

## ‘WHAT HAS THIS GOT TO DO WITH MY COURSE?’

### WIDENING HORIZONS AND ENHANCING EMPLOYABILITY OF PR AND MARKETING STUDENTS THROUGH THE INCLUSION OF AN INTERDISCIPLINARY RESOURCES MODULE

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#### Abstract

*The paper examines a collaboration between two academics (in human resource management and accounting and finance) to develop a new module, Managing Resources for PR and Marketing (MRPRaM) for second-year undergraduate students specialising in marketing and public relations (PR). The aim of the module was to widen student horizons by initiating in them an understanding of the cross-functional nature of organisational operations; thus, enhancing their employability. Surveys undertaken before and after delivery established that students with work experience and those devoting more than two hours a week to independent study were more likely to see the module as relevant, and that good teaching was highly valued. Research for future cohorts will be extended to include focus groups in order to gain a deeper insight into student perceptions.*

Keywords: employability, innovation, interdisciplinary study, perceptions, pedagogy

#### Biographies

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#### 1. Introduction

‘In today’s global market place, traditional boundaries between the different disciplines are becoming blurred. Employers expect their recruited graduates to understand how business operates across all functions due to the nature of the real-world business problem’ (Wang and Liu, 2012, p.203).

Thus, the authors were enlisted by course leaders in BA marketing (BAM), BA marketing and advertising management (BAMAM) and BA public relations and communications (BAPRC) who wanted students to learn about functions outside of their specialism in order to enhance their employability and help develop graduate competencies such as ‘influencing and persuading’, ‘critical and analytical thinking’ and ‘the ability to see the bigger picture’ (Azavedo, Apfelthler and Hurst, 2012, p.23).

The official aim of the module was 'to develop an understanding of the role of the finance and human resourcing functions within PR/Marketing organisations and their importance to the effective running and success of such businesses' (Leeds Metropolitan University, 2012, p.3). Therefore, the authors took the key subjects and themes of their specialisms and related them to the industrial context of the marketing and PR industries.

This context was considered imperative. Achieving the module aim would mean students understanding concepts and acquiring competencies, but the academic team sought acceptance: recognition of the module's legitimate place in the curriculum. MRPRaM would be one of only three modules delivered to students that semester. It should not be considered an inappropriate substitute for a domain-specific module, which students would consider to be more instrumental to increasing their expertise and, thus, their arguably narrow perceptions of their own employability.

Both tutors were experienced in teaching non-specialist learners. Both had previously taught in business programmes in the further-education sector and were accustomed to teaching outside of their subject specialism. Therefore, the HR specialist had taught accounting to the required level, and vice versa.

The module, combining the key elements of both disciplines, was first delivered during Semester 1 of 2013/2014 with assessment by examination in December 2013. One hundred and fifty-nine students were enrolled on the module. Delivery consisted of a two-hour lecture followed by a two-hour seminar. Assessment consisted of a two-hour examination with questions based on a pre-seen case study.

## **2. Review of the literature**

The literature search revealed previous studies on interdisciplinary modules that aimed to integrate two subjects (for example, marketing and IT or finance and IT) and research on the teaching of accounting to non-accounting majors. The authors were unable to identify any published papers on the teaching of human resource management (HRM) on an interdisciplinary basis, but arguably some of the generic findings detailed below would be applicable across any function. More significantly, the authors were unable to find any prior research associated with the delivery of a module integrating two disciplines to students studying a third (or arguably fourth) discipline (marketing or PR).

### **2.1. Student perceptions of interdisciplinary courses**

Hossain, Heagy and Mitra (2008) examined the post-delivery perceptions of more than 500 non-accounting students in relation to a compulsory management accounting course. Their study established that students had found the course interesting and acknowledged its 'real world' application and that instructor type (skills of the individual tutor) had been instrumental in this impression. This positive impression was enhanced in those students with significant work experience and in those with higher academic skills and higher aptitudes for learning.

Mann (1987, cited in Hossain, Heagy and Mitra, 2008) recommended initiatives to engage non-accounting students in a compulsory accounting course. These actions included linking the subject with the students' primary area of interest, demonstrating the application of accounting techniques

within the wider organisational context and teaching from the user perspective by demonstrating how managers constantly benefit from accounting techniques.

## **2.2. Student performance**

In a study of two successive student cohorts on a marketing accounting module, Chen et al. (2012) found that success depended on three variables: the extent to which students had worked through tutorial questions and answers, whether they completed the practice exam and the time spent studying. Student feedback was positive, especially from those 'who never thought they could gain command of such material' (p.248).

The findings of Clark and Latschaw (2011) correlate closely with those of the previously cited study in that student effort was found to have a significant effect on performance. In addition, student attendance was found to have an indirect impact on final grade.

## **2.3. Pedagogical challenges**

The issues associated with delivering so-called 'service' subjects were explored by Yang (2009). Issues included the marginalisation of the subjects within the curriculum and its teachers within a programme; the fragmentation of knowledge structure due to too many subjects to cover; and low student motivation, interest and attendance.

## **2.4. Escaping the 'silo'**

In a study of cross-disciplinary education and marketing students, Alden et al. (1991, cited in Athaide and Desai, 2005) suggested that a 'silo' approach to educating resulted in graduating students who were incapable of seeing the bigger picture and insisted on oversimplifying complex business issues. Bowers and Scherpereel (2008) used the same metaphor in citing a 'silo mentality' that results from course content focused on specialised disciplines where students gain technical proficiency but do not learn to share and integrate discipline-specific knowledge. A syllabus reflecting the cross-disciplinary nature of the module and appropriately integrated assessment was considered imperative in changing attitudes and preparing students to function in 'a complex interdisciplinary work environment' (p.225).

## **2.5. Good design and delivery**

Yang (2009, p.604) posited that when these subjects were well designed and deployed, students were offered not just interdisciplinary perspectives but also 'the opportunity for integration of knowledge/skills in the dynamic multifaceted professions and workplaces'. The key to success lay in adopting the 'contextual approach' (Corbin, 2002 cited in Yang, 2009; Allen, 2005) whereby the interdisciplinary subjects were anchored in the major discipline of the students' courses.

## **2.6. Embracing a student-centred approach**

A student-centred approach to teaching and assessment was also considered important with the emphasis on problem-based and inquiry-led learning and the use of case studies. These findings were echoed by Wansi and Liu (2012), who reported on the positive effect of utilising an integrative case-study project to teach finance and information technology to business-school students.

The case-study approach is not novel: in 1950, Calkins suggested that following the development of a firm through the steps of promotion, current financing, expansion and financial difficulty would familiarise students with the problems of an enterprise they might be running or working for at a later date.

## **2.7. The teaching team**

Reviewing an initiative to teach accounting skills to marketing students, Chen et al. (2012) found that the more enthusiastic tutors were with respect to the initiative, the more likely students were to access learning materials and study them early in the semester.

In the Wansi and Liu study (2012), positive results were linked to the close collaboration of academics on the course and a team-teaching approach, defined as 'a model that involves two or more faculty members who collaborate on teaching materials, course activities, and student evaluations' (Zhang and Kheim, 1993, cited in Wansi and Liu, 2012, p.204).

Athaid and Desai (2005) cited benefits for students and academics on an interdisciplinary module. For students, the acceptance of a module outside of their major 'enhances tolerance for ambiguity' (p.240) and challenges them to consider cross-functional issues. For faculty members, the opportunity to provide up-to-date knowledge of other disciplines is offered. Consistent with the findings of Hossain, Heagy and Mitra (2008) and Chen et al. (2012) cited above was the selecting of appropriately qualified instructors.

## **3. Methodology**

The research question was exploratory and explanatory in nature: exploratory in that it provided an incentive to find out 'what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and the assess phenomena in a new light' (Robson, 2002, p.59), and explanatory in nature as a means of 'studying a situation or a problem in order to explain the relationship between variables' (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2008, p.141).

The authors' choice of research methods was primarily influenced by the pragmatic considerations of resource availability and accessibility constraints. In the time available to them the questionnaire survey was not only the most practicable method, but also facilitated the collection of data for quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Thus, primary research comprised three anonymous surveys distributed in class. Broadly based on the themes identified in the literature, two specific surveys devised to explore student attitudes and experiences before and after the course were undertaken during the first and final teaching weeks of the semester. Questions were phrased to facilitate the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the results. Data from these surveys was also supplemented by the findings of the more generic institutional module evaluation survey, undertaken at the end of each semester for every module

delivered at the university. The results were potentially skewed by the fact that to complete the surveys the students had to attend the class and students in attendance, especially toward the end of the module, might have been more likely to be those with positive perceptions of the module.

### **3.1. Pre-module survey**

Eight research questions were formulated to establish previous work and academic experience in accounting and HRM, to establish attitudes toward studying the modules, and to allow for differentiation of students by course. The aim was to identify any relationship between prior student experience and attitudes at the outset of delivery.

### **3.2. Post-module survey**

Eleven questions sought to establish any dependent relationship between prior experience and attitude to study among the three cohorts. An additional aim was to assay any change in perspectives on the rationale and relevance of the module and to identify particular challenges faced by students over the course of the module relative to a student's study record and self-reported attendance levels.

### **3.3. Institutional module evaluation survey**

This was a generic survey undertaken for every module at the end of the semester. It comprised 13 questions on a Likert scale and the opportunity to comment on five areas, all of which were intended to gauge student opinion on the module, course and university.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Pre- and post-module surveys**

The pre-module survey was administered in the first lecture to 99 students comprising 33 BAM students, 36 BAMAM students and 24 BAPRC students. The post-module survey was completed by 119 students comprising 39 BAM students, 46 BAMAM students and 33 BAPRC students.

#### **4.1.1. Concerns**

When students were asked about their main concerns about studying this module, three main issues arose: (1) worries over the perceived mathematical content of the module; (2) concerns over the assessment method; that is, 100% exam; and (3) fears that as the first cohort to take this module they would be 'guinea pigs' and therefore would be affected by any initial problems.

#### **4.1.2. The likelihood of this module being chosen if it had not been compulsory**

Students were more likely to have chosen the module if they had some previous relevant work experience; that is, 42% of those with work experience were either likely or highly likely to have selected the module, compared with 36% of those without work experience.

By the end of the module, 63% of those who had previous relevant work experience were more likely or highly likely to have chosen the module. This is an increase of 21% from the initial survey. The proportion of those without relevant work experience who were more likely or highly likely to have chosen the module dropped by 13% to 23%.

#### **4.1.3. Relevance of the module**

Having studied the module, 74% of the total sample thought the module was highly relevant or had some relevance. However, BAM students (64%) regarded the module as less relevant than BAMAM (83%) and BAPRC students (76%). This includes 61 students who had answered that they were unlikely or highly unlikely to have chosen the module.

#### **4.1.4. Relationship between independent study and perceived relevance**

Forty-five per cent of PRC students claimed to have done at least two hours of independent study a week, compared with 52% of BAMAM students and 51% of BAM students. The amount of independent weekly study carried out by students made little or no difference to the perceived relevance of the module for BAPRC and BAMAM students. Thirty-six per cent of BAPRC students who did less than two hours of study a week felt the module either had some relevance or was highly relevant. This figure was the same for students who did more than two hours per week of independent study. Sixty per cent of BAMAM students who did more than two hours a week of independent study felt the module had some relevance or was highly relevant. This dropped to 58% for students who did less than two hours a week. However, BAM students who did more than two hours of personal study a week were 1.5 times more likely than their less hardworking colleagues to see the module as having some relevance or being highly relevant, with 64% of them selecting these options compared with only 40% of those who did less than two hours a week.

### **4.2. Institutional module evaluation survey**

Student satisfaction was high in eight out of the thirteen areas surveyed, including appropriateness of content, quality of learning resources, staff ability to communicate knowledge, tutor guidance and the organisation of the module, with each of these categories achieving satisfaction scores of over 80%. There were only three areas where satisfaction levels were significantly less than 80% and these were 'The module was relevant' (67%), 'I enjoyed the learning experience' (65%) and 'Overall I was satisfied with the module', which scored 66%. Positive comments generally fell into three main areas: learning resources, tutor support and module organisation.

'The tutor is very helpful as I feel I can ask questions and she will help so I'm able to understand it'

'Support for the assessment has been excellent and every week I have received feedback on the work I have produced which has really helped me develop my learning'

'Learning resources provided by the tutors were helpful'

'The information in the weekly hand outs was helpful and relevant. Practice questions helped my understanding'

'The way in which HR and Finance combined worked well'

'Module well organised and managed; clear and appropriate content for PR degree'

The majority of the few negative comments were about areas over which the tutors had little control; for example, a two-hour lecture slot late in the day, and accounting and HR content. However, several comments did mention the lack of lecture notes. There were very few negative comments linked to the students' initial concerns; that is, perceived mathematical content, 100% exam and the fear that they would be detrimentally affected by being guinea pigs for a new module. In fact, there were no comments at all about the mathematical content in the post-module survey and the comments about the exam were not particularly negative; for example, 'would rather it was less than a 100% exam'. Some even preferred this type of assessment: 'glad it is 100% exam'. Eighty-four per cent of students thought the module was well organised and, despite tutor concerns, no one commented that they felt that they had had a poor experience because this was the first time that the module had run.

## **5. Discussion of the results**

One of the key aims of the module was to broaden the horizons of students so they overcame the 'silo mentality' (Bowers and Scherpereel, 2008). Three-quarters of the students surveyed at the end of the module felt the module was highly relevant or had some relevance in terms of their career aspirations, which indicates that the module team partly achieved their aims. However, BAM students perceived the module to be less relevant than their BAPRC or BAMAM counterparts. This failure to see the relevance of the module may partly account for the relatively lower marks achieved by BAM (mean mark: 45.46) students compared to the BAPRC (mean mark: 52.76%) and BAMAM students (mean mark: 52.37%).

The amount of independent weekly study made very little or no difference to the perceived relevance of the module for BAPRC and BAMAM students. This was not the case for BAM students, where those who did more than two hours a week of independent study were 1.5 more times likely than their less hardworking colleagues to consider the module as highly relevant or as having some relevance.

There appears to be little link between the amount of independent study and overall performance. Only 45% of BAPRC students claimed to do more than two hours of independent study a week, yet on the whole this cohort performed best, achieving a mean mark of 52.76%, which was slightly higher than that of the BAMAM students and more than 7% higher than the mean mark for the BAM students. These findings do not appear to support the conclusions of Clark and Latshaw (2011) and Chen et al. (2012), who stressed the importance of student effort on academic performance.

The pre-module survey indicated that students with some form of related work experience would have been more likely than those without work experience to choose the module if it had been an option. By the end of the module students with relevant work experience were even more likely to have chosen the module, whereas those without relevant work experience were less likely to have chosen the module if it had been optional. This echoes the findings of Hossain, Heagy and Mitra (2008).

The results of the institutional module evaluation survey were very positive in terms of appropriateness of content, learning resources, organisation and tutor communication and guidance, but the scores in the two key areas of relevance and satisfaction were below 80%. This implies that the teaching team needs to review the delivery and content of the module to identify where opportunities exist to increase students' perceptions of its relevance.

## **6. Recommendations**

A significant number of BAM students without work experience failed to see the relevance of the module. Therefore, a consultation with the course leader in addition to additional research (see below) should take place with a view to developing suitable initiatives aiming to change this mindset.

The entire module will be reviewed in order to identify opportunities for improvement and, in particular, opportunities to increase all students' perceptions of its relevance. Mann (1987), cited in Hossain, Heagy and Mitra (2008), suggested several actions that may improve interest and motivation, in particular contextualising the module within the students' primary area of interest. Wansi and Liu (2012) and Calkins (1950) recommended the use of an integrated case study and real-life problems. The use of an evolving integrated case study was discussed by the authors prior to the module delivery. Although the idea was abandoned due to time pressures, it will be implemented for future delivery.

By enhancing this interrelation to and integration with accounting/finance and HR into students' major areas of interest and continuing to teach from the students' viewpoint, the authors aim to demonstrate how knowledge of accounting/finance and HRM may benefit students in their PR, marketing or advertising careers.

Students benefited from knowledgeable, experienced and highly committed instructors. Their feedback on tutor performance was very positive and consistent with the findings of section 2.7. Therefore, if possible, the current small enthusiastic teaching team should be maintained for future delivery.

Some students requested hard copies of lecture notes. Although this may be the norm on some courses, it is contrary to university recommendations on good practice. Lecture slides will continue to be published prior to lectures on X-stream (the university virtual learning environment website), but seminar materials will be issued in one module booklet instead of on a weekly basis.

## **7. Future research**

The advice of Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2008, p.141) is 'to evaluate all possible data collection methods and to choose the most appropriate to your research question(s) and objectives'. The authors' choice of research method was constrained by time and accessibility. The surveys were useful to provide an overall picture of what students on the three courses thought of the module before and after having taken it. However, the use of course-specific focus groups would have generated more in-depth data for the development of effective interventions and, as such, this research method will be implemented for the next cohort delivery in addition to amended versions of the pre- and post-module survey and the institutional module evaluation surveys. It is hoped that this more intensive method will help provide enlightenment on the perspectives of the MAM



students mentioned in section 6 (above) and identify further significant factors; for example, the impact of prior general academic attainment on perceptions and achievement.

Clark and Latshaw (2011) found that attendance had an indirect impact on student performance. Although students were asked to be honest about attendance in the post-module survey, it was impossible to verify their responses. Therefore, the authors will utilise university-collected attendance and performance data to identify any similar correlation between attendance and performance on the module.

The authors consider the project to be of internal value in the future development of the module and in enhancing the student experience and students' perceptions of their own employability. Students in business schools are often required to study interdisciplinary modules and tutors are required to teach them and justify their place in the curriculum. However, published research in this area is not widely available, in particular in modules with HRM content and with respect to an interdisciplinary module in two subject areas being delivered to students of a third. Therefore, it is hoped that this ongoing project will continue to make findings worthy of the attention of a wider, external audience.

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