

The Gap between Business Education and Business Expectations: The Case of Morocco

Mahmoud M. Yasin
East Tennessee State University

Carlos F. Gomes
University of Coimbra

Sallem Koubida
Al Akhawayn University

The objective of this study is to assess from an employer's perspective the desired profile of Moroccan business students. Using data from Akhawayn University in Morocco and a regression analysis to explore the relationships among the performance dimensions, the results show that Moroccan businesses tend to value in their entry-level managers their understanding of organizations. Furthermore, businesses value the ability to solve problems and communicate effectively. This study concludes by offering a conceptual framework to close the gap between business expectations and business education in different cultural settings and to provide a context for future research in this important area.

INTRODUCTION

Economic and technological challenges are pushing business organizations to the edge, where leadership can make the difference between mere survival and first-class performance. As these organizations push the boundaries of efficiency, innovation and reaching out for their customers, they are guided by visionary managers who blend their technical expertise with a renewed entrepreneurship spirit to lead their employees toward business excellence.

In this context, achieving performance excellence requires the adoption of an open system business model. Such a business model stresses proactive strategies aimed at increasing responsiveness to the competitive environment. Therefore, today's business organizations are in need of true leaders, rather than mere managers. As a result, higher business education is being called upon to meet new challenges steaming from the realities of the innovative, open system business model (Frølich and Stensaker, 2010).

In response to the open system performance demand of business organizations, institutions of higher business learning are finding it necessary to re-orient their own educational systems, programs of study and approaches in order to become more open in nature. As such, business education must equip its graduates with the tools, skills and attitudes needed and demanded by the business community. As a response, most business education institutions are re-engineering their graduate and undergraduate programs to make them more in tune with the requirements of the new job market (Winkel, 2010).

These programs are being modified to stress cross disciplinary knowledge, which is based on innovative problem-solving, entrepreneurship initiatives, and creative systematic thinking (Czuchry, Yasin, and Gonzales, 2004). In the process, they are focusing on a performance-oriented education, which emphasizes both the technical and the human aspects related to organizational performance (Dodridge and Kassinosopoulos, 2003).

Deregulation and increased competition within public sector institutions of a higher learning, coupled with the demands of their private counterparts are forcing public sector higher learning institutions to adopt more market-like approaches. In this context business education is no exception. The new environment realities are changing educational practices and in the process the recruitment of potential students (Gibbs, 2008). In this context, it is no surprise that business education is increasingly gaining more technological, innovation, entrepreneurship, and leadership flavors. This presents a departure from the lecture-based, subject-oriented, traditional models of business education.

In spite of the recent efforts of business education to re-engineer its educational model, the gap between traditional educational preparation and recent organizational performance expectations has been the subject of concern among scholars and practitioners (Agut and Grau, 2002; Agut, Grau, and Peiró, 2003; Digman, 1990; King, Flower, and Zeithaml, 2001; Kimball, 1998). The extent to which this gap has been reduced, in recent times, is yet to be determined, as business students continue to have employment difficulty.

The recent and diligent efforts of the European Union, which are aimed at transforming educational systems and processes in order to be more consistent with the demand of the global marketplace (Floud, 2006), perhaps indicate that such a gap has not yet been eliminated. The Bologna declaration was initially signed by twenty-nine (29) European countries in 1999. Since that time eighteen (18) more countries have joined this effort.

The main objectives of this initiative focus on the creation of a common educational model, the introduction of a unified European credit transfer system, as well as facilitating the movement of students across European countries. The ultimate goal of this joint educational effort is to create a homogenous European higher educational approach.

In order to accomplish this goal, comprehensive reforms of curricula and methods of delivery are promoted. In this context, educational programs are being aligned with the job market in order to improve employment prospects of graduates (Winkel, 2010).

Due to the proximity of Morocco to Europe and the recent launched partnerships between Morocco and European countries, the Moroccan business education is feeling increasing pressure to reform itself. In the process, Moroccan business schools are attempting to benchmark the European model in order for their educational models to become more consistent with the new realities of the job market.

As institutions of business higher learning attempt to prepare their students for the job market, internships are being utilized as important initiatives (Chi and Gursoy, 2009). In this context, internships are also being used to gauge the current practices in business organizations. This process, in turn, can be used to obtain the needed feedback in order to re-engineer the current approaches and educational emphasis of business education. This should facilitate providing business students with the skills needed to perform well in business organizations.

The research at hand attempts to facilitate and enhance the needed link between the Moroccan business community and business schools, through gauging the feedback obtained from internships of business students. In this process, the views of Moroccan business executives on the desired performance characteristics of entering managers are correlated with the performance characteristics stressed by business schools. This line of research has direct practical implications to the Moroccan business community and its business schools. Although the sample used in this study is from Morocco, this research has broader and more reaching practical utility, as it has implications to other business education and business communities in other countries. The conceptual framework offered at the end of the study serves as a context for future research in other cultural settings in this important area.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study, the records of the School of Business Administration at the Al Akhawayn University were used to obtain the evaluation forms related to one hundred and four (104) business students who recently completed their internship. In these forms, executives were asked to classify students' performance based on different dimensions during their internships. A percentage scale, from ten to one-hundred percent was used for each performance dimension.

Executives were asked to evaluate the student internship's overall job performance, along with provided performance dimensions. The linear function to be estimated is:

$$OP_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 QWORK_i + \alpha_2 SK\&KNOW_i + \alpha_3 ABTLEARN_i + \alpha_4 O\&WSK_i + \alpha_5 ABTST\&AN_i + \alpha_6 ABTTEAMWORK_i + \alpha_7 ATTITUDE_i + e_i$$

OP – Overall performance during the internship

QWORK - The quality of the student's work

SK&KNOW- The student's level of skills and knowledge related to work tasks

ABTLEARN - The student's ability to learn new skills and knowledge

O&WSK - The student's oral and written communication skills

ABTST&AN - The student's ability to synthesize and analytical ability in the study of problems and their solutions

ABTTEAMWORK - The student's ability to establish good relations with others and team work

ATTITUDE - The student's attitude displayed on the job

A multiple regression procedure was used to explore the relationships among the performance dimensions of the business students using the internships' evaluations data.

RESULTS

The regression analysis investigation focused on the link between all performance dimensions, and the overall performance (OP) of a student during the internship, as provided by executives. For this purpose, a stepwise regression model was utilized. The model utilized OP, as the dependent variable and the remaining dimensions as independent variables.

TABLE 1
STEPWISE REGRESSION RESULTS

	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate		
	0.909	0.827	0.818	2.520		
	Unstandard. Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	VIF
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
(Constant)	2.059	4.357	-----	0.472	0.638	-----
ABTST&AN	0.208	0.063	0.249	3.306	0.001	3.234
ATTITUDE	0.281	0.059	0.289	4.784	0.000	2.082
O&WSK	0.194	0.057	0.217	3.386	0.001	2.353
SK&KNOW	0.159	0.052	0.176	3.056	0.003	1.893
ABTLEARN	0.134	0.067	0.144	1.992	0.049	2.995

Based on the results in Table 1, only five performance dimensions were retained. This resulted in the model below:

$$OP = 2.059 + 0.159 SK\&KNOW + 0.134 ABTLEARN + 0.194 O\&WSK + 0.208 ABTST\&AN + 0.281 ATTITUDE$$

Where:

OP – Overall performance during the internship.

SK&KNOW- The student's level of skills and knowledge related to work tasks.

ABTLEARN - The student's ability to learn new skills and knowledge.

O&WSK - The student's oral and written communication skills.

ABTST&AN - The student's ability to synthesize and analytical ability in the study of problems and their solutions.

ATTITUDE - The student's attitude displayed on the job.

Based on the regression results, it appears that executives tended to believe that the overall performance for business students during their internships was, mainly, dependent on their learning capabilities, and their problem-solving abilities. Executives also tended to value the students' oral and written communication skills, as well as their knowledge related to work tasks. They also believed that students' attitude exhibited on job can be an important factor, which contributed to the overall performance.

The lack of value affected by Moroccan managers to the quality of students' work, and to their ability to establish good relations with others are noted. The lack of emphasis on the first variable could be justified by the learning nature of the work context of the internship. However, the lack of importance given to student's ability to establish good relations with others could be explained by the specialty-orientation of the closed system approach utilized by most Moroccan organizations. In this context, these organizations are not yet integrated into an open system, which encourages the collective work of the entire membership of the organization.

CONCLUSION

Despite its traditions and uniqueness, the Moroccan business culture is finding it more and more necessary to integrate with the European and global business counterparts. Recent partnerships among the European countries and Morocco have made the demand on Moroccan business schools more in line with their European counterparts. This study sought to assess the desired profile of business students, who recently completed their internship from the employer perspective. Based on the results of this study, the following conclusions are derived.

First, while business students are being educated in specific subject-based skills of expertise, the business community in Morocco is looking for employees who have the ability to learn and solve problems. This requires business schools to equip their graduates with broader perspective and more balanced skills. Therefore, business education needs to emphasize a cross disciplinary approach, which is motivated by problem-solving and decision-making skills.

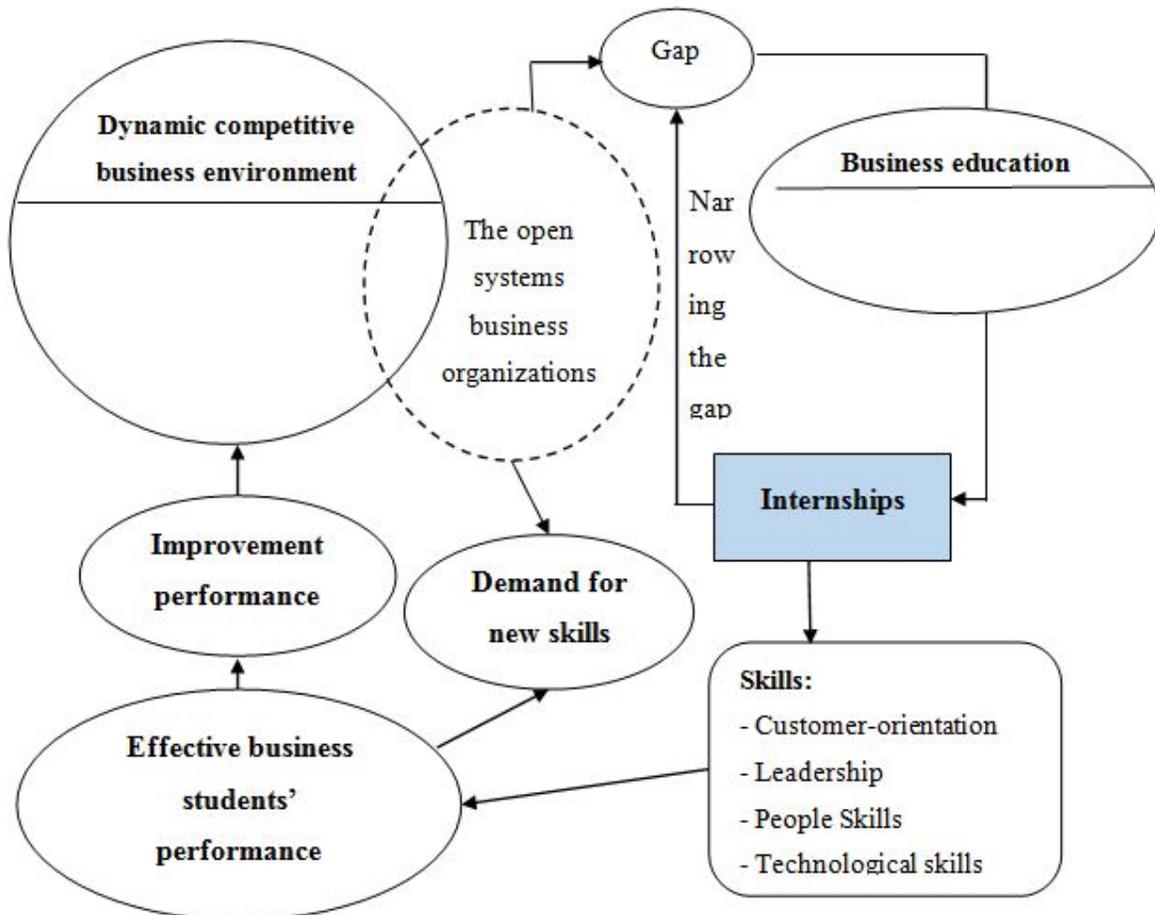
Second, it is not sufficient to equip business students with specific technical, course specific skills. Rather, business education must stress the ability to work with others in a dynamic organizational culture. This is needed as Moroccan organizations shift toward the open system business model. Softer skills will become even more important to Moroccan businesses in the near future. In this context, demands for Moroccan business schools are becoming more and more consistent with their European and global counterparts. Therefore, Moroccan business schools may benefit from benchmarking the offerings and orientations of their close by European business schools counterparts. Such benchmarking effort may enhance the success of recently formed partnerships between Morocco and European countries.

Furthermore, such effort might improve employment of business students in the changing Moroccan job market.

Third, Moroccan business schools are feeling similar pressures relative to their counterparts in other countries to realign their programs of study, course coverages and methods of delivery to become more consistent with the new realities of the global business environment.

Finally, this study has limitations that are due mainly to the small sample size and the specificity to the Moroccan context. Despite these limitations, the issues addressed in this article can be studied in other business and cultural settings. The conceptual framework depicted in FIGURE 1, which was partially developed based on the findings of this study and the literature, is advocated to promote the cooperation between business organizations and business education in different cultural settings. The framework deals with the different facets of the expectations of business organizations as they become more and more open systems for the needed skills of business students. In this context, it emphasizes the needed skills which higher business education should offer in order to promote the employment of business students.

FIGURE 1
NARROWING THE GAP BETWEEN BUSINESS EXPECTATIONS AND BUSINESS EDUCATION THROUGH INTERNSHIPS



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