



Mind the gap

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The relevance of marketing education to marketing practice

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to review the debate on the purpose, focus and necessity of UK undergraduate marketing education.

Design/methodology/approach – Assumptions in this debate are challenged by the collection and analysis of interview data from practitioners, alongside additional data from UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in respect of their current marketing programmes.

Findings – The results indicate that there is a large degree of commonality between the offerings at UK HEIs, and that some significant gaps between the teaching offered by the academy, and the knowledge and abilities required by practitioners do exist.

Research limitations/implications – The data sets have limitations of depth and scope. Further research is needed in which the details of marketing education and the requirements of marketing practice are examined more closely, and at levels other than undergraduate, and in countries other than the UK.

Practical implications – This paper should be of interest to marketing programme managers, and also to marketing module co-ordinators as a basis on which to consider the future development of their educational practices.

Originality/value – The collation of data about marketing modules offered by UK HEIs will be of interest to most marketing teachers. Further value will be obtained if this paper is used as part of the re-engineering of a marketing programme.

Keywords Marketing, Education, Curricula, Higher education, United Kingdom

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

What are the aims of this paper? They are to move towards answers to the following questions:

- What is the state of play in regard to the debate on the purpose, function and necessity of undergraduate marketing education?
- Assumptions are often made about what subjects form the core of the marketing curriculum. Are these assumptions valid? What modules are commonly offered to UK undergraduates on marketing programmes?
- Does the mix of marketing modules/knowledge areas produce marketing graduates capable of being competent marketing practitioners?



Our first aim is met by our literature review, which examines previous work on the gap that is perceived to exist between what marketing students are taught by marketing academics, and what marketing practitioners would like them to know (and be able to do) when they join organisations as new graduates. Building on this, the second and third research objectives are met by our presentation and analysis of two sets of data – one from a series of interviews with practitioners in which they reveal what knowledge and skills they would like marketing graduates to possess, and another set of compiled information from UK HEIs outlining what current undergraduate marketing students are taught on their marketing programmes.

After presenting our findings, we conclude by making suggestions for changes to the UK marketing curriculum and call for more in-depth and detailed work in several specific areas of crucial importance to the health of marketing education, these being; the processes by which marketing modules and programmes are designed, the evolutionary pressures on them, the differences between undergraduate, postgraduate and post-experience marketing education, and the differing international cultures and structures of marketing education.

Marketing education and marketing practice

The relationship between the marketing education that is provided by the marketing academy and the world of marketing practice is neither simple nor well-defined. We look at the debate surrounding the purposes of university-level marketing education, in particular the question of whether marketing education should be narrowly designed to meet employers' perceived needs, or should be designed with a broader scope allowing of general, liberal educational aims as well as a narrow "employability" agenda. This debate is current and ongoing in the USA (Narayandas *et al.*, 1998; Shuptrine and Willenborg, 1998; Wilson, 1998), France (Kumar and Usumier, 2001), the UK (Garneau and Brennan, 1999), and across other countries and regions (Howard and Ryans, 1993; Howard *et al.*, 1991). In the UK, Garneau and Brennan (1999) investigated the views of three stake-holder groups: employers, lecturers, and students. They detected a relatively narrow perspective among employers, with an emphasis on generic skills (e.g. numeracy, literacy) and attitudes (e.g. punctuality) and least emphasis on scientific and general knowledge. Students, too, demonstrated largely instrumental attitudes towards marketing education. Academic staff had a broader view, agreeing that generic skills and practical knowledge were important, but also aspiring to provide an "education for life" rather than simply an "education for work". Similar findings were reported by Shuptrine and Willenborg (1998) in the USA. Interestingly, Howard and Ryans (1993) and Howard *et al.* (1991) found that that marketing educators in Europe and the Pacific Rim emphasized the role of marketing theory in marketing education more than American marketing educators.

Coates and Koerner (1996) conducted a study of the alumni of a British BA in Business Studies program, in order to establish what practicing managers with direct experience of undergraduate business education thought the business curriculum should comprise. Their respondents argued that too much time was devoted to behavioral science, sociology and psychology, a result which echoed by the opinions of 256 senior marketers studied by Palmer and Millier (2000). Clearly, one cogent point of view that emerges from the literature is that marketing education should primarily aim to prepare students for marketing careers and that this requires an explicit focus on

marketing knowledge and skills, rather than a broader education in the behavioral sciences. Is this reflected in UK marketing education programmes?

Other researchers have sounded a note of caution. Mason (1990) argued for more liberal marketing education, to include more attention to alternative ways of looking at the world, creative problem solving, ethics and qualitative analysis. Mason (1990, p. 15) noted that “as people climb the corporate ladder, qualitative analysis becomes more important while quantitative analysis remains the same”. Several other authors have argued against too narrow a definition of the university marketing curriculum (Celuch and Slama, 1998; Kennedy *et al.*, 2001; Ramocki, 1996; Titus, 2000).

Overall, in both research and education, marketing academics face a challenge that can be more easily stated than solved. It is this: how can marketing academics get closer to, and contribute to, the world of marketing practice, and yet maintain sufficient independence and objectivity so as to retain the fundamental integrity that defines their unique contribution to knowledge production and dissemination? Too close, and research becomes consultancy, students become trainees. Too distant, and marketing education becomes irrelevant, students learn nothing of value to their future careers. We address these challenges in the following sections of the paper.

Method

Concerned about the relevance and competitiveness of its undergraduate curriculum, the Marketing Department of the University of Strathclyde commissioned a study of comparative offerings at other UK HEIs. The aim of the study was to gather data on the existing set of undergraduate marketing modules in Britain, and to compare this with the expectations and requirements of leading marketing practitioners, academics and alumni. The exploratory nature of the research meant that the research design was characterised by flexibility and plurality, the scope of which was to identify trends and generate substantive understanding, which might be significant in the wider context.

Additional data was obtained through a series of in-depth interviews, conducted with practitioners from 15 companies in and around Glasgow, selected with the aim of achieving a representative cross-section of companies across different industries, business to business and business to consumer markets, and both services and manufacturing sectors. Firms to be approached were selected from a list compiled from previously existing contacts/relationships and sources developed by professional bodies (CIM) and governmental agencies. These interviews were not part of our research, but rather part of a larger (still ongoing) project on “Marketing in a Smart Successful Scotland” which is being undertaken on behalf of Scottish Enterprise. This research project has eight key themes, three of which were directly relevant to our aims, and we feel this justifies the “borrowing” of this data set. These three themes were; the perception of marketing within the organisation, the types of marketing that were considered important and, most significantly for this study, the skills marketing graduates do or do not bring to the organisation.

The interviews, all lasting approximately one-and-a-half hours, were carried out at the company premises with either senior directors or heads of marketing, and were recorded and professionally transcribed in their entirety. We applied content analysis (Holsti, 1969; Harwood and Garry, 2003) to the transcripts.

The sample of universities included in the study were chosen by using the UCAS (2004) web site (www.ucas.com/) to cross reference universities offering marketing degrees at undergraduate level with the “top 50 Universities” as proposed by the University Guide for Business and Management Studies 2004, produced by Guardian Education (2004). University league tables have been widely criticised, and research findings into the measures used by compilers have cast some doubts on the validity of the tables, from both technical and conceptual perspectives (Yorke, 1997). However, as a first cut analysis, it was deemed to be a satisfactory method of selecting institutions to examine. To offset the somewhat arbitrary nature of the selection method, additional universities were also examined on the basis of prior knowledge of key institutions in the marketing field, and those against whom Strathclyde competes regionally. A total of 28 universities were eventually included in the study. Information on the modules offered by the undergraduate programmes – excluding honours years (England and Wales, year three; Scotland, year four) – was usually obtained through the departmental web site of the various departments. Where this was not possible, the information was acquired via e-mail or telephone. The data was subsequently entered into MS Excel for analysis.

We now present our findings, with the themes emergent from the interviews first, followed by the results of the programme content analysis.

Themes emergent from the interviews

Several clear points came out of the interviews with practitioners. There was near unanimity with the view that students had a reasonable understanding of core knowledge-based marketing. Respondents were more critical of the graduate’s writing skills – documents to be seen by higher levels of management and clients had to be checked for basic spelling mistakes. Graduates were perceived as having a poor understanding of the basics of negotiation and were believed to be naïve with regard to the concept of profit and other business imperatives:

I think to be honest my experience with the marketing graduates that I’ve worked with, I think that they’ve been relatively lightweight in terms of their commercial experience, commercial awareness and financial awareness, very, very much so. I mean when I moved into my European role, we had a marketing function of seven and we grew that to 15, and the major thing that I would say is that virtually none of them, with a few exceptions, knew one end of a pound note from the other.

A clear majority of the respondents took the view that if a candidate held a marketing degree, it provided a good starting point and it then came to how that individual’s personality would fit in with the existing personnel in the company. Interestingly, only one respondent indicated that he was influenced by the reputation of the university from which the candidate had graduated.

None of the respondents expected candidates to have built up a level of experience in the real world but most stated that, *ceteris paribus*, they would prefer to manage/work with a graduate who had completed a sandwich degree programme (involving an industrial placement with a company) over other candidates. Respondents generally agreed that it took a graduate two years to “bed in” with the company before they proved to be of real value. One respondent addressed this issue by making the following comment:

We get them (graduates) onto either running small discrete projects themselves, which isn't going to make or break the bank, or we get them working alongside people and supporting people who are running mainline projects, and I think over a period of time in terms of our induction, we need to get people thinking about making money. They don't come with that natural outlook, and that's not because they are overly theoretical, it's just because they've never been exposed to having to do it, they have no reference points.

The format and structure of these interviews, and the relatively small number of respondents does not allow us to comment on any differences perceived in the ability of recent marketing graduates to operate in different sectors or roles – we have not determined if graduates were perceived as being more suited to end-user orientated firms rather than in a business-to-business context, or if graduates are perceived to perform better in certain areas of marketing activity – market research as opposed to sales/force management. As exceptions to this, our interviewees were more convinced of the abilities of graduates in respect of the “glamorous” marketing activities such as advertising and branding, but less so in regard to activities of equal or greater importance, but lower sex-appeal – such as direct marketing.

The analysis of programme content

Table I lists the modules currently offered by the 28 institutions that formed our sample. Clearly, there are more than 21 names in use as module titles, but these have been grouped by the most common term. For example, “marketing introduction” “fundamentals of marketing” and “marketing” are all grouped under the label “principles of marketing”. In some cases these groupings were obvious and close, in other cases less so – “simulation/project/consultancy” covers a relatively wide spread of classes with a common theme of teamwork on some real or pseudo-real project. The row “number of modules offered” includes three categories not tabulated – modules which could not be conveniently grouped under a heading and only appeared once (arts marketing, health and leisure marketing), second or third modules which would duplicate entries in the same group at the same institution (retailing incorporates advanced retailing and retail store environment) and “non-marketing” modules such as HRM, or law.

Arbitrarily, the module groups have been divided into four sets. We label those offered at more than three-quarters of the institutions “core” marketing modules – although note that no one module was offered by all 28 members of the sample. Those offered by more than half but less than 75 per cent are labelled “standard” those between one quarter and one half as “peripheral” and those less than 25 per cent but offered by at least four institutions as “specialist” modules.

The “core” group of modules consists of four groups which the titles suggest are pretty tight/consistent. “principles of marketing” comes in second, surprisingly beaten by “strategic marketing”. The other pair making up the set of four modules which are most commonly taught are “marketing communications” and “marketing research”. That “principals” and “research” rest here should come as no surprise. If an institution is going to deliver marketing modules, the obvious place to start is with a foundation that will attract students from across departments – inside or outside the business faculty. Much the same can be said for “research”; most institutions being keen to give many of their students a basic grounding in the collection and analysis of data. “strategic marketing” includes a sub-group “marketing management”. Again, this was

Table I.
Marketing modules
offered by UK
institutions

	University of										Oxford				
	Strathclyde	Stirling	Caledonian	Heriot Watt	Robert Gordon	Lancaster	Aston	Manchester Metropolitan	Hull	Warwick	Middlesex	DeMontfort	Hertfordshire	Brookes	Bradford
Institutional ranking	19	63	111	47	62	15	9	36	60	2	42	35	20	21	22
Number of modules offered	12	12	18	9	12	11	7	15	8	4	18	15	18	12	13
<i>Module group</i>															
Strategic marketing	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Principles of marketing	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Marketing research	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Marketing communications	x	x	x	x		x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
International marketing	x	x	x	x		x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Consumer behaviour	x	x	x		x	x		x	x		x	x	x	x	x
Product/brand marketing	x	x	x		x	x		x			x	x	x	x	x
Services marketing	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	x
Retail marketing	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	x
B2B marketing				x	x	x	x				x	x	x	x	x
E-marketing				x	x						x	x	x		
Contemporary marketing issues	x		x					x					x	x	
Small business marketing	x		x		x			x					x		x
Supply chain/logistics		x						x			x			x	
Simulation/project/consultancy						x		x			x	x	x		
Direct marketing		x				x		x			x	x	x		x
Relationship marketing/CRM	x				x			x				x			
Public relations			x		x				x						
Sales management					x						x				
Marketing ethics			x												
Creativity			x					x							
Non-marketing modules		O	O					L			L	L	L		H

(continued)

	Keele	Kent	Glamorgan	Derby	L'pool Hope University College	Ulster University	University of Central England	University of Bradford	London Metropolitan	Liverpool John Moores	University of Chester	University of Sunderland	Sheffield Hallam	Count (28)	Per cent
Institutional ranking	25	31	33	37	38	40	42	45	46	43	41	48	47		
Number of modules offered	11	12	12	11	11	12	17	9	15	19	8	14	16		
<i>Module group</i>															
Strategic marketing	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	27	96
Principles of marketing	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	26	93
Marketing research	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	26	93
Marketing communications	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	25	89
International marketing		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	21	75
Consumer behaviour			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	20	71
Product/brand marketing				x	x		x	x	x	x	x		x	16	57
Services marketing		x		x		x	x		x	x		x		15	54
Retail marketing		x		x		x	x		x	x		x		15	54
B2B marketing		x		x		x	x		x	x		x		15	54
E-marketing			x	x		x	x		x	x		x		14	50
Contemporary marketing issues			x			x			x	x		x		12	43
Small business marketing		x	x			x			x	x		x		10	36
Supply chain/logistics			x				x					x		9	32
Simulation/project/consultancy				x					x			x		9	32
Direct marketing					x							x		8	29
Relationship marketing/CRM							x							5	18
Public relations									x					5	18
Sales management						x				x			x	5	18
Marketing ethics		x			x		x							5	18
Creativity						x								4	14
Non-marketing modules	HRM	L	H		H, L	F	F	H, L	H, L	H, L		H, L	F, L		

Notes: L – law; H – HRM; F – finance; O – other

Table I.

almost always offered as an advanced companion to the introductory marketing module. Of the four core modules, the only slight surprise is “marketing communications” coming in fourth. “communications” is offered 1.5 times as often as “branding” and nearly five times as often as “ethics”.

The largest group, that of “standard” offerings has seven constituents. “consumer behaviour” is perhaps a surprising omission from the “core” set – is “communications” really more essential than a fuller/deeper understanding of consumer behaviour? With international students becoming ever more important at many HE institutions it is not surprising that “international marketing” is so prevalent. “product” and “brand” modules are also very common and with “retailing” perhaps reflect a bias towards end-user “high street” marketing. As services continue to increase their share of GDP, it seems very reasonable that “services marketing” is another common offering. Anecdotal evidence and personal experience suggests that “B2B” remains relatively unfashionable and unpopular amongst students, but is regularly offered by staff convinced of its importance in the curriculum.

We do not mean to be condescending in describing the third set of modules as “peripheral”. Instead we wish to draw attention to the fact that these are very specific modules quite rarely offered and are almost certainly optional – for example, “small business marketing” and “supply chain/logistics”. Only “contemporary issues” could be said to have any chance of attracting a wide range of students or of being a compulsory element of the programme. “Direct marketing” is a subject that practitioners at least would like to see brought into the mainstream.

“Marketing ethics” is offered by less than one in five of these institutions. This is surely a cause for concern. The other “specialist” modules groupings have members with a less tightly grouped set of names than the core. Many would argue about the relationship between RM and CRM, but here they are grouped together. “Sales management” is another very vocational subject – do marketing academics and students feel they are above such trenches? We suspect that longitudinal data would reveal “PR” to be moving up the charts – anecdotal evidence would suggest that it is very popular at the institutions where it is offered.

A few further comments on the modules not tabulated for one of the three reasons given above. Some courses were not natural partners with any other offerings – “Introduction to fashion marketing” “political marketing” and “events management” for example. We assume these to be highly specialist offerings delivered by staff with personal experience of these industries and/or research interests in these areas.

Duplicate modules repeated or narrowed topics covered by other groups for which that institution already qualified. The last category – that of “non-marketing” modules had three sub groups. The first two – and largest – of these were courses in HRM or law, with a smaller accountancy grouping. We presume these came out quite strongly because of the common practice of allowing and even encouraging a wide range of subjects in the first and second year of a degree programme.

Conclusions and research agenda

Our interviews with practitioners clearly identify deficiencies in the area of practical skills. Graduates come to their first job with a reasonably strong theoretical knowledge of principles and frameworks but do not fully comprehend business imperatives. Our discussions with practitioners further suggest that greater levels of cooperation and

consultation should take place between academic institutions and employers in order to achieve a tighter balance between theoretical knowledge and vocational skills and aptitudes.

Our findings also suggest that there is a “disconnect” between the output of academics, in the form of graduates of marketing teaching, and the views of employers. In many ways it amplifies the findings of McKenzie *et al.* (2002) who found that very few practitioners had heard of the traditional academic marketing journals, and even fewer expected to find anything of “practical use” in them. If an institution prides itself on teaching informed by such research, is that pride justified?

What predictions do we make about trends in UK marketing education? In terms of subject matter, we would expect the core offering to remain quite stable. Classes we would expect to see increase in number include public relations[1] and direct marketing/CRM. Which topics will diminish as separate teaching entities? We predict that e-marketing and RM will be subsumed/integrated into the wider curricula in the medium term. What of subjects that are inarguably of vocational relevance but are not popular with students – B2B marketing, supply-chain management or any class with a significant amount of algebra – do they have a future in departments that need the revenues generated by “bums on seats”? This could become a serious issue.

We call for further research on this and related topics. Here are some additions to the research agenda in respect of the teaching and learning of marketing, important questions and issues that the academy should address.

Firstly, our research is exploratory, but there is a strong suspicion (based on observations of our own behaviour, and that of colleagues in several other marketing departments) that many modules/programmes are “production led”. By this we mean that marketing academic groups teach what they can, based on staff experience, interests and availability, rather than necessarily preparing graduates for the employment market by a programme. Are we correct? Someone needs to dig deeper to find out. Such a research project, examining the design, evolution, staffing, orientation and content of marketing classes could provide answers to several other important questions. Are departments of marketing addressing the demands by employers, and if so, should they be? Are we instead replicating each other? Do the offerings of pre-92 institutions, with research focussed staff who tend to have little or no professional experience differ in terms of vocationally orientated content from post-92 institutions which tend to have more post-experience staff with a teaching rather than research focus? Is module content/teaching at the postgraduate level equivalent in focus, style and intended outcomes from the corresponding undergraduate module? Should (do) post-experience marketing courses differ from postgraduate courses. The instinct of the reader will be to say that they should, but is this actually the case?

Do practitioners consider it the duty of academics to supply graduates who are “ready made” marketing managers? If organisations require highly trained young marketing managers, why have in-firm marketing graduate training programmes all but disappeared? Has this system of training and knowledge development been replaced, and if so, how effectively? What have been the causes and effects of this? Related to this, we noted that we have not managed to understand if marketing graduates perform (or are perceived to perform) better or worse in certain sectors (B2B vs B2C) or at certain aspects of marketing activity/management. More detail and depth

is needed here, in order that improvements can be targeted and more resources allocated to the areas of greatest weakness.

We recognise that our class-offering data has limitations – such as only having class titles, rather than learning outcomes. Specifically, this data from UKHEI's is a snapshot of a current position, and takes no account of the dynamic nature of evolving programmes or practice. Further, longitudinal, collection of data from these and other institutions would give a clearer understanding of the vector and pace of change in UK. Comparable data collected from North America, Europe and ANZAC/SE Asia institutions would be of immense interest.

To finish, the gaps between practitioner requirements, academic teaching and student interests must be minded very carefully indeed if we are to produce relevant marketing programmes.

Note

1. UCAS lists 251 courses in “public relations” available for 2006 entry. “Marketing” scores 1,476. A recent change in coding scheme prevents analysis of number of students applying (and being accepted) for PR courses.

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