

HRM Perceptions on MBA Graduates' Employability Competencies (Matching Importance and Performance)

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Abstract—This research is an exploratory cross sectional study aiming at assessing the Master of Business Administration Graduates (MBAG) competencies in Sudanese universities from the Human Resource Managers (HRM) perceptions. This is achieved through, investigating the gap between importance and performance of the MBAG current competencies. Additionally, to investigate the difference in importance between soft skills and hard skills. The sample is selected using cluster sampling technique. And an online survey instrument is constructed using google form and circulated to 214 HRM. Furthermore, T-test is utilized to test the hypotheses under 0.05 significant level. The study revealed that HRM are mainly dissatisfied with the MBAG acquired competencies. Furthermore, there is significant difference in importance in terms of soft skills and hard skills as perceived by HRM. The employers seem to value soft skills more than hard skills, because most of the competencies that ranked high by employers are soft skills. Additionally, the study indicates a gap between competencies' importance and performance. Thus, it can be concluded that there is mismatch between the current MBAG competencies and what is really needed by the Sudanese employers. Accordingly, business schools should perform curriculum restructures for prioritizing skills and designing coursework to incorporate top ranked skills viewed as most important by business and employers. Precisely, Design curricula so that students can learn — by doing — to apply multiple disciplines on the job, and encourage students to take electives outside the traditional core curriculum.

Index Terms — Competencies, Employability, MBA.

Acronyms: HRM: Human Resource Managers, MBAG: Master of Business Administration Graduates.

I. INTRODUCTION

In general, Sidiropoulos (2014) stated that the role of business and the reason of tertiary business education programs are to provide individuals with knowledge and skills. Therefore, only graduates with superior competencies will be able to meet these challenges and fit in the job market (Ting & Ying, 2012). In spite of the importance of MBA programs, the survey conducted by Tay (2001) found that although several employers valued the positive work attributes of MBAs, very few were willing to finance their staff to pursue such degrees. Jackson (2012) posed that there is continuing discrepancy between industry expectations and higher education provision.

According to the CIMA (2014) critical levels have been reached from youth unemployment and underemployment and are expected to continue to increase in most economies. Moreover, The World Economic Forum report, Global Risks (2014), states that many current graduates are discovering that despite their academic qualifications – often gained at significant expense –they lack the specific technical and professional skills demanded by the ever-changing jobs market. Over and above, many managers cannot find sufficient people with the skills they need to grow their business and enable the economy to improve. As such, this is threatening the global economic recovery and could lead to a “lost generation” of young adults because education is not providing the skills they need to gain the employment they seek to (CIMA, 2014). Similarly, Ting & Ying (2012), argue that there is always a gap between employers' needs and business graduate competencies.

Hodges & Burchell (2003) suggested that there is a ‘competency gap’ between importance and performance, and there is a critical need for cooperative education programs. Hence, the mission to bridge the gap is very crucial through the alignment of business graduate education with corporate requirements by equipping business graduates with a more competent set of skills (Martinovic, 2013). Furthermore, there is a rising concern in the literature on the significance of ‘soft’ skills which are viewed as complementary to ‘hard’ skills and required for superior organizational performance. The literature also suggests that there is a lack of emphasis placed on the development of soft skills by many education providers. (Rainsbury, Hodges, Burchell and Lay, 2002; Robles, 2012; Shuayto, 2013). In recent years Sudan experienced a proliferation of different MBA programs aiming at improving the business skills and enhancing knowledge in different business areas. According to Ilham, Fathelrahman, Diab, Mohamed, and Eljelly (2015) MBA programs are increasing fast worldwide and the competition among the universities that offer such a degree is also getting very tough, therefore, universities need to differentiate themselves from their competitors because of the emergence of a lot of degree choices at the elimination of potential students. In Sudan there are more than 15 public and private universities offering MBA programs and many batches were graduated from these institutions. In the last five years the number of MBA Graduates (MBAG) exceeded 5000 graduates. This besides the other universities that are on their way to establish this program. Specifically, with respect to MBAG, the gap is obvious between theories taught in the

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classrooms and the skills required for actual practice in the workplace. In other words, some scholars argue that MBA is wholly out-of-touch with the “real world” and is irrelevant to the needs of practicing managers (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009; Varela, Burke & Michel, 2013; Saxena & Bendale, 2014). Furthermore, employers want ‘well-rounded’ graduates with a wide variety of competencies, as well as they, place a great emphasis on graduates’ soft skills more than hard skills (Rainsbury *et al*, 2002; Robles, 2012; Shuayto, 2013).

The situation in Sudan is not an exception. There are continuous complaints by business leaders about the competencies of Sudanese graduates in general. Consequently, the main argument of this study is that there is a ‘competency gap’ between the Importance and the actual competencies by Sudanese organizations. Furthermore, there is difference in importance between the hard skills and soft skills as perceived by employers.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Generally, the main objective of this study is to assess the HRM perceptions critically about the MBAG current competencies. Moreover, investigating the gap between importance and performance of the MBAG current competencies. Furthermore, to investigate the different in importance between soft skills and hard skills.

Accordingly, there are four main objectives in this study:

1. To rank the relevant competencies required by employers, according to their importance.
2. To show to what extent the employers are satisfied with the current competencies of the MBAG.
3. To investigate the difference (if any) in importance between competencies in terms of soft and hard skills as perceived by employers.
4. To investigate the difference (if any) between the importance and performance as perceived by HRM.

Hypotheses

H1: There is significant difference in importance between the soft skills and hard skills from the perceptions of HRM.

H2: There is significant difference between the competencies’ importance and MBAG performance as perceived by HRM.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Employability

The Employability is considered a new business word that finds no consensus in the literature (Dhanawade & Bhola 2015). Dacre and Sewell, (2007, pp.277) stated that “employability is acquiring a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose an occupation in which he can be secure and successful”.

B. Competencies Definition and Classifications

Azevedo, Apfelthaler and Hurst (2012) stated that there is wide disagreement in defining the concept of competency and whether it is dependent or independent variable. Grzeda (2005) identified two main approaches: The American approach, which views competency as an independent variable affecting managerial behavior and performance; and the British approach, which views competency as a dependent variable or outcome (i.e., the result of managerial behavior). In the first approach, competency is defined around a person’s abilities – knowledge, skills, abilities, but also attitudes and underlying individual characteristics. Based on McClelland’s work (1973) that competencies are causally linked to individual performance outcomes and later extended by Boyatzis (1982) and Spencer & Spencer (1993). In the second approach, the definition of competency is closer to that of a ‘performance standard’ or a list of tasks (work duties) that a person is expected to perform in a given a job. It is apparent that there are two clearly different approaches applied to the concept of competency. Actually, thanks to this disagreement about the concept, as this study is seeking to consider particularly the rank of the competencies in terms of importance and of the employers’ satisfaction of the MBAG competencies.

C. Competencies Classification (Hard Vs Soft Skills)

“Hard skills are specific, teachable abilities that can be defined and measured, such as typing, writing, math, reading and the ability to use software programs. By contrast, soft skills are less tangible and harder to quantify, such as getting along with others, listening and engaging in small talk. In business, hard skills most often refer to accounting and financial modeling” (Investopedia, 2016). The Collins English Dictionary defines the term soft skills as “desirable qualities for certain forms of employment that do not depend on acquired knowledge: they include the ability to deal with people, and a positive flexible attitude” (soft skills :<http://dictionary.reference.com>). Robles (2012) stated that soft skills are personality traits, attitudes, and behaviors—rather than technical skill or knowledge. Soft skills are the intangible, nontechnical, personality-exact skills that determine one’s strengths as a leader, facilitator, manager, and negotiator.

As such, hard skills can be learned and improved over time, whereas soft skills are harder to acquire and change, because soft skills cover the personality traits that decide how well one interacts with others, and are usually a definite part of one’s personality.

Generally speaking, there is a growing concern in the literature on the significance of ‘soft’ skills which are viewed as complementary to ‘hard’ skills and required for superior organizational performance. The literature also suggests that there is a lack of emphasis placed on the development of soft skills by many education providers. (Rainsbury *et al*, 2002; Robles, 2012; Shuayto, 2013).

D. Critical Competencies Needed for Employability

Rao, Saxena, Chand, Narendran, Bharathan, and Jajoo (2014) stated that employers clearly expect certain functional roles to be filled by fresh MBAG. What is anticipated by the

employers is a realistic approach to work. They stressed that business schools must rebalance their curricula, as well as retaining a focus on their current strength in the theoretical aspect while enlarge their attention on the practical aspect. As mentioned previously, the researches conducted in the area of the required competencies by managers in workplace support the existence of “competency gap” and they propose acquiring of certain critical competencies to bridge the gap (Rainsbury et al, 2002; Hodges & Burchell, 2003; Andrews & Higson, 2008; Ting & Ying, 2012; Jackson, 2012; Martinovic, 2013; Kini, 2014; Osmani, Weerakkody, Hindi, Al-Esmail, Eldabi, Kapoor and Irani ,2015). Hodges & Burchell (2003) stressed that employers place a great emphasis on graduates’ soft competencies, and their ability to deal empathetically and effectively. Additionally, previous researches findings also indicate that employers want ‘work-ready’ graduates with prior work experience (Rainsbury et al, 2002; Robles, 2012; Shuayto, 2013). Moreover, soft competencies specified by managers to be most critical are the least competencies represented in required MBA curricula (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2007; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009).

Andrews & Higson (2008) concluded that in the four different countries included within their study, the similarities in the demands and expectations that employers have of business graduates were remarkably homogenous. Moreover, there were notable similarities in graduate and employer perspectives of what may be termed ‘core components’ of business graduate employability: the value of hard business-related knowledge and skills; the importance of soft business-related skills and competencies; and the need for prior work experience. Alternatively, Prince, Burns, Lu, and Winsor (2015) proposed a transfer of knowledge and skills to MBA studies from the workplace. They suggested that a supportive work-to-MBA-studies transfer environment will direct to more active learning of course content that has larger relevance for attaining career objectives. In spite that, Azevedo et al (2012) argue that there is a great concern for graduates’ level of key generic skills and highlight the need to strengthen competency development within undergraduate business education. On the contrary, Varela et al (2013) stressed that an emphasis on mastering complex managerial skills might be an exaggeratedly ambitious aim that can lead to neglecting early achievement in competency acquisition and create unrealistic impressions of MBA program failure. Furthermore, the authors discuss how MBA programs could consider the use of novel evaluation procedures for appraising competency development.

Boyatzis & Saatcioglu (2008) argue that emotional, social and cognitive intelligence competencies that predict effectiveness in management and leadership can be developed in adults through graduate management program. These improvements can sustain out as far as seven years. Additionally, the findings of a study conducted in business graduates by Jackson (2012) indicate relative perceived strengths in ‘social responsibility and accountability’, ‘developing professionalism’ and ‘working effectively with others’, and weaknesses in ‘critical thinking’, ‘developing initiative and enterprise’ and ‘self-awareness’. Although these findings align with those of other recent employer-based

studies, undergraduates rate themselves considerably higher than their industry counterparts. A study handled by Tiwari (2012) revealed top 10 ranked competencies are: 1. Grasp of global systems, global issues, and Interrelation dynamics. 2. Analytical, interpersonal and Intellectual skills. 3. Multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary skills 4. Communication and customer service orientation. 5. Technical skills 6. Critical Thinking 7. Appreciation of cost management. 8. Ability and willingness to learn; energy and passion; teamwork and cooperation; 9. Decision making and problem solving. 10. Motivation and Initiative.

Another study conducted by Rainsbury et al (2002) indicate that the five most important competencies; are computer literacy, customer service orientation, teamwork and cooperation, self-confidence, and willingness to learn. In terms of least importance competencies, students and graduates were in agreement, rating directiveness, organizational awareness, developing others, and impact and influence on others, as least important. Competencies which the students favored more highly than the graduates included relationship building, team leadership, technical expertise, achievement orientation, and analytical thinking. Graduates favored flexibility, willingness to learn, written communication, information seeking, and self-control as more important than the students.

According to Hodges & Burchell (2003) the top 10 ranked competencies in order by employers were: ability and willingness to learn, energy and passion, teamwork and cooperation, interpersonal communication, customer service orientation, order, quality and accuracy, flexibility, problem solving, achievement orientation, and initiative. Also, Shuayto (2013) posed that business schools deans/directors of MBA programs identify top seven critical skills/abilities to the organizations which are oral communication, written communication, interpersonal skills, decision-making, responsibility and accountability, ability to work in teams, and creativity and critical thinking skills. Six of the seven skills are soft skills. Similarly, Rao et al (2014) argue that; leadership, creativity and innovation, critical thinking and communication, and understanding the purpose of business—seem to be very clearly on the radars of the employers. Hodges & Burchell (2003) consider that business graduates need to have high levels of competency in most areas. Graduate’s ability and willingness to learn was considered to be the most important competency in the workplace by both employers and graduates in business roles. Also a key finding can be found in the study conducted by Martinovic (2013) who found that teamwork, critical thinking, creative thinking and marketing skills are the most important competencies in the eyes of the employers. In similar manner, Dotong (2014) argues that employers prefer graduates who are proactive, trainable, cooperative team players and who can carry all responsibilities with ease and result-oriented individuals with high regards to the achievement of company’s mission. At the same time, a study handled in Kenya by Okoli (2014) concluded that entrepreneurial competencies of management and marketing competencies are required of business education students for self-sustainability. Since entrepreneurship is

synonymous with self-empowerment. It is then imperative that business education students who intend to be self-reliant be acquainted with these competencies for a successful enterprise. Furthermore, Iqbal and Zenchenkov (2014) stressed that the most critical competencies to workplace are listed in table (I).

Similarly, according to Rao et al (2014) the following competencies in table (II) are selected by the employers to be the most critical competencies needed in work place and should be acquired by MBAG.

Thus, there are different sets of competencies selected to be the most crucial ones in workplace, and it differ according to the various studies conducted in different contexts and different environments. Besides, it is clear that most studies agree on the criticalness of soft skills, especially in the eyes of the employers. Nevertheless, the importance of the hard skills as complement cannot be overlooked. Similarly, the current research is not expected to deviate a lot from the findings of previous researches, taking into consideration the variation in the selected competencies by other studies and the different context.

Table (I): Critical Competencies to Workplace
Source: Iqbal & Zenchenkov (2014, pp.91-106).

Table (II): Skills Sets Required in MBAs for Initial Roles

Skill Sets required	
<i>Traditional knowledge/skill domain</i>	Functional/Foundational skills, Analytical skills, Exposure to practice, Consulting skills, Implementation skills , Ability to understand, assimilate, general awareness
<i>Developing leadership skills</i>	People management, Networking, Interpersonal and team building skills, Leadership, Process-sensitivity, Humility , Receptivity to learning ,Showing conviction .Understanding of vision
<i>Acting creatively and innovatively</i>	Learning and adaptability ,Creativity and innovation, Entrepreneurial behavior
<i>Thinking critically and communicating effectively</i>	Presentation and communication skills, Strategic thinking skills ,Understanding the roles, responsibilities, and purpose of business ,Result orientation, Need for a hands-on approach, Commitment to organizations, Business instinct ,Expectations from career

Source: Rao et al (2014, pp.12).

IV. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Hodges & Burchell (2003) and Spencer & Spencer (1993) identified a number of generic competency categories that are classified into soft and hard skills, which they claim account for 80-95% of the distinguishing features of superior performers in technical and managerial positions. Consequently, this study is endeavoring to assess the twenty-five dimensions of competencies from the perceptions of MBAG from the five universities under the study. It is clear from the reviewed literature that there is a great emphasis towards soft skills rather than hard skills, as most studies revealed the importance of the soft skills from the perspective of the employer (Rainsbury et al, 2002; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2007; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009 Robles, 2012; Shuayto, 2013). Moreover, people skills (or soft skills) are the most difficult to develop; whereas business (or technical) skills, which are comprised of many of the hard and administrative role requirements are the easiest to develop (Hogan & Warrenfeltz, 2003; Kaiser & Kaplan, 2006).

As a result, in this study the main focus is on the soft skills development assessment for the MBAG. Thus, this study

Competency Category	Critical competencies
Technical	problem solving, information management, computer literacy
Interpersonal	ability to cope with uncertainty, working under pressure, ability to change, teamwork
Intrapersonal	self-confidence, self-discipline, readiness to explore unknown
Business Knowledge	cultural awareness and adaptability, value chain

adopted 7 hard skills and 18 soft skills that will be assessed critically from the Human Resource Managers (HRM) perspective.

Competency Descriptions

According to Hodges & Burchell, (2003, pp.16-22) the following are the competencies classifications and descriptions.

Hard skills

1. Analytical thinking (thinking for self, reasoning, practical intelligence, planning skills, problem analyzing, systematic)
2. Computer literacy (able to operate a number of packages; has information management awareness)
3. Conceptual thinking (creative thinking, insight, pattern recognition, critical thinking, problem recognition and definition, can generate hypotheses, linking ideas)
4. Organizational awareness (understands organization, knows constraints, power and political astuteness, cultural knowledge, ethical understanding)
5. Personal planning and organizational skills (ability to organize self and others, effective time management, organizes and completes tasks effectively and efficiently)
6. Technical expertise (job-related technical knowledge and skills, depth and breadth, acquires expertise, donates expertise)

7. Written communication (relevant skills / appropriate use of: emails, internal memos, internal and external reports, letters to clients).

Soft Skills

1. Ability and willingness to learn (desire and aptitude for learning, learning as a basis for action)
2. Achievement orientation (task accomplishment – a completer, seeks results, employs innovation, has competitiveness, seeks impact, aims for standards and efficiency)
3. Concern for order, quality & accuracy (monitoring, concern for clarity, reduce uncertainty, keeping track of events and issues)
4. Customer service orientation (helping and service orientation, focus on client needs, commercial awareness, actively solves client problems)
5. Developing others (coaching, mentoring, providing support, training, developing others, positive regard)
6. Energy & passion (a positive ‘can-do’ attitude, high energy levels, enthusiasm, pro-active, strong drive)
7. Flexibility (adaptability, perceptual objectivity, staying objective, resilience, behavior is contingent on the situation)
8. Impact & influence on others (impression management, strategic influence, presentation skills, showmanship, persuasion, collaborative influence)
9. Initiative (seizes opportunities, bias for action, proactive, self-motivation, persistence, decisiveness, strategic orientation, diagnostic focus, looking deeper, contextual sensitivity)
10. Interpersonal communication (effective speaking and listening, utilizes and is responsive to non-verbal communication)
11. Interpersonal understanding (empathy, sensitivity to others, diagnostic understanding, awareness of others’ feelings)
12. Leadership (vision, taking charge, concern for subordinates, builds a sense of group purpose, assertiveness, decisiveness, firmness of standards)
13. Organizational commitment (align self and others to organizational needs, business-mindedness, self-sacrifice)
14. Problem solving (actively solves identified problems, carries through to completion)
15. Relationship building (networking, establish rapport, use of contacts, concern for stakeholders e.g. clients)
16. Self-confidence (strong self-concept, internal locus of control, independence, positive ego strength, decisive, accepts responsibility)
17. Self-control (resistance to stress, staying calm, high emotional intelligence (EQ), resists temptation, stamina, not impulsive, can calm others)
18. Teamwork & cooperation (fosters group facilitation and management, conflict resolution, motivation of others, creating a good workplace climate).

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

It is an exploratory cross sectional study that aim at assessing the HRM perceptions critically about the MBAG current

competencies and exploring new needed competencies. Moreover, investigating the gap between importance and performance of the MBAG current competencies. Furthermore, to investigate the difference in importance between soft skills and hard skills. According to Azevedo *et al* (2012) that there is wide disagreement in defining the concept of competency, and whether it is dependent or independent variable. Accordingly, this research is concerned with ranking the competencies rather than examining cause and effect relation (Martinovic, 2013; Rainsbury *et al*, 2002; Hodges and Burchell, 2003).

For the purpose of this study, the researcher concentrates on the MBAG, who are already enrolled in different Sudanese organizations. Specifically, focused on five universities who are the pioneers in the field of MBA programs that deliver the courses in English language including: University of Khartoum (U of K), University of Medical Sciences and Technology(UMST), Ahfad University for Women (AUW), Sudan International University(SIU) and University of Garden City for Science and Technology(UGCST). In fact, MBAG are expected to be more experienced and relevant to impact the organizations compared to fresh graduates, as they acquire and develop a variety of competencies critical for employability through their educational stages and are more likely to be hired (Tay, 2001).

A. Sampling Technique

The sample is selected using cluster (double stage) sampling technique. And an online survey instrument is constructed using google form and circulated to 214 HRM. Furthermore, T-test is utilized to test the hypotheses under 0.05 significant level.

The questionnaires were created using Google Drive, an online software for creating web surveys. An online hyperlink of the questionnaire was sent via private messages on the people’s mailbox. Individuals were asked to participate by filling out the questionnaire and to follow the hyperlink.

B. Questionnaires Design

The questionnaire is directed to the HRM of the companies in which the MBAG are working in. HRM questionnaire is divided into two sections; The first section is asking HRM, to rank the 25 competencies according to their importance to their companies. The managers are asked: “Please indicate to what extent do you agree with following statements regarding the importance of each competency for your organization”

The second section; is concerned with asking HRM to indicate to which extent they are satisfied with the current MBAG’ competencies. The managers are asked:

“Please indicate to what extent do you agree with following statements regarding your satisfaction with MBAG’s competencies”

The competencies were listed in random order on the questionnaires and the respondents are allowed to add additional competencies they felt were relevant.

HRM were asked also using 5-point Likert scale, to indicate the importance of each competency for their organization. As 1 indicates the competency was (not important) and 5 indicated the competency was (very important). The scale is graded as (1= Not important, 2= Less important, 3= Medium

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important, 4= Important, 5=Very Important). Moreover, the HRM are asked to indicate to what extent they are satisfied with “MBA graduates’ competencies” in their Organizations. As 1 indicates they are (strongly dissatisfied) with the competency and 5 indicates they are (strongly satisfied) with the competency. The scale is graded as (1=Strongly Dissatisfied, 2= Unsatisfied, 3= Medium Satisfaction,4=Satisfied, 5= Strongly Satisfied).

Table (III): Summary of Research Design and Methodology
Source: *Compiled by the author.*

The HRM were asked using 5-point Likert type scale, to indicate the importance of each competency for their organization. As 1 indicates the competency was (not important) and 5 indicated the competency was (very important). The scale is graded as (1=Not important,2= Less important, 3= Medium important, 4= Important, 5=Very Important). The mean ranking criteria also follow the same grading criteria of the scale.

Attribute	Characteristics
Research Nature	Exploratory
Research Strategy	Survey
Time Dimension	Cross-sectional
Data Collection Method	Online Questionnaire Survey
Sampling Technique	Cluster sampling technique is used to choose the sample.
Statistical methods used	Descriptive statistics, Mean ranking and t-test.

VI. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Generally, the main objective of this study is to assess the current acquired competencies of the MBAG in terms of soft and hard competencies and explore new needed competencies.

A. Research Objective (1)

To rank the relevant competencies required by employers, according to their importance.

This objective is attained by answering the first section of the HRM questionnaire, through asking the respondents “Please indicate to what extent do you agree with following statements regarding the importance of each competency for your organization”.

Table (IV): The Mean Rank of MBAG Competencies by HRM

Competencies	Ranking overall	Ranking within category	Mean	Std. Deviation
Hard Skills				
<i>Analytical thinking</i>	4	1	4.58	0.607
<i>Technical expertise</i>	4	1	4.58	0.507
<i>Conceptual thinking</i>	7	2	4.42	0.769
<i>Personal planning and organizational skills</i>	9	3	4.32	0.749
<i>Written communication</i>	10	4	4.26	0.452
<i>Computer literacy</i>	11	5	4.21	0.535
<i>Organizational awareness</i>	12	6	4.11	0.809
Overall Mean for Hard Skills			4.35	
Soft skills				
<i>Ability and willingness to learn</i>	1	1	4.84	0.375
<i>Achievement orientation</i>	2	2	4.68	0.478
<i>Concern for order, quality & accuracy</i>	3	3	4.63	0.761
<i>Energy & passion</i>	3	3	4.63	0.597
<i>Self-confidence</i>	3	3	4.63	0.496
<i>Teamwork & cooperation</i>	4	4	4.58	0.607
<i>Customer service orientation</i>	5	5	4.53	0.841
<i>Initiative</i>	5	5	4.53	0.612
<i>Problem solving</i>	5	5	4.53	0.513
<i>Interpersonal communication</i>	6	6	4.47	0.612
<i>Interpersonal understanding</i>	6	6	4.47	0.697
<i>Impact & influence on others</i>	7	7	4.42	0.692
<i>Leadership</i>	7	7	4.42	0.607
<i>Self-control</i>	7	7	4.42	0.692
<i>Relationship building</i>	8	8	4.37	0.831
<i>Flexibility</i>	9	9	4.32	0.885
<i>Organizational commitment</i>	9	9	4.32	0.820
<i>Developing others</i>	10	10	4.26	0.933
Overall Mean for Soft Skills			4.50	

Source: *Compiled by the author using SPSS statistical package.*

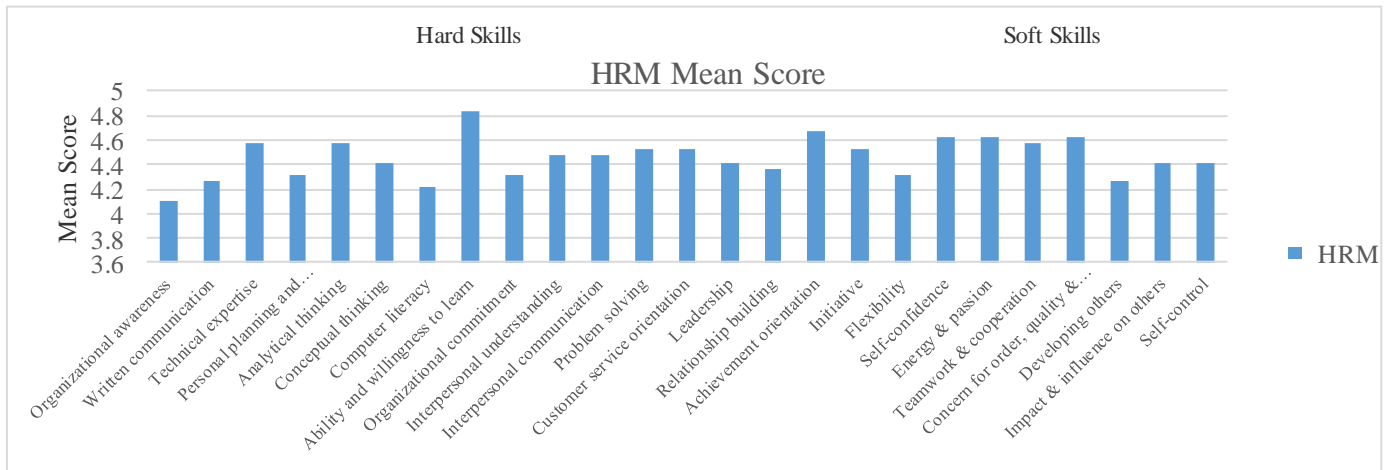


Figure (I): The Mean Rank of MBAG Competencies by HRM
Source: Compiled by the author using SPSS statistical package.

Generally, according to table (IV), HRM ranked all the competencies as important for their organizations with mean range from 4.11 to 4.84. Also, the overall mean for hard skills is 4.35 which is less than the overall mean for soft skills 4.50. This indicate that HRM rate the soft skills higher in importance than the hard skills. Moreover, it is noticed that all the competencies are ranked as important by HRM. The top ranked competencies are; *ability and willingness to learn* which scored the highest rank (rank 1, mean 4.84). *Achievement orientation* scored the second highest (rank 2, mean 4.68). While the three competencies; *concern for order, quality & accuracy, energy & passion* and *self-confidence* got the same mean and rank (rank 3, mean 4.63). Also, three other competencies have the same mean and rank, which are *teamwork & cooperation, analytical thinking* and *technical expertise* (rank 4, mean 4.58). moreover, the three competencies; *customer service orientation, initiative* and *problem solving* have the same mean and rank (rank 5, mean 4.53).

According to this research results, the most important competencies are eleven, which occupy the highest five ranks by HRM. They are: *Ability and willingness to learn, achievement orientation, concern for order, quality & accuracy, energy & passion, self-confidence, teamwork & cooperation, analytical thinking, technical expertise, customer service orientation, initiative* and *problem solving*. Most of the top competencies are categorized as soft skills and rank the same overall and within category except the two competencies *analytical thinking* and *Technical expertise* which categorized as hard skills and ranked 4 overall and 1 within category. (see table (IV) and fig. (I)).

The rest of the 14 competencies also rated as important by the HRM. The overall ranking ranged from 6 to 12 with mean range from 4.47 to 4.11. These competencies are *interpersonal communication* and *interpersonal understanding* that share the same mean and rank (rank 6, mean 4.47). Also, the three competencies; *impact & influence on others, leadership* and *self-control* (rank 7, mean 4.42). Then *Relationship building* (rank 8, mean 4.37). *Flexibility* and *organizational commitment* both rank the same (rank 9,

mean 4.32). all of the competencies mentioned previously are categorized as soft skills.

While, *developing others* categorized as *soft skill* and *written communication* categorized as *hard skill*, but they rank the same (rank 10, mean 4.26). It is noticeable that all the previous 12 competencies rank the same overall and within category. Whereas, *computer literacy* ranks overall 11, mean 4.21 and rank within category (5). Also, *organizational awareness* got the least overall rank (rank12, mean 4.11), and rank the least within category (6).

B. Research Objective (2)

To show to what extent the employers are satisfied with the current competencies of the MBAG.

This research objective is attained through asking HRM in the second section in the questionnaire that indicated to which extent they are satisfied with the current MBAG' competencies. The HRM are asked:

"Please indicate to which extent do you agree with following statements regarding your satisfaction with MBAG' competencies"

By using 5-point Likert type scale from 1 to 5; As 1 indicates they are (strongly dissatisfied) with the competency and 5 indicates they are (strongly satisfied) with the competency. The scale is graded as (1= strongly dissatisfied, 2= unsatisfied, 3= medium satisfaction, 4= satisfied, 5= strongly satisfied). The mean ranking criteria also follow the same grading criteria of the scale.

The general findings indicate that the HRM are either have medium satisfaction or unsatisfied with MBAG competencies, because all the competencies ranks fall between the mean range 2.58 and 3.68, which equivalent to unsatisfied and medium satisfaction respectively see table (V). Also, the overall mean for hard skills is 3.13 which is more than the overall mean for soft skills 2.89. In general, this indicate that HRM have medium satisfaction towards MBAG hard skills, but they are unsatisfied with MBAG soft skills.

The results show that HRM have medium satisfaction towards MBAG in eight competencies. These are: *written communication* (rank overall and within category 1, mean 3.68), *technical expertise* (rank overall & within category 2,

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mean 3.63), *personal planning & organizational skills* (rank overall & within category 3, mean 3.26), computer literacy (rank overall 7 & within category 4, mean 3.05). It is noticed that all the above mentioned competencies categorized as hard skills. On the other hand, the following competencies: *Problem solving* (rank overall 4 & within category 1, mean 3.21), *teamwork & cooperation* (rank overall 5 & within category 2, mean 3.16), *organizational commitment* (rank overall 6 & within category 3, mean 3.11) and *ability and willingness to learn* (rank overall 7 & within category 4, mean 3.05) are categorized as soft skills.

Additionally, the results show that HRM are mainly unsatisfied with the MBAG current competencies that

represent the rest of the 17 competencies (rank overall between 8 & 14, mean fall between 2.58 & 2.95). Three of these competencies categorized as hard skills and the rest categorize as soft skills. Furthermore, the Lowest ranked competency is *leadership* (rank overall 14, within category 11, mean 2.58).

Table (V): HRM Competency Rank According to their Satisfaction from MBAG

HRM competency rank	Ranking overall	Ranking Within category	Mean	Std. Deviation
Hard Skills				
<i>Written communication</i>	1	1	3.68	0.946
<i>Technical expertise</i>	2	2	3.63	1.012
<i>Personal planning & organizational skills</i>	3	3	3.26	1.368
<i>Computer literacy</i>	7	4	3.05	1.224
<i>Organizational awareness</i>	8	5	2.95	1.353
<i>Analytical thinking</i>	12	6	2.74	1.485
<i>Conceptual thinking</i>	13	7	2.63	1.383
Overall Mean for Hard Skills			3.13	
Soft Skills				
<i>Problem solving</i>	4	1	3.21	1.398
<i>Teamwork & cooperation</i>	5	2	3.16	1.463
<i>Organizational commitment</i>	6	3	3.11	1.286
<i>Ability and willingness to learn</i>	7	4	3.05	1.471
<i>Achievement orientation</i>	8	5	2.95	1.433
<i>Self-confidence</i>	8	5	2.95	1.649
<i>Interpersonal communication</i>	8	5	2.95	1.508
<i>Concern for order, quality and accuracy</i>	9	6	2.89	1.595
<i>Developing others</i>	10	7	2.84	1.500
<i>Flexibility</i>	10	7	2.84	1.385
<i>Interpersonal understanding</i>	10	7	2.84	1.500
<i>Self-control</i>	10	7	2.84	1.537
<i>Customer service orientation</i>	11	8	2.79	1.512
<i>Energy & passion</i>	11	8	2.79	1.398
<i>Relationship building</i>	11	8	2.79	1.584
<i>Impact & influence on others</i>	12	9	2.74	1.368
<i>Initiative</i>	13	10	2.63	1.257
<i>Leadership</i>	14	11	2.58	1.346
Overall Mean for Soft Skills			2.89	

Source: Compiled by the author using SPSS statistical package.

Table (VI): Paired Samples Test (Hard and Soft Skills) for HRM

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair1	Hard skills & Soft skills	17.12	2.33	0.16	16.80	17.43	17.39	213	0.00

Source: SPSS analysis according to the collected data.

C. Research Objective (3)

To investigate the difference (if any) in importance between competencies in terms of soft and hard skills as perceived by employers.

This objective is attained through comparing the mean ranks between the two categories (Soft and Hard) HRM questionnaire using also the t test for comparing two means.

H1: There is significant difference in importance between the soft skills and hard skills from the perceptions of HRM. The mean ranks between the two categories (Soft and Hard) HRM questionnaire using also the t test for comparing two means that is used previously, in order to test the hypothesis.

D. Research Objective (4)

To investigate the difference (if any) between the importance and performance as perceived by HRM. This

objective is attained through comparing the mean ranks between the two categories (Soft and Hard) HRM questionnaire using also the t test for comparing two means that is used previously, in order to test the hypothesis.

H2: There is significant difference between the Competencies' importance and MBAG performance as perceived by HRM

According to the results in table (VII) the null hypothesis is rejected at Alpha = 0.05 since P-value = (0.00). Accordingly, results show that there is significant difference between the competencies' importance and MBAG performance as perceived by HRM.

Table (VII): Paired Samples Test (difference between Importance and Performance)

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 Importance Performance	37.63158	36.13587	8.29014	20.21465	55.04851	45.39	213	0.00

Source: SPSS analysis according to the collected data.

VII. DISCUSSION

First, to rank the relevant competencies required by employers, according to their importance. Generally, HRM ranked all the competencies as important for their organizations. Also, the overall mean for hard skills is less than the overall mean for soft skills. This indicate that all the competencies are ranked as important by HRM, however they value soft skills more than hard skills which is consistent with previous studies (Rainsbury et al, 2002; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2007; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009 Robles, 2012; Shuayto, 2013). The findings revealed the top competencies that are most valued by employers are eleven, which occupy the highest five ranks by HRM. They are: ability and willingness to learn, achievement orientation, concern for order, quality & accuracy, energy & passion, self-confidence, teamwork & cooperation, analytical thinking, technical expertise, customer service orientation, initiative and problem solving. Most of the top competencies are categorized as soft skills and rank the same overall and within category except the two competencies analytical thinking and technical expertise which were categorized as hard skills and ranked 4 overall and 1 within category (refer to table (IV) and fig. (I)).

The above results are consistent with Hodges & Burchell, (2003) top 10 ranked competencies by employers. They are in order: ability and willingness to learn, energy and passion, teamwork and cooperation, interpersonal communication, customer service orientation, order, quality and accuracy, flexibility, problem solving, achievement orientation, and initiative.

The noticeable thing is that the two studies agreed on major competencies importance. Only they disagree in self-confidence (categorized as soft skill) and technical expertise (categorized as hard skill) which surfaced in this study. And interpersonal communication and flexibility which considered important according to Hodges & Burchell (2003) and categorized as soft skills, but did not appear in top competencies in this study.

MBAG ability and willingness to learn was considered to be the most important competency in the workplace. It is interesting that this was also considered to be the most important competency in previous studies, of science employers (Coll, Zegwaard & Hodges, 2002a, 2002b), and of business employers (Burchell, Hodges & Rainsbury, 2001; Hodges & Burchell, 2003). This finding seems to provide further support that there is now a perception among employers that staying capable in a world of change requires confidence in one's ability to manage one's own learning. In other words, in order to continue to be useful, one must be willing to learn new skills to keep pace with what is now seen as a rapidly changing workplace. Customer service orientation, teamwork and cooperation, self-confidence, and willingness to learn ranked from the top 5 important, which consistent with Hodges and Burchell, (2002). Also, teamwork and cooperation, showed again and ranked high according to previous studies (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Tiwari, 2012; Burchell, 2002; Martinovic, 2013). Then again, Self-confidence and Ability and willingness to learn appeared from the 13 top ranked competencies by Andrews and Higson (2012). Additionally, analytical skills, customer service orientation, technical skills, ability and willingness to

learn, energy and passion; teamwork and cooperation, problem solving and Initiative are consistent with the top 10 ranked competencies stated by Tiwari (2012). A further notable and unexpected change from the previous studies was the competency concern for order, quality and accuracy, which increased in rank from 18 to 6 in previous studies (Burchell, Hodges & Rainsbury ,2001; Hodges & Burchell ,2003) and reached 3 in this study. This perhaps suggests that employers are concerned that in a period of rapid change attention to quality and accuracy, and organizational stability can be compromised (Hodges & Burchell ,2003).

Furthermore, most of the above competencies that are highly ranked by the employers categorized as soft skills. Therefore, findings confirm what has been mentioned before that employers place greater importance on soft skills (Rainsbury et al, 2002; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2007; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009 Robles, 2012; Shuayto, 2013).

Second, to show to what extent the employers are satisfied with the current competencies of the MBAG. The general findings indicate that the HRM are either have medium satisfaction or unsatisfied with MBAG competencies, because all the competencies ranks fall between the mean range 2.58 and 3.68, which equivalent to unsatisfied and medium satisfaction respectively. Also, the overall mean for hard skills is 3.13 which is more than the overall mean for soft skills 2.89. In general, this indicate that HRM have medium satisfaction towards MBAG hard skills, but they are unsatisfied with MBAG soft skills (refer to table (V)). These results are consistent with Hodges & Burchell (2003) who claim that the lack of emphasis placed on such hard skills indicates that these are considered 'a given' and/or that any deficiencies can be 'fixed' through further training/education whereas soft skill deficiencies may be seen as less easily overcome.

The results show that HRM have medium satisfaction towards MBAG in eight competencies. These are: written communication, technical expertise, personal planning & organizational skills, computer literacy. It is noticed that all of the four mentioned competencies categorized as hard skills. On the other hand, the other four competencies: problem solving, teamwork & cooperation, organizational commitment and ability and willingness to learn are categorized as soft skills.

Additionally, the results show that HRM are mainly unsatisfied with the MBAG current competencies that represent the rest of the 17 competencies. Three of these competencies categorized as hard skills and the rest categorize as soft skills. Furthermore, the Lowest ranked competency is leadership.

Third, to investigate the difference (if any) in importance between competencies in terms of soft and hard skills as perceived by employers.

H1: There is significant difference in importance between the soft skills and hard skills from the perceptions of HRM.

The research findings revealed a significant difference in importance between the soft skills and hard skills from the employers' perceptions. This finding support previous studies conducted in this area. As they confirm that there is significant difference in importance between hard and soft skills. Moreover, according to the mean ranking by HRM

showed that they value soft skills more than hard skills. These results are totally aligned with findings in the previous studies (Rainsbury et al, 2002; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2007; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009; Robles, 2012; Shuayto, 2013).

Fourth, to investigate the difference (if any) between the importance and performance as perceived by HRM.

H2: There is significant difference between the Competencies' importance and MBAG performance as perceived by HRM.

According to the results in table (VII) results show that there is significant difference between the Competencies' importance and MBAG performance as perceived by HRM. These results are consistent with previous studies that confirmed the existence of a gap between importance and performance (Rainsbury et al, 2002; Hodges & Burchell, 2003; Andrews & Higson, 2008; Ting & Ying, 2012; Jackson, 2012; Martinovic, 2013; Kini, 2014; Osmani et al,2015).

VIII. CONCLUSION

The research revealed that HRM are mainly dissatisfied with the MBAG acquired competencies. Additionally, the study revealed the most crucial competencies that valued most by employers are eleven. They are sequentially: ability and willingness to learn, achievement orientation, concern for order, quality & accuracy, energy & passion, self-confidence, teamwork & cooperation, analytical thinking, technical expertise, customer service orientation, initiative and problem solving. Furthermore, there is significant difference in importance in terms of soft skills and hard skills as perceived by HRM The employers seem to value soft skills more than hard skills, because most of the competencies that ranked high by employers are soft skills, whereas only analytical thinking and technical expertise are categorized as hard skills. Additionally, the study indicates a gap between competencies' importance and performance. Thus, it can be concluded that there is mismatch between what is acquired through MBA programs and what is really needed by the Sudanese employers.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Business schools should perform curriculum restructures for prioritizing skills and designing coursework to incorporate top ranked skills viewed as most important by business and employers. Precisely, Design curricula so that students can learn — by doing — to apply multiple disciplines on the job, and encourage students to take electives outside the traditional core curriculum. Also, create differentiated curricula and allow students to concentrate in specific industries.
- 2) To adopt more innovative ways of designing and delivering the MBA courses and add some relevant subjects based on Sudanese organizations requirements, environment and culture.
- 3) Targeting and teaching the right things (i.e. teaching what need to be taught). Furthermore, business schools must rigorously seek to expand limits of

knowledge between students and business executives through different collaborative programs.

- 4) Optimizing business school research through effective knowledge sharing and learning between research, policy, and practice along with practical case studies that enhance the efficiency of students.
- 5) Use of training and coaching as a stepping-stone to facilitate instructors' integration of soft skills into existing MBA courses.
- 6) In order to Keep up with the pace and challenge of globalization, business schools need to facilitate an education process that include the development of the top ranked competencies by employers to engage and encourages a deep identification with change.
- 7) Fostering lifelong learning through the development of a range of employability related competencies, specifically the vital need for soft skill development in the future MBA programs.
- 8) Involve practitioners in designing the MBA curriculum and in teaching process, that can facilitate the acquisition and development of the top ranked skills by Sudanese employers.
- 9) Achieving university-industry collaboration and engagement, through employing cooperative education programs which can provide an ideal vehicle to bridge the gap between the world of work and the world of education.
- 10) A good quality and relevant training programs, in the first years of working life for MBAG could be seen as a link between higher education and competent mastery as a professional.

X. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- A. Time and cost constraints concerning the collection of secondary and primary data.
- B. Barriers exist in collection of secondary data due to some factors like scattered information sources and treating data acquisition as highly confidential issue by data suppliers.
- C. Using cross-sectional study include some limitations such as; we cannot analyze behavior over a period of time, and it does not help to determine cause and effect. Also, the timing of the snapshot is not guaranteed to be representative. Moreover, findings can be flawed or skewed if there is a conflict of interest with the funding source. Additionally, we may face some challenges putting together the sampling pool based on the variables of the population being studied.
- D. Moreover, there are some limitations of using online surveys such as the Absence of Interviewer; An online survey is not suitable for surveys which ask open-ended questions because there is no trained interviewer to explore the answers of the respondents. Also, the Inability to Reach Challenging Population; This method is not applicable for surveys that require respondents who do not have an access to the Internet. Some examples of these respondents include the elderly and people who reside in remote areas.

XI. FURTHER RESEARCH

- The competencies can be classified into more specialized clusters for e.g. marketing competencies, financial competencies, leadership competencies and other different classifications.
- Concerning the methodology in future researchers can employ longitudinal study rather than cross-sectional.

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Training and Certification

- Participating and completed Capacity Building Program on (Entrepreneurship Development and Incubation Management Systems) by (UNIDO) in University of Khartoum/School of Management Studies (Entrepreneurship Centre) certified in 19/12/2017.
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