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THE CONTRIBUTION OF ACCOUNTING DISCIPLINES TO DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL SKILLS

Case Study

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Communication anxiety,
Writing skill,
Critical thinking

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Abstract

Expectations of teachers and employers are not always confirmed by student response and performance. The objective of our research is to find out the perception of final-year undergraduate students towards the contribution of accounting disciplines to shaping and developing skills and competencies, but also to developing student personality. We have found that students prefer courses based on detailed rules rather than courses based on general principles and concepts which require ongoing recourse to professional judgment, scenarios, assumptions, tests, simulations, etc. Concerning professional judgment, students prefer judgments made in financial accounting rather than judgments made for management purposes, which are heavily based on the use of certain competencies such as communication skills, persuasion skills, critical thinking skills, interdisciplinary thinking skills, and decision-making skills.

INTRODUCTION

Syllabuses of accounting disciplines are the result of reconciling the perceptions of accounting academics, employers, and professional bodies towards the knowledge, abilities, and skills expected to be possessed and expressed by students at the end of their bachelor cycle. Such perceptions may significantly differ from the students' perception. The reasons are manifold: institutional constraints, personal skills, motivation level, student preferences for certain discipline area over others, the level of abstraction or interdisciplinarity which certain disciplines involve, performance anxiety, risk aversion in the context of communication and development of interpersonal relationships, the sometimes excessive requirements, low transparency of the evaluation method, the teaching instruments used, the teacher's discourse, etc.

In defining the specific and transversal skills related to the studied disciplines, the Faculty of Accounting and Management Information Systems of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies has taken into account:

-the needs expressed by the employers of accounting professionals;

-the IFAC requirements on the skills and competences that must be possessed by accountants who complete the initial phase of professional training (the bachelor cycle);

-the requirements of national professional bodies (CECCAR and CAFR);

-requirements of ACCA;

-best practice models provided by prestigious universities.

Some studies indicate that employers seek graduates who possess a range of non-technical skills (teamwork, leadership and command sense, self-training, the ability to develop effective learning methods, ethical awareness, the ability to inspire confidence, capacity for dialogue, exchange and negotiation, the desire for personal success) whereas students perceive that the decisive skills in a professional accounting career are the technical skills (Klibi & Oussii, 2013, Jones & Abraham, 2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lawson *et al.* (2014) develops a conceptual framework for integrating competencies in accounting education. The basis is represented by the foundational competencies (communication, quantitative competencies, analytical thinking and problem-solving, interpersonal relationships, technological competencies). Two other categories evolve from these: accounting competencies and broad management competencies. Accounting competencies include: external reporting, planning, analysis and control, taxation, management information systems, assurance and internal control, professional values, ethics and attitudes. Broad management competencies imply leadership, ethics and social responsibility, process management and improvement, governance, risk management and compliance, and additional core management competencies.

Carr (1998) analyzes the skills that the learning process should strengthen: technical skills (knowledge of the subject matter addressed and critical thinking), communication skills (speech, writing, and listening), interpersonal skills (group activities and leadership), and personal skills (self-confidence, ethics and community support, emotional intelligence).

Communication skills have become, for employers of young accounting professionals, at least as important as technical skills (Jackling & De Lange, 2009). Nevertheless, the stereotype of the unsociable accountant, unable to communicate with others, persists (Byrne & Willis, 2005).

Meixner *et al.* (2009) indicates that oral and written communication skills are perceived as less important for accounting students than for students preparing for a career in finance, marketing, or management.

Students know the concepts and rules better than they manage to convey in writing (Grimm & Hoag, 2012). Write-to-learn assignments help students master the concepts and associate them with real-world examples.

Studies conducted by Lin *et al*. (2005) in China and by Kavanagh and Drennan (2008) in Australia indicate the existence of a significant difference between employers' perception and expectations and students' perception. While both groups recognize the importance of written communication skills, employers appreciate such abilities much more than students do.

Springer Sargent and Borthick (2013) show that students who experiment problem-solving and conflictual tasks greatly develop their critical thinking and perform better than students who learn according to the traditional model, which places less emphasis on such ability.

Experience offers accounting professionals certain advantages that other business professionals do not have. They master the figures and develop solutions to difficult problems for the benefit of their clients. Business simulation helps accounting students refine their competences by an increased affinity for financial and non-financial information, as well as a propensity to analize problems in a structured manner. Simulations challenge the students to work in unstructured situations as well, developing a tolerance to assessing ambiguities (Riley et al., 2013). Ambiguity is defined as a lack of information that would facilitate understanding

of a situation and making a decision with predictable effects (McLain, 2009).
Orientation towards problem-solving activities and case studies taken from or inspired by reality creates a learning environment where the interdisciplinary approach is inherent (Herrington & Herrington, 2006).
The accounting profession in Romania is characterized by a disruption between the interests of academics and practitioners, determined by a lack of communication between the two parties. Though the academia tends to focus lately rather on research (possibly due to the university ranking and funding system), the accounting teaching should not be disregarded. The adjustment of the teaching methods in accounting and the orientation of the curricula towards the development of a critical reasoning, the creation of a vision beyond the technical dimension of accounting and the cultivation of the capacity to question the information are the prerogatives of academia. The teaching component should be the driver of the relationship between academia and practice, through the proper formation of (current or future) accounting practitioners (Grosu *et al.*, 2015).
Albu and Toader (2012) indicate that practitioners and researchers have divergent interests, agendas, and motivations. Whereas practitioners are oriented towards local and short-time specific issues, academics are encouraged by the academic evaluation system to focus on the expectations of journals which, sometimes, are of no immediate concern to practitioners. Both academics and practitioners could benefit from a closer relationship: academics could have access to real data and the possibility to explain things more logically, to enhance their reputation and use real data and research based on real data in teaching, while practitioners could receive ideas which might contribute to the efficiency of their organizations.
In Romania, due to differences in their educational backgrounds, chartered accountant trainees perceived certain barriers preventing their access to the accounting profession (Bunea *et al*., 2013). The self-assessed competence level of trainees in fields such as accounting, taxation, or IT was appreciated as at least good, while the competences regarding organizations and businesses, international financial reporting, corporate governance, and financial markets were appreciated as modest. The need for professional training is assessed by trainees considering the immediate practice and not the expectations regarding future career development or future evolutions of accounting practices. The trainees do not consider necessary any investment in competences that they cannot use immediately at the level required by small and medium-sized businesses they work for.
Stereotypes are developed mainly in relation with the national context, and therefore teaching international financial reporting standards is affected by the perceived role of accounting and accountants in society. The stereotypes affect the students' attitude towards accounting courses and indirectly, the accounting education process. (Albu *et al*., 2012).
The students' viewing the accountant as liberal and independent, also view the manager as confident (independent, optimistic and flexible) (Bogdan *et al*., 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research objective is to probe the perception of students in the final year of undergraduate degree studies at the Faculty of Accounting and Management Information Systems concerning the contribution of speciality disciplines towards shaping and developing skills and competencies, but also towards developing student personality.
Sometimes, teachers' expectations are not confirmed by student response and performance. There are multiple causes: either that teachers do not explicitly mention the use of the issues taught and their correspondence with reality, either that students have a personal hierarchy of the competencies they pursue, or that there are institutional constraints which hinder the development of certain competencies (working with large classes of students makes it difficult to develop oral and written communication skills, critical thinking, exercise of persuasion skills, etc.).
The sample includes third-year undergraduate students of the Faculty of Accounting and Management Information Systems, at the time of completing their studies. Out of the total population of 550 students, the questionnaires were distributed to 474 students present at the final exams of the June 2016 session. The questionnaires were filled in on the day of the exam, in the classroom. 26 questionnaires were cancelled as they were not fully completed, and 442 questionnaires were validated. The response rate, taking into account the validated questionnaires, was 93.24%. As against the total population, the rate is 80.36% (Table 1)
The questionnaires included 24 questions, grouped as follows:
-3 questions about the respondent's profile;
-18 questions concerning the students' perception towards the contribution of speciality disciplines to developing knowledge, skills, and competencies, but also their importance in developing their own professional profile;
-3 questions on the impact of the disciplines studied on developing student personality.

In order to analyze the perception of undergraduate students, we have selected 10 disciplines corresponding to the competencies required by the above-mentioned stakeholders: introductory accounting, financial accounting according to IFRS, financial accounting according to European regulations, management accounting, performance management and measurement, taxation, internal auditing, external auditing, accounting policies and options (advanced IFRS course), and accountant in business.
The questions conceived were based on the results of scientific studies that we deemed relevant, given the set objective.

RESULTS

We asked the respondents to position themselves as to the way they take risks in everyday life. More than half of the respondents (59.04%) said they took risks only in critical situations. 24.22% of the respondents take risks easily, whereas 16.94% declared that they had a strong aversion to risk. No significant differences result from the analysis by gender, but it is interesting to note that men declared to take risks in critical situations (63.03% men as compared to 57.59% women) rather than to take risks easily (20.17% men as compared to 26.63% women).
Next, respondents were asked to select the attributes that best correspond to the changes that the studies in accounting and management information systems have brought upon their own personality. Let us mention a few of the contemplated attributes: I have become more responsible; I have become more organized and more disciplined; I have become more intolerant to lies; I have become more cautions in dealing with others; I take risks more easily; I communicate more easily; I make judgments more easily and more frequently; I manage my time better; I enjoy a higher reputation among my acquaintances; I have higher self-esteem; I have lower self-esteem; I have become an ethical person and I am more sensitive to injustice.
Most of the respondents believe that college has made them more responsible (68.09%), but also more organized and more disciplined (51.35%). Almost half of them believe that they make judgments more often and more easily (47.01%). Other significant features identified by the respondents were:
- I have become more sociable and more open in dealing with others (41.62%);
- I manage my time better (40.39%);
- Ethics is important to me (36.42%).

A significant part (33.03%) state that they have become more cautious in dealing with others. Most students do not believe college has affected their self-esteem. Only 3.16% declare to have lower self-esteem, while 17.87% believe to have higher self-esteem. Moreover, most of the respondents do not associate their college years with personal reputation (only 9.72% believe to enjoy a higher reputation).
Some speciality disciplines studied within the faculty are based rather on detailed rules provided by the application of accounting standards or regulations. Others are based rather on concepts, general principles and techniques requiring frequent recourse to judgment, scenarios, assumptions, tests, simulations, etc. Students were asked to specify whether or not, during college, they appreciated more the courses based on detailed rules than the ones based on concepts and general principles. A significant majority of students appreciated the courses based on detailed rules (74.88%). The percentage of those who appreciated the courses based on concepts, general principles and techniques requiring frequent recourse to judgment, scenarios, assumptions, tests, simulations is much lower (25.12%).
The most demanded competencies were, on a scale from 1 (a skill very little used) to 4 (a skill very much used): memorization skills (3.75), comprehension skills (3.45), and problem-solving skills (3.18). The skills the least used were the ability to identify and exploit relevant sources (2.97), communication skills (2.63), persuasion skills (2.46), and decision-making skills (3.13).
In real life, the accounting professional prepares reports, statements, declarations, and other written materials. Students state that the ability to prepare professional written materials was rather weakly developed during their college studies – on a scale from 1 (very weak contribution) to 4 (very high contribution). The disciplines perceived as having a higher contribution towards developing writing skills are taxation (3.13), introductory accounting (3.13), financial accounting according to IFRS (3.02), financial accounting according to European regulations (2.99), and external auditing (2.93). The other disciplines were perceived as having a weak or very weak contribution to developing their writing skills.
The students were asked to rank the speciality disciplines by the contribution they believed such courses had towards developing professional judgment. The scale was from 1 (very weak contribution) to 4 (very high contribution). The result analysis indicates that on top of the list we have the discipline of introductory accounting (3.56), followed by the disciplines of financial accounting according to IFRS (3.31) and financial accounting according to European regulations (3.21). Therefore, we note that students consider as very important in their education the basic concepts of accounting and financial reporting, and the

judgments which develop from capitalizing on such concepts.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Students of the Faculty of Accounting and Information Management Systems rather prefer courses based on detailed rules than courses based on general principles and concepts which require ongoing recourse to professional judgment, scenarios, assumptions, tests, simulations, etc. As regards professional judgment, students prefer those judgments which are made in a regulated accounting framework rather than those which are made for management purposes and which are heavily based on the use of certain skills such as communication skills, persuasion skills, critical thinking skills, interdisciplinary thinking skills, and decision-making skills.

The fact that students favour financial reporting at the expense of company performance analysis is scientifically confirmed by relatively recent studies (Klibi & Oussii, 2013).

Most of the students of the faculty see themselves working in accounting and financial reporting, in taxation or external auditing. Fewer are projecting themselves in positions involving management accounting and entity performance measurement.

Throughout their studies, the competencies used the most were memorization skills, comprehension skills, and problem-solving skills. The less used competencies were the ability to identify and capitalize on relevant sources, communication skills, persuasion skills, and decision-making skills.

Further skills which were less developed among students are writing skills. The discipline perceived as having a greater contribution towards developing writing skills are taxation, introductory accounting, financial accounting according to IFRS, financial accounting according to European regulations, and external auditing. The other disciplines were considered to have had a poor or very poor contribution to the development of writing skills.

Students associate at least a medium level of abstraction to the content of the speciality disciplines they have studied. The disciplines which were considered the most abstract were accounting policies and options, management accounting, external auditing, and financial accounting according to IFRS. The disciplines considered less abstract were: introductory accounting, taxation, internal auditing, and financial accounting according to European regulations.

We believe that some respondents may not have been quite clear on what abstract content means and part of them may assimilate difficulties in the comprehension of clear rules with a higher level of abstraction. We tend to consider more complicated something that we do not understand. This is the conclusion we have reached after finding that students with a medium level of performance tend to consider as more abstract such disciplines which, for higher-performing students, have a low abstraction level. For instance, to a student graded 6 in the IFRS introductory course (financial accounting according to IFRS), the course of accounting policies and options (advanced IFRS course) may seem very abstract. A 10-graded student will not have the same perception. Furthermore, courses which require an interdisciplinary approach and advanced knowledge tools, unstructured and sometimes ambiguous situations seem to be more abstract even to higher-performing students.

Most students said that studying accounting according to IFRS first had greatly facilitated their understanding of detailed rules in the course of financial accounting according to European regulations. In our experience, this is actually not about facilitating the understanding of different rules, but rather about assimilating, in the context of local regulations, the same rules. Where differences occur in terms of terminology or in terms of rules because the takeover of certain IFRS accounting policies was partial or limited, students already encounter comprehension difficulties.

Some courses are more oriented towards debate and case studies. Others are based on lectures which rarely leave room for debate. Most students rather prefer the courses based on debate and case studies. A minority of students feel more comfortable with lecture-type courses. We noticed that the latter category mostly included students claiming that the grade which best described their academic performance was 6 or 7. The few high-performing students who prefer lecture-type courses are mostly students who either exhibit a high aversion to risk or take risks only in critical situations.

The majority of students do not believe it is important that a teacher should cover the entire syllabus at the risk of not having time to develop personal skills for the students (communication skills, writing skills, persuasion skills, etc.).

Students perceive that in certain disciplines requirements may become exaggerated and the difficulties in complying with them create anxiety and sometimes fear. An overwhelming majority have developed anxiety and fear over exaggerated requirements or sources of uncertainty associated with the upcoming assessment.

Most of the respondents believe that college has made them more responsible, but also more organized and more disciplined. Almost half of them believe that they make judgments more often and more easily. Other significant features identified by the respondents were: I have become more sociable and more open in dealing with

others; I manage my time better; ethics is important to me.

LIMITATIONS

Perception studies have a number of limitations as to the way respondents define and explain certain concepts. In the case of our study, such limitation are:

-students may perceive the term 'abstract' in different ways (concepts with are accessible but difficult to assimilate may appear as abstract to some students);

-some students may associate professional judgment with the application of clear rules in structured situations, whereas others may believe that professional judgment is exercised in unstructured situations and where rules are less detailed;

-students may believe that the disciplines in which they achieved better results more easily are more useful to them in their carrier;

-some students may mistake insecurity caused by lack of knowledge for oral and written communication anxiety;

-students may not always perceive the connection with reality in the context of certain case studies where teacher uses real data belonging to entities whose names are replaced with a generic name;

-some students may not develop high adhesion to the knowledge conveyed if they perceive that the teachers are not practitioners and are unable to provide training as practitioners would do, etc.

Despite all these limitations, the results of our research are consistent with the results of certain previous studies (Nicolescu&Păun, 2009; Klibi&Oussii, 2013; Jones& Abraham, 2008; Shanahan, 2013; Hail *et al*., 2010).

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APPENDICES

Table No.1
Respondents' Profile

Gender	
Female:	73.07%
Male:	26.96%
Internship experience	
Up to 6 months:	57.46%
Between 6 months and 1 year:	17.17%
Over 1 year:	11.99%
No internship experience:	13.34%
The most frequent grade received during college	
Grade 6:	14.25%
Grade 7:	21.71%
Grade 8:	28.73%
Grade 9:	18.55%
Grade 10:	16.75%