, p. 3)

Steve Rook also states that employability is, "knowledge, commitment and especially skills" (2013, p. 8). These authors seem to agree that employability is becoming more important in the work place. In the business world generally, but particularly in the field of accounting, it is becoming more obvious that there is a need for compatibility between the employability skills and abilities that employers desire and require, what education provides and what graduates possess. Generally, employability needs to be given more importance in education (Altrawneh, 2016).

Accountancy as a profession changes and develops alongside the business environment. This means that education needs to be changing and developing alongside the profession in order to provide society with a workforce that has the desired skills and abilities to fill the demand. Accounting education has a tendency to lean more towards the practical accounting skills rather than any other skills. This creates a gap in the skills needed and the skills acquired (Altrawneh, 2016).

A study into the skills and attributes expected by Sri Lankan employers identified, “team work, interpersonal skills and planning & organizing skills” as the main skills alongside, “positive, loyalty, flexibility, professionalism/ work ethics” as the main attitudes that employers desire (Wimalasiri, 2015).

It can be seen that some of the skills that employers desire are: the ability to plan and organise, strong interpersonal skills and the ability to work in a team. Alongside these abilities, employers also tend to desire certain personality traits. Such as; loyalty, professionalism and a positive work ethic (Galhena, 2015).

A recent study identified that there are differences between the emotional intelligence competencies that are considered important by employers and those that are displayed by graduates (Jameson, et al., 2016). This is supported by a study by Alex Tymon who also identified a large difference between what employers perceive to be important skills and abilities and what students perceive to be important skills and abilities (2013). This would suggest that there is a need to improve the development of these skills in accounting education.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

AIMS

The overall aim of this research is to analyse and evaluate the differences and similarities between the employability skills required by local employers and the employability skills that Westshire students consider to be important and desirable. In order for this to be achieved there will be precise objectives set. According to Hart, objectives are, “the tasks required to actualize adequately the main elements of the research.” (2009, p. 88). They are the tasks that need to be done in order to achieve the desired outcomes of the research.

OBJECTIVES

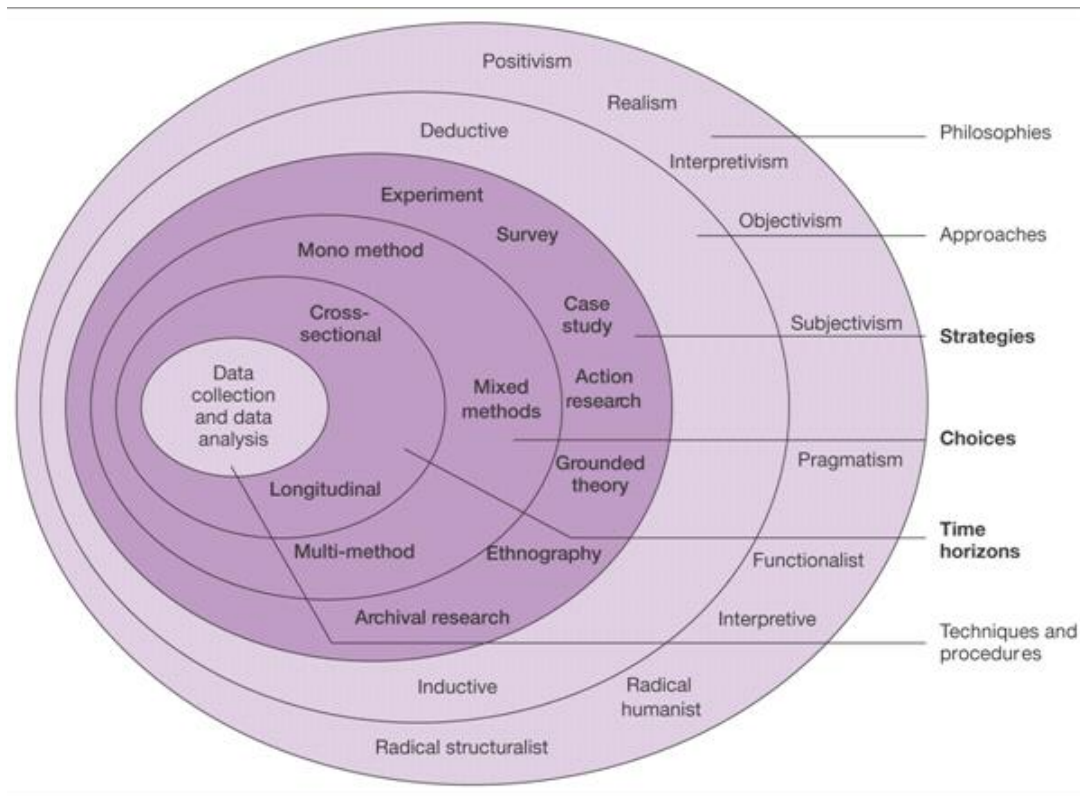
1. Establish the skills and abilities that employers expect from BA Accounting graduates.
2. Establish the skills and abilities that graduates perceive to be the most desirable
3. Investigate whether the skills that are perceived to be important are taught as part of the normal BA Accountancy syllabus.
4. Discuss any improvements that could be made to the teaching of BA Accounting in order to ensure that graduates are able to develop the required employability skills.

It is very important that the right research design is achieved. Research design can be defined in many ways. It is, “the general plan of how you will go about answering your research questions” (Saunders, et al., 2007, p. 131). Different types of research will require different research design (Cohen, et al., 2011). Research design is, “a detailed plan to guide and focus the research” (2009, p. 111) it, “guides how research should be conducted” (2009, p. 11).

Research can be defined as, “The systematic collection and interpretation of information with a clear purpose, to find things out.” (Saunders, et al., 2012). There are two different types, primary and secondary. Secondary research is research that already exists, and the researcher analyses it in order to obtain information for the project. It is sourced in books, journals, news articles and websites. Primary research is conducted by the researcher for the purpose of the project. Some examples may be; questionnaires, interviews and surveys.

Using the research onion for reference (figure 1), the research for this project will be cross sectional, this is because it will be carried out at one point in time due to the time constraints. This is opposed to over a long period of time which would be longitudinal research (Saunders, et al., 2012). The research will be mono method as it will be using just one type of data collection.

Figure 1: The Research Onion



(Saunders, et al., 2012, p. 160)

According to Saunders et al, research philosophy is, “the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge” (2012, p. 149). Five main paradigms are identified; Pragmatism, Ontology, Objectivism, Epistemology and Positivism. Positivism involves observable realities, creating generalisations similar to the laws of the physical and natural sciences (Saunders, et al., 2012).

This project will be using the positivism paradigm as information for this project will be based on data and statistics collected from secondary research and by method of surveys. This will then be analysed, based on observable reality.

A deductive approach to research is when the research begins with a theory, then the researcher looks to prove the theory. An inductive approach is when the researcher collects data to explore a phenomenon and create a new or developed theory (Saunders, et al., 2012).

The research for this project is therefore inductive in approach as data will be collected in order to explore the phenomenon of employability.

Quantitative research is normally used alongside positivism. It uses largely numerical data that can be compared and analysed using a variety of techniques. This is in contrast to qualitative research which tends to be used alongside interpretivism, using non numerical data that cannot be quantified (Saunders, et al., 2012). This research will be using a quantitative approach using surveys to generate data that can be quantified and analysed.

Phenomenological research will be used for this project. Phenomenological research looks at what an experience means to the person that experiences it (Moustakas, 1994). In the case of this research, the data collected is based on student and employer perspectives. Therefore, the data collected will be opinion based and, as such, phenomenological.

DATA COLLECTION

The research will be collected by way of two online surveys. The first of the surveys will be targeted towards Westshire BA Accountancy and BA Business and Finance at levels 4, 5 and 6. The target response rate will be 50 students. The current student numbers for BA Accounting and BA Business and Finance students are:

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Total
BA Accounting	14	11	9	34
BA Business and Finance	4	3	11	18

Where it would be ideal to obtain information purely from BA Accounting students there are not sufficient numbers of these students available to provide the information at this point in time. Therefore, it is necessary for this project to also include BA Business and Finance students to ensure enough data is collected.

The second survey will be targeted towards Local Accounting firms in the Swansea area. Again, the target response rate will be 50 firms. These accounting firms will be contacted by email in advance in order to gain an indication of the level of response and therefore amount of data that will be obtained. If there is a lack of response then it may be possible to also target accounting firms further afield.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

There will be ethical considerations and limitations to be taken into account during the process of this project. Saunders et al define research ethics as, “the standards of behaviour that guide our conduct in relation to the rights of those who become the subject of your work or are affected by it.” (2012, p. 226).

For this project specifically, consent will be obtained from the University before the student surveys are sent. Also, consent will be obtained from the accounting firms before the surveys are forwarded to them. The researcher will also be subject to guidance from the university’s code of ethics.

RESOURCES AND PLANNING

Resources that will be needed for this project will be access to a suitable PC and the internet as well as access to suitable books, academic journals and news articles. All of these resources can be sourced in the university library.

A detailed Gantt chart has been included in this research proposal in order to demonstrate the expected use of the time of this project, extending for the time period from October 20XX to May 20XX. The Gantt chart can be found in appendices A1.

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APPENDICES

A1 GANTT CHART

