Competency Requirements For South African Business Management Undergraduate Students: A Higher Distance Education Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The presentation of undergraduate Business Management degrees relevant to the needs of the business community is an ongoing challenge for any higher education institution. The presentation of such degrees must be state of the art, and the content of the degree structure has to be constantly adapted to meet the ever-changing needs of the business community. This study focuses on the broad educational competencies identified by selected South African businesses; the aim is to review curricula for undergraduate business management degrees at a higher distance education institution. The business management areas investigated were: general management, marketing management, financial management, risk management, human resource management and entrepreneurship. The nominal group technique was used, with between six and 15 specialists chosen from each of these areas from the business community. Their views were obtained on the competency requirements for the various business areas. A total of 48 such specialists participated in the study. Although each area of business held unique challenges, the results showed that the following generic competency requirements are important: good financial acumen, the ability to develop a business plan, strategic management skills and generic management skills. These competencies were considered to be vitally important for the degree programme, irrespective of the specialist direction. A further critical issue identified in the study is the need to integrate all the fundamental areas of business management into one module; this module should be included in the final year of study for the degree in Business Management. The study concludes with certain recommendations.

1 INTRODUCTION

In order for any degree in Business Management to be relevant to the workplace, it is crucial that the outcomes and content of such a degree be aligned with the requirements of the business world. Linked to this is the fact that the management environment has undergone significant changes during the recent past, both locally and internationally. Also, bear in mind that the institution itself was uncertain whether the wide variety of degrees offered in business management and current and planned curricula were still relevant in this new context.

In the South African environment, ten years since its first democratic election, the state of the economy and, in particular, the effectiveness and efficiency of the business community is of crucial importance to South Africa’s future success. There is no doubt that the education and training of business leaders and managers in South Africa not only depends on the organisations themselves but is, among other things, also the responsibility of higher education institutions in the country.

Over the past few years, the Minister of Education has announced drastic changes to the higher education landscape in South Africa. The mergers and rationalisation plans prescribed by the State have included, among other things, the merger of various higher education institutions (Universities and Technicons) and, as a result, the total number of these institutions will soon be reduced from 36 to 21 institutions of higher learning (Janscn: 2003. 29). One of the most significant mergers in the distance higher education field is the merger of the University of South Africa (
The uniqueness of distance education can briefly be described as a mode of teaching where the lecturers and students are separated by physical distance and time. Today, distance education involves a variety of communication channels, which range from print materials and postal services to sophisticated IT and communication technologies; the aim of both print and IT is to facilitate teaching and learning (Braimoh 2003:14). Distance education differs from normal residential university education in the sense that the contact between lecturer/facilitator is limited. Distance-education students are guided through their studies by means of study guides and other instruments such as the Internet, CD-ROM, e-learning and/or audio. Distance education has great potential and, according to the World Bank (Webster 2004), is the fastest growing mode of education delivery throughout the world. The advantage of distance learning in the education of Business Management is that, in most cases, students are in employment and distance education allows these students to fit learning into their working day. Students can apply business concepts directly to their work environment and obtain immediate feedback. In the process of determining competency requirements, the unique position of distance education students should be considered. For example, students studying business management through distance education vary in terms of age, work experience, educational qualifications and organisational position. The effective teaching of Business Management, however, requires a blending of traditional face-to-face education and distance education, with a strong element of what can best be called “action learning”.

2 THE CONTEXT OF AND EDUCATION IN BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Business Management involves the study of the ways in which business organisations can be managed effectively and efficiently. It examines how the limited resources (human resources, physical resources such as raw materials, financial resources, information resources and knowledge) available to the entrepreneur or businessperson can be utilised in the most productive way to profitably supply products and services to the marketplace. According to Cronje, Du Toit and Motlala (2004:24), Business Management is concerned with the study of those institutions in a particular economic system that satisfies the needs of a community. In a mixed market economy, as is found in South Africa, private business organisations are the main area of study. Linked to this is the task of Business Management, which is to determine how an organisation can achieve the highest possible output (products and services) with the least possible input. “More specifically, it entails an examination of the factors, methods, and principles that enable a business to function as efficiently and productively as possible in order to maximise profit” (Cronje et al 2004:25).

According to Macfarlane and Ottewill (2001:9), the purpose of a business and management curriculum is often conceived in terms of preparing students with the skills and knowledge required to participate in some form of business activity. They argue that, from this perspective, “business and management education is a study ‘for’ business with the essential purpose of equipping learners for the needs of commerce, industry and public service” (2001:9). However, they also suggest that, in wider terms, the purpose of business and management education is a study “about” the nature of business activity. “This implies an analysis of the role of business in society deploying sociological, economic, philosophical and other perspectives which enable learners to develop a critical understanding of business as a social phenomenon” (Macfarlane & Ottewill 2001:9). With reference to the work of Brown and Harrison (1980), Boys (1988), and Grey and French (1996), Macfarlane and Ottewill (2001:10) suggest that most writers on the aim of business and management education argue that studying “for” business tends to dominate the curriculum. However, in reality, most courses of study embody aims from across the spectrum; this includes both applied knowledge and skills and critical evaluation of business as a social activity. Liyanage and Poon (2003:1) argue that management studies are not only about theoretical constructs, but also about practical resolutions and problem solving in the real business world. Elliott and Glaser (1998:2) support this view. They suggest that management education should emphasise both theory and practice, but that the real focus should be on catering for the needs of industry and business. By implication, higher education distance learning institutions should ensure that programmes and courses in business management should cater for both these needs.
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A second consideration is that education in business management and its future development are closely linked to both the context of national education policy and various stakeholders. Macfarland and Ottery (2001:11) suggest that “within the parameters of national education policy, a particular issue for business and management educators is the extent to which they should tailor the curriculum to meet the current, perceived needs of employers and the wider business community or rely on their own judgement as to the requirements of learners” (2001:12). The same authors argue that employers and the wider business community should be the key stakeholders as far as the business management curriculum is concerned (2001:12). This argument is supported by Elliott and Glaser (1998:1), who suggest that higher education in business and management should move closer to industry, to bring industry into their confidence and to enable curricula to reflect the needs of industry.

Standards within the South African education system are governed by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (Van Dyk, Nel, Loedoff & Haasbroek 2001: 44). In essence, SAQA and the NQF require any qualification offered by a higher education learning institution to reflect a defined purpose and to be based on learning outcomes that are intended to qualify learners with applied competencies and a basis for further learning. It means the formal recognition of the achievement of the required number of credits at specific levels of the NQF as determined by the relevant bodies registered for such purposes (SAQA 2000:3). The requirements of the National Qualification Framework in South Africa and the focus on learning outcomes have already compelled higher education institutions to align their curricula, programmes and courses with the requirements of outcomes-based education (Erasmus & Van Dyk 2003: 14). Whereas the focus was traditionally on “content”, the focus is now on the desired outcomes. According to Magill and Harden (1998:1), the emphasis on the desired outcomes requires three fundamental questions to be answered. First, what are the required competencies of effective managers that can be developed in students? Second, can skills and abilities — especially the so-called softer skills, such as interpersonal skills and creativity — actually be developed in the teaching/learning situation? Third, what sort of balance should be struck between teaching knowledge (content) and teaching competencies? For the purposes of this study, competencies describe the expectations of employment and focus on work roles rather than jobs. It is also maintained that the basis of a competence-based system must be explicit, measurable standards of performance that are outcomes-based.

From the above it can be concluded that the various programmes in business management in South Africa should be aligned with both the needs of the business community and the requirements of the national education system. Furthermore, programmes in business management should not only cater for study “about” business, but also study “for” business and that, for this purpose, higher education in business management should cater for the needs of industry and business (as key stakeholders). Finally, it is crucial that higher education distance learning institutions which provide management education should stay abreast not only of developments in the field of business management, but should also align its programmes and courses to the requirements of SAQA, on the one hand, and the needs of business and best practice on the other.

3 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study was to determine what selected members of various business organisations expected in terms of competencies required by undergraduate students in business management.

4 RESEARCH DESIGN

4.1 Sample

The total population that would be available for this type of study is the total number of businesses in South Africa. For the purposes of this study, it was decided to draw a sample of 164 organisations from various sectors of the economy, for example, mining, manufacturing, wholesale and retail (see Table 1) and from this list 12 to 15 managers representing the most important areas of business management (eg general management, marketing management, risk management, human resource management and financial management) were invited to participate in the study. A total of 48 managers finally participated in this study representing the sectors reflected in Table 2.

The sampling method used was a non-probability sampling technique known as a purposeful sample. The sampling is done with a specific purpose in mind and it is therefore necessary to select participants from predefined groups.
This method of sampling can also be described as expert sampling; this involves the assembling of a sample of persons with known expertise in specific areas. In the current study it was more important to select participants from specialised areas who could provide relevant ideas and insights rather than sampling for proportionality. This type of sampling method is very useful for exploratory research (which is what this study is).

Company executives or their personal assistants were contacted by phone and informed about the aim of the study. They were asked whether they would be prepared to participate in the study and represent their company and the specific sector in which they are involved. After this initial telephone contact, the relevant executives were also contacted via e-mail and facsimile and asked to confirm their participation in the study and to indicate which session they or other members of their staff would attend.

Details of the sectors involved in the various groups are given in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Sectors, sample and number of participants in the various groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Sample drawn</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Electricity, gas and steam</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Wholesale and retail</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Transport, storage and communication</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Financing, insurance, real estate and business services</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Computer related activities and research</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Community, social and personal services (incl trade unions and government department)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>164</strong></td>
<td><strong>48</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 reflects the list of the various areas of business/nominal groups together with the representation, per sector, of the various participants.

Table 2: Areas of business and representation of sectors in nominal groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of business</th>
<th>Participants per group</th>
<th>Sectors and number of participants per sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General management</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Mining (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Electricity, gas and steam (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Manufacturing (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Government department (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Financing, insurance, real estate and business services (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Computer related services and research (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Transport and communication (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing management</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Manufacturing (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Construction (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Financing, insurance, real estate and business services (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Transport and communication (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial management</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Electricity, gas and steam (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Construction (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wholesale and retail (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Financing, insurance, real estate and business services (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Transport and communication (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk management</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Electricity, gas and steam (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Financing, insurance, real estate and business services (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human resource management</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Construction (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Financing, insurance, real estate and business services (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Government department (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Transport and communication (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurship</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Electricity, gas and steam (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Financing, insurance, real estate and business services (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wholesale/retail (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 Research instrument

Because of the nature of the information required, the researchers decided to follow a qualitative approach. This would enable the researchers to gain an in-depth knowledge of the views and opinions of corporate executives from the selected organisations. The technique known as the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) was chosen, since this would provide an environment that would enable company representatives to submit their individual ideas in a structured fashion and provide an indication of the relative importance of these inputs in terms of both current and future curricula.

The researchers also decided on the NGT because participants come from various institutions and organisations and have diverse positions and, probably, diverse opinions. The NGT is particularly useful when there are power differences between participants and when one wants to explore the degree of consensus between participants on a given topic. The NGT uses a structured approach to collecting data: the interaction between participants is under the strict control of the facilitator (De Ruyter 1996:44). In the NGT discussion is kept to a minimum and is only used for clarification purposes.
4.3 Data-collection procedure

4.3.1 Overall process

In order to create a non-threatening environment in which participants felt they could freely express their views and opinions, a Group Decision-making System (GDS) was used for all the nominal group sessions. The GDS system provided each participant with a computer terminal that was linked to a centralised server via a network. Participants keyed their responses into the computer, and these responses were then anonymously displayed on an overhead screen. Since responses could be given anonymously, this created an environment in which participants could freely air their views without being criticised by other participants or members of the research team.

After obtaining participants inputs, the various items were discussed and similar items were clustered together. This led to the creation of a list of the most important items (as perceived by the participants). In some instances, where a large number of participants were present, participants were requested to list only the five or six most important issues. This was done to avoid generating too many items and spending the remainder of the session on attempting to merge all of these items into homogeneous clusters. On average, each group ended up with between 10 and 14 critical issues. These new items where then displayed on the overhead screen and participants had to, firstly, rate each item in terms of its importance on a numeric scale from 1 to 10 and, secondly, rank each item in terms of its relative importance to the other items on the list.

4.3.2 Nominal group process

4.3.2.1 Introduction

Each of the nominal group sessions was conducted in exactly the same manner and a short explanation of the daily research process is provided in the following discussion. The facilitator welcomed participants and thanked them for their attendance and the contribution they were about to make. They where then introduced to the research team and the academic personnel; after that, they then introduced themselves to the rest of the group, giving their position and the company they represent. This form of introduction helped participants to feel at ease. An academic staff member provided participants with a short description of the aim of the research and the results/outputs required from the session. Once consensus about the aim of the upcoming session was reached, the facilitator took charge of the rest of the proceedings.

4.3.2.2 Facilitating the process

At first the facilitator discussed the GDS system, how it works and the reasons for utilising such a system. Once the participants were comfortable with the operation of the GDS system, the facilitator started the session. The facilitator asked participants to list the most important competencies (outputs) required of graduates. Participants were asked: "If you had to appoint someone in your organisation who has completed his/her tertiary education in business management, what are the non-negotiable competencies (outputs) that would be required of this person? What profile does an aspirant employee have to have?" This approach created a flexible environment that enabled participants and researchers to generate in-depth knowledge that, in turn, resulted in unexpected and surprising results.

A typical session/meeting starts when each participant is registered on the system. Once this is done, each participant takes up his/her position behind his/her workstation. A facilitator facilitates the session/meeting to ensure that the outcomes of the session are attained. When, for instance, a brainstorming session is held, each participant will be invited by the facilitator to take part in the particular exercise. Each participant will then be provided with the opportunity to key in his/her suggestions on his/her respective workstations. All the suggestions, which are anonymous, are then submitted to the leader station. The suggestions are then displayed via a data projector on a screen. Through a voting system, the participants can then rank or rate the suggestions. The result of the ranking or rating will indicate the mean standard deviation and other statistics. At the end of such a session, a report is generated by the software package (which captures all the results).

4.3.2.3 Rating and ranking of items

After clustering the items together, the various competencies (outputs) were prioritised by using a voting tool. Before rating and ranking the issues, the facilitator made sure that all the participants understood clearly what was meant under each of the items. In some cases terms had to be either rephrased or divided into two separate
concepts in order to avoid misinterpreting the items. After each voting session the facilitator asked participants and academics whether the results yielded any surprises; this question led to a discussion on the results of the voting.

4.4 Limitations of the study

Although the GDS can and does capture participants’ responses that are keyed into the computer, it cannot capture the qualitative remarks and discussions between participants. To overcome this shortcoming and prevent the loss of valuable inputs, researchers made notes of everything participants said that could not be captured by the GDS system.

One of the disadvantages of nominal groups is that the findings cannot always be generalised to the whole population. This is due to the limited number of participants and the likelihood that participants will not be a representative sample of the whole sector. Bearing this drawback in mind, the nominal groups where scheduled in such a way that it included individuals from different sectors, different companies, and different functional areas within these companies. This provided researchers and academic personnel with a rich spread of views and opinions, which is sufficient for this type of explorative research. The aim of the research was not to generalise the results to the whole population, but to provide specific inputs regarding a selected type of organisation and sector. This means that the results are representative of the specific audience in mind.

4.5 Positive aspects of the study

The interaction between participants enabled them to direct questions to each other, to the researchers, and to academic staff. This enabled them to re-evaluate and reassess their own beliefs and understanding of specific issues and led to some very interesting debates. These debates highlighted specific concepts and showed the relative unimportance of other issues. They also enabled participants to share and explain their views, beliefs and feelings about the topic under discussion.

The facilitator was very competent and did not allow any participant to dominate the discussion. The facilitator was also able to encourage less talkative participants to feel comfortable when expressing their views and opinions. In some cases opinions of the academic staff were singled out as “opinions of academic staff” and participants were asked to comment on these opinions.

Because each participant came from a different sector and position, each participant responded from within a specific context. By inviting participants to ask questions and by encouraging discussion, researchers, academic personnel and participants were able to get to the bottom of what was said. This enabled participants and researchers to get a clear understanding of what other participants meant.

4.6 Data analysis

The researchers received three lists of results obtained from each nominal group session. List 1 contained the edited list of all the competencies (outputs, outcomes, skills and abilities) identified by the participants. List 2 contained ±10 responses, each with a rating of between 1 and 10. List 3 contained an identical list of items, but these items were ranked in order of importance.

These separate lists were each used differently during data analysis. While list 2 provided researchers with an indication of the importance of each issue to be included in the curricula, list 3 gave researchers and academics an indication of which items should carry the most weight when tested during an assessment.

The researchers were given the results of their specialist area and were responsible for the exploration and evaluation of the research results. The analysis of the data can be divided into four individual steps:

1. Step 1: Evaluate the current curriculum in the light of the new information provided by the nominal group participants.
2. Step 2: Identify specific differences and similarities between the current curricula and the results obtained from the nominal groups.
3. Step 3: Identify the crucial skills and competencies that the student must possess to be able to deliver specific outcomes as mentioned by the participants.
4. Step 4: Make specific suggestions about changes in the curriculum.
Some basic statistics, such as the mean and standard deviation, were provided by the GPS system. In the majority of cases, the standard deviation was relatively small at the top and bottom of the lists, indicating that most participants agreed on the relative importance of a specific item.

5 RESEARCH RESULTS

5.1 Introduction

Based on the information obtained from the nominal group process the researchers and responsible degree heads were in a position to: (1) compare the competency requirements of the various degrees with the current curricula and courses; (2) use the results of the ranking for identifying the relative importance of the various competencies (outputs); and (3) identify similarities and gaps in current curricula. The results discussed in this paper only focus on the competencies identified for the various areas of business.

5.2 Competency requirements of the various business areas

5.2.1 Introduction

Appendix 1 reflects the results after ranking the various competencies of each business area. Given the fact that the ranking process indicated the relative importance of each competency (output) within a particular business area, no specific general pattern emerged in the results. The result of the ranking provided an indication of the relative importance of the various competencies for curriculum design and assessment. The implications of the findings in terms of the top five competencies for each business area will be discussed briefly.

5.2.2 General management

According to the findings, the most important requirement in general management is people management skills. This means that the learner must be trained in all aspects of managing and motivating people, and must be trained in interpersonal communication and interpersonal relations.

The requirement of a strong financial acumen implies financial skills and the ability to understand and manage cost structures and drivers of cost; it also requires the ability to understand and interpret financial data and information in order to manage cost, and to analyse and forecast business needs and cost implications.

The ability to strategise requires the ability to understand and apply the strategic planning process, to develop business plans and to integrate functional strategies.

The nominal groups emphasised the need for a general manager to be multiskilled in terms of the various aspects of managing a business and processes in the enterprise. The graduate must therefore be prepared to deal with all functions of business.

The requirement to prepare a marketing plan and a human resources plan is, in fact, closely linked to the requirement to strategise and prepare business plans.

The nominal group exercise identified a number of gaps in the current curricula in general management. The biggest gap at present is the lack of emphasis on managing cost structures and drivers of cost and the lack of emphasis on the interpretation of financial data and information.

5.2.3 Risk management

The nominal group felt that, at the lower level, the focus should be on the interpretation of risk. This is why this particular competency was identified as the most important.

The ability to conduct risk assessments, produce a risk management plan, coordinate the risk-management process and produce a risk-evaluation model are all considered equally important. The nominal group pointed out that not everyone will be working with all the outputs at the same time, but the graduate should be in a position to work in any of these competency areas.

It was also pointed out that the graduate must understand the whole business process.
The competencies identified by the nominal group are all covered in current curricula and in the modules that make up the degree in risk management. The only two exceptions are: (1) corporate governance and compliance; and (2) the coordination of the risk management process. These competencies should be catered for in undergraduate studies.

5.2.4 Human resource management

The results of the nominal group identified a couple of competencies that are not adequately catered for at present. Although all the functional aspects of human resource management are adequately covered in existing curricula, the following require more attention:

- Compile, present and interpret basic statistical information. At present, students are not exposed specifically to this sort of information unless they take statistics as one of the optional modules. This study clearly indicated that statistics should be compulsory for all HRM students.

- Facilitation and presentation skills. Current curricula do not adequately cater for the practical application of these skills, although the psychological and theoretical aspects of facilitation are covered.

- The ability to formulate basic HRM policy. Students are provided with examples of policy documents in HRM, but are currently not required to formulate or compile HRM policy.

- Business and HR planning ability. HRM students are at present required to do a compulsory module in strategic planning. They are also exposed to components of a HR plan, but they are not expected to compile an HR plan.

5.2.5 Marketing management

Of the top five competencies identified, perhaps two need further consideration.

Given the emphasis placed on graduates’ ability to prepare a marketing plan, greater attention obviously needs to be given to this in undergraduate studies in order to cover all aspects of marketing planning.

The research indicated clearly that students require a solid understanding of the financial implications of all marketing decisions: the bottom line. Although this issue is addressed in places in the current study material, it is felt that more emphasis needs to be placed on this competency.

5.2.6 Financial management

Virtually all the competencies identified by the nominal group on financial management are currently catered for in curricula. The only area, which requires more attention, is the preparation of a business plan, since this is an important competency for all enterprises. Financial managers play a vital role here.

5.2.7 Entrepreneurship

The competency requirements in entrepreneurship are, for understandable reasons, closely linked to those of the general manager and, consequently, general management and multifunctional skills are essential. The entrepreneur also needs to have specific competencies in financial management and business planning. The entrepreneur should therefore be able to operate across all functional areas and have the ability to integrate the various functions of business.

The competencies of implementing a business plan and networking are, at present, gaps in the present curricula of the entrepreneurship programme.

5.3 Generic requirements of all undergraduate programmes

The generic competencies across all the areas of business identified in the findings are of special importance and are equally crucial for the purposes of curriculum design (ie for the degree as a whole).

These generic competencies identified are as follows:
Financial management. This includes budgeting, cash flow management, etc, all of which should become an integral part of the degrees offered in business management.

Business planning. The elements of business planning and practical exposure to the preparation of a business plan (or parts of a business plan) must be incorporated in all the degrees offered in business management.

Integration. Before graduating learners should get exposure to the function of integrating all the various functions of business.

Strategic management. Exposure to the various aspects of strategic management is also essential, regardless of the degree specialisation. The entrepreneur, the financial manager, the human resource specialist, the marketing manager and the general manager should all be able to apply the various concepts, principles and processes of strategic management in their daily work.

General management skills. All graduates in business management require generic management skills, including soft skills such as interpersonal and communication skills.

Multi-functional skills. Graduates in general management and entrepreneurship require multifunctional skills, that is, the ability to function across all areas of business.

5.4 Overall implications of the study and challenges for the future

If higher education distance learning institutions want to be competitive in terms of producing graduates in business management who compare favourably with those who receive their education at residential universities, it is essential that distance institutions teach learners not only "about" business, but also prepare them "for" business. This, in turn, implies a clear understanding among academics of the needs of industry and business. It further implies clarity on the type of outputs required of graduates when they enter employment in industry and commerce and, finally, implies alignment of curricula and programme with such outputs.

The results of this study have confirmed that there is a need, in South Africa, for specialisation within the BCom degree programme and that existing specialisation directions should be retained. However, given the variation in businesses (i.e. from small to large to multinational), students at undergraduate level should be trained in certain generic competencies that are required by all businesses (i.e. regardless of size).

The bigger companies in South Africa can afford to spend time and effort training graduates in specific skills and competencies. However, the small companies want graduates who can operate across the entire spectrum of business activities. General management skills and multifunctional skills are therefore essential.

The review of curricula and courses in business management should cater not only for foundational knowledge in the various areas of business, but also applied competence in order to ensure that graduates are adequately equipped for the business world.

The generic requirements identified in the nominal groups should be compulsory for all the specialisation degrees. A special effort will have to be made to ensure that all graduates are equipped with competencies such as business planning, strategic planning, general management skills and financial management skills, as well as the ability to integrate the various business functions.

The emphasis placed by the business community on output, on outcomes and on applied competencies, reinforces the need for higher education in business management to be outcomes-based and to be aligned with the requirements of the national education policy. Content-based education is simply no longer an option in higher education.

We therefore need a fundamental shift in our approach, to ensure that learning materials are revised and aligned with the requirements of outcomes-based education and that learners get exposure to authentic case studies and problem-solving situations. Finally, learners must be given the opportunity to develop those cognitive skills and abilities, which will prepare them for the challenges of working in the business sector.
6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The involvement of the business sector in providing inputs on the practical relevance of some of the specialisation degrees proved to be an extremely worthwhile exercise. Both the participants and the academic staff involved found this initiative informative and meaningful. The participants from industry and commerce were very impressed by the fact that the institution took the initiative of consulting with them on these issues. They were also particularly pleased to learn that there has already been a shift in focus to prepare learners for business. The mere fact that the business community was consulted on this issue is clear proof that the institution is serious about meeting the requirement of studying “about” business and studying “for” business.

The process of consultation with the business community highlighted a number of issues considered to be of importance by employers in both industry and commerce. Many of the issues identified are already addressed in the various degrees. However, one must acknowledge that the process revealed a number of shortcomings, all of which need to be addressed in the next cycle of curriculum planning and revision of the new degrees (to be offered with effect from 2007).

The following recommendations are put forward for future consideration:

- Although the research had, as its primary aim, obtaining information from the business sector and included employees from relatively large companies, it is important to repeat the study with participants from small and medium enterprises (SMMES). The current institution provides education for a large number of students that will ultimately be employed in SMMES and it is imperative that similar information should be obtained from people with experience in SMMES. Individuals with practical experience in terms of SMMES will be able to provide information that is relevant to the SMME industry (which will probably be different from the information relevant to large, corporate companies). One example mentioned by participants was that, in a large corporation, an entry-level human resource management employee will not be involved in appointing new workers, resolving disputes and dismissal of workers. In the case of the small or medium enterprise, however, he/she might be the only person in the human resources department and should therefore be competent to carry out all these functions. As one of the focus group participants stated: “Large companies want thinkers, small companies want docs”.

- The results of this study cannot be considered in isolation when academics embark on a curriculum review process. Although the findings and results of this study must play an important role in the curriculum redesign process, it is important that inputs from other sources, such as bench-marking with local and overseas tertiary institutions, also be considered.

REFERENCES


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General management</th>
<th>Risk management</th>
<th>Human management</th>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Marketing management</th>
<th>Financial management</th>
<th>Entrepreneurship</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People management skills</td>
<td>Interpret risk related data</td>
<td>Interpret labour law requirements</td>
<td>Understanding of consumer/customer</td>
<td>Liquidity management</td>
<td>Market analysis</td>
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<td>Strong financial acumen</td>
<td>Conduct risk assessments</td>
<td>Interpret basic statistics</td>
<td>Analytical skills</td>
<td>Prepare business plan</td>
<td>Cash flow management</td>
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<td>Ability to strategise</td>
<td>Produce a risk management plan</td>
<td>Facilitation skills</td>
<td>Prepare market analysis</td>
<td>Budgeting</td>
<td>Ability to implement business plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multi functional skills</td>
<td>Coordinate the risk management process</td>
<td>Recruitment and selection skills</td>
<td>Sound financial understanding</td>
<td>Analyse and interpret financial statements</td>
<td>Plan for the future needs of the business</td>
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<td>Prepare marketing plan</td>
<td>Produce a risk evaluation model</td>
<td>Formulate basic HR policy, e.g., leave</td>
<td>Prepare marketing plan</td>
<td>Prepare financial plan</td>
<td>Networking ability</td>
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<td>Prepare human resources plan</td>
<td>Create climate conducive to risk management</td>
<td>Basic financial management</td>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>Integrated risk management</td>
<td>Competencies of a general manager</td>
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<td>Strategic focus for Black economic empowerment</td>
<td>Provide guidance on Corporate Governance</td>
<td>Conduct Job evaluation</td>
<td>Conduct market research basics</td>
<td>Conduct analysis of new projects</td>
<td>Prepare marketing plan</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Research contemporary HR issues</td>
<td>Support “to do” actions with logic and numbers</td>
<td>Capital structure</td>
<td>Be able to deliver (lead times)</td>
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<td>Business and HR planning ability</td>
<td>Prepare brand plan</td>
<td>Investment strategy</td>
<td>Multi functional skills</td>
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<td>Develop training interventions</td>
<td>Prepare media plan</td>
<td>Conduct business valuations</td>
<td>Compile and present a business plan</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Understanding of business processes</td>
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<td>Prepare a loan application</td>
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