

Graduates' perception of career success and skill emphasis in accounting programme in Nigerian institutions: An exploratory study

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Abstract

Although a great deal of studies on skills expected of accounting graduates have been conducted in industrially advanced countries, interest of researchers in developing economies is recent. Accordingly, this study explores measures of career success and the perceptions regarding the level of emphasis given to both technical and generic skills in Nigerian tertiary institutions from the perspective of accounting graduates. The study is motivated by concerns of scholars and call by the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria. Based on data obtained from 192 graduates, salary and frequency of promotion are perceived to be stronger measure of career success while technical skills; business, computing and ethical skills; interpersonal and problem solving skills as well as communication skills emerged as four components of skills taught and it was found that more emphasis was placed on technical skills at the cost of other skills. The findings from this study will have implications for accounting education in developing countries in general and Nigeria especially.

Keywords: technical skill, generic skills, developing countries, accounting education

1.0 Introduction

The ever-changing needs of the global business environment have resulted in growing emphasis on graduate outcomes. This has led to a consensus among educators, employers and other interest groups that a better mix of technical and generic skills should be fostered among accounting students. Although there is uncertainty as to which skills should be precisely identified as 'generic' (Jones, 2010), the term is used in this study to connote skills other than traditional core accounting subjects.

Most of these concerns are noticeable in economically advanced countries. For instance, in the USA, with the collaborative efforts of principal stakeholders, Accounting

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Education Change Commission (AECC) was appointed to investigate ways to improve the quality of learning achieved by accounting graduates. Specifically, the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, in a study (AICPA, 1999) concluded that public accountants (CPAs) need to have skills in communication, leadership, strategic thinking and client focus. Similarly, professional bodies in New Zealand and the United Kingdom have also sponsored studies designed to identify the desired competencies of professional accountants (as cited in de Lange, Jackling and Gut, 2006). These studies have concluded that professional accountants require technical skills, broadly based behavioural and cognitive skills.

In industrialized nations, a number of universities have introduced a policy that demonstrates the desire to promote the development of graduate skills which encompass lifelong learning, technical training, oral, written and interpersonal skills; and exposure to organisational skills and technology. For instance, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) has been developed in consultation with education and industry specialists in New Zealand. In the United Kingdom, the Dearing Report (1997) recommended the development of communication, numeracy, technology and learning how to learn skills at a higher level within all subjects. In Australia, universities have introduced requirements that graduates must complete a set of attributes which have been typically embedded within the degree courses across each university

The situation of accounting education in the third world countries mirrored that of industrialized countries. The committee on international accounting of the American Accounting Association (AAA) observed that the development of accounting in many third world countries were constrained by among others, poor state of teaching aids and government apathy to development of accounting education (Enthoven, 1983). Like other developing nations, Okafor (2012) asserts that Nigerian accounting graduates are not adequately prepared to meet the accounting needs of modern business, as well as socio-political and economic demands of government; as a result of lapses in the area of curricula content, staffing, teaching aids and funding.

Given the level of decadence in the quality of Nigerian accounting programme as pointed out by Okafor (2012), it is expedient to investigate the possible gap in the quality of Nigerian accounting graduates; and the standard expected of human capital that will provide information to drive the growing economy. Understanding the expectations of employers of accounting graduates has implications on how these graduates are educated. Moreover, evidence exists that the nature of accounting education of accounting graduates impacts on their career success (Rebele, 1985).

Whereas studies on the impacts of the nature of accounting skills on career success were mostly centered on economically developed countries (Ingram and Frazier, 1980; Rebele, 1985; Usoff and Feldmann, 1998; De Lange, Jackling and Gut, 2006), there is

an increasing interest in the emerging economy of Asia (Ahadiat and Smith, 1994; Lin, 2008). Only Awayiga, Onumah, and Tsamenyi(2010), who investigated the perceptions of graduates and employers in Ghana specifically focused on the expectation of stakeholders in Africa. The lack of study on this important issue in Nigeria, which has about 16% of the 56 countries in Africa, constitutes a serious gap in literature.

Undoubtedly, the knowledge of the perceptions of skills emphasis and how they affect career success offer a deeper insight into understanding of the phenomenon. Besides, such awareness has implications for the educators and regulators of accounting education. The objective of this study, therefore, is to bridge this gap by exploring the perceptions of Nigerian accounting graduates on career success, emphasis placed on skills during undergraduate programme by higher institutions and the gap between skills expectation in the industries.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: the next section discusses accounting education system in Nigeria while the third section details the concept and measurement of career success. Relevant prior studies are reviewed in section four; whereas the focus of the fifth section is the development of research questions. Methodology is discussed in the sixth section while details of results are presented in the seventh section. Section eight covers overall discussions of the findings, whereas the summary and future directions end the paper.

2.0 Accounting education system in Nigeria

The Federal Ministry of Education directs education at various levels in Nigeria. As part of its functions, it is empowered to develop curricula and syllabuses at the national level in conjunction with other bodies. For instance, through the National University Commission (NUC) and the National Board for Technical Education (NABTEB), the curricula of various academic programmes are determined in universities and polytechnics. In this context, curricula for accounting graduates are developed by NUC and NABTEB.

It is expected that the accounting programmes in both polytechnics and universities will be dissimilar as a result of the involvement of two different organisations in the supervision of polytechnics and universities. In the polytechnics, accounting students are expected to break for one year industrial experience in a relevant work environment before the commencement of another two-year programme, leading to the award of the Higher National Diploma certificate in accounting. On the other hand, accounting students in Nigerian universities are expected to undergo industrial training, but such experience has not been made a condition for the award of Bachelor of Science in Accounting.

Unlike other jurisdictions where professional accounting bodies and associations play positive roles in the regulation of the quality of accounting graduates through accreditation of programmes and stipulation of specific accounting courses to be passed by undergraduates before being admitted into such bodies, professional accounting bodies in Nigeria are engulfed in rivalry, litigations and struggle for supremacy (Mainoma and Aruwa, 2010; Babalola, 2012).

We are yet to see the active influence of accounting firms and business organisations in the setting of syllabus for accounting graduates in either polytechnics or universities. A beneficial relationship has developed between universities, accounting firms and corporations. In this context, universities are funded by these organisations, and the institutions, in turns, invested the fund in resources and infrastructures to produce future professionals that are needed by the funding organisations (de Lange and Watty, 2011).

The involvement of different oversight bodies in the setting of accounting curricula coupled with poor involvement of accounting bodies, the passive role of the organised private sector and the diverse demand of fast growing sectors in Nigeria may have contributed to what Mainoma and Aruwa (2010) described as challenges of accounting departments which make decisions on curriculum development for degree in accounting problematic.

3.0 Career success

Concern over career success is not only in respect of the individual but also because of its impacts on the organisational performance (Judge, Higgins Thoresen and Barrick, 1999; Thomas, Lillian and Kelly, 2005). Accordingly, efforts have been directed to identify individual and organisational factors that facilitate employees' career success. Career success has been noted as an evaluative concept (Jaskolka, Beyer, and Trice (1985). Therefore, its judgment depends on the type of arbiter. Researchers have studied career success from the perspectives of both individual pursuing the career and third parties.

When it is judged by others, career success is determined on the basis of relatively objective and visible criteria (Jaskolka et al., 1985). Researchers often refer to this type of career success as objective success because it can be measured by observable exoteric indices such as salary and number of promotions (Gattiker and Larwood, 1988; Judge and Bretz, 1994; Kotter, 1982). On the other hand, it is sometimes judged by the individual pursuing the career. In this case, it is referred to as subjective career success and measured by job and career satisfaction.

A number of past studies have focused on objective and subjective measures of career success (Kotter, 1982; Gattiker and Larwood, 1989) while it has also been noted that individuals define their success based on their objective accomplishments subjective

measures (Judge, et al., 1995). Notwithstanding the focus on individual measure, there are studies that have examined both measures (Judge, et al.,1995; Vikineswaran and Jegak, 2011). Accordingly, the current study was based on objective and subjective measures of career success.

Research on career success is considered to fall within the study on upward mobility because those who are able to move up in the society or organisations are often regarded as successful. In consistent with Turner (1960), upward mobility can be contest or sponsored mobility. Contest mobility connotes the belief that all people can compete for upward mobility whereas sponsored mobility system reflects selective favouritism of those who are chosen by the powerful to obtain upward mobility (Thomas, Lillian, Kelly and Daniel, 2005).

The protagonists of contest mobility are of the opinion that one can only rise on an organisational ladder on the basis of one's own ability and contributions. On the other hand, the advocates of sponsored –mobility perspective assert that the established elites pay attention to those individuals deemed to have high potentials and, thereby, offer support to them to ensure their career success. In the current study, we assumed contest mobility is more practised in the private sector of Nigeria and the two measures of career success were used.

4.0 Review of prior studies

The importance of non-technical skills to career success in accounting has been of great interest to accounting educators and practitioners (Rebele (1985). It has been argued that the change in accountants' role from producer of data to participant in organisational decision making has made it necessary for them to have skills that will enable them understand all aspects of how organisation works and communicate in a way that helps in presenting, discussing, reporting and defending their views effectively through written and spoken communication. Although available evidence from empirical studies appears to support correlation between non-technical skills and career success, the different types of skills and respondents used in these studies limit the usefulness of findings from these studies.

Whereas early research efforts focused on communication, their findings were mixed. On the one hand, a stream of researcher has found positive relationship between communication and career success (Ingram and Frazier, 1980; Estes, 1979; Zaid and Abraham, 1994; Stanga and Ladd, 1990; Morgan, 1997; Usoff and Feldmann, 1998) while on the other hand, there are studies where such relationship was not clearly defined (Rebele,1985).

Ingram and Frazier (1980) surveyed opinions of practitioners and academics to study the impact of communication and found that communication was relevant to career success

in public accounting firms. Similarly, Estes (1979) also investigated the importance of a group of topics, including communication skills with the aid of questionnaire administered to educators and practitioners in both private and public sectors. The results showed that all respondents considered both written and oral communication skills to be important to their current positions as accountants. In contrast, Rebele (1985) studied the perceptions of students regarding the importance of communication to career success in accounting and found that the respondents perceived writing skills as a relatively less important determinant of success in public accounting.

Despite the apparent contrary findings, Zaid and Abraham (1994) found that accounting graduates in Australia needed to tackle communication related problem in early stage of employment. In the study conducted in the United States, Stanga and Ladd (1990) asserted that above average communication apprehension exists in the beginning accounting majors whereas Morgan (1997) indicated that a wide range of communication skills is required for accounting graduates entering the accounting profession in the United Kingdom. Also the results of Usoff and Feldmann (1998) indicated that undergraduates could benefit from greater awareness of the importance of generic skills.

Unlike the early studies that focused on impact of communication on accounting graduates, interest of a section of recent researchers appears to favour wide range of non-technical skills. For instance, de Lange, et al. (2006) investigated both technical and non-technical skills. The results indicated that communication and analytical skills were the two most important career influencing skills among Australian accountants.

Likewise, Jones' (2010) study revealed that non-technical attributes should be understood as part of the professional and academic practice of account and as such should be taught as integral part of accounting programme. In this same way, Bui and Poter (2010) contended that the gap between the expectation of the labour market for the accounting graduates and the quality of graduates continued to exist.

From the above, it is obvious that most of the studies were carried out in economically advanced countries. It may, however, be difficult for developing countries to adopt these findings since economic development of nations often determines the growth of their accounting (Okafor, 2010). Besides, Bennett, Bouma, and Ciccozzi (2004) have warned against wholesale transfer of accounting knowledge across borders without due consideration to differences in business environment in individual country while Ahmad and Gao (2004) argued that social and economic characteristics must be fully taken into account in importing accounting education systems and curricula from the West.

Furthermore, Lovell and Dixon (2004) asserted that impact of socio- economic development differences across countries on accounting is not new and, in certain

specific cases, intuitively obvious. Given the wide gap between the economies of industrialized countries and their African counterparts, it is expedient to understand the uniqueness in the perceptions regarding the importance of non-technical skills and career success in accounting. The only attempt in this direction is the study by Awayiga, et al. (2010) who investigated how employers, academics and graduates from Ghana perceive the importance of specific skills to career success of accountants. The fact that Africa is made up of countries with diverse socio-cultural and economic background, it is not clear if the findings from Awayiga, et al. (2010) may be a reference for African countries. Results of studies from other African countries will, obviously, enrich the existing body of knowledge.

5.0 Development of research questions

It is obvious from the review of prior studies that there is an increasing awareness of the need to emphasize generic skills in accounting programmes in Africa. The fact that there is evidence of decline in the standard of accounting education in Nigeria and the uncertainty in the possibility of generalizing findings from studies carried out in Ghana to other African nations, it is pertinent to ascertain from a crucial viewpoint the perception of accounting graduates, being important stakeholder group, regarding the emphasis given to both technical and generic skills in Nigerian tertiary institutions. More specifically, this study attempted to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the measures used by accounting graduate to gauge career success?

RQ2: What is the current perception of accounting graduates regarding the emphasis placed on particular generic and technical skills in their undergraduate degree?

RQ3: Do Nigerian accounting graduates perceive that there is gap in emphasis in generic and technical skills acquired in their undergraduate degree?

6.0 Methodology

6.1 Sample selection

To achieve the objectives of this study, research participants were purposively drawn from members of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN). To qualify for the survey, a research participant should be a senior staff in the private sector, a minimum of first degree holder or its equivalent and also a qualified member of the Institution of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN). For convenience and reliability, snowballing technique was used to purposively administer 350 questionnaires among assessors, who were invited by the Institution of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN) for the central marking exercise in November, 2012 and their colleagues. A total of 192 usable responses were received giving a response rate of 54.8 percent.

6.2 Measurement of variables

A four-section self-report questionnaire, adapted from the instrument developed by de Lange, et al. (2006) was used in the current study. In section one, participants were asked to indicate, on a 6-point Likert scale (from 1= totally agree to 6 = totally disagree), the relative agreement that a set of four factors are perceived to measure their career success. Section two and three, on a 6-point Likert scale (from 1= extremely strong to 6= extremely weak), entailed questions requesting the accounting graduates to indicate the level of emphasis that was given to various skills during their undergraduate accounting programme. In addition, in section three, they were required to reflect on how much emphasis they thought should have been given to these skills. This made it possible to evaluate possible gaps in skills emphasis perceived by the participating graduates. The final section included demographic details of individual participant. The details related to questions on gender, age, year of graduation and educational status.

7.0 Results

7.1 Graduates opinions on career success (RQ1)

The scores were regrouped into two categories to aid interpretation of the results from the survey. The new categories are: important and not important. Responses of participants to the questions, asking them to indicate their agreement that the set of factors have influence on their career success as accountants are summarized in table 1. Nigerian graduate accountants appear to attach higher weight to objective measure of career success. Although salary and frequency of promotion appear to be perceived as better measure of career success than career satisfaction and respect by the supervisor, the finding suggests that the four factors are likely measures of career success. The findings are consistent with past studies (Kotter, 1982; GattikerandLarwood, 1989; Judge, Cable, Boudreau and Bretz, 1995; Vikineswaran and Jegak, 2011).

Table 1

Relative importance of measure of career success

S/N	Skills	Important	Not Important	Total
		%	%	%
1	Increased Salary	92.7.	7.3	100
2	Frequency of Promotion	94.8	5.2	100
3	Career Satisfaction	90.1	9.1	100
4	Respect by Superior	83.3	16.7	100

7.2 *Emphasis on skills in the undergraduate courses (RQ2)*

In this section, the perceptions of graduates about the content of their undergraduate accounting programmes, regarding the development of technical and generic skills were assessed. Responses of participants were subjected to factor analysis, using varimax rotation. Four components were extracted, and they collectively accounted for 75.44 % of the variance among the 20 items. Table 2 depicts the loadings of each item against the four components including technical skills; business, computing and ethical skills; interpersonal and problem solving skills and communication skills. The communalities of all the items are greater than 0.6, indicating that each item contributed meaningfully to the component analysis.

Further examination revealed that the major technical subjects in accounting loaded to component 1. It suggests a relative uniformity in the perceptions of respondents on the emphasis given to these subjects during their undergraduate years. Subjects relating to operational success of a given organisation loaded to form business and ethical skills under component 2. They are not qualified as generic in the context of this study but they are regarded as important non-core courses.

Four out of the six generic skills, including interpersonal skill, time management, problem solving skill and personality skills loaded significantly under component 3 while oral and written communication, two subsets of a generic skill (communication) loaded under component 4.

Table 2

Skills components from rotation

Skills	Component			
	Technical Skills	Business, Computing and Ethical Skills	Interpersonal and Problem Solving Skills	Communication Skills
Mgt ¹ Accounting Skill	.883	.168	.267	.141
Taxation Skill	.853	.245	.035	.138
Auditing and Assurance Skill	.840	.322	.101	.082
Fin ² . Accounting Skill	.834	.189	.255	.197
Business Law Skill	.717	.363	.027	.182
Financial Mgt Skill	.669	.466	.141	.145
Quantitative Skill	.597	.443	.129	.188
International Buss Skill	.293	.833	.005	.078

(continued)

Skills	Component			
	Technical Skills	Business, Computing and Ethical Skills	Interpersonal and Problem Solving Skills	Communication Skills
Business Ethic Skill	.240	.829	.180	.194
Business Envir ³ Skill	.289	.822	.167	.198
Strategic dec ⁴ Skill	.305	.778	.232	.155
Corporate Gov ⁵ Skill	.395	.721	.045	.284
Computer and IT skill	.296	.553	-.053	.512
Interpersonal Skill	.043	-.010	.868	.162
Time Mgt Skill	-.046	.287	.836	.016
Problem solving Skill	.159	.050	.772	.124
Personal Confidence	.168	-.036	.744	.174
Personality Skill	.285	.256	.735	-.056
Written Comm ⁶ Skill	.243	.264	.209	.810
Oral Expression Skill	.237	.328	.296	.723
Percentage of Variance explained by factor	48.277	14.063	8.290	4.811

Key: 1=Management; 2=Financial; 3= Environmental; 4=Decision; 5=Governance; 6=Communication

7.3 Perception of a deficiency in the emphasis on skills (RQ3)

Participants were asked to indicate how much emphasis they thought should have been given to a set of skills in their undergraduate programme to assess whether they perceive. Table 4 shows the result of the t-test performed on skills. In all the set of skills shown in table 4, all emphasis ratings – “should have been given”-were higher than emphasis rating- “was given”-. This suggests a perception of deficiency in the undergraduate courses taken by the participants and that none of the skills have been adequately emphasized.

Moreover, table 3 indicates that respondents perceived the areas of greatest skill gap to be business ethics skill, international business skill, corporate governance skill, business law and interpersonal skill. Unlike the findings of Lange, et al. (2006) where communication skill was the second with the greatest deficiency, the skills with the perceived smallest gap in the current study is written communication skill. Another interesting finding is the ranking of financial accounting, taxation and management accounting as skills with perceived very small deficiency.

Table 3

Difference between skills taught and expectation

Skill	Emphasis	Mean	Diff. means	t	Significance
Business Ethic Skill	Was	2.24	-0.61	-4.833	.000
	Should	2.85			
International Bus. Skill	Was	2.74	-0.6	-4.714	.000
	Should	3.34			
Corporate Gov Skill	Was	2.32	-0.59	-5.202	.000
	Should	2.91			
Social and Ethical Skill	Was	2.18	-0.57	-6.421	.000
	Should	2.75			
Interpersonal Skill	Was	2.01	-0.56	-5.745	.000
	Should	2.57			
Business Law Skill	Was	2.36	-0.54	-5.706	.000
	Should	2.90			
Strategic dec Skill	Was	1.83	-0.5	-5.513	.000
	Should	2.33			
Business Environ Skill	Was	2.07	-0.48	-4.629	.000
	Should	2.55			
Computer and IT skill	Was	2.40	-0.48	-4.549	.000
	Should	2.88			
Financial Mgt Skill	Was	2.17	-0.47	-3.556	.000
	Should	2.64			
Auditing and Assurance Skill	Was	1.99	-0.44	-4.413	.000
	Should	2.43			
Quantitative Skill	Was	2.10	-0.39	-3.999	.000
	Should	2.49			
Written Comm Skill	Was	1.78	-0.37	-3.645	.000
	Should	2.15			
Taxation Skill	Was	2.19	-0.36	-3.280	.001
	Should	2.55			
Teamwork skill	Was	2.16	-0.33	-3.364	.001
	Should	2.49			
Management Acct Skill	Was	2.15	-0.32	-3.259	.001
	Should	2.47			
Oral Expression Skill	Was	1.92	-0.31	-2.991	.003
	Should	2.23			
Financial Acct Skill	Was	2.03	-0.3	-2.979	.003
	Should	2.33			

8.0 Discussion, summary and recommendations

The present study was inspired by the concerns expressed by accounting scholars on the deficiencies in curriculum of accounting programmes in Nigerian higher institutions and call by the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN) for research on how to improve the quality of accountants in the country. The results of the present study address three important areas. First, it highlights the degree of importance of financial reward, job advancement, career satisfaction and respect by superior to the perception of career success of accountants in Nigeria. Second, it categorizes skilled thought into four groups and, finally, it reveals disparity between skills thought and what is expected in the work place based on the experience of respondents who are accounting graduates.

Furthermore, respondents appear to favour two objective measures of career success, including salary increase and frequency of promotion. In the like manner, the highest disparity in the level of emphasis was perceived to be placed on business ethic skill while international business and corporate governance skills were respectively ranked second and third among subjects with highest gap in the level of emphasis given. The findings appear to suggest that the lecturers are either unaware of the increasing demand for students with knowledge in these skills by the employers of labour or the institutions are facing difficulty in developing these skills in students through curriculum activities.

Whereas financial accounting, taxation and management accounting skills were among the four skills with the lowest deficiency in emphasis, written and oral communication were respectively given the least and second least actual emphasis rating (1.78 and 1.92). The observed deficiency in the skills appears to suggest lack of awareness of importance of communication skill on the part of the lecturers. It may also be misplacement of priority on the part of regulators and management of universities who make communication skills a general course regardless of special needs of students in management sciences.

In the same way, the disparity between actual and expected emphases in respect of interpersonal skill is ranked as the fifth highest deficiency gap out of the 18 skills tested in the survey. The result is consistent with those of Mathews, et al. (1990) and Lange, et al. (2006) where interpersonal skill was found to have the highest degree of deficiency. This may also be blamed on either lack of awareness of the importance of the skill by the accounting educators or difficulty in developing the skill in students.

8.1 Summary and future directions

The objective of the present study, that replicated the study of Lange, et al. (2006), was to understand Nigerian accounting graduates' perceptions of career success as well as the emphasis placed on a number of generic and technical skills developed

in their undergraduate programme. To gain insight into this problem, questionnaires adapted from the work of Lange, et al. (2006), were administered through members of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria during the marking exercise in November, 2012.

The results show that organisations that hope to effectively manage career development of graduate accountants should pay attention to objective measures of career success. The findings further suggest that the existing accounting undergraduate programme is inadequate to provide graduates with broad-based general education along with a specialized technical education that can meet the need of the modern day accounting profession. From the study outcome, it is obvious that more emphasis was given to traditional accounting skills at the expense of generic skills.

To ensure global competitiveness of our accountants, it may be necessary for the faculty members in accounting department of our tertiary institutions to review their role in preparing graduates for accounting profession. The refinement of technical skills of accounting graduates may be left with professional accounting bodies while the higher institutions concentrate on the development of graduates with broad-based education. The market can then determine the accounting body of preference where graduates should seek necessary refinement. For the effectiveness of the market mechanism, there may be a need for enabling law that makes it mandatory for the use of employment agency in recruitment of graduates into ministries and agencies at state and federal levels.

The findings from the study should, however, be viewed in the light of two key limitations: despite the fact that the participants are from different sections of the private sectors, their selection could not be on random basis. The use of graduates from both university and polytechnic is also capable of introducing bias. Future study, based on graduates from a particular type of tertiary institution, may provide different insight. Like the practice in industrialized countries, a national and more intensive study of graduates' perceptions of their courses using qualitative techniques may enrich our understanding of level of emphasis placed on specific skills.

Arising from the limitations, an investigation of the expectations of different employer groups, including bankers, insurers, government ministries, telecom operators and operators in oil and gas, therefore, imperative to provide further insight into the range of skill sets required in the accounting profession in this globalized world. In addition, interview survey of accounting graduates and employers will, in no doubt, greatly enrich the existing body of knowledge on this issue.

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