



# A new higher education marketing mix: the 7Ps for MBA marketing

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to present a new marketing mix based on MBA students' attitudes and opinions towards the marketing initiatives of business schools in South Africa. The post-graduate business education market is, and increasingly, getting more aggressive in their efforts to attract students on to their flagship degree, the MBA. The traditional marketing tools historically grouped into 4Ps (product, price, place and promotion), 5Ps (adding people) and 7Ps (adding physical facilities and processes) may be wanting in this market.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The approach taken was a quantitative survey of students registered at state subsidized universities in South Africa.

**Findings** – The factor analysed data showed seven quite distinct underlying factors in the marketing activities of these business schools, some covering the same elements of the traditional marketing mix: people, promotion, and price. There were, however, four different elements: programme, prominence, prospectus, and premiums.

**Research limitations/implications** – While the survey included only MBA students from a sample drawn in South Africa, the study does highlight the fact that the traditional services marketing mix may not be as useful to the higher education sector as it might have been originally thought.

**Practical implications** – The development of marketing strategy may be better served by this 7P model rather than the services mix.

**Originality/value** – This paper presents the underlying factors that form the basis of a new marketing mix specifically for MBA recruitment.

**Keywords** Marketing mix, Universities, Factor analysis, South Africa, Masters of business administration, Business schools

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

While the number of MBA graduates increases year on year so too are the number of tuition providers. The competition between traditional universities, independent and private universities, is increasing with a variety of joint ventures and franchise operations fragmenting this highly competitive market (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006). As the number of degree choices grows and prospective students have a wider variety of universities from which to choose, the need for universities to differentiate themselves from their competition is self evident, resulting in the role of marketing in student recruitment increasing in importance (Taylor and Darling, 1991; Canterbury, 1999; Nicholls *et al.*, 1995; Coates, 1998). To compound the problem, numerous higher education institutions (MacGregor, 2000; Merten, 2000) and some business schools have seen declines in their enrolments, further emphasising the importance of marketing for student recruitment (Taylor and Darling, 1991; Smith *et al.*, 1995; Tagwireyi, 2000).



As MBA choices available to students grow, life changing decisions about where they study are becoming more complex, with the decision-making process becoming longer while prospective students assess alternative offerings of competing business schools. Perceptions of business school offerings and the image that a business school conveys need to be managed (Ivy, 2001). While the collection and evaluation of the information on universities is being critically evaluated, universities are providing only some of the information that prospective students are using to develop the image they have of that university. Publicity and league tables in the mass media also plays an important role in student choice. At a time when many business schools are facing increasing financial pressures and competition, it has become imperative for them to market themselves.

Marketing in the higher education sector is not new. Many authors have recognised the increasingly important role that marketing is playing in student recruitment (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006; Ivy, 2001; Maringe and Foskett, 2002; Fisk and Allen, 1993; Carlson, 1992; Wonders and Gyure, 1991; Murphy and McGarrity, 1978). When universities offer qualifications that satisfy student needs, distribute the tuition using methods that match student expectations, provide the data on which they can make informed decisions about qualification choices and price those programmes at a level that students see as providing value, courses are more likely to be filled. The tools alluded to here are the most basic elements of the marketing mix, that of product, price, place and promotion, which are used by institutions to increase, not only enquiries regarding programmes, but also applications, and indeed enrolment.

### The marketing mix

The marketing mix is a set of controllable marketing tools that an institution uses to produce the response it wants from its various target markets. It consists of everything that the university can do to influence the demand for the services that it offers. Tangible products have traditionally used a 4Ps model, the services sector on the other hand uses a 7P approach in order to satisfy the needs of the service provider's customers: product, price, place, promotion, people, physical facilities and processes.

The *product* is what is being sold. It is more than a simple set of tangible features, it is a complex bundle of benefits that satisfy customer needs. In the case of a university, what is being sold is widely debated. Some argue that students registering for a degree are the raw materials of education and that the graduates are the products, with employers being the customers. While there is merit in this argument, employers seldom pay universities for their graduates, it is far more common to have students pay universities for the services that they receive and ultimately the degrees that they are awarded. For this reason, students will be seen as the customers and the MBA degree the product. Design of the degree is central to the product element of the marketing mix. The curriculum must be appropriately developed and adapted to meet the needs of the students. Programme duration is also expected to influence business school choice.

The *price* element of the services marketing mix is dominated by what is being charged for the degree or tuition fees that are required to enrol at the university. The pricing element not only affects the revenues that a university derives from its enrolment, but also affects student perceptions of the quality. With most universities charging tuition fees for post graduate education, tuition fees can have an impact on a

student's ability to afford to register for an MBA, with some researchers finding a direct link between demand for the MBA degree and tuition fees (Little *et al.*, 1997; Ratshinga, 1998). Some universities have established their business schools as separate cost centres and are expected to be entirely self funding without support from the university's central budget. Many business schools established this way are also expected to make a contribution to the university's central funds and cross subsidise other areas of business school activities, such as research. Hence, the pricing element is critical to the day to day operation of many a business school.

*Place* is the distribution method that the university adopts to provide the tuition to its market in a manner that meets, if not exceeds, student expectations. The development of alternative modes of tuition have grown significantly; no longer are students confined to the classroom and their lecturer to get the input they need to meet the requirements of the course. Access to lecture and support materials are increasing becoming available through virtual learning media, like Blackboard and Moodle. Distance learning opportunities have also developed through the post, email, the web, video and teleconferencing, block release options and more recently pod-casts.

*Promotion* encompasses all the tools that universities can use to provide the market with information on its offerings: advertising, publicity, public relations and sales promotional efforts. When one considers the wide variety of publics with which a university needs to communicate, the use of just the prospectus or the university's website is unlikely to be effective. Different elements are used for different publics. Indeed some publics, like prospective students, are so important that a number of promotional tools will be targeted at them for recruitment purposes. Open days, international higher education exhibitions, conventions, direct mail and advertising are but a few of the tools the universities employ to inform, remind and persuade prospective students to select their institution.

The intangible nature of services resulted in the addition of a further element – *people*. The people element of the marketing mix includes all the staff of the university that interact with prospective students and indeed once they are enrolled as students of the university. These could be both academic, administrative and support staff. The role of the image and status of academic staff in recruitment of undergraduate students is open for debate; however at a graduate level student perceptions of teaching staff reputations can play an important role in the choice process (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006; Ivy, 2001). Some students, for example, may be influenced by the number of academic staff who are PhD holders or have a Professorial title, others by academics' public profiles (as experts for television interviews or other publicity). On the administrative and academic support front, significant input to the provision of higher education services both at the front line and what might be considered behind the scenes is provided, which does impact on student perceptions of service quality. Lin (1999, p. 190) argues that "there is no more important element than selecting people for positions at a college or university". The simple process of how a telephone enquiry is handled may have a greater impact on whether or not a prospective student is going to keep that university in their range of options than an eminent Professor's publications or research record.

*Physical evidence and processes* are the newest additions to the services mix. Physical evidence is the tangible component of the service offering. A variety of tangible aspects are evaluated by a university's target markets, ranging from the

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teaching materials to the appearance of the buildings and lecture facilities at the university.

While *processes* are all the administrative and bureaucratic functions of the university: from the handling of enquiries to registration, from course evaluation to examinations, from result dissemination to graduation, to name but a few. Unlike tangible products that a customer purchases, takes ownership of and then takes home to consume, a university education requires payment prior to “consumption”, an ownership exchange does not take place and a long and closer face-to-face relationship often results. Students attend classes for at least a year (on post-graduate programmes) and much longer for undergraduate degrees. During the period that the student is registered, processes need to be set in motion to ensure that the student registers for the correct courses, has marks or grades correctly calculated and entered against the student’s name and is ultimately awarded the correct qualification. While this might seem quite straight forward, there are numerous other processes that need to be implemented concurrently (with the finance system, accommodation, time tabling and the library) to ensure the highest level of student satisfaction.

### **Objectives and research methodology**

The purpose of this research was to determine if the traditional services marketing mix is used by students when selecting and MBA programme. If the services mix was not used in the same way for business school selection as other service sector organisations, could there be a different underlying framework?

A single cross sectional study of over 500 newly registered MBA students was undertaken to measure their attitudes and the importance of various marketing tools they were exposed to in the selection of the business school at which they were currently enrolled. Self completion questionnaires were distributed to the 12 state subsidised business schools in South Africa. In all but one case, the course director of the university’s MBA programme distributed the questionnaire (with a self addressed envelop) during one of the classes in the first month of the new academic year. At the Graduate School of Business (University of Cape Town) the researcher distributed questionnaires to MBA students entering or leaving the business school.

In all 1,450 questionnaires were distributed either through the course director or personally; a response rate of 35 per cent was achieved, which was considered satisfactory for a self completion questionnaire where response rates of 15 per cent are common (Malhotra and Birks, 2006).

A highly structured questionnaire was developed, making extensive use of 5 point Likert scales to measure attitudes towards 25 different marketing tools covering all the main elements of the traditional services marketing mix. A standard range of demographic factors and motivations were also measured. Cronbach’s alpha was used to determine the extent to which the Likert scales employed produced consistent results if measures were taken repeatedly. Co-efficients over 0.7 are considered acceptable, with coefficients greater than 0.8 considered good (Malhotra and Birks, 2006). The 25 marketing items measured in this survey had a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.904. Item-to-total correlations were also used to identify any variable that may not be consistent with the other variables measured. In this study, all items had a significant correlation with the total, indicating high levels of internal consistency.

### Survey results

Factor analysis is an interdependence technique that is commonly used to identify the underlying dimensions (or factors) that explain the correlation between any number of interrelated variables being measured. In this study, factor analysis was used to determine the underlying relationships or structure between the 25 marketing tools that were rated by MBA students in terms of the importance in selecting a business school at which to register. As a data reduction technique factor analysis is used to reduce a large number of variables, many of which might be highly correlated to each other, into a fewer number of factors which would be more manageable for analysis.

Principal components factor analysis will group those variables that are highly correlated into the same independent factor. This grouping of similar tools creates a new but reduced number of variables that were used in the development of the new marketing mix for business schools.

Eigen values (or the latent root) is widely used to determine the number of factors that should be created. The eigen value is the amount of variance accounted for by the factor. In factor analysis, a standard cut-off requires an eigen value of 1.0. By selecting an eigen value of 1.0, each factor created will account for not less than the variance of one single variable. Effectively, only factors having an eigen value greater than 1.0 are considered significant. According to Hair *et al.* (1998), using eigen values to determine the number of factors is most reliable when there are over 20 variables, as is the case in this study. For this reason, the eigen value method was employed, resulting in a seven factor solution which accounted for 61.3 per cent of the variance.

Using principal components for extraction of the factors, with varimax rotation, seven factors were derived as shown in Table I. The 7P business school marketing mix and the variables that constitute each element of the mix are illustrated in Figure 1.

### The 7P business school marketing mix

The names for the seven factors were intuitively developed, based on the appropriateness of the label in representing the variables that were included in the factor. Given that variables with the highest loadings in that factor are considered more important, these had the greatest influence in the selection of the factor name. For example, in this factor solution, the promotion factor was named this on the basis of variables measuring advertising, publicity and electronic media communications being included in the factor. While the price label came from the “arrangements for tuition fee payment” and “tuition fees” items that made up the factor.

### Premiums

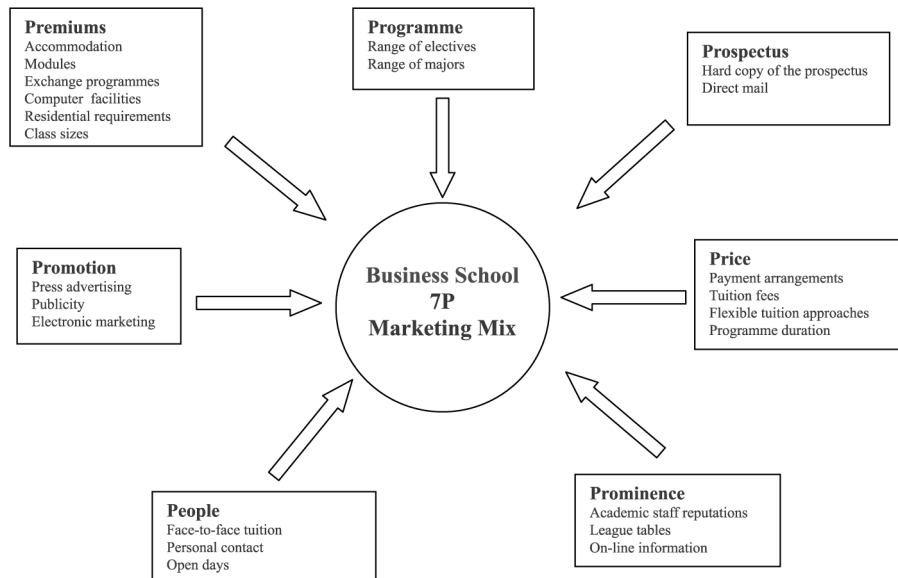
Premiums are those things that act as an incentive or something that adds special value to an offering. The premiums factor here is made up of seven somewhat unrelated tools that are seen to add value to the MBA offering in the eyes of the prospective MBA student. This factor was made up of “Availability of on-campus accommodation” (loading = 0.732), the “total number of credits for the degree” (loading = 0.568), “International student exchange opportunities” (loading = 0.565), “the racial diversity of the students enrolled on the degree” (loading = 0.522), the “residential requirements of the degree” (loading = 0.520), and the “size of MBA classes” (loading = 0.414). A Cronbach’s alpha of 0.856 suggests a very robust factor.

Variable	Marketing tool factors						
	Premium	Prominence	Promotion	Price	Programme	Prospectus	People
Availability of on-campus accommodation	0.732	0.035	0.179	0.054	-0.011	0.151	0.010
Total number of credits for the degree	0.568	0.079	0.267	0.281	0.228	0.209	0.195
International student exchange opportunities provided	0.565	0.412	0.266	-0.022	0.135	-0.089	0.151
Availability of computer laboratories	0.522	0.334	0.081	0.206	0.134	-0.018	0.328
The racial diversity of the students in the degree	0.520	0.168	0.057	0.151	0.235	0.310	0.138
The residential requirements of the programme	0.514	0.040	0.257	0.347	-0.019	0.196	-0.116
The size of the MBA classes	0.414	0.462	0.071	0.127	0.221	0.178	0.188
The reputation of academic staff	-0.003	0.758	0.125	0.045	-0.052	0.247	0.179
Reviews such as the "Best MBA report" or "MBA Survey"	0.290	0.711	0.096	0.175	0.098	-0.080	-0.004
Information on the institution's web site	0.029	0.566	0.226	0.229	0.236	0.268	0.018
Advertising in the local press	0.114	0.052	0.805	0.067	0.062	0.059	0.077
Publicity you saw for academic staff research	0.214	0.312	0.657	0.022	0.255	0.034	0.087
Electronic media marketing communications	0.367	0.294	0.497	0.258	0.127	0.214	0.055
Availability of financial aid <sup>a</sup>	0.236	0.065	0.452	0.194	-0.106	0.229	0.323
The flexibility of payment arrangements of tuition fees	0.314	0.1171	0.174	0.737	0.100	0.078	0.057
The tuition fees of the MBA	0.290	0.203	0.045	0.725	0.016	0.093	-0.094
The flexible tuition approach	-0.362	0.013	0.135	0.577	0.283	-0.016	0.205
The duration of the programme	0.297	0.189	-0.171	0.409	-0.098	0.469	0.222
The range of electives in the degree	0.111	0.198	0.080	0.013	0.811	0.145	0.033
The choice of "majors" in the degree	0.121	0.009	0.130	0.166	0.791	0.267	0.094
The MBA prospectus	0.147	0.099	0.086	-0.017	0.246	0.734	0.069
Direct mail received	0.125	0.141	0.247	0.154	0.286	0.606	-0.002
Providing face-to-face tuition where I live	0.004	0.064	0.176	-0.075	0.018	0.155	0.806
Personal contact with MBA graduates	0.349	0.300	-0.126	0.171	0.227	-0.213	0.485
Open days and information evenings I attended	0.375	0.166	0.308	0.172	0.204	0.039	0.431
Eigen value	7.789	1.622	1.425	1.294	1.143	1.047	1.000
Percent of variance	31.2	6.5	5.7	4.2	4.6	4.2	4.0
Cumulative percent of variance	31.2	37.6	43.3	48.5	53.1	57.3	61.3

**Notes:** Extraction method: Principal components; Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization; <sup>a</sup> Excluded from factor naming as communality is less than 50 per cent; figures in italics highlight which variables are in which factor

**Table I.**  
Factors of marketing tools employed by business schools





**Figure 1.**  
The business school 7P marketing mix

### Prominence

Universities have been using their image for student recruitment for years and this factor confirms its importance. The prominence factor is dominated by the reputation of the academic staff (loading = 0.758) and the university through league tables or press reviews (loading = 0.711). The inclusion of the third variable, the institution's web site (loading = 0.566), is less clear. One can merely hypothesise that the content and sophistication of an institution's website might be more closely related to a business school's reputation and status, particularly as editorial such as financial press league tables could be quickly added to the web site, as could updates on research output and new staff appointments.

Like the premium factor, the prominence factor is extremely robust, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.761 and item-to-total correlation coefficients all exceeding 0.7.

### Promotion

Business school marketing communications is split into two areas, that of traditional media promotions and direct mail promotions. The traditional areas of press advertising (loading = 0.805), publicity (loading = 0.657) and electronic media (loading = 0.497) form the promotions element of the business school marketing mix, while prospectuses and brochures are loaded into their own factor. As with other elements of the business school mix Cronbach's alpha is acceptable at 0.829 and item-to-total correlations greater than 0.75 indicate high levels of reliability for the promotions element.

### Prospectus

The two dominant elements of the prospectus factor are direct mail related promotions; that of the prospectus (loading = 0.734) and direct mail from the university

(loading = 0.606). The inclusion of the third variable in the factor is unclear, 'the duration of the course' (loading = 0.469). When split half validity tests were undertaken, the programme duration variable was placed in two different factors, while the prospectus and direct mail variables always remained paired. Coupled with the low item-to-total correlation with the "programme duration" variable, this does present a case for its exclusion from the factor and possible inclusion in the programme element. In spite of the unsatisfactory placement of the "programme duration" variable a Cronbach's alpha of 0.772 does suggest a valid factor.

### Price

The price element of the business school marketing mix is dominated by the flexibility of the payment of tuition fees (loading = 0.737) and the tuition fees of the MBA degree (0.725). The third variable in this factor (which also had a relatively low item to total correlation of 0.564) was the flexibility of the tuition approach. While not directly linked to fees, it may be opportunity cost related, where students are "paying the price" of giving up work to study full-time, or family and social contacts to study a part-time MBA degree. In spite of the lower loading and item to total score of this variable the factor as a whole has high levels of reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.800.

### Programme

Just two variables made up this factor and both are very closely related to what would be the product element of the services mix; the range of electives in the degree (loading = 0.811) and the choice of majors (loading = 0.791). The Cronbach's alpha is at an acceptable level of 0.895 and an item-to-total correlation coefficient of 0.9.

### People

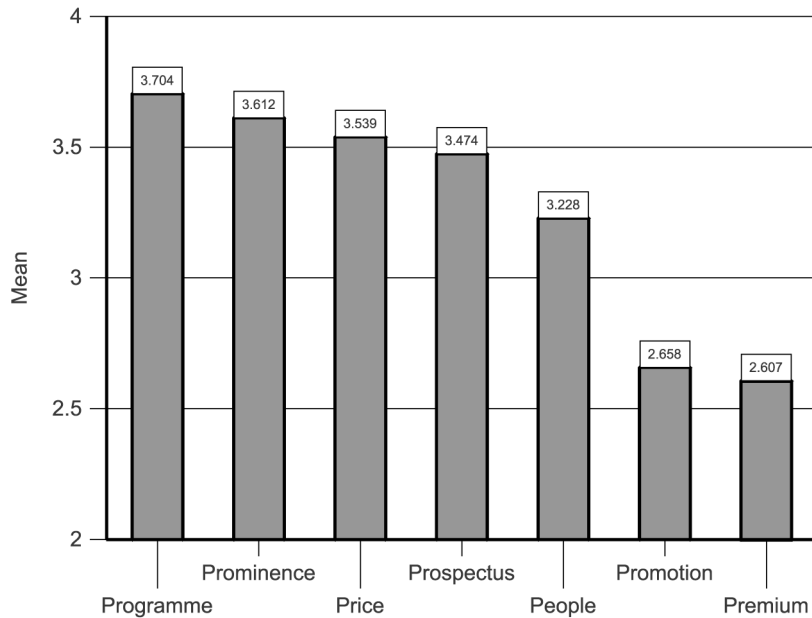
This factor is not as similar as one would expect for the people element of the services sector. In the case of the business school marketing mix, it includes "providing face-to-face tuition where I live" (loading = 0.806), "personal contact with MBA graduates" (loading = 0.485) and "open days and information evenings" (loading = 0.413). With the exception of possibly contact with MBA graduates (or alumni), the other two variables would have been found in other elements of the services mix, providing face-to-face tuition would perhaps fit more soundly into the place element of the services mix and open days in promotions. In spite of this possible difference, the factor appears to be valid with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.735.

### Analysis

A very robust factor solution has been developed with high Cronbach's alpha scores for all the factors. The underlying structure of MBA marketing needs to now be linked to how important each of the factors are in the eyes of MBA students who have recently gone through the process of selecting a business school at which to register. Figure 2 shows how important each element of the business school marketing mix was in the students selection process.

Five of the seven elements of the business school marketing mix had scores greater than the mid-point on a five-point Likert scale; programme (mean = 3.7; SD = 0.96), prominence (mean = 3.6; SD = 0.93), price (mean = 3.53; SD = 0.93), prospectus (mean = 3.5; SD = 0.85), and people (mean = 3.2, SD = 0.94). While the remaining





**Figure 2.**  
Importance of each  
element of the business  
school marketing mix

two elements were considerably less important, promotion (mean = 2.6; SD = 0.96) and premiums (mean = 2.6; SD = 0.91), business schools should be careful to ensure that these items are indeed catered for. It may well be that accommodation for some students particularly those studying part-time might not be an important aspect; however, this can not be said for all students. Similarly, some variables in the premiums factor might be considered “a given” at university – for example, not offering students access to a computer lab, would come as a surprise to many students and was seen as critically important to some students in their selection process (Price *et al.*, 2003).

The items that made up the programme element of the mix were found to be most important by numerous researchers (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006; Price *et al.* 2003; Maringe and Foskett, 2002; Ivy, 2001; BMRB as cited Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003). The level of importance of the programme element is self evident – not offering the right degree programmes, with appropriate curricula to prospective students is unlikely to attract students to register.

Prominence was measured as “Good teaching reputation” by Price *et al.* (2003) and was the fourth most important tool out of 87 items measured. The aspect of institutional image was highly rated in a number of studies (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006; Maringe and Foskett, 2002; Ivy, 2001; Lin, 1999). Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) found that “educational standard/recognised qualifications world wide” was their most highly ranked variable.

The pricing element of the marketing mix at a post graduate level has always been of importance in a student’s decision to return to full-time study. Cubillo *et al.* (2006) found that future earnings also played an important role in a prospective student’s

personal reasons for returning to full-time education. BMRB (as cited Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003) found that course fees were the second most highly rated item.

While electronic media promotions, public relations and word of mouth are reported on by researchers (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003; Ivy, 2001), the specific aspects of printed promotional material is less commonly raised. Maringe and Foskett (2002) found in a survey of 7 Southern African universities that brochures and pamphlets were an integral part of all their marketing communications. While there has been considerable growth in the role of the internet in accessing information about universities and the programmes that they offer, printed materials mailed to or collected by students remains an important tool in the marketing armoury and considerably more so than the traditional forms of promotion (Nicholls *et al.*, 1995).

The people element of the new higher education mix excluded the obvious items of academic staff and other students at the university and was dominated by students wanting face-to-face tuition. Personal contact with graduates and open days, while having a somewhat more promotions focus, did however suggest that getting advice from experts and/or alumni assisted in their decision making process. This was supported by findings of Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) and Cubillo *et al.* (2006).

The "catch-all" element premiums was least important amongst MBA students. Given that these respondents will all have had some working experience and will be older than undergraduates (that dominate most universities enrolment), the low importance of some of the items which make up this tool could be expected. Accommodation in this study was of little importance, however, Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) and Price *et al.* (2003) found that for undergraduate and international students accommodation was a very important aspect in influencing student choice.

### Conclusions

The findings of this research suggest that the traditional 4-, 5- and indeed 7P marketing services marketing mix may not be the best way to approach the marketing of MBA programmes in South Africa. Using principal components factor analysis on 25 commonly use marketing tools indicates that four new distinctive and independent elements exist along with three elements from the traditional marketing mix.

The seven factor solution accounted for over 60 per cent of the variance, and by using split half approaches to test validity and Cronbach's alpha and item-to-total correlations to test reliability, the solution was robust.

The new programme element of the new marketing mix was made up of curriculum related aspects of the MBA degree and was the most important element of the marketing mix. Prominence of the degree was the second most important element. This factor was dominated by academic staff reputations, position on league tables or MBA reviews in the popular press. The traditional promotions element of the marketing mix was split into two areas, standard mass media advertising, (which has stayed as promotion in this MBA marketing mix) and hard copy promotional materials, such as the university prospectus and direct mail posted to prospective students, called prospectus in the MBA marketing mix.

The price element of the mix is unchanged from the traditional mix. However, the people element has had a small modification, with face-to-face teaching being included along with personal contact with graduates and open day attendance. The final element of the new marketing mix is called premiums. This is a diverse element of the

mix, which included accommodation, the number of modules in the degree, student exchange programmes, university computer facilities and class sizes. While this element was considered the least important of the marketing tools, not offering some of these items could seriously damage the recruitment prospects of a business school. Indeed some items would be considered a standard offering of a university and expected by a student without further consideration or evaluation.

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### Further reading

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