

Talent Pool for Global Business Services: Industry-Academia Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

In the rapid development of Global Business Services (GBS) industry, there is a need to nurture quality and capable talent pool. One of the efforts is through industry-academia collaboration in offering of GBS course at the university. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) together with TalentCorp and Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) collaboratively developed the first GBS course in Asia. The course consists of three days of intensive seminar and ten weeks of case study project. Both seminar and case study project require direct interaction with GBS firms. The purpose of this paper is to assess the challenges of offering the GBS course faced by its stakeholders. Based on data gathered through survey and roundtable discussions, this paper presents challenges in delivering the course content and achieving the course objectives. Findings suggest that the main challenges are commitment, time management and students' preparation. Despite these challenges, the course has direct impacts on the stakeholders as the GBS course heightens awareness on GBS industry among future graduates and helps increase their employability in the industry.

Keywords: Global Business Services; Talent Pool; Impact; Challenges; Industry-Academia Collaboration

INTRODUCTION

Global Business Services (GBS) firms are designed to capitalize on the economies of scale which increases efficiency and cost effectiveness. This is achieved through centralising work, governance and processes from several areas into a single location (Wirtz et al. 2015). This is made possible with the availability of technologies and talent mobility. In Malaysia, the GBS industry is included as one of the focuses in the country's Economic Transformation Plan (ETP) and the National Key Economic Areas (NKEA) towards achieving high income, knowledge-based economy status by 2020. GBS industry is fast gaining momentum in Malaysia as more companies set up their GBS centres here. According to A.T. Kearney 2016 Global Services Location Index, Malaysia is ranked number three among the most popular countries to set up GBS centres worldwide. GBS industry is categorised as service sector and hence rely heavily on human capital. GBS is an integration of services that include Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Finance and Accounting (F&A), Human Resources (HR), and Engineering Design and Services. GBS model has changed the way business functions operates by changing the basic principles of ownership and governance (Aman et al. 2012; Maelah et al. 2011). The biggest challenge faced by GBS industry is on how to attract and retain talent with the specific knowledge and skills required (Aman 2017).

Higher learning institutions are the platform where future employees get education, knowledge and skills required by the industry. In recent years industry has raised concerns that the talents that come out of the higher learning system are not well equipped with skills required by the industry. The findings by World Bank and Talent

Corp survey (Bank Negara Annual Report 2016) laid down an eye-opening fact. The findings highlighted that firms think graduates are not ready for workplace but at the same time, firm's collaboration with universities are very limited. For example, while 80% of the companies surveyed think that the university curricula is not reflective of the current realities, only 47% of them have worked with university's career centres. Communication skills of graduates is stated as the major skill deficit by 80% of the companies surveyed but only 10% of them had experience in developing curricula or programmes with universities. Findings of this report indicates that to have industry-ready graduates, the job of educating future talents should not be left to universities alone to shoulder. To produce future talents that are industry-ready, the industry should play more active role and collaborate with universities especially in the development of programmes or curricula. Summary of findings from the World Bank and TalentCorp survey is shown in Figure 1.

The interaction between academia and industry has evolved dramatically over the years from a distant, parallel relationship to a closer, more involved and more productive partnership. This is due to the current changes in the economy where both parties need each other to remain relevant (Ishengoma & Vaaland 2016). In line with the government's effort to ensure sufficient talent pool for the GBS industry; Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), TalentCorp and Malaysia Digital Economic Corporation (MDEC) have work together to develop and offer a new course on GBS, specifically designed to meet the talent need of the industry. UKM is the first university in Asia that offers this innovative course to students. It is intended to equip

future graduates from various faculties with the knowledge and skills required to increase their employability in the GBS industry. For the students, this course will serve as an introduction and exposure to the GBS industry in order to provide graduates the confidence to start their early career in the Industry. At the end of this course, students will have the understanding of GBS business culture, business process, management tools and improvement in their soft skills especially critical thinking, problem solving and presentation. Upon completion of the first cohort of students, there is a need to assess the challenges in implementing GBS course. The purpose of this paper is to assess the challenges of the GBS course towards its stakeholders. The research questions are (1) what are the challenges? (2) how does the GBS stakeholders overcome the challenges to ensure successful implementation?

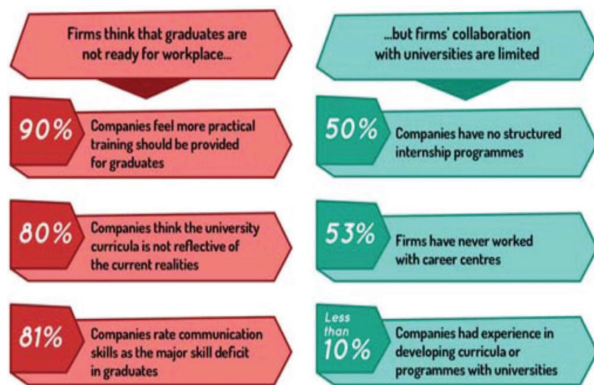


FIGURE 1. Findings from the World Bank and TalentCorp survey

Source: Ministry of Higher Education / 2016 Bank Negara Annual Report; The World Bank – TalentCorp Survey on Graduate Employability / 2016 Bank Negara Annual Report

The structure of the paper is as follows. Literature review sections presents overview of GBS industry and talent needs in the industry as well as industry-academia collaboration continues with the explanation on theoretical framework using Clements and Cord (2009) model. Methodology section introduces data collection through survey and roundtable discussion. Findings and discussion elaborate on the challenges and ways to overcome the challenges. This article ends with conclusion and implications to theory and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

GBS INDUSTRY

Over the past decades, firms have been outsourcing part of their production work or business processes to another firm or organization for cost savings. Outsourcing is a “contractual agreement according to which the principal requires the contractor to carry out specific tasks, such as parts of a production process or even the full production

process, employment services or support functions” (Eurostat 2008 p. 359). Despite the advantages of outsourcing, some firms are not willing to outsource their processes to third party due to performance risks, security and privacy. These firms have created regional or functional shared services. The shift to shared services began in the 1980s in the United States and its popularity spread to the European countries. Shared services refer to the provision of services by one part of an organization that previously was provided by more than one part of the organization, and shared across the units. A shared services centre is a separate unit in an organization that is not totally independent and operates on the basis of a provider and supplier agreement. The most important benefits that lead organizations to move their non-core business functions to shared services are service quality improvement, standardization, opportunity to concentrate on core business, cost reduction and specially taking advantage of highly competitive and well-educated employees.

As compared with the traditional models of shared services and outsourcing, GBS model is fundamentally different (Wirtz, Tuzovic & Ehret 2015). GBS exists when multiple processes (and, often, other functions) are shared in a unified global operating entity aims for scalability, lower costs, and optimized processes. Firm uses third party service providers for strategic functions whilst maintaining captive delivery ownership for some operational processes. It is an integration of services that make with the best competitive strategy that utilizes Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Finance and Accounting, Human Resources, and Engineering Design and Services. It becomes an essential tool in accelerating and complimenting shared services approaches as more companies are leveraging on GBS strategies to align their business objectives and obtain economies of scale. The driver for GBS is the ongoing search for sources of competitiveness in the form of costs saving, innovation, and growth markets.

To date, there are more than 500 foreign and multinational companies who have set up regional and global shared services centres in Malaysia (such as IBM, Shell, HSBC, Citibank etc), bringing along billions of Ringgit worth of investments and thousands of jobs opportunities. According to National IT Industry Association (PIKOM 2015), Malaysia’s GBS industry is in a stronger position to tap the US\$670 billion global market. Based on respondents from 15 key countries / economies revealed that the global GBS industry stood at US\$670 billion in 2014, with Asia Pacific Countries (APAC) accounting for the largest share of 36 percent at US\$240 billion, of this, Malaysia’s share of the pie is comparatively small at US\$4 billion, which indicates much room for growth (PIKOM 2015).

INDUSTRY-ACADEMIA COLLABORATION

Industry-academia relationships have a long history (Ashton 2016; Bower 1993, 1992). Industries and universities to work together as the collaboration can

benefit both parties. Benefits to industry include access to students, facilities, and faculty as well as an enhanced of corporate image (Fombrun 1996). Universities also want to expose students and faculty to practical problems, create employment opportunities, and gain access to applied technological areas. University research centers can be beneficial to industry through relationship alternatives that facilitate the advancement of knowledge and new technologies (Santoro & Chakrabarti 2002). Some of these collaborative activities have been instrumental in helping firms advance knowledge and propel new technologies in areas including biotechnology (Pisano 1990), pharmaceuticals (van Rossum & Cabo 1995) and manufacturing (Frye 1993).

Santoro and Chakrabarti (2002) discusses relationship between selected key industrial firm factors to each of the component of industry-academia collaboration. Four components of industry-academia relationship include; (1) research support - financial and equipment contributions made to universities by industry; (2) cooperative research - contract research and consulting with individuals and certain groups specifically to address industry problems (3) knowledge transfer - include formal and informal personal interactions, cooperative education, curriculum development, and personnel exchanges (Reams, 1986). Philips (1991) claims that recruitment of recent university graduates and employing student interns are main forms of knowledge transfer between industry and academia; and (4) technology transfer -typically done through technological consulting and joint venture between industry-university.

Collaboration between industry-academia present some challenges. Representatives of academic management and knowledge-transfer professionals refer to the divide between business and academic institutions in relation to culture and expectations (Belkhdja & Landry 2007; Muscio & Pozzali 2013;

Nooteboom, Vanhaverbeke, Duysters, Gilsing & Vandenoord 2007; Perkmann, King & Pavelin 2011). Muscio and Vallanti (2014) utilize interview data from 197 university departments in Italy to determine the main obstacles to technology transfer activity and its impact on industry-academia collaborations. Their study found that four main factors that reduce industry-university collaboration include: (1) misalignment of incentives between researchers and firms (2) lack of academic procedures to ease the interaction with businesses (3) misalignment between academic goals and technological transfer activity, and (4) distance between academic research and business needs. It showed that firms think graduates are not ready for workplace but however the collaboration with universities is still limited. The job of educating future talents should not be left to universities alone to shoulder. To produce future talents that are industry-ready, the industry should play more active role and collaborate with universities especially in the development of programmes or curricula.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper will further explore the challenges in industry-academia collaboration using course delivery model by Clements and Cord (2009) as a theoretical framework, the model emphasizes on student's learning experience (Figure 2).

Interrelationships and communication between three stakeholders provide the foundation to the success and sustainability of the course. The three key stakeholders for the course are identified as student, university (academicians) and industry (GBS industry practitioners):

INDUSTRY

Based on Clements and Cord (2009) model, proper collaboration with companies is vital to meet the job

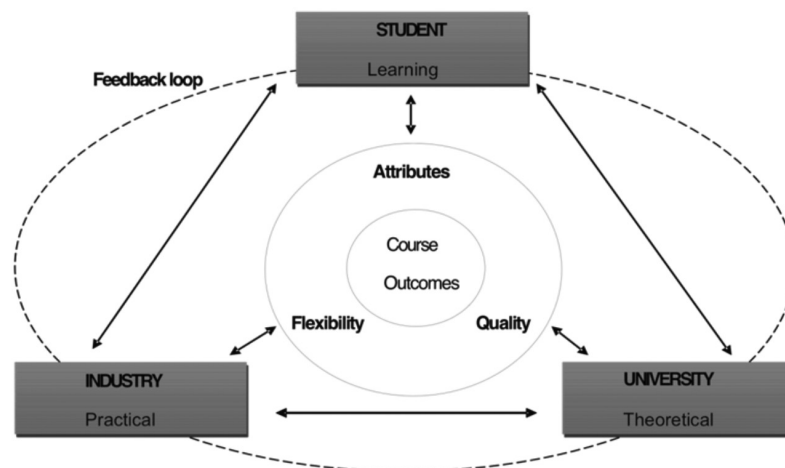


FIGURE 2. Course GBS delivery model (Adapted from Clements and Cord 2009)

demands in the economy and ensure a sustainable supply of talent. Several scholars (Ishengoma & Vaaland 2016; Mäkimattila et al. 2015; Feng et al. 2011) argue that partnerships between universities and industries are prerequisites for improved economic development. Further, industry participation is needed in the academic space not only to address the mismatch between graduates and employer demands (Talent Corp 2016) but most importantly towards producing industry ready graduate. In the context of GBS industry, GBS firms must be willing and to participate by providing practical learning experiences to students. Sharing information on the GBS industry and offers opportunities case study project could enrich students' learning experience. This could be done by assigning a group of students to a selected GBS firm in order to complete a specific task that contributes to a practical component of the course. Hands-on learning and engaging students with working environment is crucially important to ensure students' readiness in real work-life.

ACADEMIA

Many universities have formal policies for encouraging their academic staff to pursue industry assignments for a specified share of their time (Perkmann & Walsh 2008). In today's competitive job markets it is important to have an all rounded set of skills, as it will be a key advantage when looking to secure a role (Cavicchi et al. 2014; ACCA 2015). In fact, professional careers like scientist, engineer even accountant who have spent time in private or public companies are finding professional opportunities open to them in academia. Their value in higher education is varied and appreciated (ACCA 2015), as they able to provide unique perspective, share their skills and experiences to the students. Besides, academicians at the university should make necessary teaching arrangement and evaluate students' experiences. They should provide support in students' learning processes by emphasizing on theoretical knowledge.

STUDENTS

Clements and Cord (2009) model also highlighted on student's learning experience where students develop their skills specific to their career path and imperative for future job success. The rapid growth of GBS industry has impacted on students' job attainment as well as employability. Extracurricular involvement such as enrolling to GBS course allows students to link academic knowledge and practical experience, hence will develop their understanding on the significant of GBS course. Indirectly, it leads students to a better understanding on their own abilities, talents and career goals. Students should try their best to meet the course requirement. Apart from that, university's responsibility is crucially important in ensuring the success of the course including setting up the course, logistic, and enrolment processes, monitoring students experience and managing crisis. In

recent study, Blackmore et al. (2014) stated that students' exposure to Australian workplace through internships and other work-integrated learning will not only improve the employability of graduates but is likely to enhance the value of an Australian degree. Meanwhile, the notion of graduate employability is increasingly relevant to institutions of higher learning and for the industry, which demands graduates who can readily transfer into the workforce and effectively demonstrate their employability skills (Wilton 2012). Students' involvement in extracurricular activities also positively impacts educational achievement (Perkmann et al. 2011). Students who are actively engaged are more likely to have higher educational ambitions than uninvolved students.

In order to ensure consistency of values and practice, commitment of the three stakeholders, it is very important to ensure its core attributes, quality, and flexibility. The course outcomes remain at the heart of the model, which is dynamic and evolving. The feedback and course evaluation from the stakeholders are important tools to measure the success of the course.

GBS COURSE

One of the initiatives in industry-academia collaboration is the GBS Elective Course, offered by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) in September, 2015. This course is intended to equip future graduates with knowledge and skills required, hence increase their employability in the GBS Industry. With the support from the top management from UKM, MDEC and TalentCorp, this course managed to be executed. The process of designing the course took almost a year in getting everything done. This course will also serve as introduction and exposure to the GBS industry in order to provide graduates the confidence to start their early career in the Industry. The GBS course introduces the GBS industry to future graduates from various faculties to prepare students for better job employability in the industry. This course has been extended to other universities to increase talent pool for GBS industry. GBS course is offered as a 3-hour credit elective course open to students from various faculties. The course structure includes a three-day intensive seminar and a case study project at GBS firms for 8 to 10 weeks. The topics covered the introduction to GBS, managing process, governance, managing project, managing risks, managing global team and managing talent in GBS industry. At the end of the course, case study project is presented and evaluated by the academia and industry players who involve in this project. The expected outcomes are to ensure that the students have the ability to analyse business culture of the GBS industry, manage business process in selected GBS firms, understand relevant management tools on specific issues and able to apply the tools as well as soft skills especially in critical thinking and problem solving on specific issues in GBS firm.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative research methodology. It seeks answers to a question, uncovers social behaviour, and understands the interaction between industry and academia that produces findings which are not determined in advance. Basically, this approach is less concerned with uncovering the causal relationships but is more interested in understanding the social phenomenon and how to interpret them. A case study is employed as a way of conducting a qualitative inquiry instead of ethnography, phenomenology and grounded theory because the purpose of a case study is to gain an in-depth understanding on industry-academia collaboration. Therefore, case study corresponds with the research objectives that have been discussed earlier in this paper.

Qualitative data is gathered through roundtable discussion with representative from industry players and academia from accounting and finance area. The roundtable discussion was attended by 22 participants that discuss pertinent issues in relation to GBS industry in Malaysia. Themes were derived based on the issues that were discussed during the roundtable discussion. Feedback from students and industries were gathered through a simple semi-structured set of questions. 25 students that undergone the GBS course from September 2015 to January 2016 were selected in this study. According to Walsham (2006), *in multiple iteration, the moved of back and forth between data and theories interrogating field material to check whether data supported emerging claims and conversely switching between theoretical lenses to make sense of the empirics*. The semi-structured set of questions encompass issues related to the GBS course in general that includes awareness and understanding towards the implementation of the GBS course, enhancement of knowledge about careers and prospects in the GBS industry as well as the improvement in terms of soft skills (communication, problem solving, presentation, team work, passion in doing work, level of discipline, ready for a change etc.). The 25 data was collated and analyzed using basic descriptive statistics method.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Industry-Related Challenges - Findings indicate that indicated that 90% of the respondents agreed that the GBS course could contribute to talent pool for GBS industry and have direct access to their own talent pool. The involvement of industry in running the course is seen essential as the main purpose of the course is to expose the students to GBS industry. Engagement from people in the industry is of utter importance. This is in line with Clements and Cord (2009) suggestion that proper collaboration with companies is vital to meet the job demands in the economy and ensure a sustainable supply of talent. One of the main challenges is managing

time especially when tasks must be completed within a specified time frame. Arranging time and getting access to the industry turns out to be quite challenging not only for the students but also to academics. Despite that, meeting and visiting GBS companies exposed students to GBS working environment and improved their understanding about the GBS industry. In order to overcome the challenges, industry could provide schedules for the meetings at the early stage of the course and students could arrange their time accordingly.

Academia-Related Challenges - Academicians expressed significant support for industry-academia collaboration in terms of the benefits related to their research. Their engagement with industry is driven by a desire to further their research rather than to exploit their knowledge. One of the main challenges faced by the academicians is the difficulty in promoting, attracting and engaging the right students to participate in the course. Logistic and administration matters, although may be seen as insignificant, can hamper the running of the course. The fact that the course is open to all students from various faculties contributes to challenges especially in arranging time and schedules for workshop and meeting the participating companies. In order to overcome such challenges, formal guidelines and proper scheduling could be implemented with the assistance from top management. As suggested by Perkmann and Walsh (2008), formal policies could encourage academia and their students to pursue industry assignments for a specified time. The academics proposed that the improvement on the current GBS course should be done perpetually.

Students-Related Challenges - Based on survey, 90% of the students claimed they enjoyed and benefited from the course. Most students are looking forward to future engagement with the firms either in internship or employment. GBS firms' participation in seminar and case study project has improved students' awareness and understanding of the exciting career in the industry. However, there are challenges that need attention. Findings show that students' attitude, commitment and motivation can become major issues. The students are also found to be lacking in critical thinking and analytical skills. Other challenges are found to be related to time management and students preparation. GBS industry is relatively new to most students who enrolled in the course. Despite that, companies expect students to have basic understanding of the industry. This expectation gap contributes to challenges in implementing the GBS course. In order to overcome these challenges, students should attend the three days intensive workshop where CEO/CFO of the participating companies will give some overview of their companies and related issues. As indicated by Clements and Cord (2009) and Blackmore et al. (2014) student's learning experience are important for them to develop their understanding and specific skills for their career path.

The summary of of challenges and ways to overcome the challenges is shown in Figure 3.

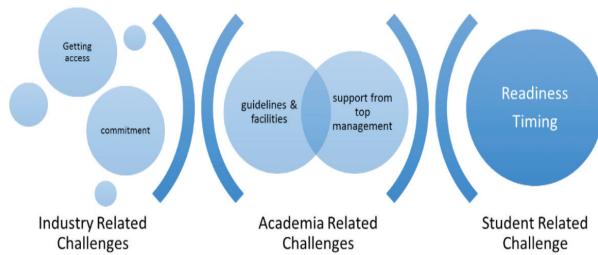


FIGURE 3. Summary of challenges and ways to overcome the challenges

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the challenges in industry-academia collaboration when delivering GBS course for the development of GBS industry's talent pool. Using course delivery model Clements and Cord (2009), this study delineates the challenges faced by three stakeholders - industry, academia and students. Findings from this study suggest that the main challenges in offering the course include commitment, time management, guidelines and students' preparation. In order to overcome these challenges, the industry should continue provide access to academia and students with proper scheduling, while students must be prepared with some basic knowledge of the company and industry. The academia can improve in coordinating the organization of the course by providing relevant learning materials for promotion, selection of students and course guidelines to ensure successful delivery of the course. Figure 3 shows the summary of challenges and ways to overcome the challenges.

Theoretically, this article extends our understanding on the course delivery model by Clements and Cord (2009) which explains industry-academia collaboration in facilitating learning by students. The model was primarily used to explain the link between industry, academia and students in the case of industrial learning (Maelah et al. 2014). The application of this model can also be used to explain the industry-academia collaboration in offering a university course such as the GBS course. The challenges faced by each party in the model are intertwined and must be resolved for the course to achieve its objective.

Practically, this article provides insights into industry-academia collaboration especially in developing talent pool for GBS industry. As the GBS industry expands, the contents of the academia curriculum should be adapted to the industry needs. The objective of the course should attempt to discuss and resolve the impending issues for the industry rather than limited to creating awareness. This will stimulate interests among the students to see GBS firms as prospective employers and in part solve the current problem of attracting new talents in many

GBS firms. Greater visibility can be obtained through seminars or conferences, public lectures or write up in newspapers by relevant parties about GBS industry-academia collaboration. Therefore, the future of the industry-academia collaboration is promising provided it continues to meet the expectations of its stakeholders.

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