Meeting Stakeholder Needs: A Study Of Marketing Courses

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Abstract

This study investigates whether or not marketing courses are meeting the needs of stakeholders – primarily students and potential employers, as well as accreditation bodies. This is the first stage in an ongoing study, investigating both Marketing and Accounting courses. Both disciplines were investigated because they both offer large foundation units that often feed into other courses, regardless of whether or not students choose to do further marketing and accounting study. Furthermore, accounting graduates require accreditation, while marketing graduates do not at this stage. This paper focuses primarily on Marketing courses, and contributes to an ongoing discussion. In order to develop implications for teaching practice, qualitative interviews were carried out and analysed, developing recommendations for educators.

Introduction

This paper investigates marketing courses and has three main goals overall in order to understand how appropriate our courses are at meeting stakeholder needs. The first goal is to examine if the core skills and curriculum of marketing courses are meeting the needs of key stakeholder groups. Secondly, we plan to identify the preferred core skills and curriculum design of stakeholder groups, which will then be compared to current core skills and curriculum design in both areas to analyse what changes need to be made. Finally, we will discuss what changes need to be made to core skills and curriculum in the business courses we teach.

Objectives and Methodology

It is important to address the relevance to employers in terms of courses in business. Marketing generally offers large foundation units in the first year, and therefore it is appropriate to examine the contribution of both disciplines and the relevance to employers. As this is primarily an exploratory study, qualitative research was utilised in order to develop a greater understanding of issues in business courses. In stage one, the project saw us interview five marketing stakeholders to gain their perceptions. After this stage, the study will investigate the curriculum requirements of external professional bodies. Semi-structured interviews were utilised to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues involved. It is important to note that understanding the opinion of Marketing lecturers is simply the first stage in a series of interviews – other stakeholders will be investigated, including students and employers.

In marketing, stakeholders have differing expectations of students and what skills, learning and knowledge they should have. Some students will only do some units in marketing, as certain stakeholders such as the Australian Institute of Banking and Finance, only require one unit to be studied to meet their professional accreditation requirements. However in the marketing industry itself, many units are required for recognition by employers that a person has the required skills necessary to undertake marketing. Therefore it is important that all
stakeholders feel that students who graduate from a course with a marketing major, or even some marketing study, are able to meet their demands and have a modern, integrative approach to marketing and to being self-sufficient learners in the external environment. For many students who graduate, the ability to know how to learn is an important skill as many will work in organisations where they will be the only marketing professional.

**Relevant areas of Educational Literature**

**Marketing Education**

One of the core concepts behind all marketing is that marketing should be designed to meet the needs, wants and demands of consumers (Kotler et.al. 2004: 8). This is related to the underlying theory in marketing of exchange, which is “the act of obtaining a desired object from someone by offering something in return” (Kotler et.al. 2004: 10). These concepts are also important to many marketing educators, with recent research (O’Brien and Deans 1995; Ackerman, Gross & Perner 2003; Feldman and McNeilly 2002; McCorkle, Alexander et. al. 2003; Smith and DeMichiell 1996) focusing on how marketing educators are meeting the needs of the different stakeholder groups in marketing. Other researchers (Davis, Misra and Auken 2002; Pritchard, Potter and Saccucci 2004) have also considered what makes students more suited to marketing studies than other disciplines and how this should influence curriculum design. For instance Pritchard, Potter and Saccucci (2004) found that those with better quantitative skills tended to choose accounting and finance courses where as those with weaker quantitative skills performed better in marketing and management courses.

The implication from these studies has been that Marketing courses can not be designed using the same curriculum philosophy as those that are used to design accounting and finance courses. Recent criticism (Rotfeld 1997) of marketing courses not being reflective enough of marketing business has meant that stakeholder influence in curriculum design is becoming important in ensuring that industry respects not only the courses being taught but the students who graduate from these courses.

**Higher Education**

The higher education sector is currently undergoing dramatic changes. As one researcher (van der Meer 2004) eloquently puts it:

> “Fundamental changes are taking place in the higher education sectors of the western world. Much has been written about these global changes (Barnett, 1994, 2003; Duke, 2002; Gibbons, 1998; Ramsden, 1998; Scott, 1995). As Barnett (1994) puts it, higher education is changing from a pre-modern to a modern institution; what we are seeing, he says, is the last stage of higher education being brought in from the margins of society (p.3-4).”

Students are becoming customers with recent changes to higher education funding seeing more students than ever paying full fees for courses. As customers students want more of an influence in course design to ensure that they are getting value for money and are employable at the end of their degree. The organisation that funds higher education in Australia, the Federal Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) also expects certain skills from graduates (DEST 2005). The department has established a set of general guidelines required for all graduates. These guidelines were developed after a qualitative study was carried out, analysing the skills required by employers and how graduates rank on these skills. DEST has recently indicated that from 2006 teaching will play a more important role in
allocating funds to universities. As it says in its Learning and Teaching Fund Issues Paper (2004):

“Another important dimension is the way in which funding will be allocated according to performance. Institutions could be benchmarked or ranked; funding could go to every institution which achieved a certain prescribed score, or to the top performers. Results could be compared across institutions for the same year or for each institution across years. In addition, performance could be compared on a whole-of-institution basis or by discipline. Results could be adjusted for the impact of student and course mix on each institution’s crude score, or compared within groupings of similar institutions”.

DEST also mention in the issues paper how there has been no consistent approaches to measuring student outcomes as there is potentially 37 different course and unit measurement tools that could be used (2004: 14) and that it is likely to move to using a Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA) test (2004: 40) at the end of a student’s degree to test how well students perform across 4 key indicators: written communication, critical thinking, problem solving and interpersonal understandings. If this is how funding for teaching performance will be allocated in the future then it is likely that as a stakeholder DEST will have a large influence in how courses are designed.

Some business educators have been concerned that research has suggested that students adopt a surface approach to learning (English, Luckett and Mladenovic 2005). The surface approach to learning has been shown to result in undesirable learning outcomes (Eley 1992). Biggs (1999) discusses a theory of learning that is broad based and empirically sound, that easily translates into practice, and that is readily understandable. Utilising the problem based learning approach (Biggs 1999), we might start to move away from surface approach and move to a higher cognitive level in our first year courses.

In marketing education there has been a large focus on the type and level of communication skills that marketing students develop over their course. Dolnicar and Stern (2003) analysed employers’ expectations of marketing graduates in Australia and found that communication skills were highly regarded, with 99% of respondents indicating that graduates should have good communication skills. Alternatively, Felson (2001) believes that marketing graduates need to improve their networking skills, citing that networking, internships and grades are the most important things a marketing graduate needs to bring to their employer. Middleton and Long (1990) hold that marketing education should be about giving graduates frameworks for them to apply to a particular scenario upon graduation. They believe that students should be given the opportunity to apply their skills into practice throughout their degree, regardless of whether it is in an academic or real business environment. Doffing, a recruiter of marketing graduates (2001, cited in Felson, 2001) believes that it is much more holistic than that, stating, “Passion is much more valuable, particularly at the entry level. It comes down to people skills, the ability to pitch oneself as much as knowing how to do anything. You can learn about print runs, presentations, how to lay out our web sites. But the real question is, do you have a flair, a real joy in what you’re doing?”

This reinforces the importance of communication skills, indicating that many of the more specialised skills can be individually taught by an organisation. Therefore, this research investigates whether or not key stakeholders think it is desirable to move in the direction of curriculum design being focused more on critical and indepth learning, and if so how. If the more cognitive curriculum approach is advocated it is hoped that first year marketing courses
will start to help students develop thinking, reasoning and problem solving skills earlier in their degree program, and help change students attitude to their discipline areas.

Results

Of the 5 marketing academics and professionals spoken to, most agreed that whilst the first year courses were meeting their needs, they were concerned that many students were merely surface learning and not attempting to undertake more critical levels of analysis. One commented that “…the smart were getting smarter but the dumb dumber”. All were happy with the material being covered and the methods of assessment used to test skills and knowledge. One assumption that can be drawn from these observations though is that perhaps smarter students are taken it upon themselves to learn more, feeling restrained by the pace of lectures or the course itself. Often academics don’t recognise that perhaps one reason why intelligent students don’t approach them or give them feedback is that the course itself is not challenging enough or allows them flexibility to learn at a faster speed.

Generally all respondents indicated that they were concerned with the learning of students in the first year level. These students are generally not highly skilled in learning and fall into the rote learning idea, and therefore not really learn the concepts we teach them. Mature age students do tend to show deeper rather than shallow learning, mainly because of the work experiences. The large class sizes at first year level are identified as not being helpful to the learning process. Overall, the respondents felt students need a lot of structure at first year level, as they tend to stop when they get stuck on a particular problem, rather than be creative and look for other sources.

All those who responded in marketing were concerned with the level of dedication shown by first year students to marketing. Many were concerned that marketing is still being seen by students to be an “easy” unit, which then leads to students not studying or working hard enough in the unit and then leading to high fail rates on end of semester assessment items such as assignments and exams. Many commented also how they had noticed the increased demand from students for course resources to be put online, which they felt was nearly spoon feeding the course to students. The marketing professionals felt that perhaps more of an emphasis in first year should be placed on professional skill requirements, such as presentations and report writing, as this would mean by year 3 that students would be familiar with what business expected. According to the respondents, there is a need to structure more open ended type questions so these students can be more creative in their thinking. From this perspective, text book questions need to be improved, as they need to get students to think beyond what they have just read in a chapter. Students in first year tend not to go beyond the text book and thus are limiting there exposure, and don’t get the wider experience they need for a course.

Respondents were asked if students are required to develop thinking, reasoning and problem solving skills earlier in their degree program. Most respondents in both accounting and marketing believe this would change the students’ attitude however a small number of respondents felt it was hard to know if there would be a change, as this is really a student specific response. There are large classes at first year, where there is only a one hour tutorial, so it maybe costly to implement also. One marketing respondent suggested a two hour tutorial once a fortnight, but again this may be difficult to implement due to timetabling and administration issues. All respondents agree it is easier to impart these skills in students as they get more mature. Reasoning skills are difficult to acquire, and at first year level they are hard to teach. The idea of a generic skills course was raised by a few respondents as they
believe it may help students at first year level gain more problem solving and analytical skills that would also be helpful for later study.

Lecturers commented that they generally only have students for one semester and cannot develop a relationship with students in order to track and help develop their self-evaluation skills further. So they might have initial exposure to it, and then have to re-discover it again in the work place a few years down the track. Even if students are good at reflecting at their own performance, they will learn more if they know why it is necessary, and also it depends on how the lecturer uses the information. In sum, most agree that what is gained throughout a degree matters more.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion the finding from the research conducted show that generally the core needs and demands of stakeholder groups are being met in both accounting and marketing courses. However what is emerging is that stakeholders, especially business stakeholders, want courses to change to meet the changing demands of the business environment. For example in marketing there was a clear demand for more practical based skills, such as presentations and report writing, to be taught from first year and in every unit. Other stakeholder groups, such as DEST, are also reflecting this in their requirement for universities in the future to use a GSA test to access funding for teaching and in rewarding teaching excellence. For academics, even though many commented on the lowering of standards in courses, many felt that the courses themselves needed to be continually assessed to ensure that they were meeting stakeholder requirements.

What is unclear though is how the changing university environment will impact upon curriculum design in the future and what stakeholder group will ultimately have the power to decide how courses are designed. The increasing customerisation of the educational experience will also be likely to bring about conflict between disciplines on curriculum design as each discipline tries to satisfy their stakeholder needs. Universities and educators need to be aware of these influences on their curriculum development though to ensure that any negative impacts are minimised and that ultimately the student is given a fulfilling, rewarding and challenging education experience that they continue to use in their own reflective learning in the years to come.
References


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