Skill Deficiencies in Students and B-School Interventions : A Qualitative Study Exploring the Perceptions of Leader - Directors

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Abstract

This paper explored the perceptions of Indian B-school (business school) directors about the lack of skills among the students and how various interventions at B-schools help students in skill development. The interviews were conducted and the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was done with the help of QSR Nvivo 11 Pro. The results suggested that the skills lacking in the students at the time of joining an MBA (Master of Business Administration) programme were ethical behavior, discipline, dexterity to work, communication skills, risk-taking abilities, innovation, and creativity. The B-school interventions to develop the skills of the students were found to be encouraging students to solve local problems using research skills, placement holidays to encourage creativity and innovation, teaching and learning through foreign university collaboration, orientation programmes, and skill labs. There was a gap in the literature, and none of the studies have explored the perceptions of Indian B-school directors about the entry-level skills of their students and the way MBA courses help graduates to become employable. This qualitative study was done to fill this research gap.

Keywords : education quality, human capital, human development, skill building, training

JEL Classification : I210, J240, O150

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Education is a source of economic advantage for every country in the world (Vassiliou & McAleese, 2012). People gain higher education credentials that help them to develop professional careers and earn money. Postgraduation is a major requirement for many jobs. MBA (Master of Business Administration) has a clear hegemony as compared to other courses among the youth as it opens doors to several opportunities in the labor market. This is because of the lucrative pay packages offered to MBAs in the country and a glamorous career of a manager in a multi-national corporation. On the other hand, businesses look for candidates who are well-qualified and expert managers with an ability to make operational and strategic choices for the company.

Schultz (1971) contended that both knowledge and skills are a type of human capital and that this capital is a result of purposeful investment. The central assumption of this hypothesis was that the educational institutions in a nation could assume significant responsibility in the advancement of its human capital. Therefore, B-schools, offering a professional course like MBA, must prepare students for the world of work.

Despite the popularity in the business world, for their ability to impart students with the vision of business management (Harsolekar & Munshi, 2018 ; Minocha, Reynolds, & Hristov, 2017), MBA programmes continue being the point of convergence of various criticisms (Poulose & Sharma, 2019). On the one hand, the quality of

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education and the importance of the skills obtained by their students is put on inquiry (Ly, Vickers, & Fernandez, 2015 ; Tho, 2017), with dominance to the acquisition of soft skills over hard ones (Clarke, 2018 ; Tomlinson, 2017). On the other hand, the gap between the curriculum and the necessities of organizations is included, with an accentuation on the rigor of methods and real-life significance of the material being instructed (Bhatia & Panneer, 2019 ; Mohapatra & Mishra, 2017 ; Sangwan & Garg, 2017).

It is also believed that the quality of the outcome of MBA education is directly dependent on the quality of incoming students in the course (Neema & Kasliwal, 2018). Research has shown that successful B-schools are those where their directors have integrated a strong vision with their capability of transformational leadership (Neumann & Neumann, 1999). Directors are required to develop an intellectual edge for their B-schools if they strive to achieve a continued leadership in a knowledge domain and should be able to provide value to their students and employers (Otara, 2015). Additionally, directors have to play a major role in developing the employability of MBA graduates. Despite this, the research on this topic is sparse.

The present research is unique in three important ways :

(i) In the Indian context, there is a paucity of research measuring the skill level of MBA students at the time of joining the course. As directors are the academic leaders who provide strategic vision to MBA programmes, knowing their perceptions about the entry-level skills of the students was deemed important. Each B-school has a unique offering in the Indian MBA education landscape, and most of these offerings are designed according to the skill requirements of the students.

(ii) Although directors are the major stakeholders in the B-school education, the research involving Indian MBA school directors is sparse and very few studies have attempted to study their perceptions.

(iii) There is a paucity of qualitative studies providing the ground reality of the situation of employability and skill development efforts, especially in the context of Indian B-schools.

Literature Review

A business school aims to develop leaders in coordination with the business environment of a country along with providing quality faculty and efficient curriculum (Bailey, Chow, & Haddad, 1999). The aim is also to breed high-quality managers who are culturally sensitive, have a higher level of emotional intelligence, constant learners, creative, and have a sense of ethics and understand social responsibilities (Mihail & Elefterie, 2006).

Despite the mushrooming of B-schools in India and strong growth in enrollment, the B-schools are more famous for their profit generation and lesser for the development of intellectual capital (Thomas, Starkey, & Tempest, 2008). This has become a predominant situation for almost all the B-schools in India. Most of the B-schools have the same mission : to produce graduates who can get placed as soon as they finish the course. However, in the present climate of fierce competition and globalization, B-schools need to develop a competitive advantage (Howard, Cornuel, & Almog-Bareket, 2012). There are frequent demands for innovation in curriculum, enhancing its practical relevance, improving the teaching and learning methods (Howard et al., 2012 ; Singh, Kazi, & Divekar, 2019), and this should alarm directors if they want their B-schools to excel in the field of MBA education.

Change has become inevitable in today's technology-intense and fast-paced world (Richards - Wilson, 2002). Ambiguity, uncertainty, and protean careers are the reality of today (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). The rapid innovation happening in the field of the business world requires managers who are dynamic in approach, sensitive, imaginative, and creative (Thomas & Thomas, 2011). The MBA education market is a global one (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006), where the competition for attracting quality students and producing employable graduates has become intense (Conway, Mackay, & Yorke, 1994).

To ensure that the students in B-schools can develop the aforementioned skills requires the change of mindset and culture (Otara, 2015). The B-schools constantly have to face a shortage of quality teachers ; resource crunch ; resistance to change ; adherence to long and inefficient procedures ; and exceptionally high expectations from students, their parents, and employers (Richards - Wilson, 2002). Additionally, B-schools in India have to face constant dissatisfaction with the ways the MBA graduates are being prepared for the industry and the overall relevance of management education (Sangwan & Garg, 2017). The expectations from employers are also vague and nonhomogenous. The B-schools, today, have to confront many challenges and to survive amid these challenges requires continuous realignment with the needs of their stakeholders such as students and employers (Otara, 2015).

The Economic crisis of 2008 has also raised concerns about the capabilities of academia in preparing quality graduates. Schumpeter (2009) contended that teaching at B-schools lacks rigor and prepares myopic graduates who severely lack creativity, critical thinking, and are morally bankrupt. Therefore, the B-schools should be blamed for the economic crisis (Howard et al., 2012). The crisis also gave ways to the debates on television news, newspapers, and business magazines about the utility of B-schools all over the world. Furthermore, due to many scandalous events such as Enron, Volkswagen, and Satyam, doubts have been cast on the ethical sense and the business education of managers.

This has created pressure on B-school directors to ensure that they are providing education to the graduates with a sense of business that is not just environmentally sustainable, but also socially responsible (Locke & Spender, 2011). The current situation requires directors to not only be flexible in their approach, but also to examine their values and assumptions (Howard et al., 2012). The directors have to provide a clear sense of purpose to the MBA programmes and impart morality and ethics to their students (Thomas & Thomas, 2011).

The directors have the responsibility to challenge the status quo and look for innovative ways to improve the organizational effectiveness of their B-schools in today's volatile environment (Abu-Tineh, Khasawneh, & Al-Omari, 2008). The issues such as technology and innovation, globalization, the impact of research, and the perspective about the ethics and corporate social responsibility are at the forefront in the debates to evaluate the value proposition of B-schools (Thomas & Thomas, 2011).

Driscoll and Wicks (1998) believed that rather than the nearly impossible task of keeping up with the speed of business, the B-schools should assume the responsibility of imparting graduates with lateral and creative thinking, imagination, and critical thinking so that they can adapt to changes easily. Ward and Chandler (1999) contended that the half-life of knowledge is becoming shorter and the skills of collecting relevant data, managing data, gathering insights, and analyzing data are gaining importance. It is a director's responsibility to answer for the business education programme's success and failure in preparing graduates to meet their professional obligations (Vidaver - Cohen, 2004).

Against this backdrop, it has been realized that there is a strong need to assess the perceptions of academic leaders about graduate skill development, especially in the context of recent organizational failures and ethical scams attributed to graduates of reputed B-schools.

Objectives of the Study

(1) To know the perceptions of the leader–directors about the various skills the students usually lack at the time of joining their schools.

(2) To explore the perceptions of the leader–directors about how the educational interventions in MBA programmes help in skill development for the students.

Methodology

This research is a part of a larger and more comprehensive study done by me during my Ph.D. project. The interviews for this research project were done during the period of seven months from November 2017 – May 2018.

Purposive sampling was done for this study. The segmentation of MBA schools was done based on *The Business Today* rankings published in December 2015 issue (Sharma, 2015). The complete rank-list of 269 schools all across India was divided into four equal parts with 25% of schools in each segment. The middle two segments were added and the final segmentation had three parts, namely top tier, mid-tier, and bottom tier. The top tier represented top-performing schools, mid-tier represented average-performing schools, and bottom tier represented low-performing schools. The list of schools located in Delhi and NCR (National Capital Region) was identified within each segment and the schools were contacted through e-mail addresses and phone numbers listed on their respective websites. The final sample had two schools selected from each of the top-, mid-, and bottom-tier list.

I personally visited each of these selected schools. The final sample size for this paper is six participants : one leader – director from each school. I have given pseudonyms to each of these leader–directors. Thus, "Leader A" represents the director of the first school from top-tier category, "Leader B" represents the director of the second school from top-tier category, "Leader C" represents the director from the first school in the mid-tier category, and so on. Please refer to Table 1 for the sample description and characteristics.

Table 1. Sample Description and Characteristics

Tier	School	Participant Pseudonyms	Participant Characteristics	School Characteristics
Top	School 1	Leader A	Male: 30 years of academic experience and 3 years of industrial experience.	School 1 comes under the aegis of a leading government university. It is one among the top 10 B-schools in India. It was established in the 1950s and has a very strong alumni base.
Top	School 2	Leader B	Male: 27 years of academic experience.	Autonomous institute with a title of Institute of Eminence. The school has received top ranks in QS 2019 world rankings.
Mid	School 3	Leader C	Male: 24+ years of academic experience.	Private leading university of India.
Mid	School 4	Leader D	Male: 30 years of academic experience.	Private B-school. For admission, it requires cut-off of 50% and above in the school's own admission test.
Bottom	School 5	Leader E	Male: 25 years of academic experience.	Private B-school affiliated to APJ Abdul Kalam University. Admission is on direct basis.
Bottom	School 6	Leader F	Female: 25+ years of academic experience.	Private B-school. Admission on direct basis.

The data were collected with the help of in-depth face-to-face interviews with each of these six leader–directors. The complete duration of each interview was approximately 1.5 hours. The verbatim transcripts were prepared for each of the six interviews, and the transcripts were imported into QSR Nvivo Version 11 for final analysis. The thematic analysis was done based on the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006).

Results and Discussion

Each of the leader–directors from the six B-schools was asked "What are your perceptions about the skills that are

usually missing from the students at the time of joining an MBA programme in your school?" The leader–directors from the top categories of schools highlighted that the major skills lacking in students were values, ethical behavior, discipline, dexterity to work, communication skills, people skills, innovation, and creative problem-solving skills.

In the words of Leader A :

> The four-five skills that are coming to my mind are…values, ethical behavior, discipline, dexterity to work, communication skills, and people skills.

Out of all these skills, Leader A emphasized the importance of ethics and values for MBA students :

> From the age of seven, right to the age of ninety-seven, the values and ethics of a person are going to be evaluated.

The famous corporate scams, such as Satyam, Enron, and Volkswagen, have increased the importance of teaching business ethics in the MBA curriculum. It has likewise been contended in the literature that dishonest conduct in school can prompt exploitative conduct in business (Ghanem & Mozahem, 2019 ; Kara, Rojas-Méndez, & Turan, 2016) ; accordingly, correcting dishonest conduct in schools can help to cultivate ethical business practices (Moosmayer, 2012). Business schools have an important task of developing future business pioneers and leaders and it is pivotal to help students in internalizing ethical practices at the school level with an expectation that students will endure these practices in their future employment also (Ma, 2013).

Leader A also raised concerns about the lack of risk-taking capabilities among students :

> People at this age don't want to take a risk. They want an assured salary. They don't want to be a risk-taker. But what is the risk at the age of twenty-three? All that you need to have is a Barsati (a one-room set) , somebody to provide you with a Dibba (tiffin), and three-four tore jeans and a couple of T-shirts. But people don't look at that part….if you can convert your dream into a reality, then you become a start-up. But the students, generally, don't apply their mind.

When the author probed deeper, Leader A stated the reason as :

> They think that I will have an experience of a couple of years and after that, I will save some money, and will get into entrepreneurship. Then it will require a very strong will power because 4 – 5 years down the line, there will be a parental pressure to get married. After you (a student) get married, another 5 years are needed to settle down, and that risk-taking capacity goes down.

The concerns raised by Leader A were found to be reasonable. The employment growth rate in the past few years has been dismally low (Oberoi, 2019). Singh, Madihchie, and Lewa (2015) also contended that most of the B-schools in India do not offer any guarantee of a job after the course. On top of that, only 5% of the adult populace in India is able to figure out how to set up their very own business. This is among the lowest as compared to other countries (Shukla, Parray, Chatwal, Bharti, & Dwivedi, 2016). The lack of entrepreneurial orientation among students is a cause of concern even for top category B-schools of the country.

Apart from the lack of entrepreneurial capabilities, Leader A also raised concerns about the lack of will power and motivation among students to become social change agents and social entrepreneurs :

Making a difference to the society… you need a real madness to do that. Some, you know, disturbed personalities will understand the relevance of that… see if it's the question of entrepreneurship …it means money first and social service later. However, in the case of making a difference to the society, it's social service first and the money later.

Preparing students to become social entrepreneurs and pioneers is becoming progressively common in B-schools around the world (Chavadi & Sirothiya, 2018). As suggested by the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals form their identities based on the feeling of belongingness to a certain social classification (that is, nationality, religion, and so on). The schools have a significant task of building up a social character or identities of their students. Smith and Woodworth (2012) argued that the students who become a part of social enterprise projects in the classrooms are able to make a positive impact on society later on.

Leader B of the top category school highlighted the lack of innovation and creativity among students. According to Leader B,

Functional skills…anyways…they get. Because they are getting regular classes on it. What they don't have is adequate input and creativity. So, yes, innovation, designing problems, seeing integrations, and solving problems in creative ways …all these aspects are completely missing.

Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak, in his interview given to *The Times of India*, mentioned that success is the composite function of academic excellence and a high paying job for the youth of India. The result is the lack of capability among the masses to be unconventional and creative in their approach toward life and career in general ("Steve Wozniak points at lack of creativity in Indian education system," 2018).

The mid- and bottom-tier schools did not have stringent admission criteria and had a very diverse student background. Many students were from different states of India and some had rural background also. According to the directors, these students lacked aptitude for management, were shy in presentations, and lacked the desired level of communication skills. The students reportedly had problems in expressing their thoughts also.

In the words of Leader C:

Skills ? We get students from all types of backgrounds. They lack aptitude for management. They are shy in giving presentations in front of their class.

Similarly, Leader D stated :

See the students we get…many students cannot communicate effectively. Not only that but effective writing, reading, and drafting skills are also missing.

The leader–directors from bottom tier also stated the lack of skills, such as communication, reading, and comprehension among their students at the time of joining the school.

In the words of Leader E:

The most important skill for an MBA student is going to be communication. Unfortunately, most of the students lack this skill. Another important skill on which they usually lack is the ability to read and comprehend.

Tuleja (2014) contended that graduates, now, have to be the part of international teams within the organization and they have to interact with the clients across the globe. The demand for English language and other foreign languages is at an all-time high now.

Leader F also highlighted the lack of communication skill as the major problem among students :

> The kind of students that we get here are not good at English communication.

All the six leader – directors were also asked how the two years of MBA in their respective schools helped students in skill development. The leader–directors talked about placement holidays, sending signals to the recruiters that they are in serious business of developing their students, sensitizing students to solve local and global problems, and various other interventions.

Leader A talked about maintaining discipline and how it works as an indicator of the seriousness of a school in preparing students for the industry :

> I enforced 90% attendance in my school. Some students said that 90% was my ego. But it was not. It was done to transfer message to the industry that this school is in serious business. In the two years duration, there were some 300 – 400 people from the industry who came to meet students, and also there were some special workshops on finance, marketing subjects in collaboration with the industry. I believe everybody could not do everything, but everybody could get something to learn. These things matter a lot.

The signalling theory proposed by Spence (1978) contended that the education of a worker helps him to claim better wage rate in the job market. The level of education works as a signal to the recruiters that the worker is capable to perform a job. However, in India, not only the level of education, but also the reputation of the school works as a signal of a graduate's capability. People acquiring a degree from the well-reputed institutions have an upper hand in searching and acquiring new jobs and they get preference from the recruiters also (Rivera, 2011).

Another point that was raised by Leader A was of the facility of placement holidays :

> We give them a two year placement holiday. So, students who want to try their hands at business can take off up to a maximum of two years…and if they fail… they can come back and say that I would like to appear in the placement interviews and the placement cell will help them.

MBA is fundamentally a risk-averse degree. The current model of MBA is characterized by some core and elective courses, one internship, some industry seminars, and a couple of corporate and industry interaction sessions. This model has worked well in the past for traditional jobs such as marketing and consulting. However, due to disruptive innovations, technological progress, and globalization, it is being said that this model will become ineffective in the times to come (Hynes, Kennedy, & Pettigrew, 2016). In such an environment of uncertainty, the B-schools have to play an important role in the development of entrepreneurial capabilities of their students (Hynes et al., 2016).

Leader B stated :

> I always encourage my students to identify the solutions to local problems and be connected with the society. The school is faring well when it comes to research, publications, and citations. However, what is missing is the connection with the society. For example, there were massive traffic jams in Gurugram due to heavy rains. Problems like this need immediate attention and the development of affordable solutions. Many companies in Gurugram are multi-nationals dealing with bigger problems facing the world. However, I believe, we should try to solve local problems also.

Leader B's school has recently attained the top ranks in the QS World University Ranking 2019 by subject (QS, 2019). It clearly shows the hegemony of the school in the field of academic research and innovation. Further, Leader B also talked about how the school is providing global orientation to its students :

> We call faculty from abroad and they teach students for 1 month or so. We bear all the expenses. The students get the chance to be aware of global business practices. It enhances their cultural intelligence and helps them to be aware of different work cultures than their home country.

In recent times, globalization of organizations over the world has become quicker than the internationalization of business colleges in terms of faculty, students, and what is being instructed (Kedia & Englis, 2011). The literature is abundant with investigations of how business colleges ought to respond to the effects of globalization (Bashir & Minhas, 2019 ; Ojala, 2019 ; Pudelko & Tenzer, 2019; Stauffer, 2019).

Leader C stated previously that the student background is diverse and they get students from rural areas also. Leader C was further asked how the two years prepare these students. In the words of Leader C :

> Our orientation programme is very helpful for all types of students. It makes them aware of what are the objectives of the course and what are the activities that will be done and how they can participate in these activities and help themselves.

Holmberg's theory of teaching – learning conversations argued that if students see the practical relevance of the course material, they feel motivated to excel in the classroom (Holmberg, Schuemer, & Obermeier, 1982). Although this theory was originally proposed in the context of distance education courses, the theory has relevance in the case of all types of educational programmes. The B-schools in India call industry leaders as well as the alumni during their orientation programmes. The alumni share their personal experiences of doing the course, along with transition experiences, and provide tips and advice to students in terms of choosing a career and internships. Similarly, the presence of corporate recruiters on the campus helps students to be aware of the industry skill requirements and to set realistic expectations from their MBA. These efforts help MBA students to design and develop their careers in the corporate world and be life-long learners.

Similarly, Leader D discussed the school's unique way of bucketing students based on the similarities of goals and providing individual help :

> Let's say we look at… at what are the skill deficiencies. We analyze their skill deficiencies concerning their career goals and then we put students into different buckets. We work on them.

Leader D elaborated further :

> See the beauty of education is not to categorize students. The beauty lies in paying attention to the individual skill requirements, sensitizing them towards their goals, and helping them to discover themselves.

Leader D also talked about the student-driven clubs :

> The other thing is the student-driven clubs. Every activity is organized by the students independently.

Leader E and Leader F (bottom-tier schools) also talked about the importance of communication skills and

personality grooming and discussed the various skill labs and personality development programmes occurring in their respective schools.

Leader E and Leader F stated :

> We have incorporated skill labs. You will see one of the labs is a skill enhancement lab. Personality grooming is there. Then an MBA student must be connected to the outside world. We have cultural events where participants come from various other schools.

> We encourage them to learn 30-40 words every day. This increases their vocabulary. We even encourage them to speak in English. It increases their fluency.

It was observed that all the selected B-schools were conducting several types of personality development programmes for their students. However, the effectiveness of these programmes and their relevance for the industry is still a matter of debate and needs to be investigated further.

Conclusion

This paper examines the perceptions of the directors of six MBA schools (categorized as top-, mid-, and bottom-tier schools) located in Delhi-NCR region about the skills that are lacking in students at the time of joining an MBA in their respective schools and how the duration of two years helps students in the development of employability skills.

The interviews revealed that the directors (especially from the top category schools) stated that apart from making students industry leaders, their efforts are also centered on sensitizing students toward entrepreneurship and encouraging them to solve local and global problems. The directors from mid and bottom categories' schools also believed that each student is different and the beauty of education is to celebrate these differences and helping students to realize their personal as well as professional goals. The directors from mid and bottom category schools also stated the need for developing the personality of the students so that they become fit for the industry.

The various interventions, as stated by the select leader–directors, are opportunity for placement holiday, a compulsion of attendance, conducting research projects that are based on local problems, inviting foreign faculty to take classes at the school, informative and sound orientation programmes, skill labs, and student-driven clubs. The research reveals that each selected school in the sample was working hard on preparing its students not only as per the requirements of the industry, but also to realize their other career aspirations, such as being an entrepreneur and social change champions.

Managerial Implications

The present study has highlighted the constraints the MBA programme directors face to advance the agenda of students' skill acquisition in a B-school environment. The acquisition of complex managerial skills as an expected outcome of an MBA can be an overly ambitious expectation of the employers and might create a false impression of the programme failure. The present study calls for the greater attention of manager–practitioners toward the partnership efforts with B-schools to provide industry exposure to MBA students. This will not only develop students' interests in MBA, but will also help them realize the importance of certain managerial skills in real-life job-related situations. The manager–practitioners can collaborate with B-school directors and consider methods of preparing graduates that will promote not only the acquisition of skills, but also their maintenance and further development.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research

The limitation of the study is its small sample size. As this is a qualitative study, the results are not generalizable to other situations. Future studies can address the same research problem in a different setting, that is, in B-schools outside Delhi and NCR region. This study can be re-designed and survey forms can be used to assess the skill level of students precisely at the time of joining an MBA programme. The results of this study can also be generalized with the help of a larger sample. The perceptions of managers–practitioners can also be included and compared with the perceptions of directors and other stakeholders.

Author's Contribution

Neha Bhatnagar conceived the idea. She collected and analyzed the data and has written the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The author certifies that she has no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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