Responding to the Challenges Of Employment Through Graduate Attributes

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Abstract

Responding to the challenges of global employment, universities recognize the need to produce graduates who meet the ever-changing demands of work and life in the national and global environment. This paper investigates the extent of practice of graduate attributes among graduating college students of a Catholic University. It determines the influence of graduate attributes in students' lives. Using a sequential explanatory mixed-method design, the findings revealed that the participants developed the graduate attributes to a high extent. Remarkable implication signifies that university education has successfully prepared and trained students to meet the challenges of national and global employment and industry.

Keywords: Extent of Practice, Employment, Graduate Attributes

1.0 Introduction

The nature of work environment is ever-changing (Moalosi, Tunde & Uziak, 2012). Consequently, universities around the world are ever more conscious of their pressing job of seeking new ways to produce graduates who can meet the changing demands of the work environment (Kemp & Seagraves 1995; Kecky & McGuigan 1997 as cited in Badcock et al., 2010). This global trend in higher education challenges universities to rethink the quality of university education they offer vis-à-vis the demands of the national and global industries, employment, and life after graduation in general. Among the major factors that contributed further to this current trend in higher education are the industry–mandated qualifications and competencies established by international accreditation agreement bodies for professionals and different countries through their educational reform agenda which set the global standards for university graduates in the practice of their respective professions. With this, colleges and universities worldwide play a vital role as higher education providers whose graduates possess the academic and professional qualifications which are 'responsive to the requirement and challenges related to the globalization of societies, economy, and labor markets' (Van der Wende, 1997 as cited in Qiang, 2003).

One strategic approach that universities can employ to respond to the agenda of internationalization and employability is through integrating graduate attributes in the curriculum and developing them in the students. The *World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century (1998 retrieved January 2016)*stressed that higher education should provide opportunities to educate students to become work and life ready. They are lifelong learners, who are be qualified graduates in their own field of expertise and

responsible citizens who are able to meet the present and future needs of the very diverse society. The university can respond to this challenge by offering the appropriate environment, the structure, and the means which can facilitate the development of desirable knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values among students to make them become well-informed and strongly motivated individuals. This means providing complete and adequate training to become "highly qualified graduates and responsible citizens able to meet the needs of all sectors of human activity."

Critical to this educational task is the curriculum and the teaching and learning process (Bond, 2003a; Bond et al., 2003; Green & Olson, 2003; Knight, 1994, 1997, 2000a; Lemasson, 2002; Paige, 2003; Tonkin & Edwards, 1981). Knight (1994) describes the curriculum as "the backbone of the internationalization process." This calls for higher educational institutions to provide a learner-centered experience for all students in order to produce versatile graduates who can meet the shifting demands of the work environment (Kemp & Seagraves 1995; Kecky&McGuigan 1997 as cited in Badcock et al., 2010) and become successful individuals in today's increasingly interdependent global society (Bonfiglio, 1999; Leask, 2001; Lemasson, 2002; Schuerholz-Lehr, 2007; Schuerholz-Lehr et al., 2007).

Bowden et al. (2000) cited that graduate attributes are "qualities, skills, and understandings a university community agrees its students should develop during their time with the institution." Further, these attributes include and go beyond the disciplinary expertise or technical knowledge that has traditionally formed the core of most university courses. In other words, these attributes make up the core competencies or outcomes of the

university education (Barrie &Posser, 2004 as cited in Albalooshi 2013) that students are expected to acquire regardless of their field of expertise. Thus, higher learning institutions worldwide "have redefined their curriculum to incorporate graduate attributes in teaching programmes to equip students with appropriate graduate skills. However, this demands a new approach to teaching and learning, thereby promoting integration and flexibility in working in multi-disciplinary projects" (Felder & Brent, 2003 as cited in Moalosi et al., 2012; see also Barrie, 2006; Kember, 2009 and Jones, 2009). Integrating graduate attributes in the curriculum ensures that students develop the skills that will better equip them for the work environment and self-employment.

Guided by quality assurance mechanism, the Catholic University in the Philippines under study responds to the challenge of global employment through integrating the graduate attributes of international standard in the curricular training, community extension, and research programs. The process of the integration of graduate attributes ensures that college students are provided with adequate knowledge, skills and attitudes to enable them to meet the changing demands of life and work in the national and global setting after their graduation. Assimilation and demonstration of the University's graduate attributes are expected from them as they progress in their academic status in their respective fields of concentration. Thus, at the end of their university education, graduates of the University are expected to be individuals who are: *Spiritually-sound,* being able to live godly and prayerful life; *Intellectually-inspired,* being able to effectively conceptualize, apply, analyze, synthesize, and communicate their ideas; *Morally-healthy*, being able to demonstrate ethical awareness

and integrity; *Physically-healthy,* being able to exhibit physical fitness, vitality and enthusiasm in their activities; *Culturally-conscious,* being able to appreciate and promote religious and cultural heritage and demonstrate culture of inclusivity; *Socially-concerned,* being able to practice mercy and compassion, justice and peace; environmental stewardship and protection; *Technically-proficient,* being able to demonstrate competence in the performance of their tasks; *Research-oriented,* being able to engage in research-related activities to explore and share new ideas and skills.

Outcomes-based teaching and learning strategies were purposely designed by the University to facilitate the process of development of the graduate attributes among college students. Through their involvement in various curricular and extra-curricular trainings, college students progressively develop these attributes during their academic stint in the University. Periodic and terminal practical and written assessment activities were devised and conducted to ensure that college students have accurately assimilated and can demonstrate these university core outcomes relative to their curricular programs. This paper, however, does not include projection of the impact of how these graduates attributes are concretely translated into their workplaces. This can otherwise become a baseline data for future studies in the context of graduates' manifested work competences and performance.

The present investigation attempts to show the manner in which the study school operationalizes the Vision, Mission, and Goals (VMG) of the institution via strategies –both academic and co-curricular. These can be seen in the syllabus requirements for immersion in the community (33 hours) per semester, spent living the Gospel values

of helping the less fortunate viacatechetical work, arranging the celebration and administration of the Sacraments Baptism, Wedding, and Confirmation. Outreach programs entail visiting the sick, bringing food to the needy,doing leadership along church related and socio-civic activities. Students, likewise, engage in research related activities like colloquia which are run once a year in cooperation with the university research office and publication.

The limited attempts in the University to conduct a study on the extent of practice of graduate attributes among college students prompted the researcher to investigate on how far college students have assimilated and demonstrated these attributes and have prepared them for the challenges of national and global employment.

This paper aimed to investigate the extent of practice of graduate attributes among college students. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed by the researchers: (1) What is the extent of practice of the graduate attributes among graduating students when taken as a whole and grouped according to college? (2) Is there a significant difference in the extent of practice of the graduate attributes among graduating students when grouped according to college? (3) What insights are revealed in the lived experiences of these graduate attributes among graduating students?

2.0 Methodology & Research Design

This study utilized sequential explanatory mixed method design. This method involved two separate phases: quantitative followed by qualitative (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The researcher first collected and analyzed the quantitative data. The data gathered in the quantitative phase were used in the subsequent qualitative investigation.

The method helped the researcher explained the initial statistical results using insights gathered from the in-depth interviews of the participants.

Qualitatively, the researcher employed the phenomenological research design to gather more insights into the prevailing lived practices of the graduate attributes among graduating college students. Phenomenology is an inductive descriptive method which aims to describe participants' lived experiences (phenomena) in an attempt to enrich the lived experience by drawing out its meaning (Holloway, 2005). It also examines the particular experiences of unique individuals in a given situation, thus exploring not what is (reality) but what is preconceived to be (Burns & Grove, 2003). It further concerns with meaning and the way in which meaning arises in experience (Langdridge, 2007; Kafle, 2011 as cited in Borres, 2013). This method adheres to Husserl's transcendental phenomenological reduction or epoché. The process involves "a bracketing or parenthesizing of something that had formerly been taken for granted in the natural attitude" (http://www.saybrook.edu/newexistentialists/posts/09-10-12). To bracket is to suspend all previous knowledge of the phenomenon being explored or investigated that is not due to the actual instance of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2007 as cited in Borres, 2013). This process aims to discover and describe the elements and underlying factors that comprise the experience of the subjects of this phenomenon. Phenomenological reduction is the process that is used to facilitate seeking the essence of a phenomenon (Lichtman, 2010 as cited in Borres, 2013).

Participants

The participants of the study were two hundred seventy-four (274) randomly selected graduating college students representing the seven colleges of the University: Arts and Sciences (CAS), Business and Accountancy (CBA), Criminal Justice Education (CJE), Education (CED), Engineering (CEN), Information Technology (CIT), and Nursing and Allied Health Sciences (CNAH). From the total population of 947 graduating college students, the sample size was determined using an online *Raosoft Sample Size Calculation Formula.* This online scientific calculator software required the researchers to key in the desired margin of error, level of confidence, and population size. In this study, the researchers used the 5% margin of error and 95% confidence level. Thus, the sample size of 274 participants was derived. To further determine the participants by college, a proportional stratified random sampling was utilized in order to ensure equal chances in selecting population representatives of the study, thereby establishing a true picture of the population. The distribution of participants per college is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of Sample Size

Colleges	Population	Sample	Percentage
Arts and Sciences (CAS)	67	19	6.93
Business and Accountancy (CBA)	291	84	30.66
Criminal Justice Education (CJE)	75	22	8.03
Education (CED)	101	29	10.58
Engineering (CEN)	148	43	15.69
Information Technology (CIT)	97	28	10.22
Nursing and Allied Health Sciences (CNA)	168	49	17.88
TOTAL	974	274	100

In the subsequent qualitative inquiry, the participants were identified using the confirming and disconfirming sampling method. It is a purposeful sampling strategy which aims to develop a richer, deeper understanding of the phenomenon and lend credibility to one's research account (Cohen, 2007) relevant to the graduates' manifestation of institution attributes. The process involves selecting samples that lend support, richness and depth to patterns emerging from data analysis *(confirming case)* and examples that do not fit emergent patterns, thereby allowing the researcher to evaluate rival explanation *(disconfirming case).* The purpose is to cull out and identify different insights and common themes that are apparently present across the sample (cf. Onwuegbuzie& Collin, 2007). Two (2) participants from each college were chosen as the participants for the qualitative inquiry of this study, that is, one student with a very high extent of practice and another student with very low extent of practice based from the quantitative data.

Data Collection Procedure

The quantitative data were collected through a validated survey questionnaire developed from the observable behaviors of graduate attributes as practiced in the University. The survey questionnaire consists of 40-item Likert type statements on the practices of university graduate attributes. It is organized into eight sections corresponding to the eight (8) graduate attributes. Five (5) items are listed under each section, expressing a particular graduate attribute in observable behavioral terms. The participants were asked to check the 5-point Likert-type scale to indicate the extent of their practice of the graduate attributes.

The qualitative data were gathered from the participants through an in-depth semi-structured interview. Interviewing is the most common form of data collection in qualitative research (Lichtman, 2010). The use of the in-depth interview helped the researcher gather detailed useful information which provided the context and broad perspective to the quantitative data (Silverman, 1993; Leedy&Ormrod, 2005; Boyce & Neale, 2006). Kvale (1996 retrieved 2014) concurred that interviews are particularly suited for studying people's understanding of the meanings in their lived world, describing their experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective on their lived world.   To establish the validity and reliability of the qualitative data, this study used the four essential criteria of the naturalistic inquiry trustworthiness. Trustworthiness consists of establishing the credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability of (Lincoln &Guba, 1985; Golafshani, 2003; Lichtman , 2010).

Data Treatment and Analysis

Quantitative data were treated using a Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The mean was used to describe the extent of practice of graduate attributes among graduating students. The Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to determine the significant difference in the extent of the practice of graduate attributes among the seven colleges of the University.

For the qualitative data, the researcher used the recursive textual data analysis. The purpose was to cull out insights from the in-depth interviews of the participants. Lichtman's (2010) three C's— coding, categorizing, and identifying concepts were utilized to help the researcher achieve an in-depth, holistic understanding about the phenomenon. This iterative process was observed

until the researchers arrived at the saturation point, that is, no new insights were developed from the themes (Creswell & Clark, 2011).

3.0 Results

Quantitatively, Table 2 showed that the extent of practice of graduating students of attributes when taken as a whole is high (M=4.2). This generally revealed that graduating students practiced frequently the university graduate attributes. In terms of individual attributes, the socially-concerned attribute got the highest mean (M=4.3), while the intellectually-inspired attribute got the lowest mean (M=4.0). When grouped according to college, the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) and the College of Nursing and Allied Health Sciences (CNA) obtained the highest extent of practice of the attribute (M=4.3). The six (6) other colleges have high extent of practice, making the College of Information Technology (CIT) the least among them (M=4.0).

Table 2. Extent of Practice of Graduating Students of Graduate Attributes when Taken as a Whole and grouped according to College

GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES	COLLEGES							As a Whole	Interpretation
	CAS	CBA	CJE	CED	CEN	CIT	CNA		
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	
Spiritually-sound	4.3	4.3	4.2	4.3	4.2	4.0	4.4	4.2	High
Intellectually-inspired	4.3	4.0	3.9	4.0	4.0	3.9	4.1	4.0	High
Morally-Healthy	4.3	4.3	4.1	4.2	4.0	4.1	4.4	4.2	High
Physically-Healthy	4.2	4.2	4.1	4.1	4.2	4.2	4.2	4.2	High
Culturally-Conscious	4.4	4.1	4.0	4.2	4.1	3.9	4.3	4.1	High
Socially-Concerned	4.4	4.2	4.4	4.3	4.3	4.1	4.2	4.3	Very High
Technically-Proficient	4.4	4.1	4.1	4.1	4.2	4.2	4.3	4.2	High
Research-Oriented	4.3	3.9	4.3	4.1	4.1	3.8	4.1	4.1	High
As a Whole	4.3	4.1	4.1	4.2	4.1	4.0	4.3	4.2	High
	Very High	High	High	High	High	High	Very High	High	Interpretation
	High						High		

The Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to determine the significant differences in the extent of the practice of graduate attributes among the seven colleges of the University. The result showed that among seven (7) colleges of the university, an ANOVA (F-value) of 1.981 leads to a p-value of 0.069 that is higher than 0.05 alpha value. This means that there is no strong evidence to prove any significant difference on the extent of practices. This implies that the very high extent of practices of the graduating students of the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) and the College of Nursing and

Allied Health Sciences (CNAH) is not significantly higher as compared to the extent of practices of the other five colleges in the university. The differences in the extent as shown in their mean were simply due to the selection of samples.

Qualitatively, six (6) themes emerged from the interview transcripts of the participants which generally characterize their insights into their lived experiences of the graduate attributes during their academic stint in the University. These are: (a) sowing seeds of identity, (b) sowing seeds of personal growth and maturity, (c) sowing seeds of spiritual and moral wellness, (d) sowing seeds of success and social transformation, (e) The sower enriches the fruitfulness of the harvest, and (f) The seeds need a good soil to grow and mature.

Sowing seeds of identity. Like seeds, the attributes nurtured the unique university identity among graduating students making them stand out among the rest of the graduates. Developed and cultivated through their years of stay in the University, this unique identity defined the characteristics of an ideal graduate who possesses a well-developed personality in all aspects, equipped with the needed knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that will help him or her cope with the challenges of work and life after graduation.

Sowing seeds of personal growth and maturity. Like seeds, the attributes are germs of growth and maturity which cultivated positive attitudes, developed skills and potentials, and enhanced the life's perspectives of graduating students.

Sowing seeds of spiritual and moral wellness. Like seeds, the spiritual and moral wellness that attributes nurtured in the lives of graduating students made them closer to God, giving them confidence and strength in facing and handling problems and difficulties of life, and leading them to perform what is right and just, thinking less of themselves and showing compassion and concern for others.

Sowing seeds of success and social transformation. Like seeds, the graduate attributes cultivated in the lives of graduating students are the qualities which will equip and prepare them to be successful in their chosen field of endeavor, employable and catalysts of social transformation.

The sower enriches the fruitfulness of the harvest. The seeds that have been sown need the cultivation of the sower in order for these to grow, mature, and bear fruits during the harvest time. Through the teaching and non-teaching personnel of the University, the sower continuously cultivates and enriches these graduate attributes in the lives of the students via its teaching and learning activities. Their presence and activities contribute positively or negatively to the development, maturity and fruitfulness of the graduate attributes in the lives of the students the moment they enter the portals of the University until they graduate.

The seeds need a good soil to grow and mature. Though the seeds, the graduate attributes, are core outcomes of the university education (Barrie, 2006) expected to be developed and imbibed by students the moment they enter the university, it is hoped that they will open their minds and hearts like good soil for them to learn, embrace, and practice these attributes. With this positive disposition, students will gradually acquire and demonstrate these attributes through the varied teaching and learning activities provided by the University.

Overall, the insights of the participants revealed how the graduate attributes sowed by the University and nurtured by their teachers formed and transformed the graduating students in many

positive ways making them competent in the practice of their profession and work/employment-ready, bringing them sense of wellness in their lives, and motivating them to be advocates of social transformation.

4.0 Conclusions

From the findings generated in the study, it can be concluded that the desired graduate attributes are seen in the students/ graduates as spiritually-sound, intellectually-inspired, morally-health, physically-healthy, culturally-conscious, socially-concerned, technically-proficient, and research-oriented. However it is clear that certain areas have to be cause for concern as intellectually-inspired and research-oriented attributes. These have far reaching implications to curriculum improvement and for management.

Efforts are directed towards addressing the above in cooperation with the university management. Also, these are concerns addressed in the institutionalVision, Mission, and Goals (VMG) as reflected in the minutes of the strategic planning done yearly.

5.0 Recommendations

Based on the above results of the study, the researcher recommends that the University engage in continuous improvement program via relevant curricular or non-curricular trainings, seminars, colloquia, graduate tracer studies, establishment of linkages, strengthening the alumni involvement, and periodic monitoring scheme of activities related to the study.

Follow-up studies investigating critical areas in the study are also in order.

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