

Developing responsible business professionalism: A capabilities approach

Dr Tracy Wilcox

Associate Professor Peter Sheldon

Ms Janis Wardrop

School of Organisation and Management,

Australian School of Business

University of New South Wales

Sydney. 2052. Australia

t.wilcox@unsw.edu.au

Abstract

Business and organisational life is increasingly fluid and dynamic, globalised and inter-cultural. The challenge for business education then is to develop a multidimensional model of *responsible business professionalism* that goes beyond simply helping students develop their employability skills. This paper presents our model of business professionalism, one we have successfully applied intensively to our teaching of many large cohorts of postgraduate business students. The model integrates what we see as key elements of socially responsive professional education. It moves beyond widely understood and acknowledged employability skills to also embrace more critical arguments for broader educational outcomes. These notably include systems thinking capabilities, contextual understanding and paradigmatic awareness, ethical decision making and a reflective self-awareness on the part of our students.

Keywords: business education, graduate attributes, professional skills, management

Business educators have lived in a blue pill¹ world with neatly defined, albeit unrealistic roles. In the concatenated silos of our different disciplines, each living and fostering the same blue pill worldview, we define ourselves as successful if we educate students who can get good jobs, enrich organizations, and help the economy grow. In that blue pill world, other goals are minimized or ignored; other consequences are seen as externalities – if they are seen at all. We are focused solely on the noble goal of serving our students and their organizations by giving students skills that impress potential employers. (Giacalone, 2007, p. 534).

In his thought-provoking call to arms for business educators, Prof. Robert Giacalone (2007) evokes the imagery of the film *The Matrix*, with its blue and red pills, to challenge us to think differently about the way we educate business students. In particular, he criticises the narrowly instrumental and overly-economic focus of much business education, and the dominant worldview associated with it. Giacalone captures a growing concern that management and business educators have focused too heavily on narrow technical and financial capabilities to the exclusion of broader thinking skills, interpersonal competencies and ethical awareness.

Over the past 10 years, corporate management failures in organisations like Parmalat, HIH Insurance, the National Australia Bank, Enron and the Australian Wheat Board have frequently provoked questions like: *how can these things happen?* Beyond performance failures among auditors and/or regulators, in each of these organisations a culture of ‘anything goes’ or ‘whatever it takes’ apparently flourished. Critics have identified business education as one of the main contributors to these mindsets

¹ In the Australian-made film *The Matrix*, the ‘blue pill’, when taken, prevents humans from seeing the world as it really is, in all its shambolic complexity.

(Adler, 2002; Ghoshal, 2005; Khurana, 2007). More recently, business schools – and their curricula – have received similar criticisms for their intellectual contributions to the underlying causes of the global financial crisis of 2007-2009 (Fishman and Khurana, 2008; Stiglitz, 2009).

The interconnectedness of many areas of society once thought separate is now more apparent. In turn, long-accepted ways of thinking face increased scrutiny, questioning and challenges to their legitimacy. Internationalisation of business and the globalisation of economic systems (especially capital markets) have thrown up an array of issues that can no longer be overlooked. The world we live in is characterised by greater complexity, flux and ambiguity, particularly as advanced service and knowledge-based activities become ever more important. All this brings more complexity, unpredictability and variety to how people work. Shifts in regulatory and governance patterns have also created heightened behavioural expectations facing managers and business professionals.

Policy makers, employer and professional associations and critics within business schools themselves have called for teaching and learning approaches that help students meet these many new challenges (Barker & Sarros, 2002; Mintzberg, 2004; Atwater, Kannan & Stephens, 2008). In order to understand and deal with many of these challenges, it is necessary to adopt a form of ‘systems thinking’ that recognises the interconnections between business action, political action and social change and, thus, awareness of likely intended and unintended consequences of managerial decision-making. As Giacalone (2007) suggests, developing the ability to reflect on contextual interconnections and question existing ways of thinking should be an important element of postgraduate business education. In addition, some business academics argue that postgraduate business education also needs to prioritise social responsibility and ethical thinking (Adler, 2002; Swanson & Fisher, 2008; Wilcox, 2002), people and communication skills (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008), and reflective self-awareness (Edwards, Ranson and Strain 2002, Wilcox, 2002).

Nevertheless, despite widespread calls for more ‘rounded’ business programs, there remains substantial scepticism or even cynicism – among students and some academics – about the relevance of so-called ‘soft’ skills for the more technically-oriented majors such as accounting or finance. Those teaching ethics or interpersonal skills sometimes face comments such as: *‘This isn’t the real world’*;

'These topics can't be taught'; 'Businesses are not interested in this stuff'; 'Why do I need to learn this?' (see also Frawley & Litchfield, 2009 p.143). In responding, it is important to ask why many people might see the human or social side of business as peripheral to the 'real' economic world.

Market-based institutions, with their associated values and worldviews, have come to dominate many sectors of society (including higher education). In an influential paper, Ferraro, Pfeffer and Sutton (2005) note that economic theories can be self-fulfilling, and that assumptions, such as the dominance of self-interest and the primacy of the market, may override other considerations. This has long been the case in business education (Ghoshal, Bartlett & Moran, 1999), encouraging a reluctance to engage with content perceived to be outside the 'core business' of business.

In this paper, we present a case study of our experience in developing and teaching a new compulsory course for postgraduate business students that addresses these dilemmas. This course provides a new model for responsible business professionalism and its component capabilities. The course has become highly popular. Indeed, according to finishing students, it has come to 'make a difference' to the character of their business education.

RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS PROFESSIONALISM: COMPONENT CAPABILITIES

A recent report for Australia's federal government (Precision, 2007) confirms that a number of business and commerce faculties in Australia have adopted explicit 'employability skills' frameworks and embedded employability skills among their respective graduate attributes. Specific skills include communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative, planning, self-management, learning and technology (Precision, 2007, pp. 25-26). Development of these capabilities has been framed in terms of job-readiness or strengthened business school-industry links. While this approach has merit and broadens business programs (Precision, 2007), we would argue that this suite of capabilities does not go far enough. Employability skills frameworks typically ignore broader perspectives and conflate employer (or business) interests with societal interests (Sheldon & Thornthwaite, 2006). Other important attributes, like social responsibility and ethical competence, are often absent.

A more holistic and socially responsive approach to business education and associated graduate attributes would specifically address concerns raised by Robert Giacalone and other critics. To this end, we propose the model illustrated in Figure 1 below to conceptualise the various capabilities we see as essential for responsible business professionalism. It comprises the understanding and specific skills in what we see as key areas of business education: leadership, teamwork, interpersonal and communication skills, cultural competence, moral imagination and ethical thinking, contextual awareness and critical thinking. Holding these together are two broad capability frameworks: systems thinking; and self-reflection.

[insert figure 1 here : Responsible Business Professionalism: Component Capabilities]

This model builds on common conceptions of graduate attributes (see Precision, 2007) but makes some important additions. Specifically, we include critical and systems-thinking capabilities, contextual awareness, ethical decision-making and cultural competence. As well, our model makes a case for a broader array of emotional intelligence components and self-reflection. These extend the self-management skills suggested by employability skills frameworks.

Systems thinking (Senge, 1990; Atwater, Kannan & Stephens, 2008) provides the first overarching framework. We argue for holistically linking it to the second framework, *self-reflection*, and other components of *emotional intelligence* (Goleman, 1995). In our view, systems thinking capabilities comprise:

1. *Paradigmatic awareness* - what Harrison, Leitch and Chia (2007, p.333) describe as a ‘loosening up of dominant paradigms of thought’ entailing the ‘intellectual agility needed to reframe, re-perceive and re-prioritize’. Such awareness must necessarily include meta-awareness of dominant economic systems of meaning and the pervading assumptions of *homo economicus* – ‘rational economic man’ - associated with the institutions of global capitalism (Friedland and Alford, 1991);
2. *Contextual awareness* - including a familiarity with the multiple levels of context, from the macro view of the globalised economy, through to organisational, group and individual elements of a business graduate’s context;

3. Awareness of *causal interconnectedness and consequences* (both intended and unintended) of business actions and decisions.

A capacity for reflective awareness in each of these areas underpins effective problem-solving and analytical capabilities. As Figure 1 indicates, business professionals can build on this capacity as they develop their capabilities in critical thinking, moral imagination and ethical reasoning and inter-cultural competence.

The second overarching framework complements these ‘big-picture’ capabilities. It relates to the student’s own evolving sense of who they are and who they might be as business professionals. Self-reflection and emotional intelligence capabilities involve the development of, among others: self-awareness; self-regulation; other-awareness and empathy; and intra- and inter-personal skills (Goleman 1995). Evidence of these capabilities includes characteristics such as self-confidence, openness to change, integrity, sensitivity and leadership.

While models of professional capabilities for business graduates address gaps in much business education, it takes more than a model to encourage a broader approach to professional practice on the part of business graduates. As we have noted, educators need to directly confront the notion that the development of such capabilities is peripheral to the ‘real’ work of business. This perceptual bias lies at the heart of many students’ reluctance to embrace deeper learning in these areas.

It is necessary, then, for educators to adopt explicit legitimization strategies when presenting courses of this nature. Legitimacy, institutional theorists tell us, is attributed to a social practice if that practice ‘fits’ into prevailing institutional norms or ways of understanding the world – or cognitive frames (Scott, 2001). Conventional business education does not necessarily include a critical examination of prevailing preoccupations with ‘shareholder value’ and short-term thinking. Furthermore, educational endeavours not based on this view may receive short shrift from students and other academics.

All of this presents significant barriers to deeper learning. To challenge these barriers requires explicitly naming and framing sets of logics, values and worldviews and asking questions about alternatives. One alternative institution still valued by society is that of the profession. It provides a

different set of norms and frames of thinking to those of the market. By encouraging business students to adopt an identity or notion of ‘self’ that includes seeing themselves as ‘professionals’, educators can open programs and curricula to broader approaches aimed at developing responsible business professionals. In the next section we discuss our recent experience in attempting this task. The challenge here was to bring together content, skills and learning processes that overcome the perceptual biases and reluctance to engage with what they see as outside the core of business knowledge.

CASE STUDY: A POSTGRADUATE BUSINESS PROFESSIONAL SKILLS COURSE

Six years ago, the business faculty within our university undertook a comprehensive review of our Master of Commerce (MCom). At the time, the MCom had an outstanding reputation for developing high-level, technical skills in more quantitatively-oriented areas of business practice – a focus reflected in its then compulsory core courses. The Faculty sought feedback and advice from employers and professional associations, the Faculty’s wide circle of prominent business alumni, recent alumni, and current students and academics. It also investigated trends among leading business schools around the world. The review uncovered widespread criticism that while graduates may have been technically proficient in fields such as accounting or finance, they lacked requisite knowledge and skills in self-reflection, interpersonal communication, teamwork, conflict resolution, inter-cultural competence and applied ethical reasoning.

Following this review, we received a mandate from the Faculty to design and teach an interdisciplinary MCom compulsory core course that emerged as *Business Communication, Ethics and Practice (BCEP)*. Through the content, teaching strategies and assessment, the course explicitly combines areas of study that are not typically integrated – by design – elsewhere. These areas included: learning theory, emotional intelligence, intra-personal awareness, interpersonal communication, perception and perceptual biases, inter-cultural awareness, organisational communication, conflict resolution and negotiation, group dynamics and teamwork, moral awareness, systems thinking, ethical leadership, ethical reasoning, professional practice.

Table 1 indicates how *BCEP*'s learning outcomes relate to our faculty's graduate attributes. Since its launch in 2005, *BCEP* has run two semesters each year and the occasional summer session. Semester one cohorts are the largest – about 350 students – while semester two usually has some 220.

Particularly as leaders of larger teaching teams, the authors taught on many of these iterations until the end of 2009. Over this time, we have put in place successful succession planning so that we are no longer involved.

As a compulsory course, intended for a student's first semester of post-graduate study, students come to *BCEP* with a variety of opinions as to its relevance to their MCom, particularly where the content of their specialisation appears distant from that of the course. One challenge was to influence students to see the course as relevant to their needs and motivate them to engage with it enthusiastically. We needed to make the course relevant to current and future practitioners, and engage students with ideas and frames of thinking that may run counter to those with which they were familiar. The aim was to develop a course *as professionals for professionals*, building students' sense of mastery of these professional skills, and fostering life-long learning and self-awareness of this process.

In responding to the above challenges, our teaching brings to the foreground the role of the course and the ways in which it may run counter to reigning ideas about what 'business' is all about. We integrate this 'foregrounding' into how we present the course to students, through written materials we prepared and in classroom activities and lectures. The objective is to bring to the surface early and then directly address any student cynicism or reluctance.

insert Table 1 here (Course Learning Objectives and Faculty Graduate Attributes)

At the outset, we explicitly discuss the part the course plays in developing professional capabilities, exposing students to debates on the role of business schools. In doing this, we raise the profile we give – through the course – to the need for self-awareness, reflective and critical analysis and ethical behaviour, alongside interpersonal competencies. The aim is to nurture our students' paradigmatic awareness and understanding of broader business contexts. This dialogue continues throughout the course, and in the first two weeks, students complete self-directed exercises encouraging them to reflect on some of the central premises in these debates through their own experiences. This

encourages them, as adult learners, to understand why they are doing the course, how it meshes with their own experiences and aspirations, and how it can contribute to their professional development.

Course Design

We designed *BCEP* to be interdisciplinary. Design and delivery purposefully and synergistically integrate the component areas of responsible business professionalism too often kept separated in business schools – business communication, ethics, organisational behaviour and critical thinking. Integration of various components occurs horizontally – across each week’s topic area – and vertically – across formal topics. All aspects of course design and delivery act as vehicles for this integration: the preparatory student material we have written, formal lectures, weekly workshops and assessment. Our rationale is that, in daily business and organisational life, professionals do not encounter these challenges as discrete topics but as varying bundles of factors or challenges. Integrating them, as we do in *BCEP*, makes the whole experience more meaningful and authentic for students and teachers. For example, when students practice negotiation skills in a workshop simulation, they do a simulation that also challenges their moral imagination and ethical reasoning, and requires application of self-awareness, other-awareness, problem-solving and communication skills.

In developing and teaching the course, we have recognised the need for a dynamic and relevant curriculum, and so we seek to engage students – through contentious topics and by embedding current business debates into readings, lectures, workshops and assessment. This approach broadens students’ awareness of relevant business concerns, raising the level of debate and discussion among students and, ultimately, encouraging their capacity for different ‘ways of seeing’ as business professionals.

Central to *BCEP* is its reinforcement of what ‘professionalism’ in business might mean. In this sense, professional practice implies a commitment that goes beyond mastering a body of knowledge to critiquing and extending existing knowledge. It involves a commitment to ideals that transcend self-interest and to high ethical and technical standards (Hilmer & Donaldson, 1996; Khurana & Nohria, 2008). By comparing notions of business professionalism with the more formalised professional

practices of medicine or engineering, we can demonstrate to students the importance of core professional values (for example ‘do no harm’ in medicine) alongside a commitment to the public good *as well as* to one’s clients or shareholders. We remind students that, in business practice, we may be called upon to make decisions in areas of either technical or ethical uncertainty (Richardson, 1985), and that development of skills in both of the two key frameworks provides support.

Approach to Teaching and Learning

As in many business faculties, our student cohorts include great diversity in disciplinary background, previous learning and employment experience, assumed knowledge and country of origin. In addition, student exposure to professional experience or even to regular employment varies greatly. Students can have quite different expectations of tertiary education and their engagement with courses. In particular, many feel reticent about the explicitly interpersonal and self-reflective engagement necessary for learning in a course such as *BCEP*. These factors have posed particular challenges for our approach to teaching and learning both within and outside the classroom.

As we have noted, many of our students, especially those from technically-based specialisations, can enter this compulsory course as unwilling ‘conscripts’. In response, we developed teaching and learning strategies that help to make the course meaningful and exciting for students, to make it ‘live’ for them, by synthesising theoretical knowledge with practical skill development. Student evaluations and other feedback, both immediate and at some remove, show that our teaching strategies have proved very effective.

We specifically developed weekly experiential workshops to engage students in all their diversity. For many students, these are their first learning opportunities of this kind, particularly if they come from cultures or disciplines that do not encourage classroom interaction, critical thinking and active student engagement. The workshops provide learning experiences that develop both systems thinking, and self-reflection and emotional intelligence capabilities. Through our use of structured exercises, students learn project management, planning, feedback, teamwork, oral presentation and analytical

skills that they can readily apply outside the course. Thinking tools such as fishbone diagrams, causal loops, and exercises in double-loop learning are introduced alongside self-reflection exercises, role plays, and other elements of experiential learning. Over the course of the semester, we remind students that they are all potential business leaders, and that their development of these capabilities will underpin their own professional business practice.

We encourage students to take risks in developing their communication skills and moral reasoning – by providing learning environments that are both safe and accepting, and places for open debate and critical thinking. Many students tell us that they are inspired to engage to a degree beyond what they would have previously imagined possible. Students are also encouraged to reflect on and debate how cultural or other – for example, disciplinary – differences create particular perceptions and cognitions that may be quite inaccurate. This approach to grounding our students' reflective learning in practice accords with Gosling and Mintzberg's (2006) approach.

The quality of student work suggests we have been successful in engaging our students, as do the results of university-administered course evaluations. They overwhelmingly show students to be satisfied (increasing to 97% by the end of 2008) with the course. Similarly, students reported that their interest in the subject area increased through studying this course (up to 92%, well above the faculty average of 84% and unusually high for a compulsory course). Students report, overwhelmingly, that they are challenged and energised by the process of developing their self-awareness and related skills. Their feedback also indicates that in developing greater interpersonal and inter-cultural capabilities through the course, they feel more motivated to learn from students from different backgrounds. This feedback received formal recognition from the Faculty and University in the form of (team) teaching awards.

Our design of assessment structure reinforces and reflects both the course learning objectives and Faculty Graduate Attributes (see Table 1). To reinforce the learning potential of assessment tasks, we explain to students how and why we have designed these assessment tasks to reinforce deeper learning. Much assessment is case or problem-based and calls on students to synthesise, integrate and apply concepts and skills developed through course readings, lectures and workshops.

For example, one major assessment task, a team-based project, responds explicitly to contemporary conceptual and policy debates about the role of business in society. It requires students to demonstrate their systems thinking capabilities. At the same time, the task encourages students to address core professional skills such as the development of effective teamwork, interpersonal and problem-solving skills, the Emotional Intelligence framework. In small teams, students undertake guided case study analysis of a particular, very current organisational controversy – ‘living’ cases which we changed each semester. Case organisations have included HIH Insurance, Australian Wheat Board, and James Hardie Group. Each project team independently explores one of a number of sets of ethical, cultural and communication concerns we set them, and in so doing, group members practice skills in an integrated manner (Goltz, Hietapelto, Reinsch & Tyrell, 1997). Use of a critical incident methodology allows us to take advantage of its dramatic strengths for student learning. Project work also encourages purposive investigation of issues relevant to the task, with students sourcing materials and conducting independent conceptual research.

We link the teamwork learning involved in this project to the teaching/learning on teamwork. Students are required to engage in team planning and allocation of duties early in the semester. We encourage use of planning tools like Gantt charts linked to these allocations. In this manner students can be encouraged to deal with the significant, albeit often unrecognised, challenges to constructive teamwork that we make explicit when we teach students teamwork theory. It also encourages informal leadership and peer mentoring within student teams.

Students quickly become aware and appreciative of improvements in their non-verbal communication and oral presentation skills, active listening and the like. Sometimes this includes greater self-awareness. Yet, it seems that some of the most important learning from our approach to teaching responsible professionalism may not be immediately apparent to students. A sense of greater mastery in areas like teamwork come more gradually, and mostly in response to substantial teamwork activities. Awareness of deeper learning regarding moral awareness, ethical reasoning and inter-cultural competence may become apparent even later. To examine this, we have started a research project on students’ experiences of *BCEP* after graduation.

Conclusion

This paper outlines an approach to the development of capabilities that we feel are central for responsible business professionalism. A first challenge has been to make *BCEP* and its learning appear relevant and valuable to those postgraduate business students initially reluctant or cynical about the human side of business. We do this by directly explaining our design for *BCEP* within debates about the purpose, form and content of business education. A second challenge has been to make the course as authentic and realistic as possible for student learning to encourage maximum student engagement and learning. In response, we have adopted a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning that integrates knowledge, skills and values-based debates into problem-based and experiential learning. This goes beyond 'adding-on' discrete elements to traditional curricula. Instead, the integration of our model through the whole course (learning outcomes, teaching materials, experiential workshops and assessment) brings home to students the more nuanced, complex but also interesting challenges they will face as business professionals.

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Figure 1: Responsible Business Professionalism: Component Capabilities

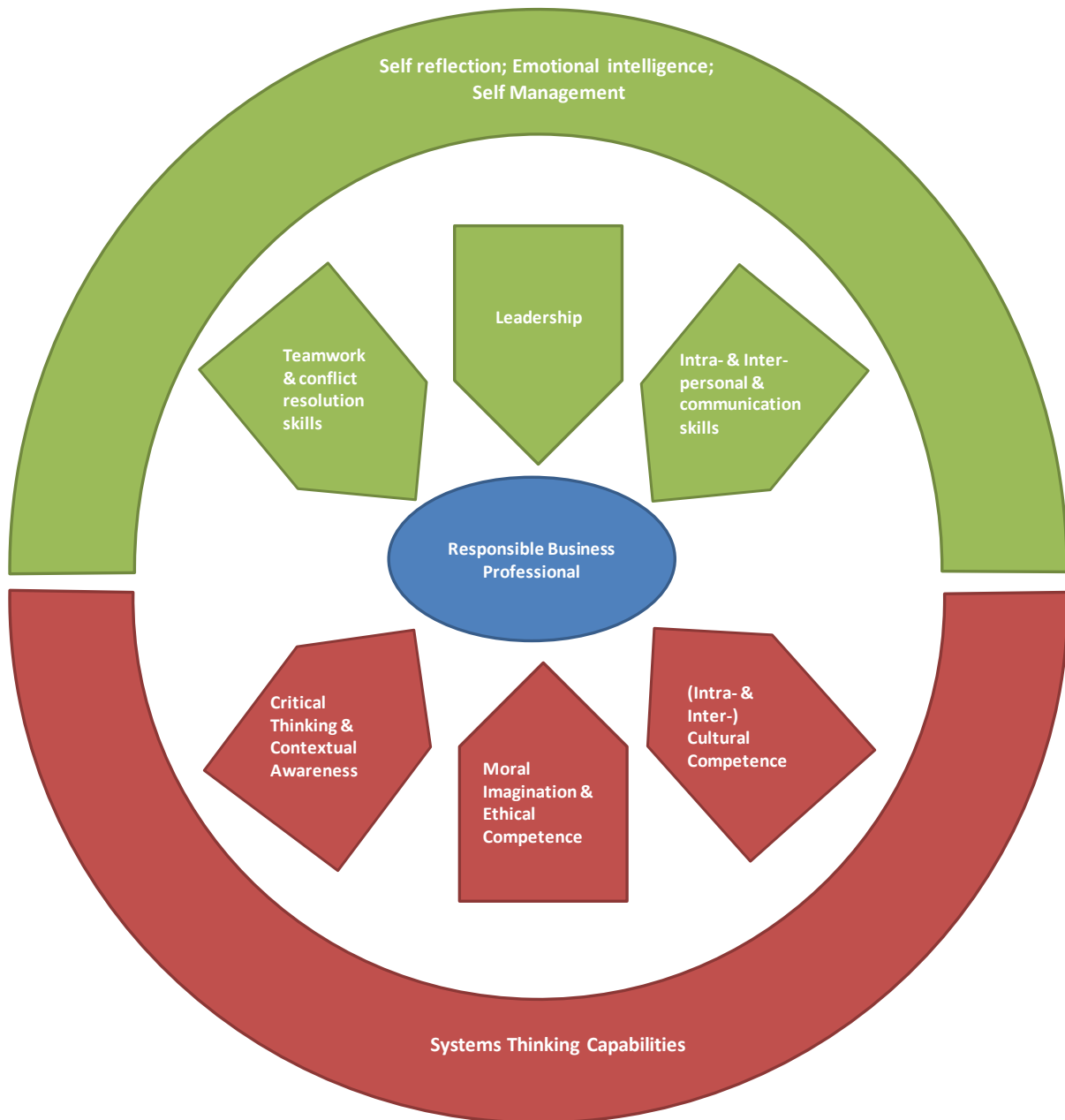


Table 1: Course Learning Objectives and Faculty Graduate Attributes

BCEP Course Learning Outcomes	Faculty Graduate Attributes*					
	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
a. Understand your own academic, professional and learning expectations as well as those of the university and employers						X
b. Critically analyse communication processes and identify strategies and techniques to improve the effectiveness of these processes	X	X			X	
c. Develop your self-awareness and interpersonal skills		X				X
d. Communicate more effectively in an academic or a business context		X				X
e. Apply skills in communicating more effectively in groups and teams		X	X			
f. Analyse interpersonal conflict situations more effectively	X		X			
g. Understand some of the main negotiation strategies for managing conflict			X			X
h. Appreciate cultural differences in communication and develop strategies for improving intercultural communication		X		X	X	
i. Identify the ethical dimensions of business practices	X					X
j. Distinguish and be able to apply different frameworks through which ethical issues may be considered	X				X	
k. Identify the various stakeholders in organisations & evaluate potential conflicts between people's multiple roles.	X			X		X
l. Appreciate the interconnections between ethics, leadership and professional practice.			X	X	X	X

* = Faculty Graduate Attributes

1. Critical thinking and problem solving
2. Communication
3. Teamwork and Leadership
4. Social and global perspectives
5. In-depth engagement with relevant disciplinary knowledge
6. Professional skills