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APAcS Star: Promoting Graduate Employability Traits

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Abstract: The issue of graduates' employability has become a growing concern globally. With many graduates, but limited positions in the workforce, it is imminent for graduates to possess employability traits. Employers also expect the students to learn a multitude of skills and abilities, on top of knowledge of accounting, while studying in the university. To reduce this gap, a student development framework, the APAcS Star was established. APAcS Star aims to bridge the gap by arming students with essential interpersonal skills. Based on three core Skill Areas, namely Critical Thinking, Communications and Leadership skills. APAcS Star is executed by further breaking those Skill Area into Traits. These traits connote an element of a Skill that, by mastering a number of those smaller Traits, will lead to a mastery of the major Skill. All the Traits from the three Skill Areas are smartly placed in events, starting with 'Knowledge Gaining', then progressing to 'Knowledge Applying' and 'Knowledge Assessing'. In 2016, 31 students graduated with an APAcS Star certificate. In 2017 and 2018, the final assessment was further enhanced into two categories, the idea pitching assessment and interview assessment, whereby 19 and 10 students respectively were awarded the APAcS Star certificate. The APAcS Star certificate increases the students' chances of gaining employability upon graduation. In conclusion, this framework was able to assist the higher education provider to craft and develop a multitude of skills and abilities of its graduates, thus reducing the employability gap.

Keywords: Communication skills, Critical thinking, Graduate employability, Interpersonal Skills, Leadership skills

INTRODUCTION

Lifewide education is an educational concept that recognizes that learning occurs in multiple contexts within a learner's life such as school, home, work and other platforms. Therefore, it is important for educational institutions to create this lifewide education atmosphere not only through formal, but also non formal and informal learning to encourage, support and recognize students' lifewide learning. Furthermore, technical knowledge on its own will not be sustainable, therefore, it is necessary to update knowledge and competency in line with lifewide education. This will ensure learners remain relevant despite huge changes in the global environment. For example, Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) itself has frequent updates to syllabus and study guide which tend to focus on the changes in technical knowledge due to the exam oriented environment. Therefore, there is a lack of focus on soft skills through formal learning education and it is a skill that needs to be acquired not only through formal learning but also by other means.

Department of Professional Accounting Studies (DPAS) has three missions which are graduate on time, graduate employability traits and becoming chartered accountant in Malaysia. This is to support national agenda on producing and increasing bumiputera professional accountant by year 2030. The graduate on time and graduate employability traits are achieved during the learning phase while the latter will be achieved with three years working experience. Specifically, graduate on time is achieved when students pass their exam in stipulated time. During this period, students will gain all the technical knowledge needed to join the workforce. In order to continue supporting our students on-going journey, DPAS has developed APAcS Star framework to ensure they are equipped with the employability traits that will make them relevant to the industries. This issue of graduates' employability is one of the main concerns that were highlighted for quite some time. One pressing issue that needs focus is the existence of a gap between 'the level of competency expected by employers' and 'the level of competency presented by graduates'. This gap is known as the 'Employability Gap'. APAcS Star program wishes to bridge the gap thus making graduates more attractive and relevant to the market.

APAcS Star is a yearlong program designed to equip graduates with critical

interpersonal skills to maximise graduates' employability chances aligned with industry's standard through industry integrated events and activities organised by the Association of Professional Accounting Students (APAcS). APAcS, a solitary student body that facilitates the welfare and development of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam's

professional accountancy graduates. APAcS has been actively helping to produce competent graduates fit for the corporate sectors in the country. Thus objective of this paper is to explain how APAcS Star programme addresses the employability traits issues that will make them relevant to join the workforce.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) is the global organization for the accountancy profession. The organization supports the development, adoption and implementation of international standards for accounting education, ethics, and the public sector as well as audit and assurance. The body also addresses the importance of accounting graduates to possess employability skills to encourage high quality performance by professional accountants in their daily work. Employability can be defined as a measurement on marketability of graduates (Rahmat, Ahmad, Idris and Zainal,2011).

Altarawneh (2015) highlighted there is a significant gap between the skills employers need and consider important compared to accounting graduate skills possessed and demonstrated. Therefore, she suggested that with the ever changing and development of the role of accountants, the appropriate skills and capabilities also changes due to the changes in the external environment. This is consistent with Albercht & Sack (2000) studies which found that the gap is growing between the education and practise due to the change of environment. Due to this gap, students did not have adequate skills and attributes (Low et al, 2013). Therefore, there is a need to evaluate the appropriate skills to ensure the sustainability of the accounting graduates for the workforce.

In addition, students and employers have different perceptions on what skills students are required to have upon graduating from the university. According to Aryanti and Adhariani (2019), their findings was that students found the top three skills as honesty, continuous learning and work ethics. On the other hand, employers top three skills were work ethics, teamwork and time management. Further, study by Kavanagh and Drennan (2008) found out that students need to be aware of the employer's expectation in terms of communication, analysis, professionalism and teamwork. This is further supported by the dissatisfaction of skills of graduates as evident in Cory and Pruske (2012). It can be concluded here that there is a significant gap between these two issues and it needs to be addressed. Though it is not the responsibility of the university, these skills expected by employers is suggested to be embedded at university level either through formal or informal learning.

Further, there are studies that discuss the importance of generic skills or better known as employability tratit. Generic skills can be described as those capabilities needed to join the workforce, other than technical skills. Abayadeera and Watty (2016) has suggested that the university should inculcate generic skills in the accounting curricula while Kermis and Kermis (2010) have called for accounting researchers and accounting firms to modify the accounting education in line with the current global working environment. At the University of Derby, the Derby Award Programme for Employability, Leadership and Management was established in 2007 to recognize student's achievement outside academic curriculum. Research by Alder found that it was beneficial to all students who had participated, even students who did not receive the award. This programme develops students interest in exploring other employability skills. It teaches students to reflect and plan for future professional and personal developments. After six years, the award was re-designed, to adapt to changes from previous experience and research.

However, there are studies that do not support this expectation gap. A study by Low et al. (2016) has found that there are employers that still focus on the technical knowledge as the main expectation for graduates to possess when they enter the workforce. This is because the study found that universities are preparing students for the workforce at the institution's best capacity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The National ICT Association of Malaysia (PIKOM) 2014 ICT Job Market Outlook in Malaysia reported that only 10% of new employees were work ready, and the rest needed further training before being able to undertake the requirements of their jobs (New Straits Times, 2014). In an article by The Star (2015), Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan, Director of Malaysian Employers Federation has stated that probably 30% to 40% of students are not really employable at the appropriate category for the first six months after graduation, and that students were weak as far as soft skills were concerned. Another article by The Star (2016) states that local graduates in particular find difficulty in getting jobs due to the poor command of English, the lack of soft skills and the inability to adapt to the realities of working life. The APAcS Star framework was designed in line with the mission of APAcS, department and Faculty. APAcS mission is to produce holistically nurtured professionals, while the departments mission is to produce a much more versatile graduate in line with the country's vision to increase the number of qualified bumiputera accountants. The faculty's mission is to become a leading reference centre and catalyst to the accounting profession.

Based on the feedback from the industry it is evident that students have under-developed interpersonal skills. The gap between the level of competency expected by employers and presented by graduates is the gap of technical competencies, inability to communicate effectively, critical thinking and leadership skills. This is because the nature of professional accounting programs does not encapsulate the development of interpersonal skills in students.

The stakeholders considered in the development of the framework were the students, employers and the faculty. The objective of this framework is:

- To enhance the students employability through the industryapproved certificate initiative.
- To develop students in the three highly critical soft skills through events under the APAcS Star
- To provide employers with work-ready and holistically nurtured graduates.
- To bestow meaningful inputs to APAcS events.

The usefulness of the framework is to increase student's employability by

way of early exposure to the working environment and participation in soft skill-enhancing activities. Also, employers will be presented with desired graduates who are not only technically competent but also interpersonally capable. The APAcS Star complements the faculty's efforts in producing future professional accountants, whereby events organized are effective and meaningful, while the type of extracurricular activities offered are monitored. Additionally, the framework serves the needs of both students and industry whereby both students and employers will benefit and employability of fresh graduates is increased.

3.1 The APAcS Star Framework – the Design Phase

The framework of APAcS Star is intelligently broken down into 3 core Skill Areas that our graduates lack in, namely Critical Thinking, Communications and Leadership skills. APAcS Star was designed with the objective of addressing all of the skills through achieving the traits (a number of unique qualities and characteristics pertaining to that Skill Area) set out in the program. Among objectives set to be achieved are:

- Developing graduates' interpersonal skills. Through this programme, graduates will have the ability to think critically, communicate effectively and ability to lead and inspire.
- Exposure to the working world. Through collaboration with firms and companies, it will help graduates to experience the working life.
- All these objectives are expected to be achieved when graduates participate in the events set out throughout the period.

The traits are smartly placed on all the events held and segregated into progression levels which are 'Knowledge Gaining', 'Knowledge Applying' and 'Knowledge Assessing'. Graduates will have the aim of becoming APAcS Star graduates upon completion of all three progression levels. The summary of APAcS Star framework is depicted in Figure 1.

| | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 |
|---|---|--|---------------------|
| Communication Key traits: Interview skills Developing a good CV | CV workshop Microsoft Excel workshop Apprenticeship English Seminar Visits to Firms Conference Lecturers' Day | Public Speaking Contest Debate Contest Apprenticeship MCE Visit to Orphanage Visit to Old Folks Home Open Floor Visits to Firms | External Assessment |
| Critical Thinking Key trait: Identify, analyze and interpret problems Anticipate cause and effect situations | Apprenticeship Conference Industrial Talks AXP Audit Workshop | AXP Audit Workshop ABF Quiz Competitions Apprenticeship Debate Contest MCE Fit 14 | External Assessment |
| Leadership Key traits: Delegate effectively | Leadership camp Conference Apprenticeship Journey to Jannah | Event Committees Futsal League Apprenticeship Fun Run and Ride | External Assessment |
| Make informed decisions | | | |

Figure 1: APAcS Star Framework

3.2 Setting up the APAcS Star

Recruitment of members involved

A task force was set up and APAcS members aged 18 to 22 were recruited. During semester break, the members were brought together for brainstorming sessions.

APAcS Star was launched during the 14 Summit on 3rd of February 2016 at Annexe Hall, UiTM Shah Alam. The launch was officiated by the Dean of Faculty of Accountancy. The programs for the year under the framework was funded using the Tabung Amanah Pelajar (TAPA).

3.3 Communication of programme

During the early stage of the program, members engaged with the graduates through social media namely Twitter and Facebook. This is to inform them about the activities to be held and the traits that they will achieve when they participate. Graduates will also get emails regarding their APAcS Star progress. Apart from that, should they need their progress report, they can personally meet the members at the APAcS room to get it.

3.4 How APAcS Star works

3.4.1 Design of APAcS Star

The APAcS Star uses Microsoft Database. Firstly, student information are put into the 'Student Information Table'. This area inserted all students of the department. Then, the 'Skill Area Table Events' and 'Skill Area Table – Traits' are inserted into the Microsoft Database. When students attend events, it will be mapped to those traits. 'Query - Event' and 'Query - Percentage of Completion' allows to track which programs student have attended to date. A 'Progress Report' is available to track students progress at a certain date. The sample of the Progress Report is attached in Appendix 2. Students can also get a 'Report Card' for each Skill. This allows student to see your progress by skills category of Communication, Critical Thinking and Leadership. All the required traits for each skill set are presented in the Skill Area sheet (Table 2). For each trait, students are required where applicable to achieve all 3 levels of progression: Level 1(Knowledge Gaining), Level 2(Knowledge Applying) and Level 3(Knowledge Assessing). Progress table (Appendix 1) is used to list out activities and events that will be conducted and traits that can be gained are listed under each of these activities and events. The activities and events are arranged according to the levels of progression. Graduates are responsible to selftrack their own progress; meanwhile APAcS will also track their progress in our designated APAcS Star database.

| Skills | Events and Activities | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|--|--|
| | Level 1 Level 2 | | Level 3 | | |
| | Knowledge gaining | Knowledge Applying | Knowledge Assessing | | |
| Communication skills Critical-thinking skills Leadership skills | Events which enables students to gain knowledge of the three skills. | Applying the knowledge obtained in Level 1 | The opportunity to network with the industry. Firms and companies supporting the APAcS Star to assess knowledge gained and application from previous levels. | | |

3.4.2 Progress tracking

When graduates participate in any activity listed in the Progress Table, the activity is marked [/] as done. The traits gained from the activity will be ticked [/] in the column provided in the Skills Area sheet. For each event attended, graduates are required to register themselves in order to be recorded in the APAcS Star database.

Figure 2: Illustration of how the progress tracking works.

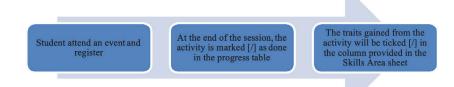
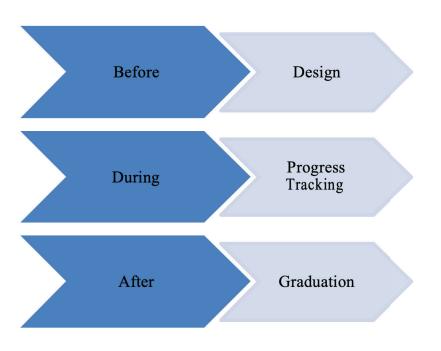


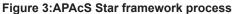
Table 2: Skill area and its relevant traits

| COMMUNICATION | CRITICAL THINKING | LEADERSHIP |
|--|--|---|
| Interview skills | Identifying, analyzing and interpreting problems | Delegating effectively |
| Developing a good CV | Anticipating cause and effect situations | Team oriented |
| Expressing opinions objectively | Developing alternative solutions | Making informed decisions |
| Group discussion | Provide credibility in reasoning | Planning skills |
| Presenting ideas & information effectively | Deliberating and justifying ideas | Emotional stability |
| Information seeking – integrity in knowledge | Stakeholder management | Inspiring colleagues |
| Simplifying complex and creative ideas | Being inquisitive in knowledge gaining | Being consistent with values and decision |
| Ability to speak spontaneously | Developing informed decisions and conclusions | Developing accountability |
| Initiating casual conversation – networking | Developing intellectual empathy | Ability to gain buy-ins from stakeholders |
| Responding to criticism | Having conviction in ideas and arguments | Ethical |
| Etiquette in communicating | Humility of thought | Flexibility of decisions |
| Engaging with audience | Remaining objectives | Taking responsibility |
| | | Giving credit |
| | | Developing resilience |

3.4.3 Completion of APAcS Star(Graduation)

Graduates will have the ultimate aim of becoming a STAR. Once a student has gone through the three level of events for a specific trait; for example, 'Identifying, Analyzing and Interpreting Problems', we assume that the student is now able to identify, analyze and interpret problems because the student has learned how to identify, analyze and interpret problems in a level 1 event, attempted to identify, analyze and interpret problems in a Level 2 event, and being assessed his level of identifying, analyzing and interpreting skills by an industry representative in a Level 3 event. However, a minimum of 70% of all traits are compulsory to be achieved in order to graduate. APAcS Star certificate and report card will be automatically given to those who have obtained all of the traits under each skill area. Should graduates need the report for Curricular Vitae purposes, it will be provided upon request.





RESULTS AND DISCUSSION - IMPLEMENTATION

The Microsoft Database was successfully used to capture the student's traits acquired and skills enhancement. An extract of the events, along with the traits acquired has been attached in Appendix 1.

4.1 Year 2016

In its year of establishment, the number of traits based on student activities were 87 traits. The number of students in the department stood at 623 students. At year end, students who had obtained 90% of the traits were awarded the APAcS Star Award. Therefore, students were required to achieve at least 78 traits to be awarded. The number of students being awarded APAcS Star Award in its premier year was 31students.

4.2 Year 2017 and 2018

After inception, the assessment was improved whereby students who had achieved above 80% of traits were required to go through a final assessment. This is to observe the skills acquired throughout the year. The final assessment consists of two sessions, idea pitching and interview. The idea pitching aims to assess students' ability in presenting their ideas in front of crowd and work in a team. The idea pitching saw students being divided into groups and judging was done based on the group presentation.

As for the interview, it is to assess students' ability in communicating with interviewers and answering questions for which will test their critical thinking skills. Evaluation was based on interviewer's judgement which was based on guidelines provided by the APAcS STAR committees. In 2017, the interviewers comprised of a lecturer, APAcS Star alumni and APAcS STAR committee. In 2018, the industry partner was also included as an interviewer.

The top scorers of the two assessments will determine the APAcS

Star Award recipients for the year. After the final assessment, 19 students were awarded the APAcS Star Award in 2017 and 10 students in 2018.

4.3 Discussion

Data are collected using questionnaire to APAcS Star Award recipients batch 2016 and 2017 to observe the employability of the recipients. There are 20 and 13 respondents for year 206 and 2017 respectively. The questionnaire was not sent to batch 2018 as these students were still studying at the university.

Table 3: Respondents current status

| APAcS Star Recipients / Year | Still Studying | | Graduated | Total |
|------------------------------|----------------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| | Full Time | Part Time | | |
| 2017 | 4=20% | 8=40% | 8=40% | 20 |
| 2018 | 3=23% | 7=54% | 3=23% | 13 |

Based from the above table, the respondents for each year is either successfully graduated or still studying as full time or part time students. Specifically, in the year 2016, 40% has graduated meanwhile 20% and 40% are still studying as full time or part time students respectively. For year 2017, 23% has graduated and 23% and 54% are still studying as full time or part time students respectively.

Further, students who have graduated or still studying as part time already have a job. They further can be classified as having a job upon completion, more than 3 months or less than six months or more than 6 months, less than 12 months and the findings are summarised in the following table:

| Year | Upon completion | More than 3 months, less than 6 months | More than 6 months, less than 12 months |
|------|--------------------|---|--|
| 2017 | 77% | 15% | 8% |
| 2018 | 86% | - | 14% |

Table 4: Respondents who were already working

Based from Table 4, the study found out that 77%(2016) and 86%(2017) got a job upon completing their full time studies. Further, only 15% have to wait in between of 3-6 months for year 2016 and none for year 2017. The balance had to wait more than six months but less than a year. This shows that those with APAcS certificate has assisted in students successfully gaining employment.

CONCLUSION

One of the recognised responsibilities of tertiary education is to offer lifewide education that would be beneficial for the students especially in terms of promoting graduates' employability. The APAcS Star framework is designed to assist the Department to develop students' employability skills during their study. The selected skills i.e. communication, critical thinking and leadership were chosen based on employers' expectations, recommendation by the professional accounting bodies and suggestion by literature on the required skills needed by the accounting graduates.

The core skills in the framework with the relevant traits for each skill were then used to design meaningful and purposeful activities for students throughout the year of study. The significant contribution from APAcS Star was increased in the percentage of students' chances of gaining employability upon graduation. The APAcS Star certificate of completion endorsed by key employers/education partner in accounting/finance industry offer evidence to potential employers on the acquired skills of our graduates. APAcS Star has brought significant changes to the landscape of the extra-curricular activities organised by APAcS to develop professional accounting students beyond the classrooms, in addition to their technical competencies any chartered accountant is expected to master. It is believed

that the continuation of this programme will become a prominent contributor to produce highly sought breed of graduates by the industry, to meet the level of competencies expected of a holistic, first- class graduates. From this programme, students will attain soft skill that will make them competitive and dynamic to enter workforce. For Faculty, this will help them to identify relevant and significant programme to be conducted

for our students and do better planning in allocating TAPA money for this activities. Through this best practice, UiTM will become a reference point by other institutions to address this employability trait.

Limitation of the study can be two-fold. One, this study only focus on the professional accounting students namely ACCA in the Faculty of Accountancy, UiTM. Second, the framework only focus on three employability skills demanded in the accounting/finance discipline, thus newly identified employability skills might be required for other disciplines. In the future, the application and usability of this framework should be extended to bigger scope of respondents such as from other undergraduates programs and disciplines in UiTM. In addition, the skills identified in APAcS Star framework must be extended to include new and emerging employability skills in the era of Industry 4.0 and beyond.

To conclude, this study is important as it assists the tertiary education in preparing the students with appropriate employability skills to meet the requirement of the employers in accounting/finance industry. This study also contributes in extending the literature by providing a framework for tertiary education to offer purposeful co-curricular activities in developing employability skills of their accounting graduates.

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APPENDIX 1: PROGRESS TABLE (EXTRACT) – TRAITS ACQUIRED THROUGH COMMUNICATION SKILLS

| Events Skill Area - Communication | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|--|-------|--|
| | Level 1 (Knowledge gaining) Level 2 (Knowledge applying) Level 3(Assessment) | | | | |
| | MIA Talk: Road to CA | | 14CARE: Community Service | | External assessment |
| ✓ ✓ ✓ | Information seeking-integrity in knowledge Developing a good CV Initiating casual conversation- networking | | (Zoo) (CI) | * * * | Interview skills Ability to speak spontaneously Presenting ideas & information effectively |
| | | * | Simplifying complex and creative ideas Presenting ideas & information effectively | * | Responding to criticism Engaging with audience |
| | Etiquette in communicating Initiating casual conversation – networking Ability to speak spontaneously Engaging with audience BDO Visit KPMG Talk | | Tak: EY Tax Challenge Simplifying complex & creative ideas Expressing opinion objectively Presenting ideas & information effectively Engaging with audience Information seeking-integrity in knowledge | | |
| | Apprenticeship(CI) Group discussion Presenting ideas & information effectively Responding to criticism Engaging with audience Ability to speak spontaneously | | APTC: 14 Talk 2(CI) 14CARE: Islamic Brotherhood Week + SolatHajat(CI) ACCA CV Workshop CV Workshop Open Floor(CI) | | |
| | Information seeking - integrity in knowledge Etiquette in communicating Simplifying complex and creative ideas | | Apprenticeship(CI) Group discussion Presenting ideas & information effectively Ability to speak spontaneously Responding to criticism Developing a good CV Simplifying complex and creative ideas Interview skills | | |
| | PWC Talk Deloitte Visit BDO Talk Theatre Play(CI) Presenting ideas & information effectively Responding to criticism Information seeking – integrity in knowledge | | Bootcamp& Speed Interview(CI) Theatre Play(CI) Annual Dinner(CI) Deloitte Tax Challenge Simplifying complex & creative ideas a Expressing opinion objectively Engaging with audience Information seeking – integrity in knowledge <u>AGM</u> (CI) | | |

APPENDIX 2: SAMPLE OF PROGRESS REPORT



| NAMA | AINA MARDHIAH BIN | TI BADLISHAH | |
|------------------------|-------------------|--------------|---------|
| NOMBOR PELAJAR | 2015155503 | | |
| | | COMMITTEE | STUDENT |
| Operational Excellen | ce Workshop | | |
| MIA Talk | | | V |
| Excel Software Work | shop | | |
| KPMG Visit | | | |
| Deloitte Talk : Alumn | i | | V |
| Deloitte Visit | | | |
| ACCA CV Workshop | | | |
| 14CARE : Zoo | | | |
| APTC : 14Talks2 | | | |
| Islamic Brotherhood | Week (IBW) | V | V |
| EY Talk : Islamic Bank | ting | | V |
| EY Visit | | | |
| Lecturers' Day : Back | to School | | |
| BDO Visit | | | V |
| EY Talk : Tax Challeng | ge | | |
| PwC Visit | | | |
| Nasyid WIRASA | | | |
| Social Shared Values | (SSV) | | |
| Accounting Sports Ca | arnival (ASC) | | |
| Open Floor | | | V |
| | | | |
| Completion progress | ; (%) | | 31 |