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Research Article

Consulting-Based Projects: A Path for Millennials and Post-Millennials to Enter the Consulting Industry

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Abstract: *The management consultant profession has become a central topic of discussion among management practitioners with regard to the impact and the evolution of its role in modern business society, yet the study of its preparation stage remains unclear and overlooked compared to other professional advisory services. In most cases, the path to the profession comes through a management education program; however, the program has faced numerous challenges in preparing graduates for the consulting role. Management education has evolved as experiential learning has been introduced to the learning module in some form. Yet, the initiative's impact remains underexplored, particularly in management consulting. The study examines how involvement in consulting-based projects, as a form of experiential learning, enhances the acquisition of foundational consulting skills in university years. A quantitative method approach was employed to gather the data of individuals with exposure to similar experiences of consulting-based projects and its impact on the development of foundational consulting skills. The data were analyzed using Multiple Linear Regression (MLR) to assess the relationship and impact of involvement in the project on the skill acquisition outcomes. The study shows that consulting engagement experience in university has impacted foundational consulting skills such as problem-solving and communication for further management consultant career readiness. This study emphasizes the importance of developing exposure for future aspiring management consultant professionals through experiential project learning to provide real-world experiences that emulate the real context of management consultant engagement.*

Keywords: *Experiential Learning Theory, Consulting-Based Project, Consulting Skills, Management Consultant.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Management consultant, a new profession in the 21st century, has established its position among other professional advisory services lines of business. The role has numerous use cases of improving organizational effectiveness from businesses to public sector institutions by providing comprehensive solutions for clients' most complex problems. Looking at the development of the industry, the overall worldwide market size of the industry has increased significantly over the years. According to Statista, the management consulting industry will be valued at one trillion U.S. dollars in 2022.

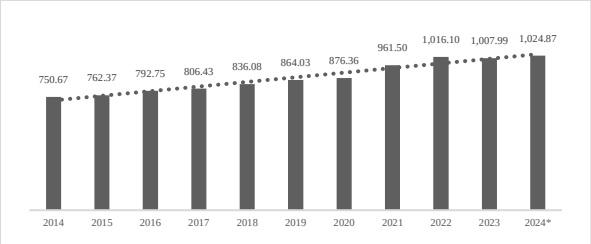

Figure. 1 Market size of the management consulting industry worldwide (in billion U.S. dollars)

According to Kubr (2002), in the origin of management consulting, the profession's development has evolved significantly over the years due to the shift in economic, regulatory, and diverse organizational needs. The profession emerged from engineering management as a response to the growing complexity of businesses in the industrial economy. As the industry became more mature, management consulting firms faced challenges in recruiting the best talent to receive the responsibility of acting as management consultants for huge organizations across sectors. Management consulting firms specifically require much more advanced competencies in terms of technical understanding of business concepts and soft competencies to conduct the role of a management consultant to the highest level of client delivery. According to the Bloomberg report on the skill gap in consulting sectors, there are several skills that recruiters from respective sectors require and see as having a crucial role in the individual needs of the companies.

Figure. 2 Skills Mapping for Consulting Sector Needs (Bloomberg Recruiter Report)

For the Consulting sectors, problem-solving, communication, and leadership skills are among the most desired qualities of graduates, while the skills remain less common in the competitive market for talent. For example, problem-solving has become the number one skill recruiters in the consulting industry want the most. Yet, the individual with the right competency match remains rare in the market. Those skills, for instance, have become very valuable, yet the consulting sector faces difficulty finding the right talent with the demanded qualities. The skill gap remains large for recruiters in the consulting sector as management education must do more work turning graduates into job-ready graduates, particularly in the consulting sector. According to QS Quacquarelli Symonds's (2023) report on the skills gap: what employers want from business school graduates, there is a disparity between the skills the industry needs and the capabilities of management education graduates.

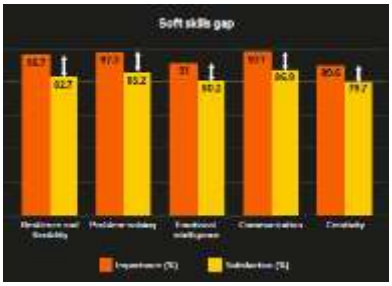

Figure. 3 Soft skills gap (QS, 2023)

The skills gap occurs when there is a disparity between what graduates of management education can provide and the main needs that firms very much see in the management consulting sector. Similarly, business schools have not engaged in preparing students for a career in the management consultant role. This profession requires a unique combination of analytical, interpersonal, and problem-solving skills. This raises a deep question for management education practice, such as whether the common management education program has equipped graduates with the required abilities and competencies to play the role of advising businesses, government, and many forms of institution to solve their biggest issues or achieving their strategic objectives, particularly in management consulting industry.

As the management education system grows over time, there is a phenomenon in several universities that offer consulting project activity platforms where students can maximize the theories they get in traditional classroom settings while at the same time integrating theories and frameworks with real-world challenges. The consulting-based project introduces the concept of integrating what students learn within the classroom with its application to real scenarios of solving organizational problems. This kind of learning activity is aligned with the concept of learning offered by Kolb (1984), called experiential learning. In essence, the concepts of learning are defined as a process where knowledge is developed through the transformation of an experience. The theory highlights four key stages: the importance of experience aspects within the learning process, which integrate concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Furthermore, experiential learning aligns with the demands of employers who prioritize graduates with hands-on experience and the ability to adapt to rapidly changing environments (Billett, 2014). By embedding experiential learning concepts in the form of consulting-based projects into business education, institutions can bridge the gap between academia and industry, producing graduates who are not only conceptually sound but also practically skilled, have a high degree of experience and exposure to real project, as well as increase the job-readiness for aspiring career as a management consultant. The study aims to understand the impact of integrating experiential learning as a consulting-based activity to close the gap between the competencies needed by the industries and those of university graduates. The study will focus on the foundational skill acquisition

graduates can benefit from in their involvement in consulting-based engagement during their university years and its correlation with the required competencies from the consulting industry. This gap highlights the need for studies that explore effective methodologies, in this case, the context of the student consulting club of project-based activity, which can bridge theoretical learning and practical skills development for aspiring consultants.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A) Management Consultant Profession

The discussion within the domain of management consultants has increased for decades among academics and other business stakeholders. A management consultant is an independent professional advisor providing an organization with the expertise to obtain organizational objectives by solving challenges, seizing opportunities, and providing organisational changes. (Kubr 2002). According to the International Council of Management Consulting Institutes (ICMCI), "Management consulting provides independent advice and assistance about the management process to clients with management responsibilities. Moreover, according to Kubr (2002), the purpose of a management consultant is to provide added value through the transfer of knowledge between the consultant and the client. The knowledge, to be an added value for the client, should be beneficial for the organization to achieve optimal conditions or an increase in the effectiveness of the organization. Management consultants play an important role in several aspects of their clients' organisation. Five generic purposes represent the main objective of the profession for the client. The five generic purposes of the profession, according to Kubr, are achieving organizational purposes and objectives, solving management and business problems, identifying and seizing new opportunities, enhancing learning, and implementing changes.

B) Foundational Consulting Skill

The management consultant profession is uniquely established as a profession where a high standard of skill, ethics, and technical capabilities has been scrutinised to understand someone's ability for the profession. The International Council of Management Consulting Institutes (ICMCI) in 2014 has developed a standardized framework called competence framework, which serves as the guiding framework for the standard of excellence in the management consultant profession. The CMC Competence Framework outlines the interconnected abilities, commitments, knowledge, and skills a management consultant must exhibit to execute an assignment independently and with high-level standards.

Figure 4 ICMCI Consultant Competence Framework (2014)

For the study, the term "foundational consulting skill" comes from the author, which only focuses on two main skills within the scope of the basic level of competence in "Values and Behaviour Competence" of the competence framework, which are problem-solving and communication skill as the study emphasizes on the development of the skills during the phase of university years where those skills are relevant in terms of the achievability and the possibility of acquiring basic foundational skills early on during university activities in consulting project-based form of experiential learning. The author will specifically focus on the essential skills, whereas students in the university years can collect and accumulate certain skills that are necessary yet feasible in terms of the skill acquisition process within the time horizon. As values and behavior competence have become the foundational competence for the profession, the study will focus mainly on the analytical skills of which problem-solving skills and personal interaction of ability to demonstrate communication skills are necessary skills of a professional management consultant have a high chance of feasible acquisition process in university years project learning.

C) Problem-Solving Skill

According to the ICMCI (2014) Competence framework, problem-solving is included in the required ability in the analytical skills group. Applying one of the analytical skills to ensure robust solutions for clients, such as problem-solving ability, has been the separator between a great practitioner of the profession and the rest of the pack. It emphasizes the use of a logical, coherent, and consistent approach to challenging assumptions and breakdown issues where it arrives at the solution for respective clients' problems. From the management consulting perspective, problem-solving is a structured process involving analysing complex challenges and applying systematic methodologies to develop effective solutions. McKenna (2006) emphasized that problem-solving is a core competency for the industry consulting profession, where consultants routinely need to solve non-obvious problems, which requires skills to find solutions that are not visible to the organization that is a client and requires

advisory services from consultants. Furthermore, Satyanarayana (2003) emphasizes the role of creativity and innovation as crucial elements in problem-solving processes, arguing that combining analytical and creative thinking facilitates the development of novel solutions to ambiguous problems. The synergy of these approaches underscores problem-solving as not just a technical process but a dynamic engagement involving creativity, interdisciplinary knowledge, and strategic application, which is crucial to delivering the solution for the client and doing the profession well.

D) Communication Skill

Joseph A. DeVito (2021) defines communication physics as a process in which individuals conduct and exchange messages in various contexts, using verbal and nonverbal methods to establish understanding between the parties who communicate. In addition, communication is not only based on the transfer of information but also emphasizes the interpretation of meaning. In addition, according to the ICMCI (2014) Competence framework, demonstrating communication skills on a project basis is a very important aspect of personal interaction within the consulting project engagement. It refers to the ability of individuals to convey information in a clear, focused manner by means of communication such as verbal, non-verbal, graphical, written, or oral communication techniques. Communication skills in management consulting are pivotal for effectively transmitting complex ideas, building client relationships, and facilitating decision-making processes. In terms of the management consulting perspective, McKenna (2006) argues that communication in consulting reaches beyond the basic activity of information exchange and includes the ability to translate expertise and particular knowledge into clear, actionable insights suited to the client's needs and organizational context. In accordance with the prior argument, the ability to demonstrate professional communication skills has become crucial, particularly for the profession, as the management consultant role faces learning-credibility tension (Bourgoin and Harvey, 2018). Learning-credibility tension is a concept faced by advisory services such as management advisory consultants where the professional of advisory services should display sufficient knowledge to convince the clients of its expertise while at the same time facing new challenges, industry, and project different from time to time. In addition, the role requires a tactical approach, in which the consultant can convey an understanding of the topics while learning new things from the client for project delivery.

E) Experiential Learning Theory and Consulting-based Project

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), as defined by Kolb (1984), is a model for conducting the learning process and knowledge acquisition, emphasizing the role of learning with experience in the process. Moreover, Kolb argued that learning is a process where knowledge is developed through experience transformation. The theory developed by Kolb integrates four key stages in a cyclical process: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Figure. 5 Kolb Learning Model

In the field of management education, one of the trends that have begun to develop is the establishment of activities outside the general curriculum (extracurricular activity), namely student consulting clubs where students gather and conduct consulting projects by providing advisory services to other companies or institutions, either pro-bono or paid, to hone their skills in running projects, integrating knowledge and concepts that can be implemented directly to conditions real-time business, and finally prepare them for a real profession in the field of management practice which is growing rapidly, namely the management consultant profession. One example of student club and project consulting researched by (Ford et al., 2023) which provides an example is Axis Consulting, an extracurricular consulting project at Simon Fraser University, Canada, successfully implementing the ELT concept in activities that support students to work as consultants and gain real-world experience managing and interacting with external clients in carrying out their duties and responsibilities to complete Client problems by applying theoretical concepts that have been learned in the classroom. These projects integrate the experiential cycle by immersing students in real organizational challenges (concrete experience), prompting them to reflect on their learning and performance (reflective observation), synthesize theoretical knowledge into actionable solutions (abstract conceptualization), and test these solutions within professional settings (active experimentation).

F) Hypothesis Development

As the Consulting-based project covered all components of the experiential learning method, the complete stage cycle of experiential learning according to the Kolb Model of active experimentation, concrete experience, reflective observation, and abstract conceptualization has been integrated into the involvement of such activity, whereas each of the components of experiential learning is tested for the relationship against two important skill for management consultant role which is problem-solving and communication skill. The research aims to understand the relationship between the two models of the relationship between experiential learning and problem-solving skill acquisition, as well as the second model of the relationship between experiential learning and communication skill acquisition.

H1
H1a. Active Experimentation (AE) has a positive and significant relationship with Problem-Solving skills (PS)
H1b. Concrete Experience (CE) has a positive and significant relationship with Problem Solving skills (PS)
H1c. Reflective Observation (RO) has a positive and significant relationship with Problem-Solving skills (PS)
H1d. Abstract Conceptualization (AC) has a positive and significant relationship with Problem-Solving skills (PS)

H2
H2a. Active Experimentation (AE) has a positive and significant relationship with Communication skills (C)
H2b. Concrete Experience (CE) has a positive and significant relationship with Communication skill (C)
H2c. Reflective Observation (RO) has a positive and significant relationship with Communication skills (C)
H2d. Abstract Conceptualization (AC) has a positive and significant relationship with Communication skills (C)

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study employs Multiple Linear Regression (MLR) analysis to examine the relationships between independent variables and the dependent variables in this study. By quantifying the strength and direction of these relationships, MLR provides insights into the predictive power of the independent variables to the dependent variable. Key parameters such as path coefficients (B) and p-values are used to assess the relationships' statistical significance and practical implications. The study surveyed three hundred respondents to gain insights into their experience with consulting-based project forms of experiential learning. The main criteria for respondents are having experience or similar exposure with the case of involvement and engagement in the consulting-based project during the university year. The MLR analysis focuses on two primary parameters: the path coefficient (B), which indicates the strength and direction of the relationships between variables, and the p-value, which evaluates the statistical significance of these relationships. All stages of analysis are executed using Microsoft Excel for basic calculations and SmartPLS 4 for advanced modeling. These tools enable efficient execution of statistical procedures while ensuring the reliability and reproducibility of the findings.

A) D.PS Model

The MLR analysis for the D.PS model examines the relationship between the independent variables (I.AC, I.AE, I.CE, and I.RO) and the dependent variable (D.PS). The results confirm the robustness and predictive power of the model, with an overall R^2 value of 0.837, indicating that the independent variables explain 83.7% of the variance in D.PS. All independent variables are statistically significant predictors of D.PS. The coefficients indicate that I.CE has the strongest positive influence (B = 0.306), followed by I.AC (B = 0.294), I.RO (B = 0.190), and I.AE (B = 0.182). This sequence suggests that concrete experience (I.CE) contributes most strongly to perceptions of success of problem-solving skill acquisition (D.PS).

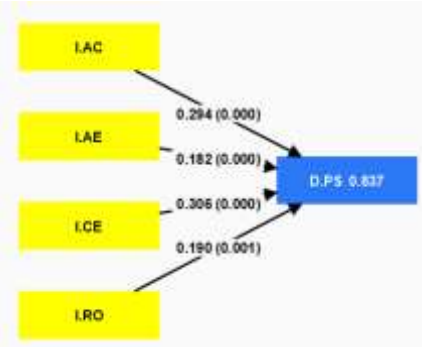

Figure. 5 D.PS MLR Model

B) D.C Model

The MLR analysis for the D.C model evaluates the relationships between the independent variables (I.AC, I.AE, I.CE, and I.RO) and the dependent variable (D.C). The results demonstrate that the model has good explanatory power, with an overall R^2 value of 0.784, indicating that the predictors explain 78.4% of the variance in D.C. All independent variables significantly predict D.C, with I.CE exerts the strongest influence (B = 0.383), followed by I.AC (B = 0.269), I.RO (B = 0.168), and I.AE (B = 0.117). This pattern indicates that concrete experience (I.CE) is dominant in shaping communication skills (D.C).

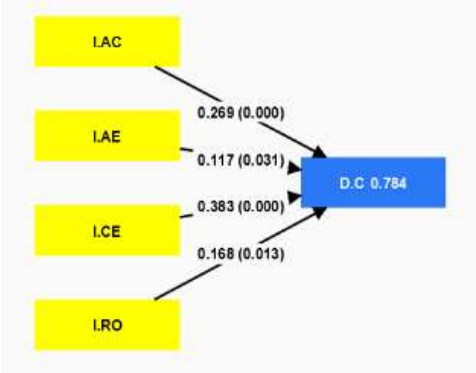

Figure. 6 D.C MLR Model

For the D.PS Model, all All-independent variables (I.AC, I.AE, I. CE, and I.RO) are significant predictors of D.PS in the base model, with concrete experience (I.CE) of experiential learning having a strong impact on the acquisition of problem-solving skills (D.PS). Moreover, the model is robust, as the significance of the independent variables is maintained across models. For the D.C Model, all independent variables are significant, with concrete experience (I. CE) exerting the strongest influence on acquiring communication skills (D.C). Overall, the model implication of the findings has shown robust study results. I.CE is the most impactful variable across both models, emphasizing the importance of intellectual involvement in driving the success of problem-solving and communication skills acquisition.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study's findings indicate that engagement during university years of consulting-based projects significantly impacts students' acquisition of problem-solving and communication skills as foundational requirements for the management consultant profession. The engagement of a consulting-based project provides the student with a concrete simulation that emulates a real-world scenario of a management consultant professional setting, which becomes very valuable to entering the industry. Moreover, involvement in consulting-based projects enhances learning in every aspect of the role as it comprehensively replicates the future condition of the job under certain circumstances of project scale and scope. The study's findings suggest that integrating consulting-based projects into the management of education can positively impact the learning experience, especially for focused students with aspirations to enter the management consultant sector. The exposure, experience, and lessons students receive and extract insights from the platform of concrete projects positively impact the foundational skill acquisition and valuable knowledge and experience valued by the market. From the findings of the research, the main contribution that this research can make is an insight for management education service providers to see the needs of specific professions, in this case, management consultants with the comprehensive skills they need in recruiting employees and management education in preparing graduates with the skills that are practically needed. To complete the learning process, the consulting project practice at the university phase has proven successful in increasing the acquisition of critical skills such as problem-solving and communication skills for graduates who specifically want to continue their careers in the consulting industry. The research by the author focuses on an approach to quantify and measure the experience of involvement in consulting projects with the level of acquisition of foundational skills that can support and improve the quality of future aspiring management consultants to be able to prepare themselves to start from their time at university, through emulation of real consulting projects. For further research to complement as well as becoming the alternatives of this study to answer the research questions and arrive at similar results, the research could be carried out by implementing various methods such as the qualitative method by in-depth interviews to explore participants' experience correlated with the benefit of skill acquisition, a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to collect insights and understand the group of participants dynamics in relation to the experience of involvement with skill acquisition, and pre-experience and post-experience test of assessments to measure the difference level of skill gap as well as the improvement of participants particular skills before and after the involvements of consulting projects. Further research could also investigate consulting-based projects in different geographical settings and the correlation with other competencies required to complete and fulfil the management consultant role. In addition, studies tracking the careers of aspiring students involved in project-based consulting during university and who

have pursued the management consultant industry for several years to validate the impact could provide a holistic perspective and insights into the long-term benefit of involvement in consulting-based projects.

Interest Conflicts

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publishing of this paper.

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