

DECODING DISCIPLINES OF A NATIONAL BUSINESS QUALIFICATION IN SUPPORT OF LEARNING

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the decoding of the disciplines of a National Diploma in Office Management to address the challenges encountered in the higher education system in the 21st century, and to align it with the South African Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework. The Semantic Code of Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) was drawn on to investigate whether the knowledge bases of this National Diploma curriculum contributed to improving students' learning. Both quantitative and qualitative data were obtained by using Delphi surveys, workshops, student surveys and interviews, as well as through an international benchmarking exercise. The findings show that the National Diploma emphasises the technical and highly contextual components of the curriculum, with less emphasis placed on the significant role of the linguistic knowledge base. The evidence provided the opportunity to address the question of the appropriateness of logic underlying the curriculum and to assist with the rearticulation process to develop strategies in support of learning.

Keywords: semantic codes, decoding, disciplines, business studies, curriculum.

1. INTRODUCTION

Office administrators are known by different names, such as "office managers", "secretaries", "personal assistants", "data processors", "administrators" or "typists", depending on the type of work they are required to do. The role of the administrator and secretary has become undervalued over time, and concealed within organisations (Russon, 1983, 33). Star and Strauss (1999, 14) have described the work of secretaries and administrators as "invisible work" while Hennebach (1989, 43) describes it as work that is "routine" and not needing training. This work has also been defined as one of the most gendered of all occupations. Truss *et al.* (2013, 349) characterise it as a "ghetto occupation" comprising three main features: poor pay and low status, feminised and narrow job content, and having modest promotion prospects.

Curriculum designers have found this lack of "visibility" to be problematic, with some curricula concentrating on very elementary levels of training. Other curricula included areas that seemed more technologically prestigious or advanced, but were largely inappropriate to the work of office administration (Waymark, 1997, 117).

The development of programmes for clerical workers and office administrators has been shaped by dominant thinking about administration – that such work is unskilled and routine. These misunderstandings develop out of dominant discourses that have diminished the labour of writing which is the foundation of clerical and administration work (Boyer & England, 2008, 241). However, over the years it has become evident that the work of secretaries and office administrators requires a greater degree of complexity than previously acknowledged (Biebuyck, 2006, 11). The stereotype of the office administrator as a secretary who simply reproduces the ideas and words of others, presumes and extends a notion of writers and writing technologies that is not in line with current research in communication and literacy (Solberg, 2014, 3).

Stemming from the above, the problem investigated was whether the knowledge bases of the National Diploma Office Management (ND: OM) curriculum, and the curricular arrangements for the training and education of office administrators, contributed to improving students' learning. The research on which this paper is based had the following research questions: 1) what knowledge areas were drawn on in the development of the ND: OM qualification for office administrators? and 2) how does the decoding of the disciplines of the ND: OM curriculum contribute to improving students' learning?

2. OVERVIEW OF THE OFFICE MANAGEMENT CURRICULUM

The ND: OM curriculum falls within the field of Business and Management Sciences. This field of study responds to the rapid changes in the world of business (Miller, 2010, 1), the main drivers of which have been new fields of work, new technologies, the growing specialisation of work and the impact of globalisation. Graduates of this field of study are skilled to participate in the economic and business sectors of South Africa. The objective of the ND: OM is the training of office administrators to provide the local and international business sector with graduates who are competent in administration, technology and management. Curricular provisions for office management studies are largely based on the work of the office administrator in support of people in different professions, industries and contexts.

Students are required to undertake three years of study for a diploma comprising 360 SAQA credits. The ND: OM programme comprises the major disciplines of Information Administration (comprising computer theory and practice) and Business Administration offered at levels 1, 2, and 3. The demand for information technology skills requires that academics are challenged to prepare students with relevant skills for progressively complex work environments, and to include new features of current software applications. Communication is offered at levels 1 and 2, and each of the disciplines of Personnel Management, Financial Accounting, Legal Practice and Mercantile Law are offered at first year level.

The third year includes a six-month internship period where graduates enter the workplace in the medical, legal, tourism, government, financial, retail or education fields.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Taking a social practice perspective, MacIntyre and Dunne (2002, 5) argue that a curriculum is a set of knowledge practices: a “complex form of socially established cooperative human activity” and a “set of skills and habits put to the service of a variety of practices”. In an age where there is a proliferation of expert occupations, the knowledge that underpins the curriculum of professions is of particular significance (Griesel & Parker, 2009; Higher Education South Africa, 2014; Young & Muller, 2014). In the academic context, practical knowledge is not usually considered as powerful knowledge but it is important in professional practice, and in professional or vocational higher education. Professional and vocational curricula need to focus on both the specific academic practices of the underpinning discipline to ensure a strong basis for practice, and the work-related practices of the profession to develop an understanding of the field of practice (Shay & Steyn, 2015, 4). This is not simple, because it is challenging to access practical knowledge which is outside its context of use. This is because knowledge which is developed in practice is usually tacit and acquired in a social way (Winberg *et al.*, 2013, 106).

Unlike the more classified disciplines of chemistry or law, office administrative studies have “soft” boundaries that result in the field of practice absorbing most of its practices and ideas from other disciplines, which include the world of management practice (Oswick *et al.*, 2011, 318). In Bernstein's terms, the development of office administration studies is an example of “regionalisation” (2000, 52) since it includes the “recontextualisation” of features of old areas of study, such as shorthand notation and typing technology, into new arrangements for the requirements of practice.

A number of curriculum theorists (e.g., Bernstein, 2000; Maton & Moore, 2010; Young & Muller, 2010) have pointed out that there is a distinction between disciplinary and practical knowledge domains. Wheelahan (2007) argues that vocationally trained students need access to disciplinary knowledge. This view is supported by Clegg (2011) who argues that students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds need disciplinary or context independent knowledge. Morrow (2009, 1) defines epistemological access to these different knowledge domains as requiring academics to consider when disciplinary or practical knowledge is needed in professional curricula, how these knowledge domains connect to one another and the principles for selecting them for insertion in higher education academic programmes. All professionally oriented education should provide students with the disciplinary knowledge that underpins professional practice (Muller, 2009, 214). As disciplinary knowledge usually underpins complex practice, there is

typically curricular movement from the disciplines to practice in professional programmes.

Barnett (2006, 149) contends that the process of “double recontextualisation” defines the process of constructing professional curricula that includes the recontextualisation of disciplinary and practical knowledge into a curriculum. This process recognises the structure and content of a professional programme as “one that both shifts the discourse of practice from its contextual base and relocates it within a university, and one that shifts the discourse of disciplinary knowledge towards an understanding of the world” (Winberg *et al.*, 2013, 109). Thus “students can learn from the disciplines, as well as learn about, and from, their future work practice” (Winberg *et al.*, 2013, 109).

Bernstein (2000) recognises two structures where he defines the conceptualising of knowledge structures which are different, namely, vertical discourse and horizontal discourse. Vertical discourse relates to the traditional academic disciplines and refers to “specialised symbolic structures of explicit knowledge” (Bernstein, 2000, 160). It is professional, scholarly and educational knowledge where “meaning is less dependent on relevance to its context and instead is related to other meanings hierarchically” (Maton, 2009, 44). Horizontal discourse relates to practical or “common sense” and everyday knowledge and involves strategies which are local, context specific, dependent and segmentally organised (Bernstein, 2000, 157). Vertical discourses comprise both “hierarchical” knowledge structures represented by the sciences as a “coherent, explicit and systematically principled structure, hierarchically organised” and a horizontal knowledge structure which is represented by “the humanities and social sciences” (Bernstein, 2000, 160-161). Disciplinary or vertical knowledge structures provide students with the principal knowledge for professional practice.

OM as a field of study could therefore be defined as a type of vertical discourse with a horizontal knowledge structure (Bernstein, 2000, 157-160), originating from applied linguistics, applied language studies and technical and business communication. Bernstein's theory of knowledge and theory of pedagogy (1975, 1999, 2000) underpin LCT (Maton, 2000, 2004, 2014) that was used as a theoretical framework for the research project on which this paper is based.

3.1 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework draws on the conceptualising approach of LCT (Maton, 2000) for the analysis of the OM curriculum. LCT embraces views from the methods of Bourdieu and Bernstein to construct a framework for investigating the structuring of knowledge and practices within intellectual and pedagogical fields (Maton, 2000; Moore & Maton, 2001; Maton & Muller, 2007).



Since there is growing pressure on higher education to contribute to instilling the knowledge and skills that will empower graduates to perform successfully in the knowledge economy (Nel & Neale-Schutte, 2013, 437) knowledge matters need to be taken seriously (Maton, 2014, 14).

LCT provides understanding of the “recontextualization of theoretical knowledge for vocational purposes” (Shay, 2013, 577), that comprises considerable curriculum and pedagogical challenges. The theoretical framework for the research project on which this paper is based utilises one of the dimensions of LCT which is that of Semantics (Maton, 2013, 10). The principle of Semantics examines “the logic of the curriculum and what gives it meaning” (Hollis-Turner, 2015, 42).

Maton (2013, 11) describes semantic gravity (SG) as defining “the external relations of knowledge practices” and as “the degree to which meaning relates to its context”. It may be “relatively stronger (+) or weaker (-) along a continuum of strengths” and “the stronger the semantic gravity (SG+), the more meaning is dependent on its context; the weaker the semantic gravity (SG-), the less dependent meaning is on its context” (Maton, 2013, 11). Semantic density (SD) is defined as “the degree of condensation of meaning within socio-cultural practices, whether these comprise symbols, terms, concepts, phrases, expressions, gestures, clothing, etc.”. It may be “relatively stronger (+) or weaker (-) along a continuum of strengths” and “the stronger semantic density (SD+), the more meanings are condensed within practices; the weaker the semantic density (SD-), the less meanings are condensed” (Maton, 2013, 11). Refer to Figure 1 for the graphic representation of Maton's Semantic Codes of Legitimation (Maton, 2011, 66).

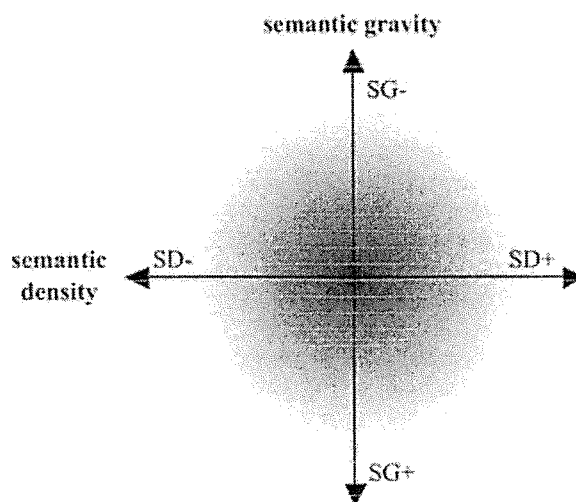


Figure 1: Semantic Codes of Legitimation (Maton, 2011, 66)

The Semantic Codes facilitate the mapping of “shifts in gravity and density” (Shay, 2013, 570). Semantic gravity enables a more exact explanation of recontextualised knowledge which comprises a curriculum while semantic density provides a more exact explanation of the concepts (Shay, 2013, 571). Shay and Steyn (2015, 4) assert that advancement in professional curricula includes advancement to the contexts of application and practice (stronger semantic gravity) from disciplinary areas (stronger semantic density). The use of the Semantic Codes of semantic gravity and semantic density allowed for the identification of what knowledge matters in the OM curriculum.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The use of LCT governed the multi-method approach used to embrace the views of employers, graduates and academics, who were able to bring their own expectations, experiences, perspectives and concerns into the research process. This paper focuses on the Delphi survey which was intended to determine the knowledge areas which underpin the OM curriculum. Delphi is a method used to acquire the opinions of a group of experts (Powell, 2003, 376), and to provide opportunities for the assessing of learning and knowledge from the experts as they develop their opinions and reach consensus. This allowed for the classification of what the Delphi panel regarded as the legitimate knowledge, attributes and practices of office administrators and office managers. The data from the surveys was analysed by utilising the Semantic dimension of LCT to investigate the knowledge areas and their related practices that give the OM curriculum meaning. The Delphi surveys provided both quantitative and qualitative data and the reliability of results was attained through constant verification throughout the process.

The research project on which this paper is based broadened the traditional Delphi view of “expert” as the Delphi panel of experts comprised not only employers, but also graduates of the ND: OM curriculum. The Delphi participants were asked to indicate, by ticking the relevant columns, the knowledge and skills they considered necessary, essential or critical for OM students to facilitate learning. A comparative analysis of the participants’ responses was undertaken to establish the consensus ratings of the employer, graduate and academic groups. In addition, the overall average rate of consensus of the three expert groups’ responses was also determined. The first round survey comprised discipline-specific content of the ND: OM curriculum. The Delphi participants were requested to identify additional items not present in the curriculum, and that in their opinions should be included to facilitate learning.

Three types of experts constituted the Delphi panel: employers of OM graduates and third-year students undertaking the six-month internship component of the curriculum, OM graduates and academics in the OM Department.

The selection criteria discussed below were followed so as to ensure that graduates and business experts were not all from large organisations.

Purposive sampling was utilised for the selection of the Delphi panel members. The Delphi panel comprised twenty-three employers, fifteen graduates and fifteen academics. The panel members consented to participate in the three rounds of Delphi surveys over a three-year period. Below are the selection criteria for the business experts, graduates and academics:

- business experts located in the Western Cape who worked in local and international medium to high technological environments;
- business experts who had employed or currently employed OM third-year students and/or graduates and were directly involved in their selection and mentorship;
- business experts who were cooperative partners of the higher education institution;
- graduates who had been working for a minimum period of three years and who were currently in office management practitioner and/or supervisory positions;
- business experts and graduates who were working in the major sectors of production, medical fields, service and retail industries, tourism, education, and government;
- those experts who spoke various South African first languages (e.g. English, isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Afrikaans);
- academics who had been employed previously in the workplace as administrative officers, accountants, management consultants, office managers, training consultants and operations managers; and
- academics who participated in frequent meetings with the business sector in order to remain up-to-date in the field of office administration and office management.

In addition, the ethical consideration of anonymity was considered for this research project. The adherence to these selection criteria allowed participants to consider objectively the current work practices in the field of office management. This allowed for the identification of those knowledge areas of the curriculum needed by office administrators and managers to facilitate learning. For the purpose of this paper the findings of the round one Delphi survey are discussed. The data comprising the average consensus ratings of the Delphi participants' responses to the discipline-specific content of 50% and more are presented and analysed.

5. FINDINGS

The Semantic Codes developed in LCT were utilised to define the logic of the knowledge selection in the ND: OM. The course documentation, credit allocations, assessments and data from the academics were analysed to highlight the stronger theoretical and conceptual knowledge as well as stronger application and contextual components of the curriculum.

5.1 Semantic gravity

Those disciplines comprising the ND: OM curriculum with stronger practical and contextual components and thus stronger semantic gravity (SG+) are Information Administration, Business Administration, Personnel Management and OM Practical.

Information Administration

The content of the discipline Information Administration is constantly up-dated in response to the recommendations from student interns returning from six months of OM Practical and from the members of the Advisory Committee. This close relationship with practice reflects the discipline's deep contextuality, and thus "stronger semantic gravity" (Maton, 2013, 11).

The first and second year syllabi of Information Administration comprise 36 credits each and the third year comprises 40 credits. The syllabi include content such as the role of text and data processing, computer applications, hardware and software, information processing technology, management information technology, and networks.

The responses of the Delphi participants' to the round one surveys showed that the Information Administration course was highly regarded in terms of facilitating learning and enhancing the graduates' employability. The average rate of consensus of each of the three expert groups' responses to the knowledge and skills they considered critical to facilitating students' learning is shown in the fourth column, and the other columns comprise the percentages of consensus for the responses of the individual expert groups.

The findings show that competent usage of email and the Internet (72%) received the highest consensus, with employers comprising 70%, graduates 92% and academics 54% consensus. The remarkably high consensus rating of the graduates for email and Internet skills is significant of the value placed on these skills by the graduates. The MS Office suite showed 72% consensus, with the employers comprising 70%, graduates 77% and academics 69% consensus. The consensus rating for word processing was 63%, with the employers attaining 50%, and the graduates and academics 69% consensus.

The ratings of the graduates and academics were not aligned with those of the employers regarding the significance of word processing to facilitate learning and the employability of the graduates. The consensus rating for the MS suite programmes of spreadsheets: Excel IF statements was 60%, followed by the protection of documents (59%) and Windows management (57%). The consensus rating of the Delphi panel for the remaining Information Administration content was less than 50%. (Refer to Table 1 for the consensus ratings.)

Table 1: Consensus ratings for Information Administration

Information Administration	Employer	Graduate	Academic	Consensus
Email and the Internet	70%	92%	54%	72%
MS Office suite	70%	77%	69%	72%
Word processing	50%	69%	69%	63%
Spreadsheets: Excel IF statements	50%	77%	54%	60%
Protection of documents	55%	54%	69%	59%
Windows management	65%	54%	51%	57%

The Delphi panel valued the stronger practical and contextual components of Information Administration and expressed views such as: "Information Administration should be about being able to apply principles ... or being able to identify the computer security threats that exist ... having knowledge alone is not enough" and that it should involve the practical "application of IT knowledge and skills". The panel members reported that the discipline needed to include Pastel payroll, MS Publisher, Systems Application Programming (SAP) and customer relationship management software (CRM). An employer commented, "the expected standard of computer technology is fairly challenging and requires competency ... to be successful". These comments highlight the extremely contextual characteristics of the work, and its reliance on staying up to date with changing office technology.

Business Administration

This discipline includes studies such as economic principles, office procedures, office and financial administration, business sectors, management, systems design and analysis, marketing, human resource management and labour relations. The first and second year Business Administration syllabi comprise 36 credits each and the third year has 40 credits.

The ratings by the Delphi panel showed 85% consensus for the importance of knowledge of the office: organisation and supervision, comprising the consensus ratings of the employers 79%, graduates 85% and academics 92%.

Administrative procedures attained 82% consensus, with employers comprising 68%, graduates 85% and academics 92% consensus. There is non-alignment of the consensus ratings of the employers on the significance of these aspects of Business Administration to facilitating students' learning since it was lower than the ratings of the graduates and academics. The consensus ratings for the control of office activities was 66%, followed by management functions (57%), and financial management (51%). Less than 50% consensus was attained for the remaining Business Administration content. The Delphi panel called for practical application of the office equipment and layout, and for simulation teaching as there is a need for graduates to have practical experience on entering the workplace. (Table 2 shows the consensus ratings.)

Table 2: Consensus ratings for Business Administration

Business Administration	Employer	Graduate	Academic	Consensus
The office: organisation and supervision	79%	85%	92%	85%
Administrative procedures	68%	85%	92%	82%
Control of office activities	63%	77%	58%	66%
Management functions	26%	69%	75%	57%
Financial management	42%	69%	42%	51%

Personnel Management

This syllabus is offered at the first-year level and comprises 14 credits. Graduates require knowledge of dealing with individuals in order to be effective in the workplace. However, the name of the discipline is misleading as the course has stronger practical and contextual components and the emphasis is on personal relationships in the workplace, dealing with individuals, and small groups. The stronger theoretical and conceptual components that include human behaviour and business psychology are minimal.

The Delphi participants' ratings of the discipline show that 78% consensus was attained for resolving frustration and conflict, with the employers showing 64%, graduates 79% and academics 92% consensus. Stress management attained 72% consensus, with employers attaining 64% consensus, graduates 86% and academics 67%. The importance of attitudes and behaviour in the workplace attained 70% consensus, with the employers showing 64% consensus, graduates 64% and academics 83%. Consensus for dealing with individuals was 65%, with employers attaining 77% consensus, graduates 50%, and academics 67%. The remaining content attained less than 50% consensus as critical to fostering students' learning. There is not much alignment of the consensus assessments of each expert group for these components of the syllabus.

However, the highest employer rating was for the significance of dealing with individuals. An employer remarked, "OM graduates have to be aware of how to deal with other people and clients".

While class work includes case studies, problem-solving exercises and research, the Delphi panel suggested that the curriculum includes implementation such as undertaking performance appraisals and simulation of workplace scenarios. An employer mentioned that "in addition to discipline knowledge and technical skills, it is necessary to be adaptable [and] to be able to apply knowledge". (Refer to Table 3 for the consensus ratings.)

Table 3: Consensus ratings for Personnel Management

Personnel Management	Employer	Graduate	Academic	Consensus
Resolving frustration and conflict	64%	79%	92%	78%
Stress management	64%	86%	67%	72%
Attitudes and behaviour in the workplace	64%	64%	83%	70%
Dealing with individuals	77%	50%	67%	65%

The OM Practical syllabus

During the final semester of the second year, students receive two periods of lectures of the Module A component of the syllabus, comprising 14 credits. Second-year students are required to develop a personal profile, compile a portfolio of evidence and to construct Curriculum Vitae. Employers conduct interviews with the students, enabling them to secure employment for the internship period in their third year of studies. The Module B component comprising 20 credits includes the six months internship period during the third year of study. Students are required to apply the knowledge and skills acquired during the first two years of study, apply critical thinking skills, solve problems, and communicate effectively in the workplace with their colleagues and clients. Students are required to produce a portfolio of evidence of their experiences in the workplace. The employers mentor students in the workplace and at the end of the six month period, assess the performance of the students.

An employer commented, "this is an important component of the curriculum ... students need to focus on a positive and assertive presentation of themselves in the workplace". This practical syllabus was recognised as significant to the curriculum with the majority of graduates emphasising the benefits of this internship period as critical to facilitating students' learning and enhancing graduate employability.

5.2 Semantic density

The disciplines comprising stronger theoretical and conceptual and thus stronger semantic density (SD+) components are Communication, Financial Accounting, Legal Practice and Mercantile Law. Stronger semantic density as the core of the OM curriculum is likely to enable progression and facilitate learning. The OM curriculum is stronger in semantic gravity and weaker in semantic density (SG-SD+).

Communication

The Communication syllabi comprise 20 credits for the first and second year of study. Communication and language support the work of the office administrator and office manager. The discipline comprises a study of communication theory, written communication including a variety of business letters, report and meeting documentation as well as public speaking, group communication, customer relations and research skills. The theoretical and conceptual knowledge gained in communication classes underpin the OM assignments in many of the other disciplines. These include applications of assignments in the computer laboratories, workplace simulations and oral presentations in the classroom, and projects on the application of interviewing skills.

The Delphi panel's assessment of oral communication and presentation skills showed 74% consensus, with employers attaining 70%, graduates 79%, and academics 73% consensus. Listening skills and conflict resolution attained 71% consensus, including the employers' consensus rating of 70%, graduates 64% and academics 80%. Teamwork and small groups obtained 63% consensus, with the employers attaining 65%, graduates 50% and academics 73% consensus. The Delphi panel's consensus rating of telephone technique was 58%, and 50% in respect of intercultural communication, organisational communication, and goals and objectives. The remaining communication content attained less than 50% consensus of the Delphi panel.

The Delphi participants commented that "technical knowledge and skills ... stand for little and are useless unless this can be communicated effectively and applied" and "communication skills are the most important skills required". The Delphi participants recommended that emphasis should be given to "communication, meeting procedure and emails" and more practical time be given to "presentations and communication skills". The curriculum should include documentation etiquette, accurate written language, and the understanding and application of the English language. Multi-literacy skills were considered to be important to fostering students' learning. (Refer to Table 4 for the consensus ratings.)



Table 4: Consensus ratings for Communication

Communication	Employer	Graduate	Academic	Consensus
Oral communication and presentation skills	70%	79%	73%	74%
Listening skills and conflict resolution	70%	64%	80%	71%
Teamwork and small groups	65%	50%	73%	63%
Telephone technique	58%	58%	59%	58%
Intercultural communication	52%	44%	53%	50%
Organisational communication	51%	45%	53%	50%
Goals and objectives	39%	50%	60%	50%

Financial Accounting

The Financial Accounting syllabus is offered at the first year level comprising 14 credits. The ratings of the Delphi panel are as follows: 78% consensus was attained for budgets and budgetary control, with employers attaining 64% consensus, graduates 83% and academics 88%. The introduction to accounting showed 67% consensus, comprising employers' consensus rating of 50%, graduates 75% and academics 75%. A consensus rating of 58% was attained for analysis and interpretation of financial statements with employers attaining 36%, graduates 75% and academics 63% consensus. The remaining content obtained less than 50% consensus as critical to improving students' learning.

It is evident that there were consistently lower ratings by the employers than those made by the graduates and academics. The employers commented that "financial accounting skills are not critical for administrative work in a training environment – this function is outsourced" and "apart from budget control and planning for the year ahead, the financial management aspect is often based elsewhere as a support service". An employer also commented that the rating of items such as debtors, creditors and so on was not possible since "one cannot do financial statements without these areas of knowledge and skills and therefore one cannot rate them as more or less important than the other".

The findings show that there are dedicated specialists at many organisations who undertake these functions and that office administrators and office managers only require basic financial knowledge and skills. Graduates who enter the workplace and require these skills will have fundamental knowledge and skills, and may further their studies if required. (Refer to Table 5 for the consensus ratings.)

Table 5: Consensus ratings for Financial Accounting

Financial Accounting	Employer	Graduate	Academic	Consensus
Budgets and budgetary control	64%	83%	88%	78%
Introduction to accounting	50%	75%	75%	67%
Analysis and interpretation of financial statements	36%	75%	63%	58%

Legal Practice and Mercantile Law

The inclusion of these disciplines in the programme implies that executive secretaries require some legal knowledge. The Legal Practice syllabus consists of 14 credits and includes content such as an introduction to the law, debt collections, close corporations, civil litigation and a brief introduction to conveyancing and wills codicils. The Mercantile Law syllabus comprises 20 credits and includes content such as general principles, immaterial property law, labour law, and specific contracts.

While the overall consensus for the content of both Legal Practice and Mercantile Law attained less than 50%, the employers' consensus rating for the content of labour law was 75% as they emphasised the need for the study of labour law as critical to improving students' learning. A Delphi graduate commented that "Mercantile Law is not used in my current work situation" and it was considered the least relevant to facilitating learning and fostering the success of graduates in the workplace. (Refer to Table 6 below for the consensus ratings.)

Table 6: Consensus ratings for Legal Practice and Mercantile Law

Legal Practice and Mercantile Law	Employer	Graduate	Academic	Consensus
Labour law	75%	44%	25%	48%

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The strengthening of both semantic gravity and semantic density is necessary for knowledge progression in ways appropriate for the field of practice. The reinforcing of the business communication underpinnings of the programme would enable this progression. A strong disciplinary core in the form of communication theory and practice needs to be established to provide a solid foundation for the role of the office administrator and office manager. Office administrators are required to communicate with customers, clients, and staff to attain the organisation's goals. An emphasis on language, communication and writing would strengthen the semantic density of the OM curriculum.



While the importance of information administration skills for improving students' learning and fostering the prospects of office administrators in the workplace cannot be denied, a strong foundation in business communication and practice would prepare students for current and future workplaces. Computer applications will be constantly changing, but graduates would have the foundational knowledge for the audience, context, and purpose of the communication and of the most suitable genres for the communication needed in a particular workplace context.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The decoding of the disciplines of the ND: OM curriculum shows that the disciplines foregrounded are those associated with the new technologies, namely, Information Administration. In accordance with international trends, the emphasis is on managing information flow and the relentless desire for efficiency through systems development and mechanisation (Zachry, 2000, 57), while the "writerly agency" (Solberg, 2014, 4) strongly related with administrative work in the past, comprises only 40 credits of Communication.

While disciplinary knowledge is recognised to be important in vocational and professional education, it is not beneficial to introduce disciplinary knowledge that is misaligned with the field of practice. The inclusion of Mercantile Law, with the exception of the labour law content, is inappropriate for the field of practice of office management, and therefore not powerful knowledge for the profession. The issue of misalignment is a noteworthy concern in professions that do not yet have a well-defined disciplinary base for their practice. Wheelahan (2010, 4) argues that it is critical to offer students opportunities to acquire disciplinary knowledge to allow them to acquire the kind of thinking that arises from such engagement. Stemming from the above discussion, it appears that in order to facilitate learning for the OM profession, an appropriate disciplinary base might be communication, language and writing. Research shows that there is a growing recognition of communication as fundamental to office administration knowledge (e.g., Zachry, 2000; Tench, 2003; Boyer & England, 2008). An employer summed up the significance of communication knowledge and skills as follows: "communication skills are 'cross-cutting' and the technical knowledge and skills stand for little unless these can be 'communicated' effectively and applied".

These findings have contributed to the decoding of the disciplines to develop strategies in support of learning and to the rearticulation of the ND: OM curriculum. These research results can be applied in practice by establishing a strong disciplinary foundation for the revised curriculum. It would need to comprise communication studies, including strong grounding in discursive and rhetorical practices of business communication and knowledge of its genres. This will enable graduates to comprehend the conventions and rules of written texts, such as business, academic, and instant messaging.

This may be implemented by means of individual and team assignments as well as activities comprising presentations, role play, and case studies. This will encourage participative learning as students make use of writing tools, such as in-class discussions, discussion boards, and analysis and reflection (Gulbrandsen, 2012, 251). Higher education should facilitate learning and knowledge transfer in preparing students for the dynamic workplace, lifelong learning, and an unknown future (Maton, 2014, 106).

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