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Undergraduate Marketing Education in the UK

Abstract: This report summarises and reflects upon a project which was supported by a small grant from the Academy of Marketing Teaching Research and Development award scheme in 2012/2013. The project collected and mixed together publicly available data on marketing education currently provided by HEIs with more detailed and specific information received directly from individual institutions. It did this in order to provide a clear strategic overview of HE marketing and related subject programmes in the UK – numbers, structure, coverage, curriculum design, aims and objectives. 108 UK HEIs were surveyed. As a result of this, a database on current provision has been created to be shared with colleagues and a number of more specific projects are underway that it is hoped will fully exploit the data to the benefit of the Academy.

Project Context and Rationale

In essence, this was a very simple project. It is also one which has supported the four key objectives of the AM TR&D grants scheme by producing evidence based examples of innovation, facilitating reviews of current practice, helping to disseminate good practice and ensuring a discussion of curriculum and class development issues.

Why was this project undertaken? There is an almost complete lack of coherent and insightful data on the strategic and tactical situation wrt UG marketing education provision in the UK. Many important decisions about class and programme design are made on the basis of unchecked assumptions, established local traditions and ignorance about innovations and alternatives used in other institutions. By providing both a detailed overview of provision, context, and integration with other subjects at the strategic-programme level, and assessment, syllabi and feedback at the tactical-subject level this project will hopefully support and develop future research on - and practice in - marketing education in the UK HE sector for years to come.

Some previous literature does of course report and reflect on this topic. A couple of papers have examined marketing education provision in the UK strategically, including for undergraduate programmes Stringfellow et al (2006) and Centeno et al (2008) at the postgraduate level. Caemmerer et al (2013) looked at the situation at the top French Ecoles de Commerce. For reasons of resource constraints, the snapshots that these publications presented of current structure and practice were limited in respect of both breadth and depth. By attempting a census rather than a sample this project was intended to give a far wider and deeper appreciation of the current situation and produce data to inform, contextualise and challenge assumptions of future work on and about marketing education in the UK.

Further, there is a continued and heated debate on whether or not there is a divide between academic research/traditional university education and marketing as a commercial practice – Harrigan and Hulpert (2011) and of course Brennan (2004). Products of this project will allow a much more accurate consideration of this issue, especially in respect of demonstrating *what* and *how* things are being done – crucial to informing dialogue with external stakeholders.

Aims and Objectives

The principal objective of the project was to produce a database of sufficient size and quality as to inform and underpin future development of the UK marketing curriculum and research into the teaching and learning of the subject. As such, its specific aims were to:

1. Provide a clear strategic overview of HE marketing and related subject programmes in the UK – numbers, structure, coverage, curriculum design. A target of 100 UK HEIs to be surveyed.
2. Provide sufficient detail on tactical issues such as class structure, typical and innovative subject treatments/syllabi, assessment strategies and feedback processes so that colleagues can contextualise and reflect on their own practice in specific contexts.
3. Produce accessible and utile resources to assist other members of the academy in both pedagogic research and practice.

Method

The project was essentially the collection and organisation/analysis of information – facts, figures, documents - from publicly available sources which then assisted and guided the collection of additional and detailed specifics from programme directors and administrators by phone and email.

The initial step was to derive a list of UK HEIs offering undergraduate classes and programmes related to marketing. A long-list was developed using information from HESA and UCAS. This list was shortened by removing institutions not relevant to the study – either by scope or by only offering PG programmes and classes. Examples would be the School of African and Oriental Studies, the Royal Veterinary College and Bishop Grossteste University. This reduced the list of institutions from 130 to 108.

Outline information for each of these institutions was then compiled from publicly available sources such as HESA, Unistats, HEA, UCAS and institutional websites. Academic publishers chipped in to cover some of the gaps. Categories of data collected in this manner included relevant names, addresses and other contact information, programmes and associated entry requirements [e.g. tariff points].

The third – and main – stage of the data collection was by direct contact with appropriate staff members at these institutions during 2013. Heads of Department or School, Programme leaders, Programme administrators, Directors of student affairs/experience. These colleagues were asked to provide as much of the following as they were willing and able to do so:

1. A simple list of marketing programmes and the classes in them offered by their institution.
2. Class Outlines from those classes. From these were to be extracted learning outcomes and assessments etc.

3. Numbers of students taking those classes currently – and if possible – historically.

The completeness of the ‘profile’ for each institution varied significantly from perfect to outline only – based on the level of engagement of institutional contacts. The PI would like to place on record his thanks for the dozens of colleagues up and down the land who took considerable time and trouble in collating and providing some or all of the required data. Regrettably, fifteen institutions declined to participate in the project – citing lack of time, programme restructuring or revalidation in process and/or unwillingness to divulge what they saw as ‘commercially sensitive’ information. The profiles for those institutions therefore consists only of information available indirectly and from other sources.

Surface Results and Analysis

The project has produced a very considerable amount of data, documentation and other evidence. Whilst not as perfect and complete a picture as hoped, the depth and detail obtained is one or more orders of magnitude greater than any previous UK study.

The very large number of documents will require considerable effort to appraise and draw detailed findings from. It is intended that by the time of this conference, this processing and ordering of data will be complete. It is however possible to make a very limited surface appreciation wrt some topics and issues based on the experiences and impressions of the PI and overviews of the information collected – better detail, precision and confirmation on these issues will come:

1. **Staffing.** Class outlines list associated teaching/class management teams. It would seem senior staff are withdrawing from the undergraduate curriculum. Programme managers are typically relatively junior and have been in place for only a short amount of time. The turnover of programme/institutional contacts even during the period of data collections was considerable. Communications with programme management staff regularly showed they were anxious and felt unsupported.
2. **Curriculum.** There is a core basic curriculum of Principles, Consumer Behaviour, Market Research and Marketing Communications. Beyond this there is a group of classes common but not ubiquitous and a long tail trailing off to the unique and bespoke. The programme structures at many institutions are surely too complex and over-pathed. A desire to allow flexibility and choice has in many cases led to chaos.
3. **Pedagogy.** There is quite a lot of standardization – not necessarily a positive – in respect of contact time and mix. Innovation in respect of assessment specification and format seems to predominantly lie in the middle of the tariff-range and is relatively absent from the higher tariff programmes.
4. **Student Experience.** There does not seem to be a correlation between tariff points for programme entry and the number of marketing classes available to select from. There is a correlation between tariff points and institutional ranking. Marketing classes are large – even in the context of business schools. There may be evidence that student effort measured - perhaps over simplistically – in number of words specified by coursework is less on lower tariff programmes and that higher ranked

institutions have proportionately more individual assessments and more end of class formal exams.

5. **Process.** There is very considerable variation in when/how/why issues such as plagiarism are dealt with. Not just between institutions, but between programmes in an institutional set. These differences are in respect of definition, sanction and appeals amongst other aspects.

Assets, Outputs and Dissemination

The main resource produced by this project is the integrated spreadsheet compiling and detailing UG marketing provision across the UK that is supported by institutionally specific document sets. Much of this will be placed into the public domain. The remainder will be gatekept by the PI and accessible through negotiation and acceptance by co-operators of the need for confidentiality in respect of certain categories of information – such as trends in student numbers. These categories of information would be available for research publications, but only with appropriate disguise or anonymisation and after a case for access has been made.

As a resource for the entire AM community, it will allow:

1. **Analysis** of sector level trends and images
2. **Segmentation** of programmes and classes
3. **Detailed** consideration of specific types of programmes and classes [e.g. comparing consumer behaviour across multiple institutions]
4. **Benchmarking** and comparison of [for example] assessment strategies and contact time mix
5. The **contextualising** of decision making and development by programme and class leaders
6. More **informed** evaluation of programmes and classes by External Examiners through allowing them to know the typical, the norm and the average in respect of all key dimensions.

There are grand plans for dissemination. As outlined above, a good portion of the data will be placed into the public domain via the AM website. The remainder will be accessible to individual researchers and teams through agreement.

The exploitation of the data will fall into publications, workshops, case studies and reports in three categories:

1. **Strategic overviews** – one to ‘introduce’ the data to stakeholders and a second to bring individual strands back together summatively towards the end of exploitation. Tables and charts giving broad overviews of current provision, and identifying key trends and issues at the sector level.
2. **Rows** – comparing and analysing how the same marketing subject is taught and learned across institutions. For example, comparing the who/what/how of a particular class via analysis and reflection upon contact time mix, assessment schemes, learning outcomes etc. As an absolute minimum, there is sufficient data to do this comprehensively for Principles, Consumer Behaviour, Market Research,

Communications classes and Keystone Projects [dissertations/final year projects] and probably several more.

3. **Columns** – cross-comparing not the same subject at different universities, but different aspects of class and programme management and process across the sector. One obvious example is issues relating to plagiarism. A second is the specification and management of groupwork and/or peer assessment. A third is types of assignment.

A small number of specific projects have already been agreed and/or initiated. These currently include an overview-paper on the project and critical issues observed by it, a comparative analysis of plagiarism policy and procedure between institutions and a detailed analysis of capstone degree projects [e.g. dissertations].

If you have made it this far and are intrigued by one of more possibilities wrt exploitation of the data, please get in touch. The same applies to any colleagues that discover errors or omissions in the published data and are able and willing to help correct them.

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