

# Business Studies Teachers and Student Needs

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is a report on the findings of a study conducted on the direct users of the Business Studies curriculum in Malaysia to uncover the perceived gap between what was experienced with what was wanted. Interviews were used to examine the needs of the Form Six (equivalent to "A" level) Business Studies teachers and students. Findings indicate that teachers wanted some form of practical work but were worried about the time constraint in carrying it out. Certain topics such as business law, cooperatives and non-profit organisations should be discarded from the curriculum or revamped. Students clamour for practical work and emphasise the need to improve their communication, problem solving and leadership skills. Teachers and students felt values such as honesty, integrity and responsibility should be inculcated in students. Positive attitude, hardworking and strongly motivated are attitudes necessary for success in the business world, and these should be emphasised as well. The Malaysian Examination Council, which is the developer of the curriculum, needs to take a serious look at the lack in the curriculum to ensure a comprehensive curriculum is developed..

Keywords: *Business, Teachers, Student*

## INTRODUCTION

In line with the Malaysian government policies of creating economic growth for the country, there was a need to provide more emphasis on business education (Malaysian Examination Council, 1998). Involvement in business needs knowledge and good business acumen to withstand global competition. Due to the fast development and expansion in businesses, the Business Studies subject was thus suggested to be taught to Form Six Malaysian students beginning in 1998.

According to the Malaysian Examination Council (1998), the body involved in designing and developing the Business Studies curriculum, the said curriculum would enable students to continue their education at institutions of higher learning; continue their education to professional level; and enter the field of business, management and entrepreneurship. Students should also be readily equipped with the minimum skills to be an average entrepreneur (Malaysian Examination Council, 1998). In similar tones, Crews and Stitt-Gohdes (2002) suggested secondary business education programmes should enable students to pursue a programme, graduate, and successfully move into the workforce or postsecondary education. In reality, not all Form Six students were able to get accepted into local varsities (Rao, 2008). Joining the workforce proved difficult as many of the school leavers were found to be lacking in skills. According to the Prime Minister of Malaysia Dato' Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak (2012), young people find their qualifications do not match the opportunities available in the job market. The ever increasing requirement for a skilled workforce and able entrepreneurs reflects the need to study the ability of schools to produce skilful small scale entrepreneurs. Dewey's ideal of "education through occupations" (Dow, 2002) reflected the need for a pragmatic curriculum. Furthermore, the advent of globalisation and increasing international connectivity has resulted in demands for a more global education model. An innovative curriculum is needed to address these challenges and give much attention to local business needs (Association of Asia-Pacific Business Schools, 2012).

## The Study

The 1998 Business Studies curriculum is more than a decade old and the users have lamented over the gap between what they wanted from it and what was actually experienced. We need to know whether the 1998 Business Studies curriculum catered to the demands of the direct users of the curriculum. The direct users of the Business Studies curriculum were teachers and Form Six (equivalent to "A" level) students. A needs analysis was carried out on teachers and ex-students of the Business Studies curriculum to delve deeply into their perceptions of the curriculum and what they wanted from it. The purpose of the study was to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the current Business Studies curriculum and its relevance to the future business environment.

Two research questions were posed. RQ1: What are the teachers' and ex-students' perceptions of the present Business Studies curriculum? RQ2: What are the teachers' and ex-students' perceptions of the knowledge, skills and values needed to be acquired by the Form Six Business Studies students for future business needs? This analysis would be able to identify the teachers' and ex-students' perceptions of the present Business Studies curriculum and the knowledge, skills and values to be acquired by the Form Six Business Studies students for future business needs.

Other stakeholders were not chosen for this part of the study as this is the needs analysis of teachers and ex-students of Business Studies. Further study on other stakeholders, and more importantly the business community, is necessary to ensure the curriculum meets the needs of the future business environment.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study is qualitative in nature and the interview method was used. A semi-structured interview protocol was chosen as the tool to conduct needs analysis of the Business Studies curriculum users. The protocol was built based on literature reviews and research question posed. Before the interviews were carried out, the interview protocol was verified by five teachers.

Interview participants were chosen from the population of teachers and ex-students of the Business Studies curriculum. The two samples used were purposive snowball samples. This kind of sample was selected for a few reasons. This study wanted to know teachers' and teacher trainers' perceptions of the curriculum as they are its direct users. They could provide a thorough evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum. Next, ex-students were chosen as sample as they have used the curriculum and hence would be able to provide their perceptions of whether the curriculum catered to their immediate needs (in universities or as entrepreneurs). Ex-students, upon leaving schools, would not be easy to trace as their personal details such as phone numbers would not be divulged by schools to outsiders such as researchers. Trochim (2006) suggested purposive sampling be used to reach a targeted sample quickly and where sampling for proportionality was not of primary concern. He further described how snowball sampling was useful for the research to reach very small populations. Using Trochim's (2006) suggestions, teachers, teacher trainers and ex-students were able to be obtained as samples for the study.

Identified participants were formally invited to participate. The first sample consisted of eleven teachers from five different states. Three of them were teacher trainers while the rest were teachers, all of whom have teaching experiences ranging from five to fourteen years. Some of the participants were also examiners marking the Business Studies Malaysia Higher School Certificate (MHSC) answer scripts. In brief, all these participants were well versed with the curriculum and were experts in the field.

The second sample had eight ex-students from public universities in Malaysia who were presently studying various types of sub-business education courses in the said institutions. The students' perceptions of the effectiveness and usefulness of the Business Studies curriculum would reflect the achievement of the objectives of the curriculum as feeders to institutes of higher learning (universities). They would also be able to provide information as to the knowledge obtained being helpful to further their studies (Malaysian Examination Council, 1998). Another three ex-students in the second sample have been working in the business environment for two years. Their feedback on the curriculum would give readers insights regarding the usefulness—or lack of usefulness—of the content learnt as applied to the actual business environment. After the interviews were conducted, they would be transcribed and coded. Emerging themes were then derived from the codes.

## FINDINGS

The 1998 syllabus of Business Studies has several major topics (i.e., Introduction to Business, Business Environment, Business Entities, Introduction to Management, Planning, Organising, Leadership, Control, Marketing, Production, Finance, Human Resource, Management Skills, Commercial / Business Law, Information Technology, Communication, Entrepreneurship, Cooperatives & Non-Profit Organisations, International Business, and Ethics and

Social Responsibilities). The majority of the teachers acknowledged the Business Studies curriculum was successful in exposing various components of business to students. The teachers felt the coverage of topics on this subject was too wide and they often had to teach them sketchily so as to ensure the syllabus would be successfully covered in the limited time frame provided. Some of the teachers suggested certain topics be taken out of the syllabus. For example, they proposed that content in business law should be reduced or taken out of the syllabus as students found it hard to digest the information. The teachers also felt the topics on cooperatives and non-profit organisations were not very important. Economic blocs touched in the topic of international business are deemed unimportant for students at this level. Many of the teachers emphasised the introduction of e-commerce into the curriculum given the present widespread internet usage and globalisation.

Six teachers were dismayed that Business Studies was more theoretical (non-engagement in practical work) than practical-based. Questions arose as to the possibility of school leavers, armed with only theoretical knowledge, being able to become entrepreneurs as they were not exposed to any business experiences. Teachers felt practical work should be incorporated because this is an applied subject by nature. An internship could be useful in providing practical work experience but the teachers were sceptical as to the logistics in getting students to go through such a phase in the limited schooling time allocated.

A very vague area in the curriculum is that skills and values were not explicitly stated in it but some teachers were proactive about these. They teach the theoretical aspect of skills and values of what students should possess for the business environment based on the teachers' own interpretation of the syllabus. Some teachers tried to provide some form of practical exposure of the skills or values through their own initiatives, as shown in the following excerpts from the interviews:

Participant T3 said: "My students and I, everytime there is a function in school, I will tell them to take part in business (to sell some products to earn money)". "...early of the year, I asked them (students) to build [sic] a small business, then asked them to develop a product, market it, and write a report on it..."

Participant T7 said: "On entrepreneurship day (as held in schools), they (students) know [sic] what to sell and how to advertise".

Seven teachers felt the curriculum was successful in producing students with entrepreneurial skills and values, while the rest of the teachers were sceptical about this. The latter felt students were only equipped with the theoretical aspect and armed with entrepreneurial knowledge; thus they could only work for employers. The entrepreneurial skills could only be obtained if the students have gone through practical work. Kolb's experiential learning model (Kolb, 1984) stated the importance of experience in the learning process. The teachers further suggested an aptitude for and good attitude toward business and entrepreneurship in students would ensure a higher rate of success in the business environment. Integrity and hard work were also values to inculcate in students entering the business world; the participants felt that students themselves need to have the entrepreneurial drive if they want to succeed in this field. To overcome the problem of time constraint for practical work such as internship, some participants suggested business simulation using business software to overcome the problem.

All participants agreed that Marketing is important but the coverage in the curriculum for this level was too wide. The topic on communication did not emphasise communication with clients and fellow workers, and thus should be rectified. Another skill mentioned by some participants was 'Problem Solving' skill; only two of them said the students obtained such skills through this subject, while the rest said students do not grasp or were very poor at it. Four teachers perceived the curriculum provided opportunities to inculcate teamwork among students. Such low perception showed teamwork was not clearly stated as one of the skills to be formally taught to students.

The needs analysis continued with interviews using the same protocol for teachers on ex-students of the Business Studies curriculum. All eleven ex-students (S1-S11) were in agreement that they gained knowledge of business through this subject, with two of them (S3 and S11) saying that they could apply what they have learned to the real world as well as in everyday life. Four of them (S1, S4, S9, and S11) felt what they have learnt was sufficient and there was no necessity to discard any topics in the curriculum.

S4 and S5 stated that they have only skimmed the surface of many topics and would have preferred more emphasis be given to the content of certain topics such as Leadership and Problem solving. S4 preferred a reduction of topics as it would provide more time to concentrate on topics deemed important for examination. Interestingly, three of the students (S1, S2, and S3) who have already started working felt that this subject was too theoretical and should have some elements of practical work.

S1 at S1/C/W/13 said, "The weakness (of Business Studies) is we learnt only (the) theory (aspect). But luckily, (my) teacher did one week of practical."

S3 at S3/C/W/99 said, "For me, I see schools give very little practical for Business Studies...when we work, I see theory we learnt different, actually in companies, different (comparing real situation with what was learnt)...In school less practical."

The most frequent topic mentioned by the students (S2-S7) was "Leadership". Three of the students (S2, S6, and S7) complained that more emphasis should be given to this topic as they felt they needed such skills at the institutions of higher learning and work.

S7 at S7/C/W/36-40 said, "(It) is very important (Leadership), ... scope not enough (was not emphasised much while in school)".

Another significant topic was 'Information Technology' where they (S1, S5, S6, and S9) felt e-business should be taught instead of just an exposure of what information technology was all about. This was similar to the opinions of teachers.

Three students (S1, S5, and S6) proposed the topic "Cooperative and non-profit organisations' be discarded and another (S2) felt it was of not much importance though it can be introduced to students. Only one student (S3) felt this topic was useful as this student had experience working part-time as a seller at a school cooperative.

Some students (S3, S4, and S8) found the topic "Finance' useful when they furthered their studies and this can be seen from S10's opinion that there was insufficient time given to this topic while at school. Three students (S1, S2, and S10) felt the topic on management skill was good and two students (S6 and S7) wished more emphasis had been given to it as they felt the skills learnt in this topic would be useful to them when they joined the workforce.

Eight out of the ten participants felt they needed more coaching on the "Communication" skill, with only participant S3 saying he had a good grounding in communication skill. Entrepreneurial skill was found lacking by five participants (S1, and S5-S8) even though eight students said they have been exposed to this. They hoped more emphasis would be given to improve students' communication skill. Nine of them suggested 'Practical work' should be incorporated into the curriculum, such as in the form of some small business activities for a short duration after school or during school holidays.

Four students (S2, S3, S4, and S7) asserted "Personal interest" (attitude) in business as crucial to a student's success in learning business. Three students (S1, S2, and S3), who had gone through some practical work while in Form Six, said they have been taught skill catering to "Customer satisfaction" and thus found this skill to be useful for the future working world. Two students (S4 and S9) who did not have any practical work experience felt they needed this skill as well to ensure success in business and working life.

Another skill highly looked upon is the "Problem solving" skill. Six of the participants, with two advocating 'Problem Solving' skill strongly, said that Business Studies had provided them with such a skill. They also felt that they had managed to learn to work as a team to solve problems within a given time frame. As such, they had also learnt time management too.

Only one participant (S3) felt he has acquired the "Creative" skill, which according to the literature reviews is important for an entrepreneur. Three other participants (S1, S4, and S5) mentioned they have learnt the technique to be creative but they find it difficult to be creative and hoped more emphasis should be devoted to cultivating this skill. They voiced:

S1 at S1/S/Cr/37 said, "...creative thinking skill less, not enough..."

S5 at S5/S/Cr/132 said, "...creative and innovative. Difficult to make oneself be so..."

Overall, most of the skills were said to have been exposed to students for Business Studies but the students do

not have much confidence with regard to actually putting the skills into practice. Here are some examples of student feedback:

S10 at S10/C/W/48 said, "...Need some practical work. Even if it is just role play, it doesn't matter. Actually, the most difficult is how to do it (put into practice what is learnt in future)."

S11 at S11/C/W/51 said, "In terms of business planning, what have done (learnt) in Form Six, (I) still can't do it."

In terms of values, all participants said they have been exposed to values, though two of them said the values were implicitly inculcated and one participant said it should be introduced formally. Interest, honesty, motivation, responsible, and integrity were some of the most frequent values mentioned as having been inculcated in the students and important to them. Participant S1 asserted that "hardworking, never give up and integrity" were values or attitudes deemed very important to be introduced to students to ensure they will conduct their businesses righteously and virtuously.

"Internship" was suggested by four participants (S1, S2, S5, and S6) as a way to overcome the problem of not being skilful by the time students enter institutions of higher learning. However, two students (S4 and S7) felt internship was limited by the time constraint. This could be overcome by having small scale practical work or carrying out some form of business activities after school hours, or as suggested by eight participants, 'Simulation' could be used to get students exposed to methods of handling businesses in different situations. Simulations could be done at home or during schooling hours.

Six participants (S1, S2, S5, S9-S11) felt that 'Leadership' skill was very important to be taught to equip students to lead their subordinates or teammates when they join the workforce. Another topic which interested the participants was 'E-business'. Six of them mentioned that 'E-business' should be taught as nowadays a lot of business is carried out online or virtually.

## CONCLUSION

The needs analysis conducted in this study shows that skills, values (and attitudes) and content need to be looked at in the design and development of a curriculum. The conceptual framework for the Business Studies curriculum is as shown in Figure 1.

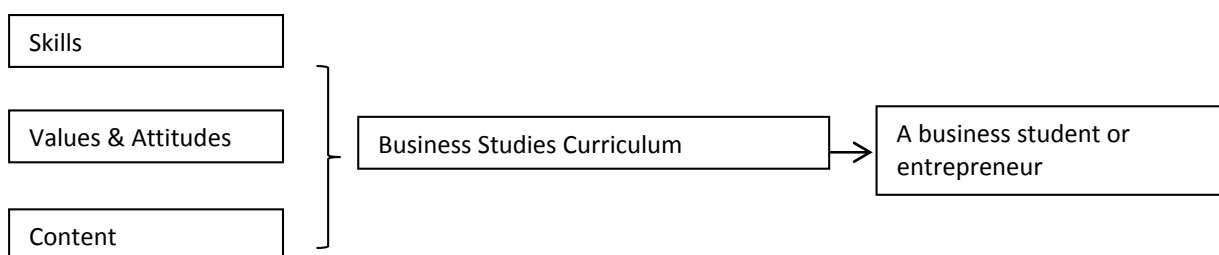


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Business Studies Curriculum.

Many of the needs mentioned by ex-students were quite similar to the needs of the teachers. Teachers' and ex-students' perceptions of the present topics in the Business Studies curriculum were relevant but there was a need to revamp certain topics due to lack of substance, and to discard a topic or two considered as not a necessity to learn at Form Six level. The result showed a strong need for some form of practical work to ensure students are able to apply what they have learnt. There were mixed perceptions as to what form of practical work to be carried out as some stated internship did not seem practical for schools given the time constraints and they preferred business simulations. Further study is necessary to look into the values and practicality of internship. The participants found Business Studies

emphasised theory when this subject needs “hands-on” experiences. Students who have gone through some practical lesson in business conducted by a more “hands-on” kind of teacher found that they enjoyed and remembered what had been taught. They were able to apply what they had learnt to actual business situations. The topic on “e-commerce” was regarded by many participants as a necessary topic to be taught.

Teachers and ex-students perceived “Communication”, “Leadership”, and “Problem solving” skills as crucial to students’ success in the business world. The skill on “creativity” was taught in the syllabus but the students felt they had not acquired the skill. As the curriculum does not have black and white documented instructions to teachers on skills and values to be inculcated in students, teachers taught what they felt were necessary, but this could cause dissimilar results between what was intended by the Malaysian Examination Council with what was implemented and what was actually experienced by the students. Marsh and Willis (2003) defined curriculum as all planned “learnings” for which the school is responsible, yet there exist now different teachers planning different skills and values to teach due to the lack in the curriculum.

This needs analysis phase demonstrated a strong need to revamp the Business Studies curriculum to ensure the curriculum objectives, namely to prepare students to enter institutions of higher learning and / or produce entrepreneurs, were met. The result of this analysis showed an undeniable reason to modify and revamp the curriculum. Further study on the other stakeholders of this curriculum is very urgently needed to identify their needs and what is needed by the future business environment. The Malaysian Examination Council, as the developer of the curriculum, needs to take a serious look at the lack in the curriculum to ensure a comprehensive curriculum is developed.

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