SOUTH AFRICAN ACCOUNTING EDUCATION

Stocktake

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CHAPTER 10

Accepting the challenge

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The goal of this book is to fuel the appetite amongst peers to research accounting education. The book addressed the accounting education field from a holistic point of view and endeavoured to address the elements of the accounting education teaching environment. The discussion in this final chapter briefly reflects on earlier chapters and attempts to organise themes identified for further research. The findings of this book make it clear that there is a great need for research and ample opportunities within the accounting education field. Two of the areas in the teaching environment, namely the physical or virtual classroom and the relationship between the lecturer and students, did not receive significant attention in this book and there is a need for more research into these areas.

1. INTRODUCTION

This book aims to create an appetite amongst accounting education peers to research their subject. St Pierre, Wilson, Ravenscroft and Rebele (2009) aptly states:

It appears almost self-evident that the effective transfer of research-based accounting knowledge to those who are intending to pursue careers as accounting practitioners ... is a nontrivial matter worthy of serious intellectual inquiry.

This book addressed the accounting education holistically and attempted to address the following elements of the accounting education teaching environment:

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- The role-players, explicitly the student, lecturer, university, professional bodies and the profession;
- The subject content;
- The teaching methodology;
- The physical or virtual classroom;
- The relationship between the lecturer and students influenced by their respective learning and teaching styles; and
- The role of the lecturer in the university and community.

The following discussion aims to organise themes for further research under specific topics, mostly as identified in the preceding chapters. Note, however, that these themes are not mutually exclusive and many areas for further research could well fall under more than one heading.

2. THE ROLE-PLAYERS: STUDENT, LECTURER, UNIVERSITY, PROFESSIONAL BODIES AND THE PROFESSION

There are a variety of role-players involved in the accounting education teaching environment, each with their expectations and frames of reference, that contribute to the complexity in the teaching environment. These role-players will be discussed next.

2.1 THE STUDENT

Chapter 1 sets out the general perceived lack of skills (especially soft skills) on the part of students. The new generation Y and Z students join universities with a different set of expectations, requirements and abilities, necessitating accounting educators to understand the emotional and psychological aspects of the generation of students in front of them. The literature in Chapter 3 showed that learning styles of students change as they progress in their studies and that each student has a combination of styles with some learning styles, however, more dominant than others in each individual. In addition, the literature on community engagement confirmed that students participating in community projects gained valuable experience from their involvement in various other projects.

On a separate matter, there has been an increase in student demands for free tertiary education in South Africa, that culminated in the #FeesMustFall campaigns

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that began in mid-October 2015 (Sesant, Eliseev, Grootes & Koyana, 2015), creating unique challenges in the South African environment.

From the content in earlier chapters, the following were identified as possible areas for further research (research questions) regarding students:

- How does generation Y and Z influence the teaching and future of accounting?
- Does the generational change in university classrooms impact on learning styles of accounting students?
- Does the recent research on propagating the learning style myth eliminate the previous research conducted on learning and teaching styles?
- How can students be prepared for the competitive marketplace?
- How will accounting programmes in future have a competitive advantage to attract professionals from declining numbers of adequately prepared high school leavers?
- How prepared are students for the workplace?
- How can students be equipped to deal with the volumes of work and the related development of time management skills?
- Does learning style change when modality changes (face to face, online or blended)?
- What are the critical success factors for accounting studies?
- Are reading-time practices and open-book exams reaching their purpose?
- What are SA accounting students' perceptions of assessment?

2.2 THE LECTURER

Chapter 1 alludes to the fact that accounting educators often resist change due to several reasons. Chapter 2 highlights the need for accounting educators to make use of a wide range of teaching methodologies and strategies to successfully equip accounting students with a wide range of required skills and competencies. The literature in Chapter 3 showed that lecturers teach based on their philosophical orientation, and most of the learning styles match with at least two of the teaching strategies. Apart from the obvious teaching obligations, accounting educators are also required to be involved in research and community engagement.

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The following were identified as possible areas (research questions) for further research:

- Why are accounting educators resisting change, and how can they be supported to instead embrace it?
- What would be the best way to incentivise accounting educators to partake in research?
- How can accounting academics become involved in meaningful community engagement projects?
- To what extent is assessment considered in teaching practices in South Africa?

2.3 THE UNIVERSITY

Chapter 1 identifies the increased focus of universities on research as a significant change over the past number of years; however, not the only reason why accounting educators need to be involved in scholarly activity. For a scholar there are not many experiences that can top the feeling of one's work accepted for publication. Furthermore, accounting education is in desperate need of change, and accounting educators must share their experiences on this through publications. Chapter 6 sets out guidance to accounting educators in this regard by referring to available journals, what to publish and hints on getting published. One of the aims of this book is to assist accounting education researchers increasing their chances of publishing their work.

As part of the three standard legs for university activities (teaching, research and community engagement), universities are involved in community projects, and often academics become involved too. Community engagement might be value-adding in many of the accountancy and business subjects by allowing students to apply theoretical concepts in practice.

While public universities were traditionally operational in the higher education space regarding professional accounting education in South Africa, more and more private providers are coming to the forth. This new type of role-player creates a fresh dynamic to the South African accounting education arena.

An area that has recently been receiving much attention in university circles is the so-called 'decolonisation' or 'Africanisation' of the curriculum. Commonly recognised is that the existing tertiary education model in South Africa is quite Eurocentric and not designed to address the unique challenges in Africa, but the debate is still in its

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infancy. In the accounting sciences, decolonisation of the curriculum seems to be less about the content (that should prepare students for a global accounting world) than it is about the delivery and assessment of such content. The discourse in this space appears to revolve around such issues as diversity in teaching methods, student support, diversity in assessments (such as in industry and entity contexts) and the language used in assessments. Much research is still needed to determine how best to address unique African educational challenges.

The following were identified as possible areas (research questions) for further research on the university as a role-player in the teaching environment:

- What effect has the research requirement of universities had on:
 - The teaching of accounting?
 - The career development of accounting educators?
- What are the challenges faced by universities regarding transformation in the profession, student body and staff? In this regard, a topical area in South African accounting education is the debate around so-called 'decolonisation' of the curriculum and assessment. Little if any research has been conducted on what exactly 'decolonising' the curriculum means, and how this can be achieved to reduce throughput differentials between various student groupings.
- What studies (in the South African context) using sophisticated statistical techniques, such as regression models, can be undertaken?
- What would be appropriate promotion criteria for accounting educators?
- What would the appropriate mix be of professionally qualified and academically qualified educators?
- How would a code of ethics for accounting educators in South Africa look?
- How can accounting academics collaborate across university and discipline borders?
- How can the barriers of collaboration between universities and the profession be overcome regarding teaching and research?

2.4 PROFESSIONAL BODIES

Accounting education, by its very nature, requires collaboration between universities, the profession and professional bodies. In general, professional bodies play a crucial role in accounting education in South Africa. From the interviews in Chapter 1, the

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majority of participants agreed with the importance of professional bodies in the accounting education environment. From the interviews, it also became clear that the relationship between the professional bodies and South African universities has benefits, but also provides for some frustration.

South African professional bodies have conducted or are currently conducting research covering various aspects. The general theme that professional bodies are concerned with regarding accounting education research is to ensure that academic programmes and educational output are in line with market requirements. Financial assistance for this research usually depends on the relevance of the study and the availability of funds.

Many accounting educators are also professional accountants who must meet requirements for continuing professional development (CPD). The whole notion of CPD rests upon the concept of life-long learning, that is also an essential skill to develop in prospective accountants.

The following were identified as possible areas (research questions) for further research:

- Should the model of teaching and training accounting in South Africa be revisited and what would be suitable alternatives?
- How can universities and professional bodies achieve a balanced partnership to the benefit of all role-players?
- What would constitute best practices of accreditation and documenting assurance of learning?
- How does accreditation improve student learning and career preparation?
- What are the post-qualification competencies required of accountants?
- How can CPD best be measured?
- What competencies are required of accountants when entering the profession and during their career progression?
- How do professional examinations influence university assessment practices? To what extent should it influence university assessment?

2.5 THE PROFESSION

Research on accounting education is regarded as vital by many of the professional firms. Professional bodies facilitate much of the interaction between firms and universities. Some of the firms and companies, that are currently only carrying out internal research are willing to research accounting education either by collaborating with academics or by providing financial assistance, depending on available funding and on the condition that such research is of direct benefit to the specific firm or company.

Transformation of the demographics of accountancy practitioners (and indeed of South Africa as a whole) is a critical consideration in accounting education at the moment, and is likely to remain so for a long time to come, as the vestiges of South Africa's past are very real and require time and the commitment of all role-players to turn around. In the accounting education context, some of the critical areas needing more research are (1) how best to incorporate diversity into teaching-learning and assessment, and (2) how to reduce or eliminate pass rate differentials between different races (Coetzee, 2016; SAICA, 2016).

The following were identified as possible areas (research questions) for further research:

- How can accounting education support transformation in the profession?
- What would be critical success factors for accounting studies?
- What is the future of the accounting profession?
- What are the specific information technology (IT) competencies required by employers for accounting trainees?

3. SUBJECT CONTENT

Interviewees referred to in Chapter 1 identified a change in the amount, volume and complexity of subject content as a significant change that occurred in the past number of years, influencing many of the other elements in the teaching environment. One such area has to do with the increase in the need for IT competencies and soft skills. The main reason for a likely gap in IT skills may be the limited exposure that students have to IT at school level, especially in disadvantaged schools. Employers further noted that first-year accountancy trainees had not mastered the essential IT competencies

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that they would expect them to have. The exposure to IT at the different SAICA-accredited universities also varies.

There has always been a debate about the future of the accounting profession and how to remain relevant, but it appears that calls for change are accelerating. With the rapid rate of technological development and automation, some argue that accountants might become redundant if accounting education and assessment continue to focus on technical knowledge at the expense of business acumen and other essential skills (Olivier, 2017). SAICA dedicated the April 2017 issue of their magazine *Accountancy SA* to the “chartered accountant of the future”. In his book *Future Shock*, well-known futurist Alvin Toffler said that “the illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn” (Olivier, 2017; Toffler, 1970). The question as to how curriculum and assessment should change to ensure that accountants remain relevant for the future world of work is an area where accounting education researchers can contribute considerably.

In response to calls for change, SAICA embarked on a research project called ‘CA2025’, that is expected to see significant changes to their competency framework, which in turn informs most university accountancy syllabi in South Africa. On their website, SAICA summarises the CA2025 project as follows:

In a world of exponential and continuous change, it has become more critical than ever to ensure that CAs(SA) remain relevant in the roles they perform. As technology continues to improve and be more and more prevalent in the typical accounting space, this creates both challenges and opportunities for current and future members and associates of SAICA. The CA2025 project undertaken is formally researching the competencies (knowledge, skills and attitudes) that CAs(SA) will need to demonstrate in the workplace of the future. This project seeks to detail the competencies most needed and these will be defined in a competency framework that will inform various aspects of the pre-qualification process (further projects that will follow include: review of the education and training model, review of formal assessments by SAICA, and facilitating improvements to teaching and learning approaches) as well as the post-qualification process (further projects that will follow include: post qualifications specialisations, and improved SAICA offerings related to non-technical learning and development) (SAICA, 2018).

The South African accounting profession has also recently been rocked by several scandals (Matandela, 2018; Van Niekerk, 2018), sparking renewed pleas

for the education system to instil ethics into graduates, definitely an area requiring a lot more work. Accounting education research has a meaningful role to play as inadequately educated/trained accounting practitioners can cause a lot of harm (Wilson, Ravenscroft, Rebele & St Pierre, 2008).

For subject content, the following were identified as possible areas (research questions) for further research:

- How can the complexity and overload of technical content be addressed?
- What, continuously, is the most relevant and current collective body of knowledge (syllabus) for educating today's accounting students and future accounting professionals?
- How can professional bodies, universities and government introduce more flexibility to reduce the time it takes to effect curriculum changes?
- How can (and should) the accounting curriculum be made less dependent on published texts?
- How should IT be taught at university level: integrated, separate, integrated and separate?
- How and to what extent should Big Data and Data Analytics be incorporated into the accounting curricula?
- How can the lack of exposure to IT at school level be addressed at university?
- How should employers, lecturers and SAICA collaborate to design an effective and sufficient IT curriculum?
- Would an IT test based on the specific SAICA competencies, to be written by students entering university and/or graduates entering the workplace, be useful to establish their overall IT competency level?
- In what way can soft skills/pervasive skills be assessed the best?
- How can ethical reasoning and conduct best be entrenched into our future accountants?

4. TEACHING METHODOLOGY

Chapter 1 indicates that various authors believe that current teaching methodologies are not sufficient in equipping accounting students for the roles they need to play in the profession. The main objective of teaching accounting is said to not only

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develop technical knowledge and skills but also to equip accounting students with the necessary professional and generic skills required for the formal work environment. In general, it seems that there has been a shift in teaching methodologies away from the traditional paradigm, where students were dependent mainly on the lecturer for all possible solutions to problems, to the modern standard, where the lecturer only takes on the role of a facilitator. These current student-centred approaches include inquiry-based teaching, interactive learning, cooperative learning, problem-based learning, experience-based learning, case studies, simulations, games, role-playing, field experiences and project-based learning. Chapter 2 identified the following as methods specifically applicable to accounting education:

- Interactive and inquiry-based learning;
- Cooperative and group learning;
- Problem-based learning;
- Experience-based methods;
- Project-based learning; and
- Methods using different teaching aids.

The literature cited in Chapter 3 suggests that a combination of student-centred and lecturer-centred and/or problem-based approaches facilitate student success, and the achievement of outcomes in the accounting classroom, irrespective of the mode (face to face, blended or online) and lecturers should create an opportunity for the success of each student, achieved by incorporating various interventions in the classroom. In response to the aforementioned, educators need to develop and create interventions to incorporate these requirements as part of tertiary level accounting education programmes (see Chapter 4). Interventions should be planned, sustained and focused on the students, and have specific goals. Interventions need to be developed, scrutinised, measured and evaluated continuously to determine their effectiveness. Some of the categories of interventions used in accounting education include case studies, simulations, games, role-playing, field experiences and group work.

The following were identified as possible areas (research questions) for further research:

- What are the latest criticisms from the profession and society relating to accounting education practices?

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- What are the challenges faced by educators in applying different teaching methodologies?
- How do accounting lecturers perceive their roles, potential and experiences in the development and implementation of different teaching methods?
- How do the methodologies applied in the South African context compare internationally? What is the role of class sizes?
- What are the most appropriate teaching methodologies to be used in the main subjects and especially taxation, that lacks past research?
- What teaching methodologies can be used to integrate the main subjects?
- How should teaching methodologies differ between undergraduate and postgraduate modules?
- Does learning style change when modality changes (face to face, online or blended)?
- How can the success of interventions be best assessed?
- How can students that participate in interventions be assessed on a fair basis?
- How can mobile technology be used in accounting education?
- How should the specific IT competencies be taught to students to ensure they comply with employer expectations?
- How do lecturers perceive their role regarding teaching methodologies?
- How could students' academic self-efficacy impact performance within the learning environment of accounting education?
- Do learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessments align in South African higher education?

5. THE ROLE OF THE LECTURER WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY

This section deals with the lecturer in a broader sense. Chapter 1 describes the changes in the corporate world as one of the main challenges for accounting educators. The corporate and business environment has become much more complicated. For educators to be able to share these changes with their students, they have to keep up to date themselves first. The increased importance of transformation was also identified as a significant change in the professional and academic environment over the past number of years.

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The literature consulted reiterates the practical benefits for students to become involved in community projects, the value added to the community and the possibility of research outputs obtained from such involvement. The positive feedback from the sample cases of community involvement and the appreciation by the community for the participation of experts in their fields, could not be measured in monetary value.

The following were identified as possible areas (research questions) for further research:

- What are the new skills required from accounting educators in the changing business environment?
- What types of community engagement activities do universities currently undertake?
- What needs do communities have, that universities can address?
- How can community engagement by accounting faculty be evaluated?
- What would be an appropriate framework to plan, execute and evaluate community engagement projects?

6. CONCLUSION AND FINAL THOUGHTS

The findings of this book make it clear that there are ample research needs and opportunities within the accounting education field. This final chapter discussed and organised these in terms of the elements of the accounting education environment, as identified in Chapter 1. The discussion included the role-players, the subject content, the methodology, the physical or virtual classroom, the relationship between the lecturer and students (influenced by their learning and teaching styles) and the role of the lecturer in the university and community. Two of these areas, namely the physical or virtual classroom, as well as the relationship between the lecturer and students, did not receive significant attention in this book and there is a need for more research into these areas.

The authors trust that the contents of this book may inspire scholars to augment intellectual enquiry into accounting education to the benefit of the profession and society. Wilson et al. (2008) fittingly states:

As the *lingua franca* of business life (in addition to its significance in governmental, educational, and other not-for-profit organisations), accounting has universal importance. Moreover, the rapidly changing context in which accounting plays its role places changing

demands on accounting practitioners who need appropriate educational preparation if they are to be effective, in turn, requires the development of expertise on the part of accounting educators so that they might provide that educational underpinning.

Accounting education scholarship is critical to the continued relevance of this profession and those who do not take up the challenge, will be left behind.

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