



A review of literature on challenges in the development and implementation of generic competencies in higher education curriculum



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ABSTRACT

Generic competencies development in higher education curriculum involves many unresolved issues concerning institutional and curriculum support, conceptualisation of generic competencies, teaching pedagogy and assessment, as well as teachers' and students' perceptions. This paper explores these challenges by way of a critical review of literature in the last two decades. It shows that teaching pedagogy, curriculum, students' experience and learning strategy, conception, missions from higher education and compliances are not aligned to ensure effective generic competencies development, and this is attributable to the lack of an agreed conceptual base. This paper will provide insights into areas for future research and development.

1. Introduction

Structural changes in economy, speed and nature of globalisation, and technological advancement and innovation are transforming the nature of work, which in turn, are affecting the skills demands of the labour markets. Employers have expressed concern that the existing higher education programs fail to prepare students with the kinds of skills required in today's rapidly changing industries (Badcock et al., 2010). In this context, organisations such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) regard the development of what they call "21st century skills", "employability skills", "soft skills" or "generic skills" an international priority (APEC, 2016; OECD, 2016). In countries around the world such as Australia, Hong Kong, Malaysia and the UK, there has been increased emphasis on not just developing the work-related skills of university students but to equip them to become "global citizens and effective members of modern day society" (Barrie, 2004, p. 262). On top of their academic knowledge, generic skills programs, which encompass work-related skills, values and attitudes that are beyond disciplinary knowledge, have emerged across different countries. These programs all highlight the role of contemporary higher education as a provider of work-related generic skills (Cranmer, 2006). It is however evident that a large majority of university academics and teachers lack understandings and awareness of issues about generic skills development, and the challenges and obstacles in developing a generic skills agenda require deeper investigations (Drummond et al., 1998; Chan et al., 2017).

This paper will use the term 'generic competencies', an umbrella term inclusive of different types of generic skills (such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, creativity and time management), positive values and attitudes (such as consideration, respect, appreciation and lifelong learning) for student development.

The topic of generic competencies has generated a lot of discussions among key stakeholders, including employers, academics, students and parents. While earlier discussions of generic competencies mostly centred on whether higher education should be responsible for students' generic competencies development, recent debates have shifted the focus to whether all academic courses should provide students with generic competencies training (e.g. Treleven and Voola, 2008), the issues of implementation and assessment, and positive attitudes and values, type of competencies which may not be immediately related to career, but are becoming vital for the betterment of society.

The unresolved complications as well as mixed attitudes towards generic competencies are the result of the different, often disagreeing, understandings and practices of all parties involved in the generic competencies agenda (Hughes and Barrie, 2010). This paper aims to provide a critical review of literature on the challenges in the development and implementation of generic competencies in higher education curriculum as identified in the last two decades. It will discuss these challenges in terms of institutional and curriculum support, conceptualisation of generic competencies, teaching pedagogy and assessment as well as teachers' and students' perceptions of generic competencies.

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2. Methodology

The aim of this literature review is to address the question: “what are the challenges involved in developing and effectively implementing generic competencies in higher education to enhance student learning in this area?” which guided the search and selection of articles for this review.

The corpus of data is drawn from the results of keyword searches conducted in library catalogues and the following online Education databases: Academic Search Complete, Australian education index (AEI), British education index, ERIC, Linguistics and language behaviour abstracts, ProQuest, PsycARTICLES, Scopus, Social sciences citation index and Sociological abstracts. The three main keywords were ‘generic skills’; ‘higher education’ and ‘challenges’; but the searching of databases also incorporated words and phrases such as ‘higher education’ or ‘university’ or ‘college’ plus ‘generic skills’ or ‘generic competencies’ or ‘employability skills’ or ‘soft skills’ plus ‘challenges’ or ‘difficulties’ or ‘barriers’ or ‘obstacles’. These terms were used to narrow the scope of the search.

The search excluded books, newspaper and newsletter articles, working papers and conference papers. Although only peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles were selected, the online databases still produced hundreds of results. The researchers then selected articles that could address the aforementioned guiding question through an initial reading of article abstracts. 56 articles were finally selected for this review and grounded theory methodology was adopted in the analysis of the articles. These reviewed articles are marked with an asterisk (*) in the reference list.

Grounded theory provides an “inductive [theory] discovery methodology that allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of the topic” (Martin and Turner, 1986, p. 141). In this paper, the aims of using grounded theory were twofold. First, grounded theory offered a systematic method to break the large dataset presented by the final selection of 56 articles into smaller, manageable and meaningful segments for analysis. Second, grounded theory allows researchers to remain open and explore a field of inquiry with no preconceived hypotheses and assumptions. In collecting and analysing the journal articles for this paper, the researchers reviewed and coded the selected articles as guided by the research question and derived the commonly occurring themes purely from the data to develop a comprehensive account of the challenges towards developing and implementing generic competencies in higher education. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), grounded theory research involves three basic steps: open coding, axial/theoretical coding and selective coding. This literature review has adopted these three steps of coding which are outlined in this section and Attachment 1 contains a list of results.

2.1. Open coding

With the topic “challenges in developing and implementing generic competencies in higher education” in mind, the researchers first analysed the selected articles, broke texts into smaller segments and marked key points as codes. These codes were essentially the labels or names the researchers used to summarise a text segment or idea as conveyed in the journal articles.

In the process of open coding, the researchers examined the texts with the questions, “does this answer the research question?” and “what challenges towards developing generic competencies does this imply?” Notes, known as memos in grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), were produced to gather ideas and dimensions about the topic in order to develop the emergent codes. While coding an idea, the researchers compared it with all previous ideas that were coded. If an idea is new and has not been coded, the researchers assigned a new code to the idea. The memos enabled the researchers to constantly compare and group the codes into categories of challenges in developing generic competencies which informed the next stage of coding.

2.2. Axial/theoretical coding

The starting point for axial coding is the list of codes produced at the end of open coding. With the notes taken in the memos, this process named axial/theoretical coding is a process of relating different open codes to each other and grouping the codes that reflect commonalities into the same categories. From the groupings of codes, the researchers identified a number of categories in relation to the challenges in the development and implementation of generic competencies in higher education. For instance, the researchers decided that the codes “not the university’s role to teach generic competencies” and ‘university’s role shaped by economic benefits rather than whole-person development and the betterment of society’ fit into a category of codes called ‘lack of recognition of the importance in universities’. ‘Lack of a standardised list of generic competencies’ and ‘lack of consensus on the meanings of specific competencies’ fit into the category of ‘lack of clarity about the conceptualisation/definition of generic competencies as a conceptual base’. ‘Re-articulation of beliefs about teaching and innovative teaching perceived unfavourable by students’ and ‘teachers’ unwillingness to deviate from traditional teaching approaches’ belong to the category of ‘teachers’ perceptions’.

2.3. Selective coding

Selective coding is implemented when the grouping of codes and categories have been identified. It is a process where the researchers continued to analyse the selected articles and confirm the categories to construct the main themes of challenges towards developing and implementing generic competencies. Selective coding is thus deductive in nature as the labelling and categorising of codes were implemented to validate, elaborate or reject the categories derived in the processes of open and theoretical coding. For instance, the main theme ‘operational challenges: conceptualisation, teaching pedagogy and assessment’ is confirmed as characterised by the categories of ‘lack of clarity about the conceptualisation/definition of generic competencies as a conceptual base’ ‘ineffective teaching pedagogy’ and ‘difficulties in assessment/measurement of generic competencies’. Constant comparison between the different categories of a main theme assisted in uncovering as many similarities and diversities around the main themes.

Below is a diagrammatical explanation of the three coding processes and the interrelations between open codes, categories and main themes identified in this review: (Fig. 1).

The coding process is complete when the information gathered allows the researcher to reach conceptual saturation and no new codes and categories can be found (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The final selection of 56 articles represented the number of articles needed to reach theoretical saturation when new challenges in developing and implementing generic competencies in higher education cease to emerge. The coding process of this literature review was terminated when all the articles were analysed and categories and main themes were confirmed.

The main themes and categories identified and analysed in this paper are aimed to provide a comprehensive account of the challenges in developing and implementing generic competencies in higher education.

3. Challenges in developing and implementing generic competencies in higher education: a Literature Review

This literature review has identified three main themes concerning the challenges in generic competencies development and implementation from the existing literature. These include ‘lack of institutional and curriculum support’, ‘operational challenges: conceptualisation, teaching pedagogy and assessment’ and ‘teachers’ and students’ perceptions of generic competencies development’. Each of these themes will be discussed in the following sections.

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