Chapter VII

Professional Skills Acquisition in the Internet Age: Exploring the Perceptions of Undergraduates and Recent Graduates

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Abstract

If academic institutions are to be responsive to changing student and industry requirements, they need to continually match their academic offerings with both market and student requirements. In recent years, universities throughout the world have experienced a serious decline in student enrolments in information systems and electronic commerce programmes. From existing literature as well as from empirical studies, this chapter explores the skills acquisition process of information systems students in order to match undergraduate and graduate perceptions of “hard” and “soft” skills requirements in the Internet Age.
Introduction

The arrival of the Internet and its consequences for business and industry saw a rapid increase in the number of students seeking to qualify in information systems. The technology—and its business potential—clearly captured the imagination of people of all ages. The resulting rapid increase in student numbers left academic institutions hard-pressed to cope—and to find suitably qualified professionals fit for the task. To cope with the flood of interest, and to help future proof their technological offerings in the marketplace, many large companies established their own “industry qualifications” to help meet the demand for IT/IS skills.

Since the “DotCom crash” that ushered in the 21st century economy, universities throughout the world have experienced a serious decline in student enrolments in Information Systems and Electronic Commerce programmes. Was this a reflection of the “commoditisation” of IT as claimed by Nicholas Carr (2004) or was it reflective of a growing skepticism about the continuing role of information and communications technologies (ICT) in driving economic growth?

While numerous theories about the causes and the longer-term effect were debated, the experience also gave cause for reflection on the content of undergraduate courses and the relevance of the experiential process to which students are subjected. Clearly, student perceptions of programme relevance to future career needs had changed. Was there a correlation between the perceptions of undergraduates and those of graduates who had been practicing in industry for several years? Perhaps the requirements of the industry had changed? Did the conventional view of the discipline need to be updated in the face of this new reality?

Generally speaking, students’ efforts are focused not only on achieving a degree or diploma, but also on the acquisition of marketable skills useful to them when they pursue their future career. One imagines they come into their first year of study with a vision of what their capabilities will be at the end of the educational process. Their vision may not be finely crafted, but it will involve some understanding of the sort of knowledge and skills to be acquired in the educational process. That understanding will partly be determined by the curriculum set by the school in which the student has chosen to study.

If academic institutions are to be responsive to changing student and industry requirements, they need to continually match their academic offerings with both market and student requirements. Of course, these may be divergent, with student perceptions being different from those of employers. At the same time, authoritative educational institutions need to ensure that their offerings are competitive with other similar institutions regionally and internationally, and, built
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