

Bridging the Gap between the Perceptions of Accounting Students and Accounting Practitioners: Evidence from Ahlia University of Bahrain

Adel Mohammed Sarea, Fatema Ebrahim Alrawahi

ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, professional accounting bodies, accounting practitioners and educators have criticized accounting education programs for failing to meet the demands of the changing business environment. This failure by universities has created a gap between accounting practice and accounting education. With the aim of increasing transparency, minimizing the gap between students, job seekers and practitioners this study sought the views of accounting practitioners and accounting students in Bahrain, regarding important competencies required for a career in accounting. Data were obtained from 39 students attending the same university and 39 practitioners from various organizations using a survey. The findings indicate that although there is an agreement between the perceptions of both groups, some significant gap still exists. Basic accounting skill is rated as the most important professional skill by both groups. While students felt that leadership is the least important skill; practitioners on the other hand felt that general knowledge is the least important. The findings and conclusions of the paper have implications for accounting education in Bahrain. Accounting graduates are not well-equipped to take an immediate part within many Bahraini employers' business and must be trained extensively before becoming fully functional.

Keywords: Accounting; Accounting Education; Student Perceptions; Practitioner Perceptions.

INTRODUCTION

Accounting is the language of business; in turn the language of accounting is of Debit and Credit. Speaking the "language of accounting" is vitally important in the business world. Accounting is a fundamental and artificial language which was created for the communication of business information. The accounting profession requires practitioners to be fluent in this language, and for years, universities have provided students with the basic "language" skills needed for a

career in accounting. On the other hand, recent major developments have led to drastic changes in the business world, thus making the environment in which accountants practice their profession more challenging.

A first major development has been a wave of corporate globalization. Due to faster modes of transportation and immediately available information, the world has become a colossal market where buyers can purchase products from overseas as conveniently as they can from a local store. Second, technological advances in communication and information have changed the face and pace of business through low cost, high speed data collection, processing and dissemination. Third, corporate governance reforms have received increased attention due to high-profile scandals involving abuse of corporate power. For example: the scandals of companies such as Enron,

*Director of MBA, College of graduate studies and research, Ahlia University, Kingdom of Bahrain
asarea@ahlia.edu.bh

**College of Business and Finance, Ahlia University, Kingdom of Bahrain

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WorldCom and Tyco over the world. This has changed the ways in which a business is conducted and managed. Consequently a business is required to be transparent with regard to its transactions, making all necessary recognitions, measurements and disclosures according to International Accounting Standards (IASs) and Domestic Accounting Standards (DASs).

In order to maintain a competitive advantage in this challenging environment, employers are seeking a diverse range of skills and attributes in recent graduates. This issue raises a significant question: Are universities appropriately preparing accounting students for the challenging business environment? Apparently many people think otherwise. Since the mid eighties of the twentieth century, accounting employers, academics and professional bodies have criticized universities for failing to equip students with the competencies such as knowledge, practical skills and personal characteristics required for the contemporary business environment mentioned earlier.

The general belief is that the current structure of accounting education is infected with serious problems. It is broken, obsolete and in need of considerable modification. It struggles to keep pace with the dynamics of the business world and in turn it fails to meet the demands of accountants in the industry. This creates a growing gap between what accounting practitioners usually expect and what accounting educators and students perceive.

In 1986, the Bedford Committee¹ declared the need for a much wider role for accounting education than that being fulfilled by schools and universities today. Regard this quote from The Bedford Report—Future Accounting Education: Preparing for the Expanding Profession:

“There is little doubt that the current content of professional accounting education, which has remained

substantially the same over the past 50 years, is generally inadequate for the future accounting professional. A growing gap exists between what accountants do and what accounting educators teach. Accountants who remain narrowly educated will find it more difficult to compete in an expanding profession” (American Accounting Association - AAA, 1986).

In 1984, the Bedford Committee was appointed by the AAA President Doyle Williams. The Committee issued its report (AAA, 1986) more than three years before the appointment of the AECC. Four committees dealing with implementation issues followed the Bedford Committee report.

Along similar lines, the Big 8 (which are currently known as the Big 4) accounting firms urged university academics and professionals to cooperate in order to effect proper changes in the accounting education structure, so as to guarantee a brighter future for the profession(White Paper, 1989). This urgency was shown in the same year when Arthur Anderson et al., invested five million dollars in the Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC) to bring about these changes (White Paper, 1989) & (Albrecht, W.S., & Sack, R.J.2000).

Likewise, professional accounting bodies and employers of graduates have all called for accounting education to change to reform the identified weaknesses. These include Institute of Management Accountants (IMA), 1994; the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA), 1998 ;(Albrecht, W.S., & Sack, R.J. 2000).

Haigh (1994) noticed that accounting students expect accounting courses to produce knowledge and skills that are practical and can be easily applied to their future jobs. As a result, they react negatively to faculty members who deviate from this goal. In addition, Millard (2003) found that students view accountants as

mere bean-counters and accounting work as being onerous and dull.

These attitudes towards university courses and the accounting profession make the gap wider. The question of interest is: Why do students have such perceptions? Siegel et al., (2010) established that educators were not communicating the right information about the application of the profession in a corporate setting and the experiences that students may face as they begin their careers. Contrarily, students did not seek firsthand knowledge of the business world on their own. Thus, graduates' experiences fell short of their expectations for the real world.

In response to the Bedford Committee's warning Albrecht & Sack (2000) have recommended prompt changes in the accounting curriculum and abandoning a wholly technical approach to financial accounting. Others have suggested the need for alternative learning approaches, such as case study approaches, seminars, role-plays and simulation, to engage students in the learning process and develop generic skills (AECC, 1990; Albin & Crockett, 1991; Lavitt, 1992; McEwen, 1994; Cheng, 2002; Howieson, 2003).

This research acknowledges that the problem of the gap exists in the Kingdom of Bahrain as it faces rapidly changing challenges as the rest of the world. In order to cope with these challenges, Bahrain aspires to shift from an economy built on oil wealth to a productive, globally competitive economy, shaped by the government and driven by a pioneering private sector – an economy that raises a broad middle class Bahraini citizens who enjoy good living standards through increased productivity and high-wage jobs. This vision, which was launched by Bahrain's Economic Development Board (EDB) in 2008, is known as 'The Economic Vision 2030'. The EDB is a dynamic public agency with overall responsibility for attracting inward investment into

Bahrain and supporting initiatives that help enhance the investment climate in the country. The Bahrain EDB Board is chaired by His Royal Highness Prince Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, the Crown Prince and First Deputy Prime Minister and includes representatives of the Bahraini Government and private sector.

The EDB hopes to achieve their objective by the year 2030. (The Bahrain Economic Development Board, 2008). At the heart of 'Vision2030' lies the idea that a decent education is the passport to employment, income and personal dependence. In fact, Bahrain has long had a successful track record in education - it was the first country in Middle East to introduce universal education for men and women, over 70 years ago.

Based on the country's Ministry of Education, Bahrain has the oldest public education system in the Arabian Peninsula. The system was established in 1930 when the Bahraini government assumed responsibility for operating two pre-existing primary public schools for boys. Subsequently, separate girls' schools and various universities were established in the 20th century. According to data from the 2010 census, the literacy rate of Bahrain stands at 94.6% (CIA World FactBook, 2010).

With help of the EDB, it is currently working to reform its education system to meet the economic and social challenges of the 21st century by supporting growth and development, and ultimately, providing greater opportunity for all citizens.

1. Research Problem and Research Questions

According to the EDB, Bahrain is facing a shortage of both quality employment and appropriate skills.

"Over the next ten years, the size of the Bahrain's workforce will double. Currently, over 4,000 Bahrainis per year are entering the job market with at least a college degree. If present economic trends continue, the quality and number of jobs available will not satisfy the demand."

Lack of career guidance and transparency has been cited as one of Bahrain's biggest Human Development and employment challenge. (Allen Consulting Group, 2009). This lack of transparency leads to a lot of uniformed decisions on what skills and attributes to develop to meet the demands of the market.

Additionally, Bahrainis are not the preferred choice for employers in the private sector, since the education and vocational systems do not provide graduates with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in the labor market.

With the aim of increasing transparency, minimizing the gap between students, job seekers and practitioners, the researchers of this paper have undertaken a study to address two main areas that would benefit in improving the quality of accounting education in Bahrain, namely Ahlia University. These areas include: 1. the identification of the criteria used by employers in the selection of accounting graduates; 2. the identification of the skills and competencies which are considered to be the most important for successful practice in accountancy during the first years after graduation. Moreover, this study was designed to determine if the competencies perceived by accounting practitioners are the same competencies as perceived by accounting students, thus verifying whether a gap actually exists.

Accordingly, the researchers reviewed the international context of the presented issues and applied them to Bahrain. The context of the study is Ahlia University (AU) which is a private university in Bahrain, established in 2001. It is the first private university to be licensed by the Government of Bahrain and it is highly reputed in the region. It is an autonomous institution, independently chartered, funded and managed by the private sector. All the professional programs offered by AU are recognized by Bahrain's Higher Education Council.

AU currently consists of six colleges: College of Arts, Science and Education, College of Business and

Finance, College of Engineering, College of Information Technology, College of Graduate Studies and Research and College of Medical and Health Sciences. However, the largest College is the College of Business and Finance with the largest department being the Accounting Department.

As of 2010, around 70% of students were from Bahrain, 20% from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Oman and 5% from outside of the Gulf regions (The Quality Assurance Authority for Education & Training, 2010). As a result, the researchers have chosen Ahlia University due to its prominence in the region.

It is not presumed that definitive answers to the questions raised exist. The "correct" answers will vary across accounting students as well as accounting practitioners. That being said, the following questions guide the researchers to answer the research aims and objectives:

1. What are the perceptions of students and practitioners regarding the criteria used by employers in the selection of accounting graduates, and how do the views of the two groups differ?
2. What competencies are considered important for the future career of accounting graduates as perceived by both students and practitioners, and how are the ratings of these competencies different between the two groups?

The importance of this study is to produce and contribute knowledge that can aid Bahrain's Economic Development Board in taking a step and moving forward towards achieving 'Economic Vision 2030'.

Based on the results of the study, the researchers proposed recommendations that might aid accounting educators in bridging the gap between the views of students and practitioners regarding the competencies required for a career in accounting.

3. Theoretical Literature

This section attempts to review the previous studies that have been published by accredited authors and researchers in the field of accounting education. It includes relevant articles that demonstrate the current state of knowledge in the subject, its limitations and how the current research fits in and contributes to the body of literature available.

A study conducted by Zaid & Abraham (1994) highlighted the importance of effective communication as one of the key objectives of the accounting profession. However communication between accountants and non-accountants was considered ineffective, because non-accountants are foreign to accounting concepts. Accordingly, accountants must learn to communicate in a language through which concepts such as assets, liabilities, financial position and income can be understood by non-accountants.

Zaid & Abraham noted that the accounting curriculum of most universities prioritize technical skills. Accounting graduates are able to communicate with each other, but they cannot communicate effectively with non-accountants because they lack the necessary skills.

Their paper had three purposes: to gather information regarding the perceptions of academics, employers and accounting graduates concerning required communication skills; to identify any differences which might have occurred in those perceptions; and to compare and evaluate the differences and suggest solutions to any communication gap.

Along similar lines a study conducted by Usoff&Feldmann (1998) recognize that accounting students require more than technical skills to be successful in today's business environment. An important goal for accounting educators is to motivate their students so as to improve their non technical skills.

Students are unlikely to work hard for improvement unless they are convinced that these skills are critical to success in the work environment. The study was conducted in order to assess the perceptions of accounting students regarding the importance of non-technical skills relative to technical accounting skills, and to relate their perceptions to demographic characteristics.

In their paper, Hassall et al. (1999) agree that this is a period where there is pressure for change in the accounting education from both employers and academics. They question the exact nature of accounting knowledge and personal skills that are needed for someone to be deemed professionally competent. The main aim of this research was to examine the importance of vocational skills for qualified management accountants as valued by CIMA (Chartered Institute of Management Accountants) employers.

Furthermore, De Lange, Jackling& Gut (2006) report that the role of the traditional accountant as a score keeper is no longer valid due to new global business models. If graduate students are to succeed as knowledge professionals in the highly changeable global environment, they must exhibit a range skills required by accountants to add value for their clients.

This study aimed to examine which skills accounting graduates thought were important to acquire in their undergraduate studies to achieve success in the accounting profession. Henceforth it sought to investigate the emphasis placed on technical and generic skills developed during undergraduate accounting courses from the perspective of graduates. Additionally, it sought to ascertain how much emphasis they thought should be given to generic skills during an undergraduate accounting degree.

According to Kavanagh &Drennan (2008), only a few studies call attention to the perceptions of

graduating students despite the fact that they are the main stakeholders in the whole process. Subsequently, they ask the following question: "What skills and attributes are perceived to be required of graduates by students and employers in today's business environment?" As a result, they undertook research to investigate views of graduating accounting students about the skills and attributes they perceive significant to their career and the emphasis placed on the development of these skills during their degree program. The paper also examines the skills and attributes expected by employers and explores the gap between students' perceptions and employers' expectation.

In 2009, Jackling & De Lange further explored the given issue by carrying out yet another study. It was motivated by two issues: firstly, calls by the accounting profession and international education committees regarding the professional competency of graduates. Secondly, the challenge facing educators and professional bodies to insure accounting courses provide graduates with the necessary skills to add value to business.

After reviewing the relevant literature, the researchers have undertaken a systematic review of the divergence between the perspectives of graduates and employers. The purpose of this paper is to address this shortcoming in literature. Consequently, this investigation compares and contrasts the graduates' perceptions of graduate accountant's attribute set, in terms of convergence and divergence of skill sets.

In related study, Wells et al. (2009) acknowledge the need for the development of professional capabilities and skills to address teaching and learning deficiencies in the accounting education. They sought to identify the capabilities which are considered by employers in public practice to be the most important for successful practice in accountancy during the first years after graduation. It also sought to discover the extent to which graduates

believed that New Zealand universities have focused on these issues; and to ascertain key ways to improve the content, delivery, support and assessment of the undergraduate accounting programs.

Another paper was published in Ghana by Awayiga, Onumah & Tsamenyi (2010) which claim that studies conducted in the western world and the emerging world criticize the quality of accounting graduates. The educational model has failed time and again to concentrate on developing a set of skills for graduates to enable them to pursue successful careers in accounting. They designed a study to investigate the perceived relevance of accounting education in Ghana. The research specifically focused on the knowledge and skills which graduates acquired from their accounting program at university to prepare them for entry into the profession. Both the professional and information technology skills (IT) skill requirements required by graduates were examined.

Upon graduating, many accounting graduates find themselves in the uncomfortable position of not knowing if they have the qualifications companies are seeking. Much of the problem arises from the fact that they are not certain if they have been appropriately equipped to satisfy the demands of companies for which they aspire to work. Therefore, they doubt themselves when they are interviewed by possible employers. To address this issue, Dean & Campbell (2010) issued a paper that aimed to identify the key factors that accounting employers are looking for in future accounting employees. In order to achieve their aim, the researchers reviewed the job requirements of companies with entry-level job positions.

Wally-Dima (2011) believes that calls for accounting education reform have mostly come from research done in Western countries and there is very little available from developing countries. Hence their research, which

was conducted in Botswana, contributes to the literature from the developing world.

There has been an agreement among accounting practitioners and accounting academics about the lack of skills and the need to expand knowledge subjects. But there has not been a general agreement on the kind of knowledge and skills required for accounting students. Wally-Dima(2011) designed a study to identify these knowledge subjects and skill requirements. In Botswana (the case study) and some developing countries, accounting education programs were not initiated but have been influenced by foreign accounting systems. The main objective was to find out if the current accounting program of the University Of Botswana provided accounting graduates with the knowledge and skills needed at work. The researchers planned to gather the views of important stakeholders such as accounting educators and practitioners whose views are essential for the development of appropriate accounting programs.

In addition to the Theoretical Literature, the following discussion analyzes the differences between the current study and the previous ten studies reviewed in this paper, and highlights the gap in the literature. It is evident that significant research has been conducted into the causes of accounting education's failure to sufficiently equip accounting graduates with the competencies desired by the accounting profession.

Prior studies on graduate competencies have tended to focus on identifying the perceived generic skills and capabilities of accountants in practice as perceived by:

1. Employers and recruiters - (Awaiyga, Onumah & Tsamenyi, 2010; Hassall et al., 1999; Jackling & De Lange, 2009; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008; Zaid & Abraham, 1994)
2. Graduates - (Awaiyga, Onumah & Tsamenyi, 2010; De Lange, Jackling & Gut, 2006; Jackling & De Lange, 2009; Wells et al., 2009; Zaid & Abraham, 1994)

3. Students - (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008; Usoff & Feldmann, 1998)
4. Practitioners - (Wally-Dima, 2011)
5. Academics, educators and lecturers - (Wally-Dima, 2011; Zaid & Abraham)

As can be deduced, all of the above mentioned studies have failed to take into account the perceptions of both students and practitioners simultaneously. One key question that needs to be asked, however, is: who is the best judge of what future skills accounting graduates are likely to need?

This research assumes that accounting practitioners are the best judges because, firstly, they are the ones who apply these skills in their profession and they know what skills they require the most. Secondly, accounting practitioners were once students who gradually evolved as professionals. This study, therefore, examines and compares the views of undergraduate students before they join the workforce and views of practitioners who have already joined the workforce.

Furthermore, these studies have been undertaken in the western world (such as Australia, New Zealand and the USA) and the less developed countries (such as Ghana and Botswana). However no prior study has been conducted in the Gulf region, namely Bahrain. It is interesting to investigate the perceived relevance of accounting education in Bahrain. This is regarded as necessary since context is important when putting together accounting education programs.

Research Design and Methodology

In order to address the research questions, data were collected using a quantitative data collection method by means of a questionnaire distributed to undergraduate accounting students (Group A) and accounting practitioners (Group B). Both questionnaires (Group A and Group B) were conceptually the same; however minor changes were made to suit both groups. An example to demonstrate this difference in wording was

the question concerning the development of skills and attributes. Accounting students were asked to list the skills and attributes which were not being developed by their university accounting program. While accounting practitioners were asked to list the skills and attributes that accounting graduates lacked and should be developed by university accounting programs.

The questionnaires were constructed from issues identified from the review of relevant literature. The questionnaires initially consisted of 20 questions; subsequently they were revised and shortened to include 16 questions based on feedback from colleagues at Ahlia University who felt the questionnaires were very long. The questionnaires addressed to the students and practitioners are provided in appendices A and B respectively. Both questionnaires included 3 sections:

Section 1 requested demographic and background information from the respondents.

Section 2 asked the respondents to rate statements about the criteria used by employers for the selection of accounting graduates on a scale ranging from 5 (Strongly agree) to 1 (Strongly disagree).

Section 3 required the respondents to rate 12 specific skills/attributes on a scale ranging from 5 (Very important) to 1 (Not at all important). This section also contained open-ended questions asking the respondents to list the three most important skills/attributes according to them.

Research Hypotheses and Variables

To provide a starting point for analysis, two research hypotheses were put forth. These are directly related to the research questions.

1. Hypothesis 1 (null): There is no difference in the perceptions of students and practitioners regarding the criteria used by employers in the selection of accounting graduates.

Hypothesis 1 (alternative): There is a difference in

the perceptions of students and practitioners regarding the criteria used by employers in the selection of accounting graduates.

2. Hypothesis 2 (null): There is no difference in the perceptions of students and practitioners in terms of competencies that are important for a career in accounting.

Hypothesis 2 (alternative): There is a difference in the perceptions of students and practitioners in terms of competencies that are important for a career in accounting.

This study used two variables in the development of the questionnaire. They are defined as follows:

1. Criteria used by employers for the selection of graduates: these are the basis, standards or tests by which assess and select accounting graduates at entry-level. These may include exam results, personality of the graduate, qualifications and previous work experience.
2. Accounting competencies: these consist of professional skills, personal attributes and knowledge demanded by accounting professionals.

Research population

Sample selection – Accounting students

To capture the perceptions of undergraduate accounting students, a random sample was drawn from a private university in Bahrain called Ahlia University. To ensure the validity of the study third and fourth year students were approached because they have completed 90 credit hours or more. They are deemed better judges of the skills that are not being developed by their university than first or second year students. Moreover they are more aware of the content of accounting courses as they have taken more accounting classes or courses.

A total of 200 students were approached, but only 50 students agreed to participate in the study. The

questionnaires were hand-delivered to the participants during the month of March, 2012. In all, 39 questionnaires, representing 78% of the sample, were fully completed and collected within a period of three weeks. Several attempts to collect the remaining questionnaires failed.

In 2010, the Quality Assurance Authority for Education & Training's (QAAET) Institutional Review Report on AU reported that there were more females

than males enrolled at the university. As of 2010, there were a total of 1693 students, 926 were females (54.7%) while 767 were males (45.30%). This is in line with international trends. For example in August 2011, the Pew Research Center, reported that among all American college graduates in 2010, 55 % were women and 45% were men. Similarly, this research confirms the same trends. This is proved by examining the table below.

Table 1: Demographic composition of the student sample

Category	Number in each category	% in each category
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	16	41
Female	23	59
Total	39	100
<i>Age group</i>		
<20	1	2.6
20-25	35	89.7
25-30	2	5.1
>30	1	2.6
Total	39	100
<i>Year of University</i>		
3 rd year	16	41
4 th year	23	59
Total	39	100
<i>Credit hours completed</i>		
60-90	2	5.1
90-120	17	43.6
>120	20	51.3
Total	39	100
<i>Work experience</i>		
Yes*	20	51.3
No	19	48.7
Total	39	100

Category	Number in each category	% in each category
<i>Experience period</i>		
< 3 months	11	55
3-6 months	5	25
6 months-1 year	1	5
>1 year	3	15
Total	20	100

*Note: The respondents who answered 'Yes' in the 'Work experience' category are the only ones who were allowed to answer the 'Experience period' category. Therefore the % in the 'Experience period' category represents the valid %.

Sample selection – Accounting practitioners

A random sample of accounting practitioners from a number of different organizations and industries were contacted by telephone and email. A total of 50 questionnaires were sent to the respondents via email

during March, 2012. Coincidentally, 39 of these questionnaires were fully completed and received within a period of three weeks, giving a response rate of 78%. The following table provides the background of the responding practitioners.

Table 2: Demographic composition of the practitioner sample

Category	Number in each category	% in each category
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	27	69.2
Female	12	30.8
Total	39	100
<i>Age group</i>		
<25	3	7.7
25-35	19	48.7
35-45	11	28.2
>45	6	15.4
Total	39	100
<i>Degree</i>		
Master	20	51.3
Bachelor	15	38.5
Diploma	4	10.3
Total	39	100
<i>Professional Certificate</i>		
Yes	19	48.7
No	20	51.3
Total	39	100

Category	Number in each category	% in each category
<i>Position</i>		
Manager	10	25.6
Head of department	6	15.4
Other	23	59
Total	39	100
<i>Experience years</i>		
<5 years	6	15.4
5-15	17	43.6
15-20	6	15.4
>20	10	25.6
Total	39	100
<i>Organization</i>		
BNP Paribas Bank	10	25.6
Gulf Air	7	17.9
BAPCO	8	20.5
GIIC	6	15.4
United Steel Corporation	4	10.3
Al Mannai Technical	4	10.3
Total	39	100

Research findings

This section analyses the data obtained from the questionnaires and reports the findings using tables. Bearing in mind three conditions need to be met in order to reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis. These are as follows:

1. Mean > 3
2. T-test > 1.678
3. Significance < 0.05

To understand the above terms better, they are defined below:

1. Mean: a value, often known as the average,

calculated by adding up the values of each case for a variable and dividing by the total number of cases.

2. T-test: Statistical test to determine the probability (likelihood) that the values of a numerical data variable for two independent samples or groups are different. The test assesses the likelihood of any difference between these two groups occurring by chance alone.

3. Significance testing: Testing the probability of a pattern such as a relationship between two variables occurring by chance alone (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009)

Table 3: Perceptions regarding the criteria used by employers

Question 1:	Students				Practitioners			
	Mean	Mean %	t	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean	Mean %	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Interview skills	4.21	84.2	11.470	0.000	4.18	83.6	10.779	0.000
Interpersonal and communication skills	4.08	81.6	11.602	0.000	4.33	86.6	14.422	0.000
Motivation and interest in the job	3.85	77	6.781	0.000	4.21	84.2	12.243	0.000
G.P.A	3.36	67.2	2.108	0.042	3.95	79	7.177	0.000
Academic qualifications	4.15	83	9.675	0.000	4.36	87.2	13.520	0.000
Previous training or work experience	4.21	84.2	7.694	0.000	4.33	86.6	11.291	0.000
Basic knowledge in accounting	4.36	87.2	12.698	0.000	4.38	87.6	12.155	0.000
Total	4.0293	80.586	19.403	0.000	4.2491	84.982	21.485	0.000

The first question in the questionnaire, asked the students and practitioners to rate items based on their perceptions of the criteria used by employers in the selection of accounting graduates at the time of entry. The results are shown in Table 3.

The table is quite revealing in several ways. An analysis of the mean ratings reveals that basic knowledge in accounting, interview skills and previous training are the top three criteria rated by the students. Similarly the practitioners rated basic accounting knowledge as the top rated criterion. However this rating is followed by academic qualifications and interpersonal skills. Both the groups rated GPA as the least used criterion by the employers in the selection of graduates. It is interesting to note that while students considered interview skills as the second top criterion, practitioners rated it next to the last rated skill (GPA).

In order to test Hypothesis 1, the researchers compared the total mean % and total mean ratings by

students and practitioners by examining the above table:

The total mean rating by students is 4.0293 representing 80.586%, and the total mean rating by practitioners is 4.2491 representing 84.982%. Therefore the mean by students is less than the mean by practitioners. This suggests that there is a possible difference between the perceptions of the two groups. To further confirm the assumption a series of one sample t-tests were conducted. The t-test by students (19.403) is less than the t-test by practitioners (21.485). As both of these values are greater than 1.678 and have a significance of 0.000 which is less than 0.05, Hypothesis 1 (null) is rejected and Hypothesis 1 (alternative) is accepted.

Hypothesis 1 (alternative): There is a difference in the perceptions of students and practitioners regarding the criteria used by employers in the selection of accounting graduates.

Table 4: Students' and practitioners' perceptions of the skills and attributes considered important for a future career in accounting

Question 2:	Students				Practitioners			
	Mean	Mean %	t	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean	Mean %	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Oral communication skills	4.38	87.6	14.654	0.000	4.10	82	10.120	0.000
Written communication skills	4.00	80	7.858	0.000	4.08	81.6	9.569	0.000
Critical thinking/Analytical skills	4.05	81	7.402	0.000	4.49	89.8	14.429	0.000
Information Technology skills	4.05	81	7.166	0.000	3.92	78.4	8.202	0.000
Basic accounting skills	4.54	90.8	17.321	0.000	4.64	92.8	16.325	0.000
General Knowledge	3.90	78	7.435	0.000	3.69	73.8	5.406	0.000
Interpersonal skills	3.74	74.8	5.465	0.000	4.13	82.6	10.738	0.000
Teamwork	3.87	77.4	6.302	0.000	4.23	84.6	11.518	0.000
Leadership	3.59	71.8	3.445	0.001	3.87	77.4	6.091	0.000
Strong work ethics and values	4.10	82	7.115	0.000	4.38	87.6	10.612	0.000
Potential for continuous learning	4.00	80	6.805	0.000	4.18	83.6	11.444	0.000
Self motivation	4.03	80.6	7.094	0.000	4.41	88.2	14.811	0.000
Total	4.0214	80.428	15.092	0.000	4.1774	83.548	18.457	0.000

Using a five-point Likert scale (5 = very important to 1= not very important), both the respondent groups were asked to rate the importance of certain professional skills considered significant for the career of accounting graduates. The results are represented in Table 4.

The mean rating by students shows that students indicate that basic accounting skill is the most important skill by far. This is consistent with the study conducted by Usoff&Feldmann (1998). Next in line of order of importance were oral communication, strong work ethics and values, critical thinking, IT, self motivation and written communication. These skills are closely followed by potential for continuous learning, general knowledge, teamwork, interpersonal skills and finally leadership.

On the other hand, practitioners felt that the most important skills are basic accounting and critical

thinking. This confirms the results found by Kavanagh &Drennan (2008). These skills were followed by self motivation, strong work ethics and values, team work, potential for continuous learning, interpersonal, oral communication, written communication, IT, leadership and lastly general knowledge.

While there is a general agreement among the respondents in respect to professional skills, students rated oral communication higher than the rating provided by practitioners. However, the findings of the current study do not support the previous research undertaken by Hassal et al. (1999) and Awayiga, Joseph &Onumah (2010). In those studies practitioners rated oral communication skills as very important to graduates.

Other differences between the two groups concern IT skills and teamwork. Students rated IT as the 5th most

important skill and teamwork as the 10th most important skill. Conversely, practitioners rated teamwork as the 5th most important skill and IT as the 10th skill. Despite these differences in the findings, both groups agreed that leadership skill is not very important for a career in accounting.

To test Hypothesis 2, the researchers compared the total mean % and total mean ratings by students and practitioners by examining Table 4:

The total mean rating by student respondents is 4.0129 representing 80.428 % whereas the total mean rating of practitioners is 4.1774 representing 83.548%. Hence it is assumed that the mean by students is less than the mean by practitioners indicating that there is a possible difference between the perceptions of the two groups. Additionally a series of one sample t-tests were conducted. The t-test by students (15.092) is less than the t-test by practitioners (18.457). Both of these values are greater than 1.678 and have a significance of 0.000 which is less than 0.05. Hence Hypothesis 2 (null) is rejected and Hypothesis 2 (alternative) is accepted.

Hypothesis 2 (alternative): There is a difference in the perceptions of students and practitioners in terms of competencies that are important for a career in accounting. It is therefore assumed that while there is some commonality between the perceptions of accounting students and accounting practitioners, some significant differences do exist.

Finally this section included an open-ended question that asked the students to list the skills that were not being developed by Ahlia University. Students felt that their university had not developed their communication skills, technological skills, computer skills and analytical skills. These sentiments were also reflected in the responses from students who commented:

'Students at Ahlia University are forced to follow a strict pattern and curriculum which is not very flexible.

This is why students cannot relate theory from text books to practice. And this is exactly what we are missing.'

'I don't feel confident enough to enter the work environment because I am not adequately prepared to react to real work problems.'

'Everything is summarized, memorized and forgotten the next day. It all goes down the drain after we take our final exams. Seriously I can't even remember what I studied in Intermediate Accounting II and this was last semester.'

Additionally, practitioners were asked the same question, albeit it was phrased differently. They were asked to list the skills that accounting students lacked and needed to be developed by their university. Practitioners stated that students lack good communications skills, IT skills, analytical skills, interpersonal skills and the ability to work in groups. Some of their comments are below:

'I don't know when universities will adapt to technology, which is a must to survive at the workplace.'

'Newly graduated employees often lack self confidence on the job and general knowledge. General knowledge about the economy and industry is very important. Plus mathematical skills are imperative.'

'Accounting graduates lack common sense!'

A note to educators

The Bedford Committee Report (1986) was issued 26 years ago yet the message remains the same. Students and parents trust universities to prepare students in a manner that will equip them to enter their desired careers. Educators need to meet this demand; otherwise universities will continue to provide employers with ill equipped employees who are lacking some of the basic skills they need to not just get a job, but to be successful at said job.

Concluding comments

Finally we will conclude this report with comments made by both groups regarding their recommendations

and advice to improve the quality of accounting education in Bahraini universities. The student's comments are as follows:

'Ahlia University should not place too much attention on theory and textbook. The lecturers should try to ask questions from real life scenarios. There is also far too much emphasis on final examination marks. The final exam should carry only 25% while the other 75% should be divided among research projects, presentations, assignments and quizzes. So we can study without pressure.'

'Reading from slides is NOT teaching.'

'Tests are based on examples and exercises given during classes where only the numbers are changed for the test. This does not give us the sense of challenge and self-motivation required for the practical life. I would also like to add that the course content is summarized and only a few and selected examples are explained. Therefore, we only know how to answer those questions and if other questions are asked we get completely lost. There is no flexibility whatsoever.'

'Our university should give us lectures on interview processes and important academic qualifications that we should seek after graduation.'

The practitioners' comments are as follows:

'The written and oral communication skills of Bahraini graduates need to be improved much, especially in English language. This is the basic skill required to study any course including accounting practice.'

'Quality of the internship programs should be enhanced, rather than the current scenario where the student spends the two-month internship period idle with no value added. More emphasis should be given to technology solutions such as accounting software tools, Enterprise Resource Planning tools and spreadsheet tools.'

'Decision making abilities should be developed. Normally, decision making involves a trade-off between

2 things. Weighing the costs and benefits in a structured and methodological manner is something that needs to be reviewed by the universities. To do this, more subjective elements should be introduced to the case studies handed in to the students, rather than a clear-cut scenario, where the answer is known with applying a simple formula.'

'The pre-graduation training program should be more than 2 months, to ensure the involvement of the trainee in real cases. More field visits are required as well to enable the student to understand the real work environment and compare it to what they are studying.'

'Role – playing approaches should be employed where the students are given a couple of days to act as they are working for a real institute rather than focusing on lectures and memorization.'

Conclusions and recommendations

This paper has presented the perspectives of two key stakeholder groups, students and practitioners, with respect to important competencies (knowledge, skill and attributes) for a career in accounting. Based on the data analysis and results, it is concluded that although there is some common ground between the views of accounting students and accounting practitioners, a significant gap still exists.

What is of concern, however, is the emphasis presently being placed by universities on competencies and learning approaches that accounting students consider as important. Since student motivation to learn is often driven by views about the relevance of these skills and learning approaches to their careers, the findings and conclusions of this study have important implications for accounting educators. This study suggests relevant input for evaluating the accounting curriculum in order to develop the knowledge and skills required for the 21st century accountant in Bahrain. Therefore, we recommend Bahraini universities, mainly

Ahlia University, to reconsider their accounting education process, and incorporate necessary changes required to focus on generic skill development.

These changes can be brought about by adopting active learning approaches such as role-plays, case studies and interactive group work. Another approach that could be adopted by universities includes incorporating additional elective courses/Seminars in the curriculum such as vocational training courses namely: Neuro-Linguistic Training (NLP), Communication Skills, Presentation Skills, Writing skills, Health and Safety, Meeting Skills and courses involving Bahrain's Business environment and its different sectors and industries.

Moreover, in order to bridge the gap between education and practice, universities need to forge links with practicing accounting firms and financial institutions so as to assist in infusing accounting practical training with classroom theory. A Structured Internship enables accounting students to demonstrate acquired skills and knowledge in an industry setting. During the internship or work placement a student should have specific tasks to undertake in order to demonstrate competence. They should be regularly monitored and assessed on the job. Benefits for students might include: 1. gaining 'hands-on' experience in the

workplace, 2. gaining knowledge of employers' expectations, 3. establishing contacts for future job prospects, 4. the opportunity to gain confidence and better interpersonal and communication skills through learning in an adult environment. A logbook could be used by employers to record and monitor the students' achievements, skills acquired and learning activities at the workplace.

Limitations and scope for further research

The major findings of this study should be viewed in the light of a number of limitations. First the student participants are restricted to only one university. Secondly this study relied predominantly on survey data which is associated with low response rates. This means that the results may not be a perfect representation of the world. The findings may have been different if the samples had been larger or if they related to accounting programs in other universities. These limitations highlight opportunities for further research.

Besides, future research that combines both quantitative and qualitative data would enrich the results. Interviews and focus groups could provide additional sources of rich data. Moreover, an investigation of the perceptions of accounting educators is warranted to provide further insights into the issues presented in this current study.

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سد الفجوة بين تصورات الطلبة والممارسين لمهنة المحاسبة: دليل من الجامعة الأهلية في البحرين

عادل السريع*، فاطمة الرواحي**

ملخص

على مدى العقدين الماضيين، وجهت انتقادات من قبل العديد من الهيئات المحاسبية المهنية للتعليم المحاسبي في الجامعات والمؤسسات التعليمية المختلفة لفشله في ردم الفجوة بين الإطار النظري والتطبيق العملي للبرامج المحاسبية في المؤسسات التعليمية. حيث خلق هذا الفشل فجوة بين الممارسات المحاسبية والتعليم المحاسبي. وعليه، وبهدف زيادة الشفافية، وتقليل الفجوة بين الطلبة والباحثين عن عمل من جهة والممارسين لهذه المهنة من جهة أخرى فقد سعت هذه الدراسة إلى استطلاع آراء ممارسي المحاسبة وطلبة المحاسبة في البحرين. حيث تم الحصول على البيانات من 39 طالباً من الجامعة الأهلية، و 39 من الممارسين لهذه المهنة من مختلف القطاعات العاملة في مهنة المحاسبة في البحرين، وذلك باستخدام المسح الميداني. حيث تشير النتائج إلى أنه على الرغم من وجود اتفاق بين تصورات كلا المجموعتين إلا أن بعض الفجوات لا تزال موجودة. لذلك تم تصنيف المهارات المحاسبية الأساسية والمهارات المهنية أهم العوامل المؤثرة في كلا المجموعتين. في حين يرى الطلبة أن المهارات القيادية هي أقل مهارة مهمة. ومن جهة أخرى يرى الممارسين أن المعرفة العامة هي الأقل أهمية من ضمن مجموعة من العوامل المدروسة. وبالإضافة إلى ذلك، تشير نتائج هذه الدراسة إلى أن طلبة المحاسبة غير مؤهلين بشكل كامل للانخراط مباشرة بالمهنة قبل أن يخضع الطالب للتدريب ومن ثم الانخراط في سوق العمل.

الكلمات الدالة: المحاسبة، التعليم المحاسبي، آراء الطلاب، آراء الممارسين للمهنة.

* باحث، كلية الدراسات العليا - الجامعة الأهلية في البحرين

** أستاذ، كلية المال والأعمال - الجامعة الأهلية في البحرين
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