

Success factors of master of science curricula in business administration

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Success Factors of Business Curricula

Running head: Success Factors of Business Education

Success Factors of Master Curricula in Business Administration during Labour Market Entry

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Success Factors of Business Curricula

ABSTRACT

Departing from the work of Mintzberg (2004), and Pfeffer and Fong (2002) concerning the lack of fit between business education and labour market requirements, we investigated different business curricula in an occupational labour market to identify curriculum factors that make a productive contribution to graduates' labour market success. A portfolio study, presenting a conventional, problem-based, or competence-based program, was carried out among twenty large companies in a variety of industries. Employers ranked authentic tasks as key-factors of business curricula, and associated such tasks with a configuration of flexible thinking skills, robust content knowledge, and social skills, which were the most desired competences in the eyes of employers. Other curriculum factors, such as internationalization and admission criteria, are discussed and related to their implications for business education programs and future research.

Introduction

Business administration curricula are subject to continuous debate worldwide. Mintzberg (2004) points out that business schools are teaching the wrong things, in the wrong ways, to the wrong people. Pfeffer and Fong (2002) suggest that business schools operate as major screening or recruiting services, and that their curricula show a lack of relationship with labour market demands.

Such critiques on business education are characteristic for the situation in the USA. The labour market in the USA, and consequently its needs, differ from the needs in the European labour market. Gangl's research (2001) concerning educational output in the secondary sector has classified the USA as an internal labour market (ILM), while the European labour market showed to be differentiated in a mixture of ILMs (the UK, Ireland, France, and Belgium), occupational labour markets (OLMs, such as in Germany, Austria, Denmark, and the Netherlands) and a group of Mediterranean labour markets (Greece, Spain, Italy, and Portugal) that tend to show their own characteristic needs. According to Gangl (2001) ILMs tend to bring forth general, broad, weakly stratified education systems that produce academic competences. In ILMs companies take the lead in recruiting and training graduates during transition stages from school to work. In parallel, reputations of universities and ranking systems for business schools are inclined to play a major role as proxies for the quality of the higher education that is provided. OLMs on the other hand are related to highly stratified education systems that produce many different education levels and an abundance of horizontal differentiation and their related domain-specific competences. The latter are assumed to be immediately productive (Gangl, 2001). Most OLMs have a dual higher education system: higher vocational education (HVE) that focuses on knowledge application, versus universities that focus on specialist knowledge development, and research. Universities in OLM labour markets emphasize the education level and academic knowledge, just like universities in ILM markets. However, graduates from universities in OLM labour markets have to compete with relatively large numbers of graduates from HVE, and graduates from HVE have shown to be serious competitors for university graduates in comparable disciplines (Heijke & Meng, 2006). Specifically in the business education domain this competition is fierce, and HVE graduates in

the business domain seem to have a comparative advantage during periods of economic decline (ROA, 2009).

Since school systems are closely linked with labour market characteristics, the European business education debate at the university level is framed in different terms in OLMs, such as whether generic or domain-specific competences should be emphasized, and whether it is possible to design university level business programs that are able to integrate both a high level of academic, and domain-specific competences. Economic studies tend to fall short in informing educational scientists on how to improve their curricula. Stasz (2001) has indicated that “research from the economic perspective tends to provide broad labels or definitions concerning skill requirements which have somewhat limited value to education practitioners [...], and the measures that are used are underdeveloped (p. 395).

The aims of this study are to explore which university business curriculum factors are key factors in the eyes of employers in private and public companies in an OLM labour market to best prepare graduates for the transition from school to work. The study is based on conceptualizations of competences and curriculum theory. A holistic conceptualization of curriculum is presented that is closely connected to frameworks that are developed by formal accreditation bodies in business education. Three different curriculum design models that are currently implemented in business education are selected, and used as cues in the qualitative research method that investigates the business education problem at the curriculum level in an OLM labour market. The findings from the study are translated in implications for practice and future research in OLM labour markets.

The Competence Concept

Competence is an umbrella concept that serves the debate on educational goals and labour market demands (Van der Klink & Boon, 2002). The concept of competence encourages business schools to formulate educational outcomes in terms of graduates' performance, according to standards set by business, industry, and accreditation bodies. The process to determine such standards requires strong connections between the curriculum and the needs of stakeholders, such as the corporate world (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002;

Van der Klink & Boon, 2003). Competences have shown to be stronger predictors for job allocation and follow-up training than traditional human capital indicators such as field, grade-point average, and thesis results (Semeijn, 2005).

Domain-specific competences.

Domain-specific competencies are the baseline for developing expertise in a profession (Boshuizen, 2009). Domain-specific competences facilitate access to jobs that closely match the level and content of the curriculum (Heijke, Meng, & Ris, 2003). To support the development of domain-specific competences curriculum planning and design should ideally be informed by expertise research and available knowledge concerning knowledge-development stages (Boshuizen, 2009). For example, Arts, Gijsselaers, and Boshuizen (2006) who studied task performance among a range of different expertise levels in the domain of business administration, have reported that master students pay much attention to both relevant and irrelevant information. At least eight years of management experience after graduation was needed before graduates could accurately distinguish relevant from irrelevant information. In contrast, experts focus on structural features and patterns, pay far more attention to strategic issues, and their knowledge is highly organized (Lehmann & Gruber, 2006; Nievelein, Van Gog, Boshuizen, & Prins, 2007). Experts have excellent long-term memory for domain-related issues (Feltovitch, Prietula, & Ericsson, 2006) and can retrieve this knowledge very quickly from memory, even under high stress or time-constrained conditions (Woods, Howey, Brooks, & Norman, 2006). Such findings have implications for the curriculum design, in the sense that intermediates (master students) should be supported in identifying and establishing relations between concepts and theories. Expertise researchers stress that a well-organized knowledge base and skills development in an authentic, domain-specific context supports transfer of what has been learned to professional practice.

Generic competences.

Generic competencies are competences that can be transferred to many situations, vocations, professions, jobs and industries. Generic competencies (e.g. problem solving, the ability to learn, higher-order thinking

skills, communication, teamwork) are assumed to contribute to a broad range of career opportunities. Labour market research has shown that generic competences facilitate entry to jobs outside one's own discipline, and selection for follow-up training (Heijke et al., 2003). This type of competences is also known as key-competences, academic competences, or key qualifications (Nijhof & Streumer, 1998; Rychen & Salganik, 2001).

Labour market researchers such as Van der Velden (2006) have suggested that generic and domain-specific competences cannot be acquired separately. Even generic competences only derive their meaning in a specific context. For example communication is a competence that is necessary in many professions. However, how to communicate effectively differs strongly for a journalist, a surgeon, or a manager. The same goes for problem solving, reasoning, and teamwork. This point of view has been endorsed by instructional design scholars such as Van Merriënboer and Kester (2008) who argue that separating the acquisition of generic and domain-specific competences inhibits the transfer of what has been learned to practice. In their view, both kinds of competences should be learned simultaneously in a variety of authentic situations across the curriculum. The variety of authentic tasks should instigate and sustain different types of learning. Competence development needs a curriculum that specifically promotes the integrated acquisition of knowledge, skills, and professional attitudes.

The Curriculum

Curriculum is defined as a learning plan, composed of strongly interrelated components and essential elements. Curriculum components and elements correspond to a certain degree with quality indicators as audited by accreditation committees, although quality frameworks are structured in differently labelled categories, such as in the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS, 2008) framework, provided by the European Federation of Management Development (EFMD). The EQUIS framework is particularly designed for business education, and seven out of its eleven categories overlap with curriculum categories (Table 1).

A holistic conception of a curriculum differentiates in learning materials and resources, learning activities, teaching strategies, and time and space, where quality frameworks use broader categories such as instructional design and connections with the corporate world. Quality frameworks tend to emphasize the strategy and quality assurance programs of business schools (Prøitz, Stensaker, & Harvey, 2004), and their consistency with other curriculum elements. From a curriculum perspective consistency is the congruence between all curriculum components and elements (internal consistency), and the contingency among the various stakeholder perceptions of a curriculum (external consistency; Kessels & Plomp, 1999). Consistency is considered as the most important characteristic of curricula (Verloop & Lowijck, 2003). The holistic conception of a curriculum, as reflected in Table 1 is a contrast with narrow definitions of a curriculum, in purely content related terms. The holistic perspective of a curriculum also takes the characteristics and expertise level of the student target group into account, which is analogous with accreditation committees evaluating admission criteria for education programs, or the international composition of the student target population. It is a consistency issue that curricula are tuned with the features and characteristics of their target population, and the needs of their key-stakeholders, such as employers and students.

Table 1

Essential Components and Elements of Curricula (Sources: EQUIS, 2008; Klein, 1991, in McKenney, 2001, p.18).

Essential curriculum components and elements	Description	Corresponding EQUIS-categories
Goals, objectives and purposes	The anticipated outcomes of teaching and learning	Mission and structure
Content	Facts, ideas, concepts, processes, generalizations, attitudes, beliefs and skills with which students interact as	Content

	they experience a curriculum	
Materials and resources	The objects, places and people used to facilitate the learning process	Instructional design
Activities	What students do when they are engaged in the process of learning	
Teaching strategies	The role taken by the instructor (be it a person, book, computer program etc.) in order to facilitate learning	Connections with the
Time	Whether allocated on a formal or informal basis	corporate world regarding task or course development,
Space	The design and use of the physical learning environment, such as a classroom, school , virtual space, or the shade of a tree	guest lectures, projects, and internships.
Evaluation	Procedures to determine what students have learned	Quality – e.g. stakeholders that play a central role in the curriculum design.
Grouping	The processes and results of determining the composition of clusters of students that facilitate the learning process	Selection and target group Internationalization

In the next section three curriculum design models and their fit with labour market demands are discussed. After presenting the key-features of the conventional business curriculum design model, attention

is paid to two alternative models that are currently implemented in the domain of business education: the problem-based (PBL) and the competence-based model. The latter is described in terms of a specific whole task model. These two models are selected since both models have emerged from practice (the labour market needs), and focus on the use of authentic problems. However, the PBL-model is learner-centred while the competence-based model is task-centred. It is argued why certain curriculum design models can be favoured in comparison with others.

Conventional models.

Traditional instruction is characterized by a teacher-centred approach, the use of lectures delivered in theatre-like settings, and learning goals and assignments that are predominantly set by the teacher (Albanese & Mitchell, 1993).

Boshuizen (2009) identifies the following problems inherent to teacher-centred academic curricula: a lack of horizontal and vertical integration of the subjects taught (referring to a lack of multidisciplinary coherence and a gap between theoretical and practical relevance); a constant overload and an overemphasis on the principles and practices of the separate disciplines. Consequently, students have to fill in the gaps between the separately presented discipline knowledge and the integrated professional application in real life practice.

Students are socialized in predominantly memorizing isolated facts and learning for the test, immediately forgetting such non-real life facts after the exam has occurred. Van Merriënboer and Kester (2008) call this situation “the transfer paradox”: Methods that work the best for reaching isolated specific objectives are often not the methods that work best for achieving integrated objectives and the transfer of what has been learned to professional practice. Consequently employers either complain that academics cannot put their knowledge into practice (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Renkl, Mandl, & Gruber, 1996; Stark, Renkl, Gruber, & Mandl, 1998), or search for work experience or extracurricular activities in graduates’ résumés as indicators for practically oriented competences (Vermeulen-Kerstens, 2007).

Problem-based curricula.

Problem based curricula (PBL) already exist more than half a century, predominantly in the medical domain in response to students' unsatisfactory performance in clinical practice (Hung, Jonassen, & Liu, 2008). In medical practice students are confronted with clinical problems that are characterized by complex multidisciplinary characteristics, and it has been argued that PBL better prepares students in reasoning and problem solving from a multidisciplinary perspective.

Current models for problem-based learning (PBL) curricula in different disciplines show the following characteristics (cf. Dochy, Segers, Van den Bossche, & Gijbels, 2003; Hung et al., 2008): Student-centred learning; learning which occurs in small student groups guided by a tutor who operates as a facilitator; authentic problems which are encountered firstly in the learning sequence, before any preparation or study has occurred; problems that are used as instruments to acquire the necessary knowledge and problem-solving skills; self-directed learning as the major strategy to gather new information. Goals of PBL curricula are: increased motivation for learning; the construction of knowledge that can be used in professional practice; more effective reasoning processes, and the development of self-directed learning skills (Prince, 2006).

Opponents of PBL curricula (Sweller, Kirschner, & Clark, 2007) argue that at least in some domains (natural sciences and biology) more directive, task-based instruction has proven to be more effective for novices and intermediates than PBL-approaches. According to these authors the minimal guidance of students in PBL curricula may undermine students' domain-specific knowledge base and consequently transfer of what has been learned to professional practice.

Empirical evidence underpinning the labour market effectiveness of PBL curricula in the medical domain has indicated that PBL-students feel better prepared for practice and more confident about their teamwork and communication competences than students in traditional curricula (Prince, Van Eijs, Boshuizen, Van der Vleuten, & Scherpbier, 2005). Similar patterns have been revealed in PBL curriculum evaluations (Ramaekers, 2004) and PBL-alumni career evaluations (De Vries, 2006) in economics and business administration. In addition to this type of self-perception studies Allen and Ramaekers (2006) have conducted a survey amongst employers of PBL-graduates in economics and business administration. Their

study has indicated that employers rate PBL-graduates above average regarding their interpersonal skills and problem-solving skills, which suggests a direct relation with the PBL curriculum and its emphasis on such generic competencies.

Competence-based models: the whole-task-model (WTM).

WTM-curricula focus on learning complex, multi-element issues, and the simultaneous acquisition of domain-specific and generic competences, which optimizes the chance that transfer of learning occurs (Van Merriënboer & Kirschner, 2007). The content of the curriculum, based on professional profiles, future scenarios, cognitive and task analyses, is categorized in different authentic whole-task classes that are sequenced from simple to complex, from easy to difficult.

Task classes encompass series of learning tasks of equal difficulty, format, and complexity that merely vary in topics, and the amount of support and guidance that is provided. Whole tasks implicate that the core professional competences are represented in each learning task, instead of separated in part-tasks. Part-tasks are only included when a high degree of skill automation is required. Recurrent generic, professional skills and attitudes are trained in a variety of contexts in each learning task and task class, and become internalized skills and professional attitudes. Domain-specific subject knowledge and skills vary in each learning task and are supported by task support or just-in-time information (Van Merriënboer & Kirschner, 2007). In current whole-task models final attainment levels are described in terms of competences (Van der Klink & Boon, 2003). WT-models are more flexible than PBL models, since WT-models are context independent, and can be applied both with and without group-based learning.

WT-models are innovative and recent models in higher education, emerging in the late 1990s. Consequently the body of evidence that supports the labour market effectiveness of the WT-models is still modest. All research findings so far in different domains reveal that WT- approaches are particularly effective to teach complex skills and professional competences in an integrated way (preparing grade books (Lim & Reiser, 2006); mastery of the Excel database (Merrill, 2002); building plans for different locations (Sarfo, 2005); applying statistics in psychological research (Van Buuren, 2008). Common competence-based

models have shown to deliver desirable labour market results for graduates from higher vocational education (ROA, 2009). Whole-task competence based-models are recently introduced in university curricula.

Consequently empirical findings concerning labour market results are still lacking.

Summary curriculum design models.

Table 2 summarizes the goals, characteristics and available evidence concerning labour market results of the three different types of curricula.

Table 2
Summary of Curriculum Design Models

	Conventional model	PBL-model	WT-model
Goals	Knowledge transmission	Learning motivation; knowledge that can be applied in practice; problem-solving skills; self-directed learning skills	Integrated domain-specific and generic competencies specifically focused on complex learning. Highly automated routine skills, and highly flexible mental models.
Characteristics	Lecture-based Teacher centred mass education.	Student-centred; small groups, guided by a tutor; authentic problems; problems as instruments for identifying and overcoming knowledge	Task-centred. Shared teacher- and learner control, gradually moving to self-control in task selection. Authentic and whole tasks;

		gaps and the development of problem-solving skills; Self-directed learning.	hierarchical task sequencing from simple to complex, arranged in task classes; Scaffolding and fading of support within task classes.
Evidence concerning labour market success	Knowledge component in domain-specific competences over emphasized and non-integrated. Inert knowledge. Lack of transfer to the job.	Students feel better prepared for practice. Employers rate PBL-graduates above average in interpersonal skills and problem-solving skills. Knowledge component in domain-specific competences might be less developed than in traditional models.	Effective at the cognitive and metacognitive level with respect to complex learning. Labour market results not yet available.

Table 2 reveals that conventional curriculum design models tend to sustain the ‘transfer paradox’ and the associated lack of practical skills in the eyes of employers. PBL-models may under develop domain-specific knowledge bases and skills, which are also necessary for transfer to practice. Moreover, labour market outcomes of PBL curricula are merely studied in self-perception studies among alumni instead of a

representative range of employers. Labour market outcomes of WT-models are unknown. A study, carried out by Heijke and Meng (2006) compared various academic curricula in Europe. Their study revealed that activating learning methods contribute effectively to both the acquisition of academic competences and the acquisition of discipline-specific competences. The acquired level of discipline-specific competencies can be increased without diminishing the acquisition of academic competences if sufficient attention is paid to task support (theory, and mental models); the academic (generic) competences support the acquisition of discipline-specific competences. These findings suggest that curriculum formats that facilitate activities such as team work, the integrated learning of various skills and knowledge, and working on authentic (ill-structured) problems can enhance the development of the kind of expertise that is acknowledged by the labour market. Yet, the question remains unaddressed which crucial curriculum components contribute to what is important for business. There exists an emerging need for empirically-based insights to support curriculum designers in decision-making processes regarding the reform of business curricula.

This leads us to the central question in this qualitative comparative study: “Which curriculum components or elements contribute substantially to the labour market success of graduates in business administration in the eyes of employers?”

Methods

Participants

In close cooperation with the Dutch Association for Personnel Management & Organisational Development (NVP), and two alumni associations, twenty Dutch companies were selected, varying in industry, relative size and geographic location. HRM- or MD-managers, responsible for the recruitment, selection, and in-company training of managers were approached to participate in this study. All managers had a higher education background. Their mean age was 38; the average work experience was 15 years, while the average work experience in the current company was seven years. The mean number of employees in the selected companies was 5410. The companies were more or less equally divided over seven industries:

20% in knowledge products and consultancy; 10% in logistics, transport and communication; 15% industrial, fast moving consumer goods; 15% industrial technical consumer goods; 10% in finance products; 10% in human resources, and 20% in other industries or services. Selection criteria for the companies implicated that participating organizations regularly recruited university graduates in business administration.

Four companies were public organisations and sixteen companies were private organizations. All companies except one were involved in international business, alliances or other international activities.

Materials

Three different types of real, existing MSc curricula in business administration were our inspiration for curriculum portfolios that were presented to the HRM-managers: a conventional, a problem-based, and a competence-based curriculum. The data for these curriculum portfolios had been collected by document research based on quality assurance reports, information from study guides and from websites.

The curriculum categories were structured according to seven of the eleven categories in the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS, 2008) framework, as depicted in Table 2 in the previous section.

The three different curricula in the portfolios varied optimally in the seven selected categories to facilitate the participants' decision-making on the most relevant components or elements. For example, the PBL curriculum and the competence based curriculum, which both can be considered as integrated curricula, varied in delivery (small-group learning versus distance learning in a computer-supported learning environment), and student population (average age 25 versus average age 35; studying fulltime versus combining work and part-time study; international student population versus mainly national).

Specializations varied from General Management, to Implementation and Change management, Finance, Marketing and Supply Change Management, to Public Management and could either be more nationally or internationally oriented.

All portfolios had supplements in which content, specializations, admission criteria and quality assurance features were presented in more detail. The portfolios also included a concept map in which all major curriculum components and elements were pictured.

Instruments

A guideline for a semi-structured in-depth interview was developed, composed of 28 questions such as “Which competences are relevant for an entry-level management job in your company?”; “Suppose you have to select a candidate for an entry-level management position, which of the two portfolios would you prefer as the candidate’s educational background?”; “Why did you select this portfolio?”; “Why didn’t you select the other portfolio?”; “Which competences do you expect of the candidate in your preferred curriculum?”; “Which competences do you expect of the candidate in the other curriculum?”; “Which curriculum factors do you consider as most important? Can you rank a top-3 of curriculum factors?”, and so on.

Procedure

To test the interview guideline and the three composed portfolios, pilot interviews with HRM-officers were carried out. The pilot-study showed that the interview was well tuned to both the portfolio structure and the HRM-manager’s subject knowledge and that the estimated time for each interview was feasible.

First contacts with HRM or alumni associations were established via network contacts in the domain of personnel management. After being informed about the study and its goals, the associations decided to participate and a letter of recommendation was sent to their members. Individual appointments were made by telephone and confirmed by email.

The portfolios were anonymous and labelled as A, B, and C. The portfolios were the object of discussion during the interviews. They were presented pair wise and counterbalanced, to avoid either cognitive overload or presentation effects, and according to a predetermined sequence (AB, AC, BC, BA, CA, and CB), established by the date of an appointment. Thus each interviewee studied two portfolios. Interviews were scheduled in participants’ own organizational environment and lasted approximately 1,5 hour. Prior to

the interview, two different portfolios were handed over to the participant with the request to read them thoroughly in the presence of the researcher, followed by the in-depth interview.

All interviews were recorded on webcam (Logitech Quickcam) and I-pod (Creative MuVo TX), and the researcher made notes during the portfolio study-time and the interview. All recorded interviews were transcribed, validated by the interviewees and coded.

Analysis

All analyses were conducted in Atlas-ti, 5.5.9, and in Excel. The qualitative analysis was based on grounded theory (Strauss, 1987). This implicated that data were coded and analyzed during the series of interviews, until the coding categories that were assigned in the analysis were saturated. The series of interviews was finalized when the coded data showed to be saturated. All researchers read and reread the transcripts. Initial codes were assigned, refined and described in a coding book. Based on the coding book two coders rated several transcripts independently. Differences in the assignment of codes were discussed until consensus was achieved. The remaining transcripts were coded by one coder, and controlled by the authors.

Results

Relevant competences for business

Interviewees were asked to list business education outcomes in terms of competences that were of specific interest for their own company.

The most detailed and most frequently mentioned category was “flexibly applied academic knowledge” (35% of all mentioned attributes), which could be divided in generic (73%) and domain-specific (27%) knowledge components. Our interviewees mostly preferred ‘thinking skills’, in which subject knowledge, such as business processes, business (re)structuring, implementations of innovations, cultural differences and markets is combined with problem identification, problem solving, conceptual and analytical skills,

conditional knowledge, demonstrating a helicopter view, putting things in perspectives, thinking outside the box, learning to learn skills, and proper decision making.

The second most prominent category was a shared position for 'social competences' (21% of all attributes) and 'attitudes' (21%). Social competences consisted of knowledge and skills that are acquired in social interaction. The most frequently mentioned element was interpersonal skills (30%), closely followed by teamwork (20%) and persuasiveness (17%). Attitudes were dominated by achievement orientation (36%), supported by personal initiative, independence, and flexibility.

The fourth category was 'situated organizational knowledge' (14% of all attributes), with (internal or external) client orientation at the first place (53%). Other such attributes were organizational awareness, political savvy, and the ability to tune with the target group.

Leadership as an overarching competence took the fifth place (7% of all attributes). The majority of our interviewees were having the opinion that leadership should be based on the previous categories and further developed in practice and by follow-up training.

Finally there was a small category of personal characteristics (3% of all attributes), divided in assertiveness, resilience and personal effectiveness.

Expected competences in the three different curricula

Our interviewees expected the highest number and broadest range in flexibly applied academic knowledge (such as linking theory to practice, metacognition, domain-specific knowledge, conceptual and analytical skills, problem identification and problem solving) and the most favourable attitudes (such as independence, achievement orientation, discipline, initiative) in the competence-based program. The PBL curriculum was expected to particularly support problem solving skills, approaching problems from multiple perspectives and social competences such as interpersonal skills and teamwork. The conventional curriculum was associated with conceptual and analytical skills, an expert-like attitude, extracurricular activities, initiative, and independence.

Motives for curriculum selection

The PBL and conventional curricula were equally popular, and were selected respectively nine times out of the fourteen presentations (64%) and eight times out of the thirteen presentations (62%). The competence-based curriculum was selected three times out of the thirteen presentations (23%).

The major reason to select the PBL curriculum was the curriculum design (77% of all arguments) that was supposed to support personal learning needs, problem solving, and the ability to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The major reason for not selecting the PBL curriculum was uncertainty regarding the achieved knowledge level and the kinds of social skills (36% of all arguments). For example, company 11 (C11; consultancy) pointed out¹: *“They’ve worked a lot in small groups, which is a very structured social environment. [...]. They’ll probably excel in attending meetings.”* Other reasons for not selecting the PBL curriculum were the lack of variation in learning approaches, the emphasis in the curriculum on internationalisation, and a supposed lack of independence of the candidate.

The predominant reason to prefer the conventional curriculum was the identified similarity of the curriculum with the interviewee’s own prior educational experiences (48% of all arguments) that provoked a ‘What I recognize is what you get’ response. As C3 (logistics) stated: *“In this (conventional) program I’ve attended lectures, and accomplished exams. This means that at least you can jump 1 meter 20. I’m not sure about the other program.”* Another cluster of arguments (20%) was content-related, such as the strong emphasis on knowledge acquisition and the recognition of subjects and specializations (such as Finance). A third cluster of arguments was either associated with internationalization or the student population (each 10%). Both the title of the curriculum and the description of the student population raised expectancies about the international composition of the student population. The majority of reasons for not selecting the conventional curriculum was the curriculum design (85% of all arguments) that was associated with mass education, a one-sided emphasis on information transmission, inert knowledge or the theory-practice gap. Another objection was the mathematically-oriented admission criteria.

¹ All quotations are translated from Dutch into English

The major reason to select the competence-based curriculum was that the curriculum allowed the simultaneous acquisition of relevant work experience and theoretical knowledge in tasks that resemble real business problems (50% of all arguments). Other reasons were the supposed independence and self-discipline of the graduates. The predominant reason (50% of all arguments) for not selecting the competence-based curriculum was the student population (older, too mature and too expensive for an entry-level management position). Another argument, also associated with the student population, is reflected in the quotation of C13 (consumer services and logistics) “*This program attracts more students from practice, from higher vocational education². Prejudiced as I am, I would critically examine their intelligence.*” Other reasons were the supposed lack of cooperative activities in the curriculum and a possible lack of verbal fluency in English.

Key curriculum components and elements

We arrived at our central research question: “Which curriculum components contribute substantially to the labour market success of graduates in business administration in the eyes of employers?” To investigate this issue, our interviewees were requested to rank their top-3 curriculum components or elements.

The top-ranked curriculum component was an integrated curriculum design, more specifically the authentic tasks. As C4 (Industry; FMCG) pointed out: “*I think that the design is most important. This (the integrated model) instructional design did not yet exist during my own academic education. The problems are really like in business practice.*”

The number-2 curriculum component concerned the content of the curriculum (specializations, and subjects such as mergers, outsourcing, innovations, markets, business processes and structures).

The number-3 curriculum component was a shared position for quality assurance and social settings for learning. The first comprised stakeholder involvement, and the latter was related to group work. C3 (logistics) indicated: “*Cooperative learning is important, since our managers have frequent contacts with*

² In Europe many countries (e.g. Germany, the Netherlands,) have a dual higher education system. Admission criteria for Higher Vocational Education are more liberal than for University Education. Curricula in Higher Vocational Education are practical skills-oriented, while universities emphasize academic knowledge and research skills.

the supply chain, our internal and external clients. They themselves are part of this chain. So it is an advantage to be able to collaborate with people who have different intellectual and social backgrounds.” C8 (finance products) suggested: *“That suits our organization. We consider awareness and insights in how individual behaviour affects others as more important than theoretical knowledge.”*

After insisting to indicate irrelevant curriculum components, our interviewees produced a few non-relevant curriculum components. The more notable positions in irrelevancy were occupied by quality assurance, admission criteria, and internationalisation.

The critique on quality assurance practices consisted of disregarding student perceptions in course designs, the undervalued role of the teacher as a pedagogue, and the merely internal relevance of quality assurance. Interviewees thought it was important to consult students in course and curriculum design, acknowledging the fact that students are important stakeholders. Measuring student perceptions was recognized as an accurate instrument to translate relevant student perceptions into course design. According to our interviewees another disregarded aspect in quality assurance was the important role some teachers fulfil as pedagogues, by providing informal consultancy or ‘teaching by wandering around’.

Although 50% of our interviewees appreciated the admission criteria as screening devices for intelligence, the remaining 50% of our interviewees criticized the same criteria because of their restrictiveness and the overemphasis on mathematical or analytical skills. C20 (information systems) pointed out: *“I think the admission criteria are too restrictive. In practice you meet excellent managers who do not yet possess a university degree. I recommend universities to develop a more adequate admission test for that group.”* C19 (industrial; FMCG) stated: *GMAT is only relevant in relation to other competences, such as verbal competences and people skills [...] Our assessment centres use assessments for future managers that are accurate in 90% of all cases, and those experts indicate that when analytical skills are overemphasized, people skills are lacking.”*

Objections towards internationalization are best illustrated in the comments of C3 (logistics): *“Well, in practice I don’t see that happen, though I’m employed in an internationally operating company. Obviously*

it provides a certain prestige to the program. But to be honest, I don't see opportunities for graduates during labour market entry to work internationally. [...] In many management positions that story is unrealistic. [...] So where does internationalisation play a significant role? In Finance functions. Those guys travel around the world, so internationalization is reality in that domain. But the real business stuff...beliefs, opinions, and changes. [...] Presenting internationalization in this kinky way to the large average club reflects a high marketing content of that school."

Our interviewees also indicated that three components were disregarded or underemphasized in the curricula: management of students' expectations, ethical issues and internships³.

The unique contribution of a university graduate in business administration

Interviewees were asked whether university graduates with a master degree in business administration made a distinctive contribution to their company. Most interviewees (80%) pointed out that specifically graduates in business administration were able to close the communication and coordination gap between departments and divisions, internal and external clients, could operate as the most flexible and communicative managers in the company, and were predisposed to develop a long term vision on business. When interviewees compared graduates in business administration with economists, they described economists as less flexible and more eligible for staff functions only, while business administration graduates could be assigned to many different job positions, departments, and divisions. However, the remaining four companies (20%) had different opinions on graduates in business administration. Their beliefs are best illustrated in the quotation of C13 (consumer services and logistics): *[...] Students that didn't know what to study used to select Law as their field of study. Law was very boring. Instead, business administration is far more convenient. [...] Business administration is a patchwork of a bit of everything [...]. The question is what intellectual level have those young graduates achieved? [...] I think you must be an expert to be able to manage something. Even when you manage one hundred people, the question still is 'What business are you managing'?"*

³ Except for the competence-based curriculum in this study, in which students combine their jobs with an academic study

Conclusion/Discussion

Curriculum Factors

This study has identified key-curriculum factors that are important in the eyes of employers in an OLM labour market. In addition, the study has provided deeper insight regarding the generic and domain-specific competences that are valued by employers in an OLM labour market, and insight in which competences are expected as functions of differential curricula. In addition, the study has revealed a lack of consistency between the curriculum factors and competences that employers appreciate, versus what employers actually chose as the most favourite educational background of graduates in business administration.

Our study addressed the central research question: “Which curriculum components contribute substantially to the labour market success of graduates in business administration in the eyes of employers”? We found the following answers: ‘integrated curricula’, particularly authentic tasks; content; the social context in which learning occurs and quality assurance.

The characteristics of integrated curricula were extremely popular amongst our participating companies. Enabling students to work on authentic tasks was the most frequently mentioned curriculum element in the ranking tasks.

Domain-specific knowledge was the second key-curriculum component. However, regularly employers criticized the content of business curricula as being too superficial.

The number-3 ranked curriculum component was social settings for learning. Employers thought that social interaction was important. However, even the group-based setting of the problem-based curriculum design was not perceived as satisfying. More business practice experience, such as internships, was perceived as a more realistic social setting to acquire the desired competences for the business domain. Quality assurance, which shared the third position in the selection of the top-3 key-curriculum components with social settings was important regarding stakeholder involvement (students, and companies). .

Taking into consideration that employers highly appreciate integrated curricula, their authentic tasks, and integrated learning, it is remarkable that accreditation bodies do not pay much attention to the curriculum design (AACSB, 2008; EQUIS, 2008; Prøitz, et al., 2004). Even a triple-crown accreditation does not guarantee an integrated curriculum.

Internationalization seemed to have the most ambiguous role as a curriculum element. It functioned as a reason to select and reject a curriculum, did not play a major role in the selection of key-curriculum components, but was relatively frequently mentioned in irrelevant curriculum elements. Surprisingly internationalization added status to the conventional curriculum, while simultaneously diminishing the status of an integrated curriculum. It might be that a teacher/student population, composed of trans-European nationalities, looked more appealing than mainly European nationalities. However, being able to speak English fluently is a generally valued feature, just like having some experience in working in international groups of students. Conversely, the opportunity to internationally operate as a manager seems to be distant from graduation and only realistic for a small elite-group of students.

Admission criteria were mentioned as one of the irrelevant curriculum elements. However, during the first ranking task the criteria popped up as relatively important. Fifty percent of our employers believes that intelligence screening is an important criterion. The remaining fifty percent of our employers advocates a balance between analytical skills and social predispositions, while simultaneously taking prior learning and prior competence acquisition into account (cf. Fastré, Gijsselaers, & Segers, 2008; Joosten-ten Brinke, 2008). Mintzberg's (2004) observation that business schools teach the wrong groups of students might be true, also in an OLM labour market. It may be that current admission criteria suffer from a lack of validity, and favour students that are not equipped with predispositions for leadership. According to our group of employers current curricula can only provide the fundamentals for leadership.

Curriculum Selection versus Selection of Curriculum Factors

The findings in our study suggest that conventional curricula suffer from a lack of fit with what is important for business. However, employers have a positive sentiment towards the conventional curriculum,

based on their own prior educational experiences. In addition, conventional curricula are still doing well in the market of business education (Spender, 2006). To redesign the curriculum into whole-task competence-based or problem-based curricula requires considerable effort, multidisciplinary teamwork and investments (Athavale, Davis, & Myring, 2008; Thompson, & Purdy, 2009). To date a quick return on such an investment is not very likely. Consequently this type of business education will only change when formal policy or funding systems demand such curricula to change, based on the more enduring long-term social value of business education.

The competence-based curriculum in this study suffered from a lack of popularity predominantly because of a few specific cues: the more mature student population and the electronically enhanced distance education format. When employers had to decide which curriculum they preferred, they argued that the candidates in the competence-based curriculum were too mature and too expensive for entry-level positions. At the same time, with respect to management functions, the employers did not seem to be very open towards recruiting more mature managers. Regarding the mobility in management functions, OLM labour markets seem to act like ILMs, promoting intra-firm mobility. In addition, some employers had a notable perception about the distant type format of the presented competence-based curriculum. Though they understood that this curriculum was specifically designed for students that combine work and study, they perceived an electronic learning environment as 'socially deprived'. Specifically a younger subgroup of interviewees failed to recognize that such students are both learning on-the-job and in their study environment. The negative associations (higher wages; limited life cycle of the candidate in a 'new' organisation; unpopular educational background; supposed lack of analytical intelligence, socially deprived learning) were generalized to the whole curriculum, reflected in a lack of popularity. This behaviour was a sheer contrast with the high rankings the employers assigned to the authentic tasks in the competence-based curriculum, which were considered as mediators for employers' desired flexibly applied academic knowledge, and attitudes.

Recommendations for Curriculum Design and Future Research

Our findings have revealed that employers evaluate business education curricula or specializations in master curricula as superficial, when compared with other scientific disciplines. Our study focused exclusively on university business curricula in an OLM, and revealed consistently that both a high level of domain-specific competences and a high level of generic competences is required of business graduates (specifically a broad range of thinking skills, preferably combined with people skills). In an OLM labour market both the level of education and the specializations are cues for the assignment to higher function levels and entry level management positions during labour market entry.

In the OLM labour market there is a fierce competition between graduates from HVE and universities, specifically in the domain of business administration, and HVE graduates seem to have a comparative advantage (ROA, 2009). Based on the empirical findings regarding the learning effectiveness of whole task competence-based models for complex learning, in combination with the high ranking that employers assign to the central role of authentic tasks, it is highly recommended to transform university business education curricula in OLM markets in whole task competence-based curricula, to support university graduates' success in the labour market. As Heijke and Meng (2006) have indicated, activating learning environments in higher education are very likely to preserve domain-specific knowledge, while simultaneously supporting and integrating generic competences. The whole-task competence-based model has shown to support complex learning. In addition, the model offers the opportunity to systematically design internships, which is particularly important for younger student populations (GMAC, 2009; Hernández-March, Martín del Peso, & Leguey, 2009; Narayanan, Olk, P. M., & Fukami, 2010). Prior to the master thesis, an internship can be introduced in the master curriculum. The internship can support a thematically designed project, and the selection of specialisation courses, which can function as an integrated preparation for the master thesis project. A whole-task design can also support graduates in developing more realistic expectations, their orientation on their future careers, and stimulate the internalization of 'what is important for business'. Ethics, an underestimated issue in business curricula, can be integrated in learning tasks across the curriculum. Acquired organizational knowledge during an internship can be applied in the thesis project, and

support graduates' entry in the labour market. In addition, internships are relatively profitable contracts for employers and offer decent opportunities to scout leadership talent.

The findings in this study reflect the expectations employers have about business curricula, curriculum components, and associated competences that are important for businesses in an OLM labour market. However, there still is a lack of evidence about the actually achieved competence levels in differently designed business curricula. A cross-sectional study is necessary that investigates hypothesized differences in knowledge application between master students that have attended differential curricula. Moreover, a longitudinal study should identify whether different curriculum models are related to different kinds of intellectual and practical development in the transition stage from school to work, or from work to school.

Contributions and Limitations

The method used in this study at the curriculum level was innovative. Employers have never been consulted about which curriculum components are important for business, using differently designed business education curricula, presented in portfolios. During the last decades, HRM-management job positions have been professionalized, and HRM-managers are well-informed on training programs. This allows researchers to investigate curriculum issues with innovative methods, such as portfolio research.

By investigating the business education problem at the curriculum level, the impact of individual differences was eliminated, and selection and ILM-mechanisms were exposed. In addition, and in contrast with the literature on core competences (cf. De Wit, & Meyer, 2004) the method revealed that most companies do not yet translate entry-management requirements in terms of integrated competences, but in detailed skills and knowledge types. The study was firmly grounded in curriculum design theory, and has provided relevant information about domain-specific and generic competences in relation with curriculum factors, curriculum design, and employers' preferences. The findings in this study are relevant for curriculum designers who intend to reform master curricula in business education in curricula that deliver results that are important in the eyes of employers. The study was neutral regarding school-internal issues

that might constrain the redesign of business curricula, and exclusively focused on the interest of one of the most important stakeholders in business administration curricula: the employers.

Obviously, our study has limitations. The study was a relatively small-scale qualitative study in a small, though densely populated and trade-oriented country. The disadvantage of a portfolio study is that the study is time consuming (both for companies and researchers) since it requires meticulous document research and both a focused and tuned interview guideline, based on competence concepts, curriculum theory and available empirical evidence. In addition, substantial transcripts have to be processed, validated, and coded. The available detailed data must be aggregated into higher, more integrated competence concepts before relevant patterns in the data can be identified. All such constraints make a portfolio study laborious, and expensive, to scale-up such studies to European or trans-European levels.

The three curricula that were used in this study were purposefully selected because of their contrasts in curriculum components. As a consequence this comparative qualitative study has provided rich and detailed information about strengths and weaknesses of academic business education curricula, and their relations with what is important for businesses in OLM labour markets. Moreover, the method puts previously unobserved labour market mechanisms such as selection- and recruitment practices, and career beliefs in a new light that helps to explain the state-of-the-art of business education in OLM labour markets.

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