

A GAP ANALYSIS OF BUSINESS STUDENTS' SKILLS IN THE 21ST CENTURY: A CASE STUDY OF QATAR

Khaled Alshare, Qatar University
Maysoon F Sewailem, Qatar University

ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study is to explore any existing gap between business students' skills/competences provided by college of businesses and the needs of the current job market. The study examines twenty important employability skills needed for the 21st century workforce and global economy from the perspective of both employers and business educators. The participants responded to a survey that dealt with twenty important skills identified by experts and drawn from the literature. The results indicated that a gap does exist between business students' skills/competences and the needed skills/competences in the job market. Moreover, employers and business educators differ on the relative importance of these skills. While employers emphasize the importance of the soft skills, business educators emphasize the importance of the hard skills. The results of this study are important for both business educators and employers in bridging the skills gap.

Keywords: 21st Century Skills, Business Educators, Employers, Skills Gap, Qatar.

INTRODUCTION

Today's global economy demands highly educated citizens who possess many necessary skills such as critical thinking, adaptability and communication (Velez, 2012). This demand is affected by several trends and challenges, such as the development of information and communication technologies (ICT), automation, globalization changes, workplace change and the increased expectations of employers. In other words, employees capable of expert thinking and advanced communication skills are in great demand (Jerald, 2009). ICT and innovation continue to develop as time passes, making the workplace more complex and challenging. Therefore, it is increasingly critical for students to learn these 21st century skills so that they can quickly adapt to the new business environment and ensure success in the current highly competitive workplace. Twenty-first century skills include knowledge, skills, work habits and character traits that are critically important to success in today's world. Stakeholders such as educators, college professors and employers believe that these skills are essential and will be applicable throughout student's life, whether in an educational, career or civic setting (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2016). Embedding 21st century skills into educational systems becomes necessary, to update the education system and to increase students' critical thinking skills, foster their creative drive, stimulate innovative thinking and generate new implementable ideas that are vital if a nation is to succeed in the long-run (Ruppert, 2010). Therefore, the priority now is to equip and prepare students for the challenging workplace. Businesses graduates who have an edge in 21st century skills and competencies will alone be successful in today's competitive world. Cleary, Flynn & Thomasson (2006) define employability skills generally as follows: Basic/fundamental skills (technical and knowledge of the task); Conceptual/thinking skills (planning, collecting and

organizing information, problem-solving); Business skills (innovation and enterprise); community skills (civic and citizenship knowledge); People-related skills (interpersonal qualities such as communication and team work); Personal skills (attributes such as being responsible, resourceful and self-confident). In the workplace, soft skills, such as people-related skills and personal skills are considered to complement hard skills, which refer to technical knowledge and occupational skills. While soft skills, such as etiquette, getting along with others, listening and engaging in small talk are intangible and hard to quantify. Hard skills are teachable abilities that can be defined and measured, for example, typing, writing, reading and the ability to use software programs. Accounting and financial modelling are the most common hard skills in the business field (Investopedia, 2017).

The main distinction between hard skills and soft skills is that hard skills are context specific, while soft skills, in general, are transferable across job types and employment levels and they are not job-specific. Another difference between the two set of skills is that hard skills, in general, are easy to learn through training and education, whereas the soft skills are harder to be taught and thus, they mainly grow through experience in a collaborative business environment. Additionally, graduates with well-developed soft skills will find better opportunities in the workplaces (Wikle & Fagin, 2014; Tsitskaria et al., 2016). As reported by Rao (2014) “people rise in organizations because of hard skills and fall due to dearth of soft skills.” The hard skills are the core skills, domain skills and technical skills, while the soft skills, which complement the hard skills, are people skills, life skills and interpersonal skills. Moreover, while hard skills account for about 15 percent of the reason an individual gets a job, keeps the job and advances in that job, the soft skills account for the remaining 85 percent of job success (Rao, 2014).

Skill gaps are defined as insufficient or not adequate skill levels among workers to meet the requirements of their current job (McGuinness & Ortiz, 2016). The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) defines a skills gap as a significant gap between an organization’s current capabilities and the skills it needs to achieve its goals (Singh & Sharma, 2014). Skills gaps have the potential to harm a firm’s productivity level, inflate average labour costs, given that organizations require more workers per unit of output and thus consequently to adversely impact a firm’s profitability level (McGuinness & Ortiz, 2016). The literature on the skills gap tends to identify three broad reasons for its occurrence globally: 1). Shortcomings in the academic system that fails to train new graduates with basic interpersonal and ICT skills that prepare them to quickly adapt to a work environment (Wilkerson, 2012; Rosenberg, Heimler & Morote, 2012; Rosenberg, Heimler & Morote, 2012; Hobson et al., 2014; Bedwell, Salas & Eduardo, 2014); 2). Rapid and constant technological change (Oslon, 2015); and 3). Dwindling apprenticeship or training opportunities in industries that would have enabled new and existing employees to expand and absorb industry-specific skills (Oslon, 2015; Berchem, 2015). In their study, Wikle & Faginthe (2014) found that employers and educators differed in rating of the importance of some of the skills needed by graduates such as data capture skills, project management and written/verbal skills. Malik & Venkatraman, (2017) reported that employers who visit universities for recruitments indicated that students do not have the essential skills needed for the job market. Moreover, prior studies, for example, Strebler (1997) reported that educators perceive soft skills as being less important, compared to hard skills, in finding a job. On the other hand, Crebert et al., (2004) found that employers put more value on the soft skills such as teamwork. In another study conducted by Patacsil & Tablatin (2017) reported that there was no significant difference in the perception of employers and students in terms of the importance of the soft skills. However, the two groups significantly differ on the importance of the hard

skills. While students perceived hard skills as very important, employers perceived them as somewhat important. The literature may differ on whether it is the industry or the academia or a lack of collaboration between them that causes the skills gap (e.g. perception differences). To narrow the skills, gap the literature also recommends a more teamwork oriented active learning environment as well as integrating education with work experience/apprenticeship programs (Martz, Hughes & Braun 2017).

Twenty dimensions of employability skills for the 21st century workplace were identified from extensive research and the opinions of several stakeholders. These skills are critical thinking/problem solving, creativity/innovation, collaboration/teamwork, communications (oral & written), professionalism, leadership, information technology, interpersonal skills, technical skills, flexibility/adaptability, multicultural awareness, work ethic, planning and organizing, voluntarism, analytic thinking, social responsibility, dealing with real world problems, knowledge, creativity/innovation, global business and decision making. Educational institutions teach students by providing them with curriculum-related theoretical and content knowledge. However, the Ernst & Young Report 2015 found that three-quarters of employers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), including Qatar, feel that the education system does not equip students with the necessary skills to succeed. In addition, the Arab News report (2013) under the headline "Saudi Kingdom, UAE and Qatar face skills gap warning" stated that, although Qatar is recognized as one of the most competitive economies in the Arab World, it is still faced with a severe skills gap that hinders its economic development. More specifically, the report notes that graduates leave universities short of the skills that employers are seeking, such as critical thinking as well as written and oral communication. It is believed that this skills gap will continue while the education systems and the needs of 21st century employers remain disconnected. Therefore, it is imperative for business colleges to show leadership in enhancing the positive relationship between the skills learned by their students and the requirements of the 21st century workforce. This study is intended to help administrators and business educators to improve their best practices for integrating career preparation and requirements into the curriculum of business programs. The main purpose of this study is to explore and determine to what extent 21st century skills are being incorporated into the learning process and practices of the colleges of business. In other words, how far do its curricula incorporate the requirements of employers? This can help to determine if there is a skills gap and if so how well the curricula of the colleges of business is aligned with the needs of employers. To this end, the study was directed by the following research questions:

1. What are the most important skills from the employers and business educators' perspectives that students need to tackle the 21st century globaleconomy?
2. Is there a gap between the skills learned in the college of business and the skills required by employers?
3. Do business educators and employers agree on the skills required in the 21st century?
4. Are business educators satisfied with the skills taught in their curriculum?
5. Are employers satisfied with the performance of business graduates?
6. Do demographic variables (gender, academic rank) influence business educators' responses?
7. Do demographic variables (gender and the company's sector) influence employers' responses?

The rest of the study is organized as follows: Section one provides an overview of the literature related to this study. Section two presents the conceptual framework and hypotheses. Section three describes the methodology, which includes sampling, the research design, subjects, survey instruments and methods of data collection and analysis. Section four presents the data analysis. Section five presents the findings and results. Section six reports the

conclusion drawn from the findings and offers some recommendations. Finally, section seven highlights some limitations of the study and suggestions directions for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Twenty-First Century Workforce Readiness Skills

The 21st century has experienced the highest level of globalization. The development and growth of critical competitive competencies have contributed to elevated levels of competition, especially among the workforce. Global organizations have also increased the level of their scrutiny of the skills that they demand from employees. In addition to diverse technical skills and substantial experience, employees are also required to have soft skills (Hurrell, 2016). In fact, on top of being creative individuals, professionals in most fields are also expected to possess strong interpersonal skills (Kleckner & Marshall, 2014). In addition to a good grasp and application of technical skills, employees should be ready to work with colleagues from diverse backgrounds. Based on an extensive review of the literature and the feedback from both employers and business educators, a list of critical skills that business graduates need as members of the 21st century workforce and global economy is identified. These skills are classified into two main groups: Soft skills and hard skills. The soft skills include: 1). People-related skills, which include interpersonal skills, communication and collaboration/teamwork; 2). personal skills, which contain adaptability and flexibility, leadership, professionalism, work ethics, voluntarism and social responsibility. The hard skills consists of three sub-groups: 1). Basic/fundamental skills, which include technical skills and knowledge in specialized area; 2). conceptual/thinking skills, which include critical thinking/problem solving, analytical thinking, planning and organizing, decision making and IT related skills; 3). business skills which comprise dealing with dealing with real world problems, creative thinking (innovation), global business and multicultural awareness.

Soft Skills

People-Related Skills

An individual with effective people related skills such as interpersonal skills, communication and collaboration/teamwork can add value to the organization (Wu, Turban & Cheung, 2012).

Interpersonal Skills

Personal and professional interaction is an inexorable aspect of employment; hence the need for employees to possess exceptional interpersonal skills. Interpersonal skills contribute to the way that individuals interact with those around them. Good interpersonal skills contribute to individuals being viewed in a positive light, due to their possession of qualities such as optimism, charisma, willingness to help others and confidence (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2005). According to Robles (2012), interpersonal skills, also called 'people skills' are considered to be the most important at all levels of the organization. These skills form the foundation for good office interaction and communication, positive attitudes, leadership, teamwork and customer service. Interpersonal skills are not only necessary within the organization but are also imperative for promoting good relations with the organization's stakeholders.

Communications (Oral & Written)

Effective communication skills are imperative for ensuring that an individual can clearly and accurately convey information and ideas to a range of audiences (Chan, 2011). Effective communication also promotes working relationships and interaction. Further, communication skills are useful in identifying the best modes of communication to use for varying scenarios and varying audiences and the approach to take when passing various kinds of information. Oral communication skills are considered imperative because they enhance interaction and communication in the workplace and they are useful in dealing with customer queries and complaints, making oral presentations, explaining and negotiating, persuading and discussing important matters in the organization (Chan, 2011). Written communication skills ensure efficiency in such forms of correspondence as emails, reports and letter writing, among others. Therefore, most recruiters focus on communication skills when they are hiring employees (Deepa & Seth, 2013). Business colleges recognized the importance of such skills and incorporated them in their curricula as one of their learning outcomes.

Collaboration/Teamwork

The ability to work with others is a very valuable skill, given the increasing need for collaboration in the modern workplace. According to Yang, Lee & Cheng (2016), teamwork and collaboration are a pre-requisite for hiring new employees. For an organization to achieve its objectives, employees must work together, with each contributing skills, expertise, ideas and experiences in achieving mutual goals (Matthews & Mclees, 2015). Furthermore, 21st century organizations rely more than before on teamwork, given its ability to promote communication, collaboration, innovation and exceptional performance (Maruping & Magni, 2015). University graduates should be given the opportunity to work in teams in order to prepare them for the work environment.

Personal Skills

Personal skills describe the person traits such as the ability to adapt new work environment, demonstrate leadership capability, show professionalism and work ethics, voluntarism and social responsibility. These skills/competences are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Adaptability/Flexibility

Organizations increasingly seek individuals who are flexible in terms of what they can offer the organization and who can easily acclimatize to different situations. Flexibility as a skill means that employees are not rigid in terms of the duties they can perform and that they can perform exceptionally in any organizational setting (MacDuffie, 1995). According to Bedwell, Salas & Eduardo (2014), employees should be flexible so that they can adapt to ever-changing systems at the workplace. Adaptability is highly desirable because it ensures that the business can easily transit through change phases.

Leadership

Leadership skills are so highly regarded in modern organizations that employees at all levels should be capable of undertaking leadership roles in all the aspects of the business they encounter. This includes team leadership to ensure the mobilization of resources and the steering of teams to achieve set objectives (Sohmen, 2013). Employers seek individuals who exude exceptional leadership qualities, including intelligence, effective communication, integrity, creativity, adaptability, confidence, collaboration, self-determinism, empowerment skills, team building, proactiveness, negotiation, conflict resolution and resource management skills (Sohmen, 2013; Kunnanatt, 2004).

Professionalism

Professionalism is a process of attaining and maintaining a proficient status through the development of a trustworthy and worthwhile approach among a group of people (Evetts, 2014). Professionalism is mainly required for extremely responsible occupations (e.g. auditing, consultancy, technology, human capital, investment management and social care work). These occupations seek recognition for the significance of their work often by calling for qualifications, learning and training for standardized practice among new entrants. Many organizations have included professionalism as a criterion in their hiring process to achieve their objectives, realize their mission and motivate employees.

Work Ethics

Ethics refers to models of human behavior, norms and choice applied during the decision-making process or performing of a task. Ethics plays a key role in the development of a sound work culture and sets the required standards for a working culture in organizations. Ethics helps the decision-making process where the decision maker must ponder the responsibility and moral angles during the decision-making process, thus an ethnically based decision seems to be more reliable than any other (Ferrell, Fraedrich & Ferrell, 2011). It is not unusual to find that many business colleges include work ethics as one of their learning outcomes.

Voluntarism

Volunteering concerns activities to get involved in through participation, to support others and to build trust between people in a network (Grese, Kaplan, Ryan & Buxton, 2000). Volunteerism builds confidence in the volunteers through the existence of a social context and thus better decisions can be taken and activities can be successfully performed with least effort. Volunteerism raises the level of motivation for the volunteers, as well as other members of a society who benefit from the volunteered acts. The desire to volunteer helps to develop better recognition among the society and it also brings long-term survival and success to individuals (Andronic & Andronic, 2011).

Social Responsibility

Social responsibility obliges decision makers to consider the possible effects of their decisions on society rather than considering only their own benefits or gains at the cost or loss of others (Friedman, 2007). A sense of social responsibility supports decision makers in deciding the

best action to take; they can consider alternative and avoiding or minimizing negative effects on society (Armstrong, 1977). Social responsibility skills bring long-term advantages to the organization, such as high sales turnover, customer loyalty and low employee turnover (Giannarakis, Litinas & Theotokas, 2009).

Hard Skills

Basic/Fundamental skills

Technical Skills: Technical skills are the skills that are acquired through professional knowledge, practice and experience at the learning and development stage. These skills help tasks to be performed better, with higher proficiency, in greater safety and more reliably (Rajesh & Ara Darzi, 2006). These skills allow employees to understand how the various parts of the organization work together (Messum, Wilkes & Jackson, 2015). Therefore, employees should learn as many technical skills as possible to understand the different parameters of their organization. Technical skills contribute to the prompt tackling by an organization's programming gurus of challenges such as Internet and cyber security threats from hackers. Moreover, technical skills place individuals at an advantage over competitors in the job market (Bedwell, Salas & Eduardo, 2014).

Knowledge in the Specialized Area

According to Boystzis (1982), knowledge in a specialized area refers to expertise in terms of a conceptual framework, models and theoretical knowledge, which are converted to usable information. Models of performance are integrated with specialized knowledge so that it can be used to improve performance. The results of numerous studies of job performance show that specialized knowledge is mostly related to the management of performance. There is no doubt that business colleges have been providing their students with the necessary knowledge in their specialized fields.

Conceptual/Thinking Skills

Critical Thinking/Problem Solving

Critical thinking and problem solving skills are the abilities that are commonly applied in everyday decision-making and the resolution of issues. Critical thinking is an intellectually based process for actively and skilfully hypothesizing, examining, applying and synthesizing collected data or information (Snyder & Snyder, 2008). Critical thinking refers to the ability to come up with viable solutions for common as well as complex ideas through an elevated level of comprehension, thinking, learning, analysis, synthesis, rational reasoning and decision-making (Weaver & Kulesza, 2014). Employers are increasingly demanding problem solving or critical thinking skills as a prerequisite for employment (Weaver & Kulesza, 2014). The elevated level of complexity in the modern business world calls for individuals to be able to apply suitable skills and knowledge for approaching novel and unusual business scenarios. To do this, students must have problem solving and critical thinking skills instilled in them.

Analytic Thinking

Analytical thinking is a capacity, which contributes to the prompt generation of solutions for both the short- and long-term challenges facing an organization. Therefore, organizations want to hire new employees who by thinking analytically can place them at a competitive advantage against other industry players. Further, employees who possess and use their analytic thinking in assigned tasks can contribute to the higher benchmarking of a corporation against other players in the field (Brown, 2006). Most of the decisions in the organization require information, which derives from an analysis of situations and challenges.

Planning and Organizing

Planning is the process of listing and mapping a future task, while organizing is the process of allocating and controlling resources of the planned tasks. Planning and organizing both contribute to the prompt and effective execution of assigned tasks for employees (Olusanya, Awotungase & Ohadebere, 2012). People and organizations can attain better success and results through effectively planning and organizing their tasks to reduce the consumption of resources such as time and materials.

Decision-Making

The decision-making process affects everyone as a matter of routine. Research has shown that cognitive and behaviourist approaches lead to better decision-making skills, which can be developed through learning and development (Kutty, Shee & Pathak, 2007). According to Wood & Bandura (1989), decision-making skills bring stability to an organization enhancing the environment of control and self-governance needed for the decision-making process.

Information Technology

Contemporary organizations depend on technological efficiency and innovation; hence the increasing demand for candidates who are familiar with information technology applications. Employers are likely to prefer candidates who have taken additional information technology related courses, as well as their basic degree courses (Conrad & Newberry, 2011). Most organizational processes are now automated and rely on specific technology skills to operate. Chatterjee et al. (2015) note that to succeed in today's world, candidates should have armed themselves with adequate knowledge of current computer applications.

Business Skills

Dealing With Real World Problems

Real world problems are recurring practical issues such as the uncertainty, complexity and risk management that people regularly face. These issues are critical to people's performance and work life; they can face them only if they have prior learning or guidance in dealing with them. A constructive learning approach based on a fast-driven curriculum and practical prototype exercises using adequate handling can help to face future practical problems (Gordon, 1998). According to Wood, Bruner & Ross (1976), higher-level problem solving skills can be developed through a hierarchical learning approach in which a variety of skills works together.

With this approach, candidates are given different tasks related to real-world scenarios to exercise their problem-solving approach. Students at business colleges are exposed to real world problems through discussing case studies and participating in internship programs where students spend time in a real business environment.

Creative Thinking/Innovation

Creative thinking refers to set of rational actions applied by a person while keeping in view some specific item, situation and state; in other words, we can define it as people's efforts to deal with non-routine issues in a unique, imaginary and proactive way (Birgili, 2015). The rapidly evolving business environment has led to increased use of innovation as a differentiator and source of competitive advantage (Lee & Benza, 2015). All employees must nowadays be actively involved in resolving current issues in the business environment and contribute towards business growth by their lively ideas (Sripirabaa & Maheswari, 2015). Creativity and innovation have thereby become critical skills for job seekers to possess. Employers seek candidates who will provide value for their organizations through creative and innovative ideas. The process of innovation calls for students to possess creative thinking skills, open-mindedness and creativity (Lee & Benza, 2015; Sripirabaa & Maheswari, 2015).

Global Business

Awareness of global business is needed because international firms are exposed to many more challenges and risks than local businesses are. Therefore, a dynamic learning environment is required to develop international business skills and professionalism for employees in complex international economies. According to Ananthram & Nankervis (2014), global business requires sets of skills for mounting efficient and active operations in today's complex universal business atmosphere. A business curriculum should be designed in a way that satisfies the requirements of international business skills so that the candidates meet the challenges of the global business environment (Ortiz, 2004). As a response to this challenge, business accreditation agencies demand that business colleges include in their learning outcomes the global business issues.

Multicultural awareness

Increasing globalization has meant that modern workplaces are highly diverse, requiring employees to be multicultural sensitive, able to work with people from diverse backgrounds (McAllister & Irvine, 2000). Furthermore, global business means that employees are likely to interact with people of varied cultural backgrounds employed elsewhere. Thus, individuals who understand the culture, beliefs, behaviors and business practices of diverse cultural groups and nationalities are likely to interact more effectively. Multicultural awareness ensures that an individual can interact, communicate and negotiate with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, while maintaining professionalism and good relations. Deepa & Seth (2013) note that the demand for employees with multicultural awareness is expected to grow exponentially in current workplaces as the level of globalization accelerates and workplace diversity begins to prevail at all levels. An organization whose employees are aware of unfamiliar cultural parameters is likely to create and uphold good business relationships. Institutions of higher learning need to create curricula that foster the appreciation of cultural diversity (Yee et al, 2015).

Based on the previous sections and the purpose of the study, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H₁: There is a significant difference between business educators' satisfaction with their curricula coverage of the 21st century skills and the employers' perceptions of the importance of the 21st century skills.

H₂: There is a significant difference between business educators and employers' perceptions of the importance of the skills needed for the 21st century workforce.

H₃: There is a significant difference between business educators' satisfaction with their curricula coverage of the 21st century skills and their perceptions of the importance of the 21st century skills.

H₄: There is a significant difference between the employers' satisfaction with business graduates skills and their perceptions of the importance of the 21st century skills.

H₅: Gender influences business educators' responses.

H₆: Academic ranks influence business educators' responses.

H₇: Gender influences employers' responses.

H₈: Employment sectors influence employers' responses.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling

The target population for this study consists of business educators from all departments in the College of Business and Economics at Qatar University and employers from the private, government and semi government sectors in Qatar. The employers' survey was sent online by email to about 140 employers in different sectors in Qatar; only 60 responses were collected. The faculty survey was sent also by email to 110 instructors and only 49 responses were collected.

Study Instruments

Two surveys (one for business educators and one for employers) were compiled based on the literature review (Baird, 2016; and Duvall, 2016). Employers' and business educators' feedback was also considered, in order to identify the essential skills for the 21st century workforce. As a result, a list of the 20 skills that were most important for today's business students to possess was created. Then, the first drafts of the surveys were prepared. The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire with close ended questions. Reactions to statements on all skills were to be chosen on a 5-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 5-very important/strongly satisfied to 1-not important/strongly not satisfied). The surveys were translated using the back-translation method. A linguistic specialist conducted the translation (from English to Arabic and vice versa). Then the two versions were compared and any discrepancies were resolved, to ensure consistency between the Arabic and English versions. The survey instruments were validated by a pilot test to ensure that all the questions were understandable and clear to the respondents. Their feedback and comments were noted and used to develop a revised survey. The links to these online questionnaires surveys were sent and distributed to individuals using emails and WhatsApp to widen the publication, especially for

employers.

Statistical Procedure

The collected data were examined and analysed with descriptive statistics, using SPSS software. The mean, frequencies and standard deviation for all factors (skills) were calculated. The proposed hypotheses were tested using independent T test and paired sample T test. In addition, ANOVA was used to determine whether the demographic variables had influenced the participants' responses.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics

A sample of 60 employers and 49 instructors are considered in this study. More than half of the sample were male (58%). Thirty-eight percent of the participants were from the private sector and 37 percent from the semi-government sector. The rest of the respondents were from the government sector. Most employers (43%), whether they were managers, heads or supervisors had worked in the same company from one to five years. Approximately, 27% worked for more than 11 years in the same company.

With respect to the business educators' sample, 78% were males. About 53% of the business educators taught undergraduate students only and approximately 47% of the instructors taught both undergraduate and graduate students. Forty-seven of instructors were associate professors. Eighteen percent were assistant and others and 16 were professors. Thirty-nine percent of the instructors have taught in the same college for 6 to 9 years.

Business educators ranked the twenty employability skills according to their importance from their own perspective, from greatest importance to least importance as shown in Table 1. Among the hard skills, critical thinking/problem solving and dealing with real world problems skills were reported as the most important skills. On the other hand, work ethics and interpersonal skills were rated as the most important soft skills. Instructors see that these skills as very important in enabling business students in today's competitive labour market. Business educators, however, ranked voluntarism as the least important skill. It should be noted that instructors rated all the twenty skills as important to very important.

When instructors were asked to rate their satisfaction with the coverage of these skills in their curricula, they were most satisfied with the following hard skills: Knowledge required in specialized area and decision-making. Among the soft skills, the instructors were most satisfied with interpersonal skills and collaboration/teamwork as shown in Table 2. However, they believed that their curricula did not provide enough coverage of creative thinking/innovation and critical thinking/problem solving skills, which are very important skills for today's challenging workplace.

When instructors were asked to rate their satisfaction with the coverage of these skills in their curricula, they were most satisfied with the following hard skills: Knowledge required in specialized area and decision-making. Among the soft skills, the instructors were most satisfied with interpersonal skills and collaboration/teamwork as shown in Table 2. However, they believed that their curricula did not provide enough coverage of creative thinking/innovation and critical thinking/problem solving skills, which are very important skills for today's challenging workplace.

On the other hand, employers in the Qatari employment market ranked the skills that in their opinion employees should possess in order of their importance, as indicated in Table 3 from greatest to least importance were work ethics, communication and adaptability/flexibility, which are belong to soft skills category. This means that employers need employees who have principled work ethics and can communicate probably with their co-workers in several ways. In addition, they want employees who are adaptable and flexible, ready for any changes in the environment at the workplace.

Skill	Mean	Std. Dev.
1) Critical Thinking/Problem-solving	4.71	0.500
2) Dealing with “real world” problems	4.71	0.540
3) Knowledge required in their specialized area	4.69	0.619
4) Work Ethics	4.69	0.624
5) Analytical Thinking	4.61	0.533
6) Technical Skills	4.55	0.679
7) Interpersonal Skills	4.53	0.710
8) Creative Thinking/Innovation	4.53	0.767
9) Adaptability & Flexibility	4.47	0.680
10) Collaboration/Teamwork	4.47	0.649
11) Information Technology	4.45	0.679
12) Communication Skills	4.43	0.866
13) Decision Making	4.43	0.707
14) Planning & Organizing	4.35	0.751
15) Social responsibility	4.33	0.826
16) Global Business	4.29	0.890
17) Leadership	4.20	0.735
18) Multicultural Awareness	4.10	0.770
19) Professionalism	4.00	0.890
20) Voluntarism	3.94	0.899

Skill	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Knowledge required in their specialized area	3.78	0.848
2. Knowledge required in their specialized area	3.78	0.848
3. Interpersonal skills	3.59	0.888
4. Decision Making	3.59	0.814
5. Collaboration/Teamwork	3.55	0.937
6. Communication	3.49	0.794
7. Information Technology	3.41	0.888
8. Social Responsibility	3.39	1.017
9. Adaptability & Flexibility	3.37	0.859
10. Technical Skills	3.37	0.972
11. Dealing with “real world” problems	3.35	0.969
12. Work Ethics	3.33	1.068
13. Planning & Organizing	3.31	0.94
14. Professionalism	3.27	0.953
15. Multicultural Awareness	3.24	0.83

16. Analytical Thinking	3.18	1.034
17. Global Business	3.18	0.782
18. Leadership	3.16	0.85
19. Voluntarism	3.12	0.904
20. Critical thinking/Problem Solving	3.08	1.057
21. Creative Thinking/Innovation	2.96	1.06

Skill	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Work Ethics	4.36	1.287
2. Communication	4.33	1.166
3. Adaptability & Flexibility	4.33	0.971
4. knowledge required in their specialized area	4.24	1.181
5. Collaboration/Teamwork	4.22	1.208
6. Information Technology	4.21	1.183
7. Planning & Organizing	4.20	1.105
8. Critical thinking/Problem solving	4.17	1.129
9. Interpersonal Skills	4.17	1.299
10. Dealing with "real world" problems	4.13	1.166
11. Creative Thinking/Innovation	4.09	1.114
12. Professionalism	4.09	1.154
13. Technical Skills	4.09	1.033
14. Social Responsibility	4.08	1.141
15. Analytical Thinking	4.06	1.156
16. Multicultural Awareness	3.91	1.103
17. Decision Making	3.89	1.223
18. Leadership	3.81	1.167
19. Global Business	3.44	1.144
20. Voluntarism	3.44	1.284

When employers report their level of satisfaction with business students' skills, they were very satisfied with their knowledge about the subject, work ethics, information technology, professionalism and technical skills as shown in Table 4. However, they were least satisfied with students' skills/competences of multicultural awareness, voluntarism and global business.

Testing the Hypotheses

Table 5 summarizes the results of testing the hypotheses. Business educators' satisfaction of skills learned by business graduates through curriculum versus employers' perception of importance of the 21st century skills (Hypothesis H1) was tested by an independent sample t-test. The results indicate that there were significant differences in 17 out of the 20 studied skills. These skills/competences are knowledge, dealing with "real world" problems, technical skills, adaptability and flexibility, critical thinking/problem solving skills, creative thinking skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills, leadership ability, professionalism, work ethics, social responsibility, information technology, multicultural awareness, analytical thinking, planning and organizing and collaboration/teamwork skills. Their p-values were less than 0.05, as shown in Table 6.

Skill	Mean	Std. Deviation
Knowledge required in their specialized area	3.85	0.921
Work Ethics	3.80	1.203
Information Technology	3.77	1.202
Professionalism	3.75	1.056
Technical Skills	3.69	1.004
Collaboration/Teamwork	3.62	1.269
Creative Thinking/Innovation	3.55	1.131
Social Responsibility	3.50	1.198
Analytical Thinking	3.47	1.086
Planning & Organizing	3.45	1.108
Interpersonal Skills	3.45	1.176
Decision Making	3.43	1.035
Adaptability & Flexibility	3.43	1.059
Communication	3.35	1.122
Critical thinking/Problem solving	3.35	1.027
Leadership	3.33	1.155
Dealing with "real world" problems	3.31	0.977
Multicultural Awareness	3.22	1.074
Voluntarism	3.20	1.067
Global Business	3.18	1.083

Hypothesis	Result
H ₁ : There is a significant difference between business educators' satisfaction with their curricula coverage of the 21 st century skills and the employers' perceptions of the importance of the 21 st century skills.	Supported
H ₂ : There is a significant difference between business educators and employers' perceptions of the importance of the skills needed for the 21 st century workforce.	Partially supported
H ₃ : There is a significant difference between business educators' satisfaction with their curricula coverage of the 21 st century skills and their perceptions of the importance of the 21 st century skills.	Supported
H ₄ : There is a significant difference between the employers' satisfaction with business graduates skills and their perceptions of the importance of the 21 st	Supported
H ₅ : Gender influences business educators' responses.	Not supported
H ₆ : Academic ranks influence business educators' responses.	Not supported
H ₇ : Gender influences employers' responses.	Not supported
H ₈ : Employment sectors influence employers' responses.	Not supported

With respect to the second hypothesis, the results of the two independent samples t-test indicated that there were significant differences between employer and business educators' perceptions in 10 skills out of the 20 skills. These skills/competences are knowledge, dealing with "real world" problems, technical skills, critical thinking/problem solving skills, creative thinking/innovation skills, leadership, global business, voluntarism, decision making and analytical thinking, as shown Table 7. Thus, H₂ was partially supported. The results of the paired sample t-test for the third hypothesis showed that there were significant differences in business educators' satisfaction with curriculum coverage of the skills and their perceptions of the

importance of the skills for all the twenty skills (Table 8a). Thus, H3 was supported. With respect to the fourth hypothesis, which tests employers' satisfaction of business student's skills versus their perceptions of the importance of the 21st century skills, the results, as shown in Table 8b, indicated that there were significant differences in all of the twenty skills. Therefore, H4 was supported. The results show that gender and academic rank were not significant factors in influencing business educators' responses. Moreover, gender and employment sector did not influence employers' responses. Thus, Hypotheses H5-H8 was not supported.

Table 6
TWO INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T-TEST RESULTS (BUSINESS EDUCATORS' SATISFACTION VERSUS EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTION OF SKILLS IMPORTANCE)

Skill	Group	Mean	SD	Sig. (2-tailed)	Skill	Group	Mean	SD	Sig. (2-tailed)
Knowledge	Instructors	3.78	0.848	0.023	Professionalism	Instructors	3.27	0.953	0.000
	Employers	4.24	1.181			Employers	4.09	1.154	
Dealing with "real world" problems	Instructors	3.35	0.969	0.000	Work Ethics	Instructors	3.33	1.068	0.000
	Employers	4.13	1.166			Employers	4.36	1.287	
Technical Skills	Instructors	3.37	0.972	0.000	Social Responsibility	Instructors	3.40	1.026	0.002
	Employers	4.09	1.033			Employers	4.08	1.141	
Adaptability & Flexibility	Instructors	3.37	0.859	0.000	Information Technology	Instructors	3.41	0.888	0.000
	Employers	4.33	0.971			Employers	4.21	1.183	
Critical Thinking/ Problem Solving	Instructors	3.08	1.057	0.000	Multicultural awareness	Instructors	3.24	0.830	0.001
	Employers	4.09	1.114			Employers	3.91	1.103	
Creative thinking	Instructors	2.96	1.060	0.000	Voluntarism	Instructors	3.12	0.904	0.142
	Employers	4.09	1.114			Employers	3.44	1.284	
Interpersonal Skills	Instructors	3.59	0.888	0.010	Decision Making	Instructors	3.59	0.814	0.147
	Employers	4.17	1.299			Employer	3.89	1.223	
Communication	Instructors	3.49	0.794	0.000	Analytical Thinking	Instructors	3.18	1.034	0.000
	Employers	4.33	1.166			Employers	4.06	1.156	
Leadership	Instructors	3.16	0.850	0.002	Planning & Organizing	Instructors	3.31	0.940	0.000
	Employers	3.81	1.167			Employers	4.20	1.105	
Global Business	Instructors	3.18	0.782	0.177	Collaboration/Teamwork	Instructors	3.55	0.937	0.002
	Employers	3.44	1.144			Employers	4.22	1.208	

Table 7
TWO INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T-TEST RESULTS (BUSINESS EDUCATORS' AND EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF IMPORTANCE OF THE 21ST CENTURY SKILLS)

Skill	Group	Mean	SD	Sig. (2-tailed)	Skill	Group	Mean	SD	Sig. (2-tailed)
Knowledge	Instructors	4.69	0.619	0.016	Professionalism	Instructors	4.00	0.890	0.652
	Employers	4.24	1.18			Employers	4.09	1.154	
Dealing with "real world" problems	Instructors	4.71	0.540	0.001	Work Ethics	Instructors	4.69	0.624	0.101
	Employers	4.13	1.166			Employers	4.36	1.287	
Technical Skills	Instructors	4.55	0.679	0.010	Social Responsibility	Instructors	4.33	0.826	0.209
	Employers	4.09	1.03	Employers		4.08	1.141		
Adaptability & Flexibility	Instructors	4.47	0.680	0.417	Information Technology	Instructors	4.45	0.679	0.205
	Employers	4.33	0.971	Employers		4.21	1.183		
Critical Thinking/ Problem Solving	Instructors	4.71	0.500	0.002	Multicultural awareness	Instructors	4.10	0.770	0.298
	Employers	4.17	1.129	Employers		3.91	1.103		
Creative Thinking	Instructors	4.53	0.767	0.023	Voluntarism	Instructors	3.94	0.899	0.025
	Employers	4.09	1.114			Employers	3.44	1.284	
Interpersonal Skills	Instructors	4.53	0.710	0.078	Decision Making	Instructors	4.43	0.707	0.007
	Employers	4.17	1.299			Employers	3.89	1.223	
Communication	Instructors	4.43	0.866	0.642	Analytical Thinking	Instructors	4.61	0.533	0.002
	Employers	4.33	1.166	Employers		4.06	1.156		
Leadership	Instructors	4.20	0.735	0.044	Planning & Organizing	Instructors	4.35	0.751	0.448
	Employers	3.81	1.167			Employers	4.20	1.105	
Global Business	Instructors	4.29	0.890	0.000	Collaboration/Teamwork	Instructors	4.47	0.649	0.194
	Employers	3.44	1.144	Employers		4.22	1.208		

OBSERVATIONS ON THE RESULTS

The initial observations from the study results are:

1. While business educators emphasize the importance of hard skills (e.g. critical thinking/problem solving, dealing with "real world problems), employers, on the other hand, give emphasis to the soft skills (e.g. work ethics, communication/flexibility and adaptability).
2. Business educators were not satisfied with the level of coverage of the listed skills in their curricula, at the same time they strongly believed in the importance of such skills/competences.
3. Employers, in general, were not satisfied with many of business graduates' skills/competencies; for example, communication, adaptability/flexibility and interpersonal skills, in which they believe these skills, are very important for the 21st century workforce.
4. Both groups agreed on the importance of the twenty employability skills/competencies. However, they differed in the extent of their importance.
5. Both groups rated the importance of the skills/competencies higher than their rating for their satisfaction.
6. Both groups indicated that the skill/competence that they were most satisfied with was students' knowledge required in their specialized area.

Pair	Diff. Mean	Std. Dev.	T	Sig
BES1 ^a -BEI1 ^b	-0.918	0.909	-7.071	0.000
BES2-BEI2	-1.367	1.074	-8.910	0.000
BES3-BEI3	-1.184	1.093	-7.580	0.000
BES4-BEI4	-1.102	0.918	-8.399	0.000
BES5-BEI5	-1.633	1.074	-10.639	0.000
BES6-BEI6	-1.571	1.155	-9.526	0.000
BES7-BEI7	-0.939	1.069	-6.149	0.000
BES8-BEI8	-0.939	0.944	-6.958	0.000
BES9-BEI9	-1.041	1.060	-6.874	0.000
BES10-BEI10	-1.102	1.177	-6.554	0.000
BES11-BEI11	-0.735	1.114	-4.617	0.000
BES12-BEI12	-1.327	1.214	-7.647	0.000
BES13-BEI13	-0.939	1.248	-5.264	0.000
BES14-BEI14	-1.041	1.020	-7.144	0.000
BES15-BEI15	-0.857	1.021	-5.879	0.000
BES16-BEI16	-0.816	1.149	-4.974	0.000
BES17-BEI17	-0.837	0.874	-6.699	0.000
BES18-BEI18	-1.429	1.021	-9.798	0.000
BES19-BEI19	-1.041	1.136	-6.415	0.000
BES20-BEI20	-0.918	1.038	-6.196	0.000

Pair	Diff. Mean	Std. Dev.	T	Sig
EMS1 ^c -EMI1 ^d	-0.735	0.751	-5.708	0.000
EMS2-EMI2	-1.061	0.933	-6.528	0.000
EMS3-EMI3	-0.848	0.939	-5.188	0.000
EMS4-EMI4	-1.176	0.999	-6.866	0.000
EMS5-EMI5	-0.912	1.164	-4.566	0.000
EMS6-EMI6	-0.848	0.939	-5.188	0.000
EMS7-EMI7	-0.882	0.946	-5.439	0.000
EMS8-EMI8	-1.206	1.225	-5.738	0.000
EMS9-EMI9	-0.727	1.180	-3.541	0.001
EMS10-EMI10	-0.588	1.351	-2.539	0.016
EMS11-EMI11	-0.559	1.078	-3.021	0.005
EMS12-EMI12	-0.727	1.039	-4.021	0.000
EMS13-EMI13	-0.758	1.173	-3.709	0.001
EMS14-EMI14	-0.606	1.223	-2.846	0.008
EMS15-EMI15	-0.912	1.111	-4.785	0.000
EMS16-EMI16	-0.559	1.501	-2.170	0.037
EMS17-EMI17	-0.794	1.008	-4.592	0.000
EMS18-EMI18	-0.853	1.019	-4.881	0.000
EMS19-EMI19	-0.971	1.000	-5.662	0.000
EMS20-EMI20	-0.939	1.144	-4.717	0.000

- b. Business educators' satisfaction.
- c. Business educators' perception of skills importance.
- d. Employers' satisfaction.
- e. Employers' perception of skills importance.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results show that employers and business educators have different views of many of the skills that business students need to acquire. For example, employers want business colleges to focus more on the soft skills such as communication, adaptability and flexibility and work ethics. This could indicate that employers and business educators are not communicating well enough to establish common ground with respect to a set of skills that students need to have. Moreover, the results indicated that there is a substantial skills gap in the Qatari market, because the employers were barely satisfied with the performance of business graduates. This elevated level of discrepancy can be explained in three ways: (a) Employers view certain skills as important for graduates to possess, but they are not taught well enough in business curricula; (b) the academic courses cover certain skills which are properly conveyed to the students, but the employers often overlook or dismiss these skills as irrelevant to their businesses; and/or (c) the main objective for each group is different; for example, while business educators focus on preparing future business leaders, employers focus on skills/competencies needed for their businesses to excel. Therefore, business educators value hard skills (e.g. critical thinking), employers value soft skills which enable employees to work hard to improve businesses environment. On one side, employers need to know that the mission of business programs is career education, not job training and on the other side, business educators need to understand the needs and the expectations of the employers from business graduates (Trauth, Farwell and Lee, 1993). Thus, the results of this study reinforce the need to take the action and institute the reforms suggested by multilateral discussions, in which employers, policy-makers and educational institutions would be involved.

The results of this study should be of interest to business educators and policy-makers in the educational institutions. These results are also be of interest to people who want to understand the evolution and progress of education and labour market requirements in satisfying the needs of today's global economy. In addition, the results will be useful for readers with a general interest in human capital and economic initiatives. Moreover, the results of this study will make instructors aware of the modern skills and competences that employers need the most so that they can be integrated in the business curriculum. The study demonstrated that there might be a disconnection between employers and business educators in the sense of what being taught at the college of business and what is required by marketplace. Several recommendations can be formulated from the present findings that might help to bridge the skills gap. These recommendations, as described in the next paragraphs, require the partnership and participation of employers, business educators and the policy-makers.

First, business educators need to teach students the skills that employers demand. This is made possible by forging a relationship between them and employers and involving the latter in designing the curriculum. As such, companies would play an active role in influencing the business curriculum according to their present and projected skills needs. Moreover, this communication would let business educators modify and update their curricula promptly at the request of employers. Second, companies can play an active role in bridging the skills gap by providing students with hands-on training, for example by offering internship programs and

summer jobs where students could polish their skills and gain practical knowledge and experience. Companies should also allocate funds to train their recent employees by providing workshops and professional development seminars for them inside or outside the country to develop their skills and keep them up to date. In addition, companies need to deepen their involvement with educational institutions to improve the fit between graduates' skills and the jobs available. Third, government stakeholders can participate in reducing the skills gap by funding "skills development" programs and implementing remedial reforms in educational institutions. This can be done in partnership with international academic institutions and by bringing expertise (academics or international experts) that will enhance the academic learning process and improve the students' engagement levels and skills.

Based on their written comments, business educators believe that for any college of business to improve the quality of its student's education and to better serve the employers' needs for the 21st century marketplace in a global economy, students need to learn how to process, analyse and use information. Teaching them ideas and facts, without teaching them how to use them in real-life settings, is no longer sufficient. In addition, students need to be taught how to, create, interpret and use information, rather than using most of their time in finding and presenting information. Therefore, instructors need to adapt and develop innovative ways of teaching and limit the use of traditional lectures so as to create more interactive classes; for example, focusing on the intensive use of simulations and games to engage students more deeply. Moreover, instructors need to foster students' understanding by facilitating problem-solving discussions based on real-life situations and real case studies. The purpose of university should be to prepare students for success after graduation. Therefore, teaching students only to perform well in tests or exams is clearly inadequate. For example, business colleges can provide more assignments that involve hands-on training and reduce the emphasis on closed book exams. At the same time, teamwork based real projects can enhance the students' ability to work in a real-life setting. There is a need to link the knowledge gained in lectures with applications practiced in organizations by expanding field trips and workshops and adjust the curricula to better simulate real-world working conditions.

Employers, on their part, believe that, for college of businesses to improve the quality of their students, they need to allow students to pursue alternative learning pathways. For example, students might earn academic credits and satisfy graduation requirements by completing an internship, apprenticeship or volunteer experience. Thus, they might acquire a variety of practical, job-related skills and work habits, while also completing academic coursework and meeting the same learning standards as are required of students on more traditional academic courses. It should be noted that all these recommendations, whether being suggested by the authors, business educators or employers will help in reducing the skills gap if and only if all stakeholders are seriously engaged and committed to the process. This will contribute to producing business graduates with a competitive edge in skills and competencies that are ready to work in today's challenging and competitive workplace.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Although the results of this study provides insights for business educators who want to modify and update their business program/curricula to enhance business students' skills and satisfy the requirements of employers, yet the study has several limitations, which are highlighted below. First, this study was limited to business students at one business school, as such; the results of this study cannot be generalized to all business students from other

universities. Therefore, further research to increase the scope and coverage of the study is recommended. In addition, further research may duplicate this study by including business colleges from countries to compare the results. Second, this study has considered only the opinions of business educators and employers, so this study might be repeated to consider business students' opinion, as a crucial factor if a triangular design approach is taken. Third, further research would be valuable to study in depth the reasons for the gaps that are identified in this study. Finally, larger sample sizes would enhance the reliability of the results.

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