

International Business Students’ Perceptions of Skill Development Through Undergraduate Education

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Abstract. Self-perceptions of skill development among International Business (IB) majors serve as the context for this research. The study’s main research questions are: (1) How much have perceived skills and areas of knowledge changed because of higher education? (2) How do these changes compare to those reported by others? and (3) What is the impact of an IB degree on perceived change in different skill categories? For deeper understanding, individual characteristics and college experiences of IB majors are examined and compared to those of non-IB majors. Analysis of surveys from over 440,000 graduates (619 different U.S. higher education institutions) shows that across 15 skills the majority of the IB students surveyed report improvements in their abilities over the course of their college education. Only 2 skills generate less than 70% positive self-ratings (Getting Along with Dissimilar People and Mathematics). Recommendations for areas of improvement for IB educators are provided.

Keywords: international business, international business education, international business major, business education, perceived skill change, perceived skill acquisition, curriculum development.

1. Introduction

According to the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), “employers are more frequently searching for business professionals that are experienced and knowledgeable about international business operations. Because of this, programs that focus on global business have become increasingly popular over the past decade” (AACSB 2018). Students graduating with an international business (IB) degree learn how to think globally about the business world (The College Board 2019). Skills and knowledge related to export sales, trade controls, monetary policy issues, and how to manage business in different countries and foreign markets are exactly what IB instructional programs should be delivering in the classroom (NCES 2010).

Business is one of the most in-demand degrees (Adams 2014), yet business knowledge is not the only set of skills employers are looking for in today’s

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graduates (Hora 2017). Developing personal skills among business students that include not only hard but also soft skills is becoming the norm in post-secondary educational programs (McCarthy 2014, Pang and Hung 2012). These “soft” skills are particularly important for IB students to develop given the need for cross-cultural communication and collaboration that comes with a career in the field (Reynolds 2017). Employers are significant stakeholders in higher education, but so are students. As a practical concern, student perceptions of skill and knowledge development could influence career outcomes through students’ feelings of self-efficacy (Hartley, Routon, & Torres 2018).

The present study intends to examine how IB majors feel their skills have changed during college. A survey of over 400,000 graduates from over 600 different colleges and universities in the U.S. yielded the study’s data. This research looks at students’ subjective beliefs of skill change and knowledge development during college. Therefore, the primary research question is: At the time of graduation, what skills and knowledge do IB majors think they have gained? Furthermore, how do these changes compare to those reported by students majoring in a different discipline? Lastly, what is the estimated impact of an IB degree on perceived change in each of 15 different skill categories? To provide greater explanation of the estimated answers to the third research question, differences between characteristics and college experiences of IB majors versus non-IB majors are examined.

2. Literature Review

According to the most recent Global Human Capital report by the World Economic Forum (World Economic Forum 2017), education systems around the world are not completely in sync with the skills needed to excel in today’s marketplace. The report, besides comparing several countries’ performances, calls for improvement in higher education to deliver knowledge and train skills that help graduates better prepare for their future. Specific to the U.S., while a significant number of employers feel colleges and universities are delivering the right information to be successful in the workplace, an even bigger portion believe there is opportunity for improvement (Hart 2015). Contrary to employers’ perception, students seem to be more optimistic about their skill sets. This study’s main focus is the latter: skills graduates believe they acquire in college. In particular, this manuscript offers an examination of graduates in IB, one of the few academic disciplines that, by nature, connects domestic students to the world.

Comparisons between IB students’ perceptions of the skills needed in the labor force and what higher education offers are not new in research. Several studies have been conducted around the world, and findings differ across time. Yu, Guan, Yang, and Chiao (2005) explore the perception of IB majors in Taiwan and find firms give greater emphasis on international expertise, foreign language