

Are Accounting Graduates Prepared For Their Careers? A Comparison of Employees' and Employers' Perceptions

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Nowadays, accounting graduates are expected to possess a wide set of technical and generic skills to meet the requirements of the work place. Most employers find that accounting university programs are unable to provide graduates with the skills that are required by the profession. The aim of this research is to examine accounting graduates' self- assessment and employers' assessments of skill sets acquired in the accounting university programs. During the period April – May 2014, a quantitative study was done involving data collection from 70 accounting employees at entry level and 70 practitioners. The study also assesses the perception of employees and employers of the importance of technical and non-technical skills at entry level employment in accounting. Moreover, the fresh graduate's job satisfaction during their first year of work was investigated. Findings suggest that there is an existing perception gap between employers and the newly hired employees about the preparedness of the latter and about the importance of the skills required by the profession. Results revealed that there is a positive significant relationship between the employee's self-assessment and his/her job satisfaction. This empirical study provides a deeper understanding of the skills expected for accountants to succeed in their professions. It also assesses the accounting education in Lebanon, a representative middle-eastern developing country, and suggests approaches to narrow the education gap.

Field of Research: Accounting Education

1. Introduction

In today's business environment, employers seek for employees with a wide range of skills and knowledge. Accounting employees, are not the exception, they are expected to possess a large range of skills that meet the expectations of their employers. Most employers find that accounting university programs are unable to provide graduates with the skills that are required by the profession. It is the aim of this study to highlight what are the needed skills to help students, employers and educators to narrow the gap. This education gap may be the reason of why graduates find their early employment experience far from their expectations. In most cases, fresh graduates are unaware of the skills desired by their employer. Their employability for entry level positions and their performance in the first year is largely affected by the fit of their acquired skills and those required by the job. A mismatch between the possessed and the demanded skills may lead to the new hire's demotivation, low performance and dissatisfaction.

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The purpose of this study is to identify the gap between employers' and new employee's perceptions of the needed skills and attributes to succeed in the accounting profession in Lebanon. Moreover, the preparedness level of the accounting graduate in this country is assessed. The perception of two main stakeholders is investigated: the practitioner of the accounting profession that hires fresh graduates and the fresh graduate at his/her first year of experience. This study surveys the employer's satisfaction with new hire's set of skills acquired and the new hire self-assessment of acquired skills while his/her memory is at its best; thus, determining the effectiveness of the Lebanese accounting programs in meeting the demands of the market. This study addresses the following research questions:

Do employers and fresh graduates agree on the skills needed for career success?

Is there a gap between the perception of employers and fresh graduates regarding the latter's preparedness for their careers?

Is there a relationship between the fresh graduate perception of preparedness and their experiencing job satisfaction?

This paper will be a meaningful contribution to the literature as it examines a topic not yet investigated in Lebanon. First, the paper provides an assessment of the preparedness of the new graduates perceived by both the employers and new graduates themselves; hence, identifying the gap between what is being taught in the Lebanese university programs and what is needed in the market. Second, findings will help educators to adjust accounting program's curricula to meet the profession's demand. More importantly, the findings will guide students to improve their skills to meet the demands of the workplace. Students will know what their weak areas are and what is needed to increase their employability. Moreover, the findings of this study are insightful for they will help employers to prepare training programs to fill the gap where needed.

Prior studies have examined such skill gaps in various countries; However, they addressed the problem only from the employers', the students' or the fresh graduates' point of view (Jackling and Sullivan, 2007, Jackling and De Lange, 2009, Daff et al., 2012). Few compare their perceptions; it will be a meaningful contribution to the literature, the comparison of their perceptions. For that reason, this study examines the perception of two main stakeholders: the employers and the employees. To the author's knowledge, no such study has been undertaken to examine the perception gaps among Lebanese accounting practitioners and fresh graduates in their first year of work experience. Moreover, the findings of this study are insightful for they suggest the existence of a positive relationship between graduates' perceived preparedness and their job satisfaction.

The following section presents a review of the literature on employers' and new employees' skills' perceived importance, the relevant expectation-performance gap theory and the **Person-Environment Fit theory**. The next section describes the methodology used in this study, followed by the findings with their analysis. Finally, conclusions and implications section is then presented followed by the limitations of the study and future recommendations.

2. Review of Literature

Early employment experience could be disappointing when the skills the fresh graduate possesses are far from their employers' expectations. Employers might prioritize a set of skills that graduates might perceive as not being important. Previous studies have found that employers in the accounting profession require employees to possess a set of generic skills in addition to their technical and functional skills. Generic skills are the skills, knowledge, and abilities of university graduates, beyond the technical and discipline knowledge, which apply and transfer to different contexts and are required as the result of completing any undergraduate degree (Barrie, 2006). Daff and his colleagues (2012) developed a Framework of Generic Skills that differentiates between two broad domains: cognitive and behavioral. Cognitive skills are routine, analytic/design, and appreciative skills. They mainly relate to the student's ability to evaluate, analyze, interpret and report information. The behavioral generic skills are their intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. They involve managing one's self and being flexible in new and different situation (intrapersonal) and dealing with people, communicating, negotiating and leading (interpersonal).

Several researchers have indicated that employers value more generic skills because they enable employees to make successful use of their acquired technical skills (Jackling & De Lange, 2009). Employers take for granted that students acquired technical skills in the accounting programs but they must develop generic skills to succeed in their profession. The perceived skill importance varies across countries because employers face diverse circumstances and contexts. In Australia for example, researchers found that the generic skills that employers rate as most important were communication, teamwork, self-management, initiative, analytical/problem solving, business awareness and planning (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008; Tempone et al 2012). Sugahara, S. and Coman, R. (2010) found that in Japan, practitioners perceived the information and the behavioral skills as the most important skills. These findings reflect the change of the Japanese accountant's role from the traditional wealth counting to a more knowledgeable professional that provides information and judgment. Similarly, results in Barac's study (2009) reveal that South Africa practitioners also rated communication, interpersonal, time management and analytical skills as being very important. In the same token, employers in Tunisia emphasized the need for graduates to develop generic skills related to ethical awareness, communication, critical analysis and teamwork (Klibi, M & Oussii, 2013). Hassall et al. (2005) compared the perceptions of the employers of two countries in Europe, Spain and the UK. The findings reported that the most important skills for the UK employers were communication skills (oral, written and effective listening); whereas, practitioners in Spain rated higher the commitment to life-long learning, problem solving and the global vision of the organization. Saudi Arabia employer's perceptions differed from their counterparts in other countries in that they consider technical accounting skills as being more important than generic skills (Mallak, 2012).

On the other hand, fresh graduates seem to perceive technical skills as more important than generic skills (Usoff & Feldmann, 1998; Klibi & Oussii, 2013; Yu et al, 2013). Students tend to perceive as important skills those skills that are emphasized in accounting programs, such as routine accounting and research skills (Jackling & De lange, 2009). Similar results were found by Kavanagh and Drennan (2008) where students rated continuous learning as the most important skill, focusing on routine technical expertise as well as oral and written

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communication skills, problem solving and appreciative skills. Accounting graduates seem to believe that grades, personal qualities and communications skills are the most important criterion used by employers (kim et al. 1993). This difference in perceptions between students and professionals may be the result of a lack of communication between them. Paul Wells' (2009) findings in New Zealand differ from others in that graduates' perspectives of generic skills, personal and interpersonal emerged as being more significant than professional skills.

Meeting the accounting needs of the market depends greatly on education. There has been considerable discussion about the perceived gap between accounting education and the needs of the students and employers in the accounting profession (Siegel, 2010; Wally-Dima, 2011). Employers find that accounting graduates are not being adequately taught generic skills in their university programs. They are seeking graduates that are able to apply learned skills in the workplace. Previous research found that education has failed to meet standards expected by practitioners in the critical thinking, team, communication, interpersonal, leadership, ethical awareness, emotional intelligence and technological areas (Burnett, 2003; Kavanagh and Drennan, 2008; Jackling and De Lange, 2009, Daff et al., 2012; Yu et al, 2013). Moreover, some students perceive that they are not being adequately taught skills and attributes they considered important to their careers. Universities are not increasing their 'employability'. They should be given a "holistic learning experience that combines structured learning, with industry participation, work experience and extra- curricular activities" (Jackling and Sullivan, 2007). It seems that university accounting curriculum in most countries is being designed to provide a strong theoretical accounting base for students rather than prepare them for employment opportunities. (Athiyaman, 2001; Kavannah and Drennan, 2008). Cranmer (2006) goes as far as to suggest that generic skills should be taught separately from the technical skills and the little they learn on their programs adds no value to their employability. He suggests that generic skills are best learned on the job.

Globally, professional bodies express concern that accounting programs are over-emphasizing technical skills at the expense of generic skills. To narrow the perceived education gap, accounting professional bodies responded by recommending the inclusion of generic skills in the accounting programs. In 1990, The Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC) suggested that accounting graduates must possess generic skills in its Objectives of Education for Accountants: Position Statement Number One. In the same manner, the International Accounting Education Standards Board (IAESB) has recognized the need of the development of generic skills for accounting graduates (EIS3, 2005).

Employers expect graduates to be more prepared than they actually are, resulting in an expectation- performance gap. This gap refers to the "difference between the competencies desired by employers and the actual competencies demonstrated by graduates". (Brui and Porter, 2010) The literature highlights the fact that employers and students have different perceptions about the importance of the generic attributes that are required for career success. (kavananh and Drennan, 2008; Yu et al, 2013; Abayadeera and Watty, 2014) These findings may explain why accounting graduates are having difficulties at entry level positions: first, they are not prepared as expected and second, they are unaware of what are the employers' desired skills. As Gati (1998) observes, if employers continue to prioritize skills that entry level graduates do not possess then their efforts to secure satisfactory employees may not be very successful. Maybe, as Cranmer (2006) put it, it is unrealistic to expect that

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graduates will possess all the required skills upon graduation. Thus, employers should understand that learning is a continuous process and many of the generic skills that they expect can only be developed with guidance 'on the job'.

The literature highlights the different perceptions of practitioners, academicians and students about the required skills to succeed in the profession. However, it does not survey the perception of the new-hires. New hires are in better position to assess their preparedness to work than students or fresh graduates without experience are. To the author knowledge, only one previous research compared the perceptions of interns, employers and alumni but it was limited to only one university (Yu et al, 2013). By surveying fresh graduates during their first year of experience should give more insights about their preparedness and hence test the current curricula adequacy.

The mismatch between the job requirement and the employee abilities lead to discontent, poor performance, low achievement, and job turnover (Holland, 1997). According to **Vroms' Expectancy Theory**, an employee motivation is affected, among other variables, by the strength of his/her belief of whether a particular job performance is attainable or not. This state is the result of individual factors such as personality, skills, knowledge, experience and abilities. Therefore, if an employee believes that he/she does not possess the skills required for the task he/she will not be motivated to do it (Vroom, 1964). This idea is consistent with the Demand-Abilities model of the **Person-Environment (P-E) Fit theory**. The model holds that when there is a mismatch between the demands of the job and the ability of the employee to meet them, employee will develop strain and tension. The model was tested and results showed that tension was positively related to job's demand and negatively related to employee's abilities. Moreover, the higher the level of congruence between what the employee has to offer and what is expected of him/her, the higher the level of job satisfaction (Edwards, 1996). Job satisfaction is said to be a variable that measures to what extent employees like their jobs and the different aspects of it. (Spector, 1997) From the employer standpoint, job satisfaction is important because it increases employee's motivation and productivity. If the employee is satisfied he/she will be more motivated to effectively complete a job. When individuals are satisfied with their jobs they will be motivated to work harder and less likely to leave their jobs. Therefore, job satisfaction contributes to motivation as well as the employee's future at the organization (Brooks, 2007).

Based on the previous reviewed literature, the following research hypotheses are addressed:

- H1:** Employers and fresh graduates assess the latter's skill-level significantly differently.
- H2:** Employers perceive generic skills as more important than technical and functional skills at entry level position.
- H3:** Fresh graduates perceive technical and functional skills as more important than generic skills.
- H4:** There is a significant positive relationship between the fresh graduates' perception of preparedness and their level of job satisfaction.

3. Methodology

The author conducted a quantitative study involving data collection from 70 accounting employees at entry level and 70 practitioners across a number of organizations and industries. The sample size used follows the recommendation of Hair et al. (2008) which suggests that the sample size should be 4 to 5 times the number of questions on the research instrument. The instrument has a total of 25 items which makes the sample of 140 reasonable.

The questionnaires were administered using a convenience sample during the period of April - May 2014. They were distributed and collected by researchers who waited for the respondents to complete them, thus ensuring a 100% response rate. The survey instrument has been structured in three main parts: a competence-skill profile, a ranking of perceived skill importance and demographics.

The Deppe (1991) competence-skills profile was used to measure employers' assessment and employees' self-assessment on the latter's preparedness in accounting programs. Minor refinements were made for the Lebanese context and the scale was reduced to 23 items down from 35 for simplicity. The competence-skills profile was sub-grouped into 6 categories: technical and functional skills, interpersonal and communication skills, knowledge of business environment, professional ethics, teamwork and leadership development, and decision making skills. The Likert scale was anchored by "strongly disagree" (1) and "strongly agree" (5) to measure the perceptions. In addition to Deppe scale, two additional questions, drawn from Spector's scale (1997), were used to measure job satisfaction in the fresh graduate survey. To the author's knowledge, no such study has been undertaken to examine the relationship between graduates' perceived preparedness with their job satisfaction. This study have improve previous surveys in that it added a rank to measure the employers' and employees' perceived relative importance of the generic and technical attributes based on the six categories indicated above. Personal attributes, also considered important in the literature, was added to the ranking question. They were measured on a 7 point scale, ranging from (1) "most important" to (7) "least important". And finally, a set of 3 items were related to demographics age, gender and years (months) of experience.

The data was statistically analyzed using SPSS (19.0). Descriptive statistical tests were perform, namely mean comparisons, t-tests, factor analysis and multiple regression. The validity of the questionnaire was assessed by Cronbach's alpha test. The test produced an Alpha of 0.937 which is greater than the 0.7 recommended by Nunnally (1978), thus indicating a good internal consistency. See Table 1 below.

Table 1: Scale reliability

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.937	23

4. Findings

4.1 Demographics Characteristics of the Sample

The sample data of the employers regarding age was normally distributed and the respondents' age ranged from 22 to 73 years with a mean of 37. In terms of gender, respondents were about 35% female and 65% male, reflecting the gender distribution of the accounting profession in Lebanon. The mean age of the fresh graduates was 22.6 reflecting the age of employees at entry level position. As for the gender 56% were female and 44% male. The mean of the years of experience of the employers was of 13 years, ranging from 2 to 50 years. The mean of the months of experience was about 8 months as the targeted respondents were fresh graduates at entry level position with less than one year of experience.

4.2 Employers' and Employees' Assessments of Graduates' Skills

The first hypothesis was whether employers and fresh graduates assess the latter's skill-level significantly differently. So the analysis started by comparing the means of employers' perceptions of acquired skills with the employees' self-assessment. The means were computed for each skill and by category. Results indicate that the employer's rating of skills was less than the employees' skill rating in all categories and every skill. The employers' mean of the means for the 23 skill-rating items was 3.25 falling in the undecided range; this low ranking reflects employers' dissatisfaction with the graduates' skill level. It appears that employers believe that students are not adequately prepared for their work at entry level positions. Similar results were found by authors in previous research (Burnett, 2003; Kavanagh and Drennan, 2008; Jackling and De Lange, 2009, Daff et al., 2012; Yu et al, 2013) On the other hand, the employee self-assessment's rating was higher than the practitioners at all skills, with a mean of 4.04. Previous research in USA lends support to these findings (Yu et al 2013) students doing their internship rated their own skill sets greater than the employers did greater than 4 on a Likert scale 1-5. Fresh graduates' rating their skill sets higher could be the consequence of their inexperience and unawareness of needed work skills and that's the perception gap we wanted to identify in this research. Moreover, students might really believe that they have acquired the required skills because universities in which they enroll usually claim to have the best accounting programs.

The mean of each category was used to compare the preparedness of the fresh graduates as perceived by the two groups of respondents in the different skill areas, see Table 2 below. The lowest skill ratings from employers' perspective went to graduates' decision-making skills. Fresh graduates lack of decision making skills because accounting programs at many universities and colleges in Lebanon focus on routine accounting. Fresh graduate also feel they are unprepared in decision making skills, rating them the second lowest.

Results indicate that there are needed areas of growth in the technical and functional skills of fresh graduates. Deeper analysis on this category showed that the skills that the students lack the most are technological, IFRS knowledge, management accounting tools and fundamental of Lebanese taxation. Employers find fresh graduates underprepared in those skills because most of Lebanese universities do not have a deep coverage of those topics in their curricula. Most Lebanese universities provide a single computer literacy course and that

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may not be the adequate coverage for technologic knowledge. A better approach might be to require the use spreadsheets in all accounting courses in addition to a separate course that includes software programs applications. Lebanese taxation is not thoroughly covered in most Lebanese universities mainly because universities import foreign textbooks and teaching methods. We found support to our findings on a report prepared by the world bank on the Observance of Standards and Codes (World Bank, 2003), in which it was found that accounting education in most of the Lebanese universities suffers from the lack of updated accounting curricula.. They also reported that accounting programs barely covers accounting information systems and do not provide students with the necessary background for modern accounting and audit. Moreover, they found that most universities, importing accounting literature from the United States, teach GAAP rather than IAS. It seems that no major effort has been done to upgrade the accounting curricula since the issue of that report.

The findings of this study reveal that employers and fresh graduates perceive that the latter are apparently better prepared in generic skills than in technical and functional skills. The two groups of respondent rated professional ethics as the highest possessed skill. This could be due to the fact that accounting employees at entry level positions are unlikely to engage in unethical behavior, first because there are in a trial period and second, because they do not have yet any authority nor they are involved in any decision making. Moreover, a recent research found that Lebanese business students are aware of business ethics principles and have the intention to behave according to the morality principle in their future employments. Students refer mostly to morality principle in their managerial ethics decision making. (Zgheib, 2005).

Employers and employees agree that Lebanese graduates communicate well in foreign language. Those findings are due to the fact English and French that are the primary languages of instruction in most Lebanese universities and schools (CERD, 2006). However, they do not have the ability to present their views in writing in Arabic nor make oral presentation in Arabic, the local language. University programs should take initiatives to improve the local language of their students since Arabic is the language used in the preparation of financial statement for tax purpose and in the official governmental documentation. Both groups also rated interpersonal skills relatively high. The Lebanese people developed high interpersonal skills may be as a result of their intimacy and gregariousness and close family ties, communal networks, and their festive and outgoing culture. (Khalaf, 1989)

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Table 2: Mean comparisons of skills rating of newly hired graduates

		Employer		Employee	
	Skills categories	Means	STD DEV	Means	STD DEV
1	Technical and functional skills	3.08	0.36	4.03	0.25
2	Interpersonal and communication skills	3.33	0.32	4.11	0.32
3	Knowledge of business environment	3.13	0.07	3.79	0.09
4	Professional ethics	3.68	0.015	4.16	0.02
5	Teamwork and leadership development	3.67	0.15	4.04	0.07
6	Decision making skills	2.95	0.11	3.89	0.03
	Average	3.25		4.04	

The previous table 2 showed clear differences between the means; however, to test that they were statistically different, an independent samples t-test was performed. The t-tests indicate that all skills, except those related to team work and leadership development, were rated significantly different – higher by employees. See Table 3 below.

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Table 3: T-test for skill assessment by employers and employees

Skill	Levene's test for equality of variances		T-test for equality of means		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
They know the purpose and elements of financial statements	0.084	0.772	-5.55	138	0.001
They are able to apply international financial reporting standards	0.033	0.856	-9.64	138	0.001
They know methods of gathering summarizing, and analyzing financial data.	1.83	0.178	-7.968	138	0.001
They know how to determine, analyze and control costs.	2.054	0.154	-6.433	138	0.001
They know how to prepare budgets and appraise investments.	0.459	0.499	-5.679	137	0.001
They understand the fundamentals of Lebanese taxation.	0.359	0.55	-4.342	138	0.001
They are able to use spreadsheets and accounting software.	3.538	0.062	-5.673	138	0.001
They understand the fundamentals of auditing.	0.001	0.979	-3.361	138	0.001
They are able to present views in writing in Arabic.	6.259	0.014	-4.214	138	0.001
They are able to present views in writing in English or French.	6.781	0.01	-7.089	138	0.001
They are able to make oral presentation in Arabic.	0.975	0.325	-4.667	138	0.001
They are able to make oral presentation in English or French.	2.468	0.118	-5.439	138	0.001
They understand interpersonal and group dynamics.	1.402	0.238	-3.622	138	0.001
They understand the economic, social and cultural forces in the world.	4.026	0.047	-5.592	138	0.001
They possess knowledge of financial markets and institutions.	0.305	0.581	-4.849	138	0.001
They understand the code of professional ethics.	0.046	0.831	-3.642	138	0.001
They can apply the code of ethics in their work.	0.125	0.724	-3.268	138	0.001
They can work effectively with diverse groups of people.	1.537	0.217	-1.771	138	0.079
They can organize and delegate tasks.	0.256	0.614	-3.959	138	0.001
They can motivate other people.	3.67	0.057	-1.595	138	0.113
They can solve diverse and unstructured problems.	0.15	0.699	-7.161	138	0.001
They can interpret data and induce general conclusions.	0.853	0.357	-7.465	138	0.001
They can select and assign priorities within restricted resources.	0.32	0.573	-5.128	138	0.001

These findings supported H1, employers and employees assess fresh graduates' preparedness significantly differently. Employers and fresh graduates may use different criteria to assess the acquired skills. Employers may be evaluating new hires based on the expectations of their future performance whereas fresh graduates might have assessed their preparedness on current performance. Employers have higher expectations, particularly in matters related to decision making and analysis.

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4.3 Employers' and Employees' Perceptions of Skills' Importance

This section of the study will evaluate both groups' perceptions of skills' importance to career success. On a scale from 1 to 7, (1 being the most important and 7 being the least), respondents were to rate what skills they perceived as more important. The employers' ranking results showed that the mean score for technical and functional skills was the highest (mean = 2.29), followed by teamwork and leadership development, and interpersonal and communication skills; whereas, personal attitudes and knowledge of business environment were ranked last (mean = 5.14), see table 4 below. The results do not support H2. Results are different from those found in the literature where practitioners prioritized generic skills over technical skills. In those countries, it seems that employers take for granted that fresh graduate possess the basic technical and functional skills. Students are expected to make better use of their acquired technical skills by exerting their generic skills (Jackling & De Lange, 2009; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008; Tempone et al 2012). Similar to our results were found in Saudi Arabia where employers still value technical skills more than generic skills (Mallak, 2012). These results may be due to the fact that practitioners in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia feel students are not being adequately taught the fundamental technical and functional skills. Employers recognize the importance of generic skills such as leadership, interpersonal and ethics (all below the 3.9 mean) but still they stress the importance of functional and technical expertise. This findings are also supported by the results in the previous section where employers rated technical and functional graduates' skill level relatively low (mean of 3.08 in a scale of 1 to 5). They perceive students lack the basic skills needed in the profession.

Similarly, fresh graduate ranked technical and functional skills as the most important skill (mean=3), supporting H3 and findings in the literature. Students tend to prioritize those skills that are currently emphasized in accounting programs, such as technical and research skills. The results indicate that there is some agreement between the employers in terms of some skills' importance, they both prioritize technical skills, ranked interpersonal and communication skills amongst the top three and personal attitude as the least important. However, they disagree in the importance of leadership and decision making skills valued more by employers than by employees.

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Table 4: Mean comparisons of skills importance

	Employers		Employees	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
technical expertise and functional skills	2.29	1.607	3.00	2.239
interpersonal and communication skills	3.91	1.840	3.20	1.828
knowledge of business environment	5.14	2.228	4.09	1.867
professional ethics	4.00	1.956	3.65	2.003
leadership development	3.67	1.901	4.62	1.818
personal attitudes	4.67	1.539	4.66	1.830
decision making skills	4.14	1.662	4.77	1.609
Valid N (listwise)				

4.4 Job Satisfaction

4.4.1 Factor Analysis

Since the third hypothesis suggested that there might be a positive and strong relationship between the fresh graduate's perception of preparedness and his/her job satisfaction, a multiple regression analysis was performed to test the cause effect relationship. Fresh graduate's preparedness was measured by the 23 competence-skill profile items and in order to reduce and summarize them, factor analysis was used. The factor analysis test produced 6 factors and a satisfactory 0.8 KMO value measuring sampling adequacy, see table 5 below. The generated factors could explain a large portion of the variance in the items under study. The total variance explained reached 75% which is a considerable percentage, refer to table 5. The 23 items were grouped as follows: 1- Leadership and decision making skills, 2- Interpersonal and ethics skills, 3- knowledge in preparing budgets and financial statements, 4. Lebanese taxation, spreadsheets and audit knowledge, 5- arabic written and oral skills, and finally, business environment knowledge.

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**Table 5: KMO and Bartlett's Test
Total Variance and Sampling Adequacy**

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	.800
Bartlett's Test of Approx. Chi-Square Sphericity	1168.80
Df	7
Sig.	.000

Component	Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	4.317	18.769	18.769
2	3.504	15.237	34.006
3	3.053	13.272	47.278
4	2.350	10.216	57.494
5	2.309	10.038	67.532
6	1.742	7.573	75.106

4.4.2 Regression Analysis

The 6 factors generated in the previous section were used as independent variables in our regression model. The regression analysis was performed to measure to what extent the variability of the dependent variable, job satisfaction, was explained by the fresh graduate's perception of skills' possession. The regression analysis produced an adjusted R- square of 0.27. This means that only 27% of the variability of the dependent variable was explained by the independent variables. According to the P-E theory, job satisfaction is affected by the employee's fit in the job. Results revealed that there is a positive significant relationship between the employee's self-assessment and his/her job satisfaction. The ANOVA TEST showed that the F-statistic = 5.44 and is highly significant (Sig. = .000). 3 of the 6 factors were statistically significant (Sig.< 0.05). According to these results, the factor with the most influence in job satisfaction, was the technical and functional skill, knowing how to prepare a financial statement and budgets (Beta = 0.338). The next highest beta was for the generic skills, leadership and decision making skill (Beta = 0.324) and the third factor that also appears to have an effect on job satisfaction was the interpersonal skills and ethic awareness (Beta=0,227) (Refer to table 6).

So it could be said there is a significant positive relationship between the fresh graduates' self-assessments and their level of job satisfaction, supporting H4. The more the fresh graduate feels that he/she is well prepared, the more his/her self-confidence increases thus increasing his/her job satisfaction.

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Table 6: Regression model results

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients			Standardized Coefficient			sig.
	B		Std. Error	Beta			
(Constant)	4.055		0.085			47.816	0
REGR factor score	0.275		0.085	0.324		3.218	0.002
REGR factor score	0.192		0.085	0.227		2.251	0.028
REGR factor score	0.286		0.085	0.338		3.354	0.001
REGR factor score	0.122		0.085	0.144		1.428	0.158
REGR factor score	0.082		0.085	0.096		0.957	0.342
REGR factor score	0.148		0.085	0.175		1.735	0.087

a. Dependent Variable: They feel satisfied in their job because they have the skills they need to perform the job.

5. Conclusions

The results of this study reveal that there is a perception gap between employers and fresh graduates about the preparedness of latters for the accounting profession. From the employers' standpoint, accounting education is not in line with what is required in the work place. Employers' low rating of the graduates' preparedness in all areas under study reflects their general dissatisfaction with the graduates' skill level. These findings support previous research findings about education failing to meet standards expected by practitioners (Burnett, 2003; Kavanagh and Drennan, 2008; Jackling and De Lange, 2009, Daff et al., 2012; Yu et al, 2013). Fresh graduates' high rating of their acquired skill sets shows their inexperience and unawareness of the desired skill level. This difference in perception could be due to fact that employers evaluate new hires based on future performance expectations whereas fresh graduates assess their preparedness on current performance. Employers have higher expectations, particularly in matters related to decision making and analysis. Despite their different perspectives in most of the skill's rating, both groups agree that the decision making skill was the weakest area of graduates' preparedness.

Accounting graduates in Lebanon are found to be inadequately prepared in technological skills and applications, IFRS knowledge, management accounting tools, fundamental of Lebanese taxation and Arabic communication skills (local language). The findings of this study, coupled with those of prior research, give a call for major changes in the accounting curricula. To better reflect the change of the accountant's role in organizations, accounting curricula need to be restructured to cultivate decision making, analysis and communication skills. Case studies, unstructured problems, accounting decision-making tools should be included in accounting courses. Additional courses such as Arabic communication skills, Lebanese taxation and computer software application should be added to the curricula to meet the demand of the profession. Moreover, to close the gap, practitioners and accounting bodies should be invited to participate in the restructuring of the accounting programs.

The findings in this study indicate that there is some agreement between the two groups in terms of skills' importance, they both prioritize technical skills, ranked interpersonal and communication skills amongst the top three and personal attitude as the least important. This particular finding forms a point of divergence from previous literature which indicates that employers and students have different perceptions about the importance of the generic attributes that are required for career success.(kavananh and Drennan, 2008; Yu et al, 2013;

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Abayadeera and Watty, 2014) However, they disagree in the importance of leadership and decision making skills valued more by employers than by the fresh graduates. One of the reasons of this difference in perceptions is that students have too little interaction with the practicing community and they are unable to understand the need of the profession. In most cases, students have no contact with the profession until they are employed. Students should be provided with opportunities to participate in field work, community service engagement and internships. Also, inviting practitioners to lecture in class or to hold workshops will be of help to close the gap.

The overall research findings reveal that employers expect graduates to be more prepared than they actually are and that accounting graduates are supposed to possess a wide range of skills that they may not even be aware of. This perceived gap discourages graduates and dampens motivation leading to low performance. New hires might experience job dissatisfaction and are unlikely to achieve their goals if they do not believe in their ability to perform. In this research, it was found that there is a significant and positive relationship between job satisfaction and student self- assessment of acquired technical, functional, leadership, decision making skill, ethical and interpersonal skills.

This paper provides accounting educators with a useful framework with which to review the current curricula. Knowing employers' and fresh graduates' expectations will help educators to create a learning environment that promote high learning outcomes. It will also help students in their preparation for future employment. Being aware of what are the skills that employers value the most, students will be motivated to acquire or improved them. Finally, findings of this research will guide employers to develop their training and orientation programs, keeping in mind that learning is a continuous process that should be completed on the job.

A limitation of this study is the use of a relatively small and convenient sample. Any extension of this research should include the perceptions of academics and professional bodies and mitigate the above limiting factor. The use of various variables as potential causers of job satisfaction should also be evaluated in an effort to expand the insights gained from P-E fit theory. It will be interesting to test the expectancy theory model in accounting students and fresh graduates already working in the profession.

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