

Brief Encounter: the use of consultancy projects in enhancing the learning experience of postgraduate Marketing students

There has been a growing recognition of the need for management education to embed the 'practice' of management in curricula, and more effectively manage the relationships between organisations and business schools. The recent report of a Government-initiated Task Force to address such concerns highlighted designing practice into courses as a key area for change (Thorpe and Rawlinson, 2013). Many business schools have introduced consultancy projects into marketing courses as a way of bringing this practical experience into the curriculum and in some cases are being 'scaled up' to replace dissertations or other major projects. At Master's level across Europe, The Rotterdam School of Management (2013) find that 29% of final projects take the form of a field project, normally via an internship or consultancy project.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate one such consultancy project for a MSc Marketing course at a Midlands Business School. Whilst existing studies highlight gaps between graduate skills and knowledge and those sought by employers, or between what students expect and what they receive in respect of practical experience, few studies specifically focus on the operation of consultancy projects nor do they seek to investigate the associated tensions between constituent groups. This project therefore seeks to do this and to make recommendations to other marketing educators considering the use of or currently using consultancy projects.

Background: The Applied / Consultancy Project

A revalidation of the MSc Marketing course caused us to take stock of our philosophical position on marketing education. As a School with a strong employability record and business focused mission, consultancy projects were introduced. However, we acknowledged that such an approach could lead to a focus on skills. Nonetheless, consideration of a key philosophical and pedagogical imperative, as emphasised by O'Doherty and Jones (2005: 2) in their polemic on Business Schools, was given of their view that education should allow students to think beyond existing business dogmas.

As Clarke et al. (2006) note; a curriculum and educational philosophy driven purely by the 'employability' agenda could lead to an instrumental view of that education (one characterised by skills development, personal development and a 'secure' curriculum). Indeed, they argue that most marketing practitioners are likely to see education in this way, given the focus on gearing curricula to the marketplace. However, they argue a marketing education should instead be geared towards the 'liberal arts' view of education as intrinsic rather than instrumental (characterised critical thinking, an awareness of alternative views and the development of personal autonomy), and to develop intrinsic aims (rather than content). That is, it is not enough simply to be able to apply the techniques; students should be able to critically assess the techniques, make moral judgments and contribute to a critical discussion of the role and development of the marketing. Similarly, Gibson-Sweet et al. (2010) draw on Schibrowsky who classified these distinct philosophies as 'liberal arts school' (teaching about marketing), the vocational school (teaching skills), and the 'professional school' (to prepare students for a career in marketing). It could be argued that this latter approach is the most desirable, if we assume that practice requires some combination of the other two.

Our aim was therefore to find a way of developing in students those skills desired by employers (more on this later), but not to lose sight of the intrinsic aspects of education which go above learning content or skills and applying techniques. Drawing on

O'Doherty and Jones' (2005) polemic, we wanted to find ways to encourage students to be inventive and responsible within the confines of a one-year Master's degree, which prepared students for a marketing career, and which would deliver a curriculum aligned with the School's mission. However, this therefore highlights possible tensions between the aims of the marketing profession and those of marketing educators, characterised by many as the gap between education and practice.

The Gap Between Education and Practice

Clarke et al. (2006) highlight this tension in their appeal for marketing educators to deliver intrinsic education; that practitioners (and, by extension, recruiters) may only focus on those instrumental skills seen to be immediately relevant to marketing practice. This in turn leads students (through exercising choice) to determine a marketing curriculum focused only on instrumental aims. This leads to the identification of two related gaps: firstly, the gap between what practitioners expect and what curricula deliver (the theory-practice gap) and secondly between what students expect and what they receive in respect of practical experience (see for example Liu, 2010, Centeno et al. 2008, and Gray et al, 2007). Stringfellow et al. (2006) note that the gap is: "...neither simple nor well defined." (p246), also noting a tension between instrumental and intrinsic goals. They argue that a challenge exists between marketing academics delivering curricula which details the world of marketing practice whilst at the same time maintaining sufficient independence and objectivity. They found that the practitioner view is that graduates hold a sound marketing knowledge, but lack commercial awareness, thus expressing a preference for graduates who have completed an industrial placement.

Fortuin and Bush (2010) and Woods et al. (2011) observe how working in cross-cultural consultancy teams can enhance students' awareness of cultural boundaries, and can often help them to develop cross-disciplinary awareness. Heriot et al. (2007) add to these skills by observing that student consulting projects help students develop confidence in dealing with business owners, looking at the business from an holistic perspective, and being able to offer opinions (so perhaps moving students towards more intrinsic ways of learning, as previously noted).

Summary

There emerges a number of tensions in marketing education; the tension between intrinsic and educational aims (input), the tension between theory and practice (process) and the tension between student skills and knowledge development (output). Whilst some studies have started to consider the use of student consultancy projects from a skills development perspective, there remains a need for further research to investigate the ways in which such consultancy projects might contribute to the resolution (or at least the 'compression' of such tensions). In particular, there exists a need to explore the extent to which consultancy projects might help to develop 'intrinsic' qualities in students, the extent to which such projects achieve their educational aims, and to provide greater clarity around the skills which are developed.

Consultancy Project Operation

Consultancy projects are sourced by the university and each company is visited by an academic member of the team to engage the client, fully develop and agree a single side of A4 brief. Thomas and Busby (2003) highlight the time required to write briefs, attend presentations and monitor individual student performance in groups, and the challenges in ensuring projects fit the curriculum and provide students with an equal learning experience. McLoughlin's (2004) sTo counter some of the problems he suggests that greater learning opportunities exist in SME's. Whilst most of our projects have tended

to be companies in the SME or ‘third’ sectors, we have also had projects from larger organisations, and it would be useful to explore McLoughlin’s assertions further.

Summary

As Ardley and Taylor (2010) argue, action learning should be central to learning about marketing. However, further research is required to understand different perspectives in relation to it. Whilst a number of studies have argued successfully for forms of experiential learning, and the development of the skills such learning encourages, the research base overlooks the contribution of such projects to developing intrinsic student qualities, and employer or school perspectives on the operation of such projects. This research therefore seeks to develop and deepen this body of knowledge. The specific objectives of the research are therefore to develop a deeper understanding of staff, student and employer experiences in MSc Marketing consultancy projects.

Methodology

As the intention is to explore the experiences of the constituent groups and due to its exploratory nature, the project adopts an interpretivist perspective and correspondingly utilises qualitative methods to develop insight into the perceptions of each of the three constituent groups. Respondents in all cases took part in a consultancy project on the MSc Marketing course within the last two years. More specifically the research comprised of three employer depth interviews with discrete employer types, five depth interviews with MSc Marketing graduates from the last graduating cohort and one focus group with staff. It was expected that a focus group format would be more useful in generating feedback on the supervision process as a ‘shared experience’. Sampling in was a mixture of purposive and convenience to identify individuals which met the required profiles, and who were willing and available to take part in the research.

Employer Perspectives

Three employers took part in the research. One large corporate (LC), a small to medium-sized enterprise (SME) and a not for profit organization (NFP) (see Appendix 2 for detail) and all participants have been given pseudonyms. All of the clients interviewed were mostly positive about their experiences and felt the time invest was worthwhile. For example, the client at the NFP felt that any time spent with the supervisor defining the brief or indeed explaining the brief and the business to the students was useful. He regarded the supervisor as a ‘critical friend’ who encouraged him to commit ideas to paper and communicate to the students. Indeed, all the clients discussed how the briefing process helped them to reflect on their marketing objectives, something which they often don’t give time to. However, two of the clients recommended that more time is devoted to the scoping of the brief by the University and client organization.

As noted above, O’Doherty and Jones (2005) call for business education to encourage students to ‘get out of the system’; we found strong evidence that students exhibited inventive and responsible behaviour. The NFP in particular acknowledged how the students brought unexpected recommendations in terms of increasing the level of community focus for the reward scheme. Initially the client expected that social value would be driven through improving individual behavior, but instead the students recommended that the organisation developed community awards. Additionally the students recommended a customised approach for vulnerable groups rather than a ‘one size fits all’ approach originally planned. It was also noted that the students did not necessarily deliver what the client wanted to hear, thus further giving weight to the notion that these types of projects develop students’ critical skills. It should be noted, however, that these types of ‘breakthrough’ recommendations are not necessarily the ‘norm’. Anecdotally, our experience is that students will recommend action already

considered by the client organization however this gives them further confidence in decision making.

The disconnect between theory and practice was highlighted above, however, the NFP noted how theory was used to support recommendations and how this in turn gave the client a perceived foundation on which to persuade to the Board. Nonetheless, clients identified a level of expectation of what would be received and most recognized the age and experience levels of the students and how this would impact their output.

Student Perspective

Five recent graduates took part in the research and reflected on their experiences as students and are referred to as students in this research. Key objectives were to evaluate their perspectives in terms of experience and outcomes (learning, skills development and employability benefits). On the whole, they enjoyed the experience and felt that going through the process, even when tensions arose with others in the team, facilitated their development. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the key issue related to the challenge of group work and in turn managing cultural differences within a mainly international cohort of students. Internal feedback from students is that their preference is for self-selection of groups. However, a number of the student respondents reflected after the project that tutor-selection of groups was an approach they benefitted from, not only in terms of improving their cultural awareness, but also in terms of the team benefitting from the skills and expertise of certain international students of which they had previously been unaware. A significant finding was that the preconceptions UK students had about working with international students appear to have persisted throughout 'normal' classroom activities, but had been challenged through the consultancy project. Whilst the students had worked together in internationally diverse group for two terms in the classroom, it was through the consultancy project that one student talked about becoming more aware of international student abilities and he admitted that 'If Annie (an international student) wasn't in the group I wouldn't have got the grade I got'.

Another student, Mason, highlighted how working in consultancy teams differed to working in teams in the classroom in that classroom group work was short and the consultancy project gave you more time to build leadership, communication and cultural awareness. Additionally, the initial anguish with respect to the managed selection of teams by academic staff was highlighted by one student. However on reflection, he regarded this approach positively after the process and found it a valuable team working experience in that he ended up working with people he wouldn't have chosen and learning a great deal from them.

In terms of 'softer skills' one student, Dan, highlighted that one of the most valuable skills he learnt was "... more to do with the client/customer relationship. It was something I'd never really thought about. But I'd say the main skill was probably working with people." The students saw the consultancy project as a 'stepping stone' to industry. One student, who had subsequently been recruited by the client, welcomed the comfort provided by working in a team as a bridge between the classroom and the workplace. For those now working in Marketing roles, the consultancy project was identified as a key reason for their employment. As one student pointed out, 'A dissertation wouldn't have got me the job whereas with the consultancy project it was one of the main things I talked about in all of my interviews after graduation.'

In terms of assessment, all of the students accepted completing the literature review last. Rather than a means of informing practice, the literature review was regarded as a way of understanding practice and supported post-event evaluation. One student pointed out that all of the assessment approaches “did different jobs” and thus provided different perspectives on learning. Anecdotally, staff perceive that reflection is something students often struggle with, or in which they fail to see the value. However, a number of students discussed how useful they found the experience of reflection, again helping them with the transition to the world of work. Without hesitation all of the respondents felt that they had met all of the learning outcomes associated with the module. This contradicts with the views of the staff, however, and the final reporting of results will consider their views.

Staff Perspectives

As previously outlined, the experiences of both the clients and students were framed in largely positive terms. However, it should be recognised that a great deal of these outcomes (as alluded to by both groups) relies on the experience and efforts of the supervisor. Notwithstanding the risks and challenges of supporting a group of students, most supervisors found the experience a useful and rewarding one.

As has been touched on previously, staff felt the briefing process was crucial to the success or otherwise of the consultancy project for those involved. At times clients are very clear about their requirements and sometimes they are not, and it then becomes a process of establishing requirements. A concise brief with not too much information which could either overwhelm the students or indeed give them the answers is required. The module leader very much saw the brief as a starting point and it was then the responsibility of the supervisor to work out with the client the exact deliverables. Selecting student groups was another important step in the process and one member of staff termed this “organised social engineering” based on ability, attitude and attendance. Facts were gathered about the students along with views from the administrators and academic staff to select the best combination of group members.

One of the most acutely mentioned areas for student support was around business social etiquette. Supervisors also questioned placing the literature review at the end of the assessment schedule and also the inability of students to reflect. Finally, as was also pointed out by the students, the whole process was identified by one supervisor as “bridging that gap between the professional world which they are not familiar with and the sort of academic world which arguably they are used to”. It was agreed by all staff members that experienced staff supervisors were required to achieve this outcome.

Discussion and Conclusions

Contrary to McLoughlin’s (2004) assertions, we found little variation between organisation type and ‘quality’ of learning experience. Indeed, in our three cases the two which perhaps afforded the best learning opportunities were the large corporation and the NFP. It was clear that the most important factor is the quality and scoping of the brief and the nature of the problem to be considered, along with managing client expectations about output. Nevertheless, the experience for all companies was positive, although it should be noted that our sampling perhaps predetermined this outcome.

We also find strong evidence that the second ‘critical success factor’ (and benefit to the client as a ‘critical friend’) is the supervisor. However, few previous studies have sought to explore this relationship or the supervisory skills required in more depth, and we see a need for future research here. In particular we find that supervisors require skills in balancing client and student needs, commercial awareness, problem/conflict

resolution and an ability to appropriately scope projects, striking a balance between sufficient detail to help the students, but not so much as to ‘answer’ the brief for them.

A number of tensions were proposed in the conceptual section of this report. First was the tension between the achievement of intrinsic and instrumental aims (Clarke et al., 2006). We find compelling evidence that the consultancy project helps students to achieve both aims, both in terms of developing students’ skills (and in particular ‘soft’ skills such as communication and teamworking), but also by developing the critical and creative facilities which characterise intrinsic education. In particular, the project with the NFP appeared to develop these skills the most, with students challenging the client’s views, proposing an innovative solution, and developing an improved social benefit. With respect to the first point, with the exception of one case, we found no tensions between the academic requirements and client’s needs as suggested by Lamond (1995).

A tension between theory and practice was also highlighted (Fortuin and Bush, 2010; Stringfellow et al., 2006; Baker, 2001). Feedback from all three groups suggested that, again, the project and its assessment helped to ameliorate some of this tension. Students saw the projects as helping them make the transition from University to professional life, and how the project had helped them to make connections between the ‘practice’ of the project and some of the later conceptual / theoretical work.

Gray et al. (2007) note tensions between views on which skills practicing marketers require. Whilst this was not an aim of the research, we found evidence that the projects developed students’ interpersonal, communication, intercultural, teamworking and leadership skills, as well as developing commercial awareness and confidence in dealing with employers. However, further research could explore in more detail the full range of skills developed in students adopting particular team roles; our sample mainly included those students who had tended to ‘lead’ projects. However, it should be noted that students perceive they meet the learning outcomes for the module, but staff do not necessarily agree, citing in particular student weaknesses in understanding briefs and/or organisational contexts, reflective skills and in some cases, client relationship and teamworking skills. Whilst this presents a further identifiable tension which is worthy of further investigation, we suggest that the consultancy project can help to relieve some of the tensions identified at the start of the project and provide appropriate and valued learning experiences for students.

Recommendations

- Involve a range of organisations; resist the urge to approach only large corporates or SMEs. The best learning experiences may be in NFP organisations.
- Invest time prior to the start of the project to ensure the brief is well developed and is agreed by the client team who will work on the project. Do not provide too much detail, and ensure the client expectations can be delivered by the students.
- Ensure supervisory staff have appropriate time resource and skills to develop the project. We recommend staff development for all supervisory staff involved.
- Manage team make-up carefully, balancing a range of nationalities and skill-sets. Put in place a robust teamworking policy which sets out expectations of team members but which also allows for contribution (or lack of) to be recognised in marking.
- Employ reflective and conceptual assignments, but ensure students receive sufficient development to complete these.

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Appendix one – Assessment Regime

There are four elements of module assessment.

First is a group presentation to the client. Formative assessment and client feedback is given through Q&A and after the event. Clients also assist the academic supervisor in the summative assessment of these presentations. After the presentation students have one week to make any necessary changes and submit a group report to the client. The content of the presentation and report are one of two forms of action research; either diagnostic research to be presented to ‘action takers’, or feedback on data from participants of a system as a basis for influencing ongoing action (Rowley, 2003). Woods et al. (2011) highlight the unique opportunity afforded by postgraduate management courses containing internationally diverse cohorts, and the benefits of multicultural group work in developing cross-cultural awareness and creative problem-solving. Fearon et al. (2012) also note the benefits in developing technical skills, business acumen, and demonstrating the ability to relate theory to practice, and Hall and Wai-Ching Sung (2009) further note that group work can facilitate free discussion among multi-cultural groups that may not be possible in the classroom. As previously noted, and taking a lead from Reisenwitz and Eastman (2006), a group work policy is operated which provides guidance for students in dealing with issues and problems, and staff for assessing group as well as individual performance. The policy allows for penalties (or rewards) to be applied for inadequate (or exceptional) performance.

However, Hay (2011) argues that action learning should be seen as a process of organizing as well as a process of learning, and that students should focus attention on the process of organising as well making recommendations for the ‘action’ under consideration. Thus, there is a significant learning opportunity from reflecting on the “emotional and political aspects of learning” (p34). Students therefore also submit an individual reflective essay within three weeks of the submission of the group consultancy report, which allows them to reflect on the group’s findings, the group’s performance and their own role within and contribution to the group. The benefit of this piece of work is that it allows students who experienced problems or tensions within their groups to draw on the experience as a learning resource.

Finally, the students submit an individual conceptual piece in the form of a literature review. The intention is that this takes the approach of a form of grounded theory in which students may turn to the theory during the project as a ‘stepping off’ point or to stimulate questions, but the analysis of data in the project will stimulate questions and areas of conceptual interest to the student which may confirm the group’s findings, or illustrate gaps in the literature (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). We were also keen to retain an individual higher-level conceptual piece as part of the course, as appropriate for M-level study and to meet relevant benchmarks such as those set by the QAA (2007).

Appendix two – The Client Organisations

LC, a global information services group with operations in 40 countries, has its operational headquarters in the East Midlands. The brief for this project involved the investigation and internal marketing communications strategy for an accountancy team who worked globally between offices in Nottingham, Malaysia and Chile. As accountants they also perceived themselves to lack the marketing knowledge required and wanted to use the students as a way of providing expertise.

The SME is an arts organisation based in a large provincial city in the East Midlands. The team were tasked to profile marketing data held within the organisation's database and to make marketing recommendations on how best to maximise the targeting information held within it, especially making an assessment of likely returns of targeting postcodes identified as 'low frequency areas'. Again, the project concerned an issue that the SME felt they didn't have the time or the expertise to explore.

The NFP is a large housing association based within the East Midlands who provide social housing, care and support services for 80,000 customers. Whilst it is a large commercially-led organisation, its social agenda and mission related to improving the lives of its service users provided students with the awareness and experience of a organisation with a social agenda. Their brief was to investigate tenants' views of a proposed loyalty scheme aimed at incentivising good tenant behavior and sanctioning poor behaviour. As the client noted: "Our input into them is helping their careers and this input fits in with our CSR".