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## **Managing The New University Student Experience In Marketing Education**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports on two processes used with one first year cohort, with the aim of enhancing the teaching-learning partnership. Managing the new university experience by obtaining meaningful feedback from students, acting to address student needs, and giving students early feedback on writing provide the impetus for this study. The researchers 'broadened the boundaries' in student-lecturer interactions by two means. The first was to use a recently developed instrument to understand student expectations at the start of a semester-based first year business core course. The second process was to provide pre-submission feedback for the first essay. The qualitative data showed how students perceived their ways of learning, their potential contributions to small groups, and that appropriate student contributions to lectures, tutorials and assignments are important to the learning process. The study also investigates the effectiveness of providing structured feedback about draft assessment to students before the submission of their first university assignment, showing that a statistically significant improvement in assessment marks results from allowing students to submit a draft of their first university assignment, provided that they receive constructive feedback. Together, these processes contribute to broadening the boundaries for effective teaching and learning.

Keywords: Marketing education, New university experience, Expectations, Teaching-learning partnership

### **Introduction**

The challenge to marketing and business educators is to broaden the boundaries of how we consider the expectations and skills of students new to marketing education at university. The new student often comes from a structured secondary education to tertiary courses where self-motivation and self-discipline are contributors to success. The current study focuses on two areas, initial student expectations and the effectiveness of using draft assessment submissions to assist student learning. Firstly, we present an overview of the relevant marketing education literature about engaging students in a learning partnership. Secondly, we discuss the design of the study. To capture student expectations, we used a recently designed instrument, which was the result of an initiative to provide early feedback to students. The aim was to alert both staff and students to the students' expectations and concerns at the start of the course. Previous experience had shown that some students express concern about essay writing, so an additional process was woven into the curriculum where students could receive feedback on a draft essay prior to submission. Finally, we discuss the implications of using the insights gained from this study, and take into account current resource constraints in the tertiary education context.

## **Literature Review**

The marketing education literature shows that research can focus on various tertiary education organisational levels and on diverse educational issues. For example, Soutar and McNeil (1996) used service quality as a means of developing performance indicators, and Soutar and Turner (2002) sought to understand how and why students select universities, and hence focussed on the institutional level. In a different approach, O'Brien and Deans (1996) argued that to achieve an integrated approach to marketing education, it would be useful to conceptualise business education as a supply chain, which is an interesting concept that has received little attention. Measurement of the effectiveness of curriculum, teacher and situation can emphasise the quality of the learning experience (Patel, 2003). Obtaining student perceptions of learning outcomes, although a difficult process, can contribute to program evaluation (Duke, 2002). However, within a course (subject, paper) lecturers must grapple with the characteristics of their students, which raises the question of how teachers can quickly understand each cohort.

Tertiary education institutions require an increasing range of student evaluation surveys which may be considered onerous. However, Chonko, Tanner and Davis (2002) suggest that surveys continue to be the best means of understanding student needs. The typical end-of-semester course or teaching evaluation attract considerable criticism, the contentious areas being non-standardisation of criteria (Marks, 2000), poor evaluation tools (Simpson and Siguaw, 2000; Laverie, 2002) and the cost of such evaluations (Wallace and Wallace, 1998). Yet, arguably, conducting cost effective evaluations is critical to accountability, continuous improvement of the teaching-learning partnership, and the new student experience. Changes in student demographics and experiences are factors that often are not considered (Oblinger, 2003), particularly in terms of the capability of higher educational institutions to meet the entrepreneurial requirements of students (Collins, Hannon and Smith, 2004). An obvious process problem with end of semester evaluations is that the resulting insights cannot be used to improve the experiences for current students or staff. Innovative approaches to creating student-teacher partnerships through student participation and learner involvement based on participants' expectations have been proposed and tested (Diekelmann, 2004; Miller and Fisher, 2004; Fisher and Miller, 2005).

In an example of formative evaluation, data relating to student expectations were collected at the start of the semester and at mid semester (Miller and Fisher, 2004). Another study (Fisher and Miller, 2005) proposed a teaching and learning partnership evaluation process, which combined formative and summative evaluations, with an emphasis on making responsive improvements. Yet, while research on commencing university students might examine student expectations of teaching (Sander, Stevenson, King and Coates, 2000), the expectations that students have of their own contributions to the teaching and learning partnership have received little attention.

## **Research Design**

The research design is an evaluation case study that uses qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell, 2003; Yin, 2003). As in other university courses, student evaluations of teaching and the course were conducted but they are outside the scope of this paper. For this study, data were collected using a survey instrument to capture student expectations data at the start of the semester, and from an assessment of the impacts of a course process innovation for

providing structured feedback on essay writing. These two activities may appear disconnected, however, the one student group was used, and the activities were incorporated into the course curriculum to improve the teaching-learning partnership. This study reviews the findings from these processes.

### **Survey instrument: Student Expectations Snapshot at start of semester.**

The commencement survey of student expectations was developed and trialled with business students prior to the study reported here. The instrument had some qualitative measures of student expectations and concerns about the course. Students could identify their questions about the course; indicate the ways in which they felt they learned best which was indicative of their preferred learning styles; anticipate their contributions to their own learning ('I can contribute to my own learning by ...'), and state how they expected to contribute to group effectiveness for their assessable small group projects. They could indicate on a continuum ('low ... high') how active they were in scanning the business environment, and the extent to which they were scanning academic business literature and the business press. This information was used by staff to emphasise to students the types of scanning activities that were needed and to reinforce where they should be seeking information (business media, academic databases). In the data analysis phase, the researchers converted the responses to a five-point interval scale (Berenson and Levine, 1996) to allow quantitative analysis of the data. Students also indicated their intentions to consult their tutor ('Yes/No'), and to attend lectures and tutorials ('I plan to attend ...all/ most/ sometimes').

The current study uses data collected from an Australian university for a course (subject, paper) at the first year level in the first semester of the academic year. For most students the course was one of their first university undertakings. The number of students enrolled in the course was 920. The survey instrument was administered in the first lecture. Completion of the instrument was voluntary, and anonymity was optional, although many students chose to provide their student numbers. The course convenor and tutors used the feedback from the time of collection for continuous improvement of the teaching and learning partnership within the course concerned. Aggregated feedback was given to students in class and tutors were briefed for special areas of attention.

### **Process innovation: Optional Draft Critical Essay**

Progressive assessment for the course consisted of a critical essay, group presentation, reflective essay and a final examination. For many students the first essay assessment item, due in the sixth week, would be their first university assessment. In a process innovation, which aimed to decrease anxiety and increase performance, students had the option of voluntarily submitting a draft first assignment to their tutors in the fourth week of the course. Tutors were briefed and they used a single page pro-forma to give feedback on seven key points, with each point rated on a scale (ranging from *not attempted*, *very poor*, *poor*, *average* to *good*) as well as specific advice. The tutors retained copies of their feedback. The Business School allocated resources to the researchers to support this initiative. The essay feedback sheets were matched to the previously administered survey instrument, to give a pool of 316 self-identified students, which we used to test the effectiveness of the draft essay process.

## Data analysis

Firstly, the survey questions that required qualitative responses were analysed using a thematic analysis of student responses. The overall useable responses were 768, which form the basis for the qualitative thematic analysis, which used an initial sample of ninety documents using *Leximancer* data mining software. *Leximancer* is designed to analyse the content of documents containing text and to visually display the extracted information. Concepts contained within the text are identified in terms of the frequency with which they occur and how they relate to other concepts. A number of conceptual categories and associated concepts were identified. Ninety student expectation instruments were randomly selected and converted into portable data format documents. A further 30 documents were randomly selected, prepared in portable data format and added to the original 90 documents making 120 in total. Thematic analysis was again conducted using the software. It was observed that no new concepts were evident; therefore the categories identified in the analysis were deemed to be saturated, as proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Secondly, data relating to students submitting or not submitting draft essays were coded and linked to class results. Analysis of the effectiveness of allowing new students university to submit drafts of their first university essays was carried out using SPSS software. The significance of the relationship between submission of drafts and results of the assessment was tested utilising an independent T-test.

## Results

We present the findings in two ways. Firstly, the thematic analysis of the qualitative responses in the Start of Semester Snapshot is given. Secondly, the results of the quantitative analysis demonstrate the significance of allowing new university students to submit a draft first essay.

### Qualitative Analysis

Thematic analysis of the 120 student expectation documents, conducted using *Leximancer* software, suggested that the most frequently occurring concepts were *Learn*, *Study*, *Questions*, *Group* and *Assignment*. The student expectation documents used for the analysis were also referred to in conjunction with the analysis. Most concepts were clustered in two overlapping areas that represented the ways in which people learn. The most frequently occurring links involved *questions-study*, *questions-assignment*, *learn-assignment*, *key-communication*, *learn-ways*, *assignment-class*, *class-reading* and *assignment-study*. *Assignment* was the common element in the linked concepts, appearing four times in the eight most frequent links.

The two overlapping thematic areas representing the ways in which individuals learn were of considerable interest to us. In previous categorical and metric analysis of student expectations data, students had been quite specific about the ways in which they perceived they learned best, expressed mostly in terms of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic (Lamarche-Bisson, 2002). Within the overlapping areas was an interesting configuration of concepts, all of which were joined with relatively high frequency links. The central concept was identified as *class*. *Assignment*, *contribute* and *class* were linked to each other. *Class* was also linked to *study* and *ways to learn*.

## Quantitative Analysis

The results of the T-test for student submitting/not submitting draft essays for their first university assessment show a significant difference in the mark obtained for the critical essay assessment between students who chose to submit a draft essay and those who did not (Table 1). The mean mark for students choosing to submit the draft essay was higher than for those who did not. Cohen's (1988) measure (Cohen's  $d$ ) was used to interpret the effect size of the T statistic. Cohen (1988) suggested that  $d = 0.2$  represents a small effect size,  $d = 0.5$  a medium effect size and  $d = 0.8$  a large effect size. For the T-test measuring the effectiveness of students submitting draft essays Cohen's  $d = 0.59$ , indicating a medium effect size.

**Table 1: Effectiveness of students submitting draft essays**

Draft Essay	N	Mean	S/D	t	df	p
Submitted	104	17.99	2.403	4.076	314	<.001
Not submitted	212	15.920	4.909	4.076	314	<.001

## Discussion

Overall, the use of the initial Expectations Snapshot identified the levels of awareness that students had about some aspects of tertiary education, and in practice helped the teaching staff to be responsive and proactive. In the thematic analysis, given that *Assignment* was the common element in the linked concepts, we interpret this to mean that students were very aware of the importance of assignments to learning and that they recognised the importance of asking questions, participating in class and study in this context. However, awareness did not necessarily translate into action, with only 104 student submitting drafts essays (Table 1). Clearly those who did submit draft essays were able to integrate the feedback into their final essay submission and improve their performance.

Identifying *class* as central to the linked concepts contained in the overlapping categories of perceived student learning was important. It underlines the centrality of lectures and tutorials to undertaking assignments, study, making contributions and learning. It is also consistent with attitudes such as structure and formalisation associated with secondary education, which often pose difficulties to students new to study in the less structured university environment. In terms of course processes and the awareness of individual contributions, the findings of the close proximity and linkage of associated concepts, show a clear indication of student expectations that appropriate contributions to lectures, tutorials and assignments would be important in terms of learning *per se* and the preferred learning styles expressed in the linkage of the concepts *ways-learn*.

## Implications and Conclusion

On balance, the use of the survey instrument and draft feedback process to enhance learning and responsiveness of staff are useful contributions to helping new students at university, and create the opportunity to make changes in real-time. Following the initial capturing of expectations with the process innovation reinforces for students the cumulative nature of

learning and the opportunities for gaining feedback to enhance performance. The benefits for staff are that they have meaningful ways of collecting and analysing data and responding to the results quickly. The findings however, also highlight the need to emphasise to students that although they may be *aware* of the importance of assignments, potentially they can achieve performance improvement through gaining feedback on drafts. While this may seem axiomatic to teaching staff, the results showed that many students did not pursue this opportunity. This process can be incorporated formally into courses as in this study, or recommended to students as a performance improving strategy. In the former case, the resource implications must be considered.

We contend that business schools should strategically and systematically incorporate these twin approaches to enhance student performance, and contribute to a positive and engaging educational experience for new students. The Start of Semester Expectations Snapshot incurs some design and printing costs, but we argue that the benefits to staff and students are sufficient to justify the relatively small expenditure. If the responses are processed using *Leximancer*, there are data input costs, but as shown, theoretical saturation can be reached without using all documents. More basically, frequency counts, and exception reporting can give useful information for lecturers and tutors, if institutional support is not forthcoming. With the draft essays, the provision of feedback has resource implications. Institutions could target one core course in each year to offer such a service as an aspect of quality teaching and learning.

This case study contributes to marketing education knowledge and practice in several ways. Firstly, it emphasises the need for a partnership approach between educator and student in managing the expectations of students new to university study. Secondly, it applies a recently designed instrument to capture student expectations and intentions. Thirdly, through qualitative and quantitative analysis of data it suggests that the triad of *contributions-class work-assignments* is important to student learning and that the nexus between the three should be explicitly emphasised in classes by lecturers and tutors. Finally, students new to university marketing courses and programs do derive significant benefit from being allowed to submit a draft of their first assignment. While there are resource implications, we believe that these two processes can enhance teaching and learning as demonstrated in this undergraduate course. Arguably, we can test the application of this approach in postgraduate marketing courses and continue to broaden the boundaries of how we approach marketing education.

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