

THE ROLE OF CONSUMERS' NEEDS AND WANTS IN THE DESIGN OF MBA (MARKETING) CURRICULUM: OPPOSING VIEWS FROM STUDENTS VS. EMPLOYERS IN THE DESIRED COURSE

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ABSTRACT

Universities in Thailand devise several marketing strategies to draw interest from students while other groups of stakeholders such as employers are not explicitly targeted to. It is thus interesting to examine whether the needs of two types of university consumers, students and employers, are congruent. In this study, the MBA (Marketing) curriculum is used to represent a product from a marketing viewpoint. The focal research question asks what kind of courses the consumers want to be included in the curriculum: (1) non-marketing general business courses versus (2) specialized marketing ones. A survey was conducted with students and employers. The results indicate that students want the curriculum to increase the number of marketing courses and to reduce the number of non-marketing general business ones. The results from employers, however, reveal quite the opposite. They prefer the curriculum to contain more general business or broad marketing courses (e.g., fundamental of business, statistics), rather than specialized marketing ones (e.g., marketing for sport, tourism, and recreation, marketing for society and non-profit organization). The current findings urge the higher education sector to refine who their “primary” and “secondary” consumers are.

INTRODUCTION

At present an increasing number of universities in Thailand are attempting to devise several marketing strategies to draw more attention and interest from students and other stakeholders. Ample surveys of several trade magazines and business newspapers reveal growing competitions among players in Thai higher education (Polyorat 2011). For example, now several foreign universities, especially from the West, open their campus in Thailand. These foreign institutions tend to bring along such marketing – oriented practices as branding which is relatively common in their home countries. Further, numerous public Thai universities are becoming more modernized and/or privatized, resulting in their attempts to attract more students in order to raise higher revenue for their institutions. The private universities themselves also join the fierce competition by introducing student-oriented marketing gimmicks such as the provision of laptops for students, heavy advertisements in various media, event marketing and sponsorships in order to strengthen their university brands in the students’ mind.

Marketing for higher education has attracted an increasing interest especially in terms of choices issues, student recruitment and how to persuade student to an individual institution. Universities now appear to willingly accept the value their key stakeholders (such as government and industry) possess (Scott et al 2004). Interestingly, most of the higher education marketing practices seem to primarily focus on a particular group of university consumers, namely students. Other groups of consumers or stakeholders, however, are not explicitly targeted to. It is possible that different groups of stakeholders may have different perceptions and needs in a context of higher education. For example, Polyorat et al (2012) found that, out of ten dimensions, employers have statistically different perceptions from those of other groups of stakeholders in the following seven dimensions of desired student quality: (1) human relationships and responsibility, (2) quantitative analysis, communication, and technology skills, (3) research skills, (4) social responsibility and art & cultural conservation, (5) national and international cognition, (6) physical and psychological well-beings, and (7) happiness and good environment. The results urge the need to carefully explore each group of stakeholders.

To develop and revise a curriculum, which in Thailand is required every 5 years, the study of the demand side will provide insightful input (Gulid 2011). As one of the major tasks of higher education is to produce graduates to fulfill the workforce requirements, it is of a particular interest to examine the need and perceptions of future employers in addition to those of students. In fact, it would be interesting to investigate whether or not the needs of two types of university consumers, students and employers, are congruent. Although employers may be considered a third party (Hawkins and Frohoff 2011), the university accountability cannot be ignored if the university wants to maintain credibility with this group of stakeholder.

As marketing is more than just advertising and selling, there is a need to know more about stakeholders' desires and requirements under the rubric of consumption (Eagle and Brennan 2007). In this study, the MBA (Marketing) curriculum was used to represent a product from a marketing viewpoint.

The focal research question asks what kind of courses the consumers want to be included in the curriculum. Courses are broadly classified into two categories: (1) non-marketing general business courses and (2) marketing ones. Non-marketing general business courses include subjects such as fundamental of business, statistics, finance, and accounting. Marketing courses include, for example, marketing research, strategic marketing management, and integrated marketing communication. From a managerial standpoint, it would be interesting to see if the two groups of consumers share similar desires or not so that an applicable marketing strategy can be devised accordingly to attract each group of consumers.

METHOD

A survey research was conducted to collect data from 80 students (both current and alumni; 60% female) and 102 employers (51% located in Bangkok) using purposive sampling. Several approaches of data collection were used with different groups of respondents. The questionnaires for the current students were distributed in the classroom. The questionnaires for the alumni were distributed via email. For the employers, a combination of mail survey and telephone survey were used.

Students were asked to indicate their satisfaction with the current curriculum, and whether and how the curriculum should be revised. Employers were asked to indicate the desired quality of the students and the courses that should be included in the curriculum. Several questionnaire items were mandatory and drawn from the office of higher education manual while the rest was specifically developed for the present study.

RESULTS

STUDENT DATA

In terms of satisfaction gained from studying in this curriculum (see Table 1), the three most satisfied aspects include self-study skill ($\bar{X} = 3.84$), knowledge in the academic discipline ($\bar{X} = 3.82$), and human relationship skill ($\bar{X} = 3.82$). What students desire most from the curriculum (see Table 2) is an ability to learn in the future ($\bar{X} = 4.24$).

Eighty percent of the student respondents indicate that the curriculum should be revised. The primary reason (see Table 3) is to be up-to-date to the current situations (67.2%). However for those who consider the curriculum revision unnecessary, the primary reason (see Table 4) is the current curriculum has a sufficient number of courses (53.3%).

Most students (63 %) view that the number of credits should remain unchanged whereas twenty-three percent and fourteen percent suggest a decrease and an increase, respectively. If the curriculum is to increase the number of credits, the majority of the respondents (72.7%) suggest the addition of more marketing-related courses while 27.3% suggested the non-marketing-related courses. If the curriculum is to decrease the number of credits, the majority of the respondents (77.8%) suggest the removal of non-marketing-related courses while 22.1% suggested the marketing-related courses.

EMPLOYER DATA

Employers' desire for different aspects of students' quality is displayed in Table 5. In terms of work skills and abilities, the top three desired qualities include ability to perform work with high quality ($\bar{X} = 4.92$), work management and planning ($\bar{X} = 4.66$), and judgment and ability to make a decision ($\bar{X} = 4.65$). In terms of work responsibility, the desired qualities include punctuality ($\bar{X} = 4.96$) and responsibility ($\bar{X} = 4.92$). In terms of work enthusiasm and care for service receiver, the desired qualities include interest in and attention to work ($\bar{X} = 4.89$), strong determination for success ($\bar{X} = 4.84$), and care for service receiver ($\bar{X} = 4.78$). In terms of relationship with colleagues, the desired

qualities include good human relationship ($\bar{X} = 4.95$), ability to work with other people ($\bar{X} = 4.92$), and proper behavior ($\bar{X} = 4.87$). In terms of initiative, the desired qualities include ability to learn and perform the work ($\bar{X} = 4.74$), and initiative and creativity ($\bar{X} = 4.62$). In terms of work skills and abilities, the top three desired qualities include discipline ($\bar{X} = 4.97$), willingness to take order, advice, and criticism ($\bar{X} = 4.88$), and ethics ($\bar{X} = 4.85$).

Regarding the courses desired by employers (see Table 6), the top five include business fundamental (86.1%), selling techniques and negotiations (78.2%), statistics and data analysis (75.2%), service marketing (71.3%), and marketing research (64.4%).

DISCUSSION

The present study results provide several implications for curriculum development and revision. First, as the students' satisfaction in terms of communication skill, leadership skill, and presentation skill are the lowest, the curriculum should pay more attentions to these 3 skills. This could be accomplished by, for example, designing a new course devoted specifically for the development of these 3 skills, or attempting to include these 3 skills in every existing course.

Second, because "ability to learn in the future" is ranked the highest desired by the students and most of them indicate that the curriculum should revised primarily to be up-to-date with the current situations, the curriculum should be revised to be more in tune with this demand. For example, new courses in new technology & marketing or changing consumer behavior & marketing could be considered.

Third, as the most desired student quality by employers are discipline, punctuality, responsibility, and working with quality, the curriculum thus should make sure that these issues are included in the classroom instruction.

Finally, the results indicate that students want the MBA curriculum to increase the number of marketing courses and reduce the number of non-marketing ones. The results from employers, however, reveal quite the opposite. They prefer the curriculum to contain more general business or broad marketing courses (e.g., fundamental of business, statistics), rather than specialized marketing ones (e.g., marketing for sport, tourism, and recreation, marketing for society and non-profit organization).

This incongruent demand from students and employers urges the higher education sector to refine who their "primary" and "secondary" consumers are. In fact, universities these days should start thinking how to serve each of these two types of consumers. This is problematic when these two have

two opposing wants. Universities may consider how to compromise the needs of these two groups when possible. The question is, when not possible, which group should be the top priority. The answer to this may, in part, depend on how universities define what their products or outputs are to offer. Specifically, they may decide whether their primary offer is education or graduates. For the former, then their primary consumer is students. For the latter, it is employers. Although there may not be a clear-cut and simple answer to this question, these issues need be carefully considered in the creation of university mission, vision, goal, and strategic planning especially for those universities considering embracing the concepts the marketing and consumerism in higher education (Helmsley-Brown and Oplatka 2007).

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Table

Table 1: Students' satisfaction

Aspects of students' satisfaction	\bar{X}	S.D.
Sufficient knowledge for real work	3.69	.76
Knowledge in the academic discipline	3.82	.757
Self-study skill	3.84	.86
Communication skill	3.56	.93
Presentation skill	3.59	1.02
Time-management skill	3.62	.97
Leadership skill	3.57	1.00
Problem-solving skill	3.71	.94
Human relationship skill	3.82	1.03

(1=very unsatisfied, 5= very satisfied)

Table 2: Students' desire

Aspects of students' desire	\bar{X}	S.D.
More maturity	3.94	.90
Ability to adapt to different environment	4.09	.83
Ability to change and accept new ideas	4.11	.88
Ability to learn in the future	4.24	.83

(1=very undesirable, 5= very desirable)

Table3: Reasons of curriculum revision

Aspects of reasons of curriculum revision	n	%
To be up-to-date to current situations	43	67.2
The former curriculum does not allow for student specialization	17	26.6
The old curriculum provides too few elective courses.	30	46.9
Some courses in the old curriculum are not suitable for a marketing degree.	17	26.6
Other reasons	6	9.4

Table 4: Reasons of no need for curriculum revision

Aspects of reasons of no need for curriculum revision	n	%
The old curriculum is still up-to-date to the current situations.	6	40.0
The old curriculum has sufficient number of courses.	8	53.3
The old curriculum allows for specialization.	6	40.0

Table 5: Employers' desire for students' quality

Employers' desire for students' quality	\bar{X}	S.D.
<i>Work skills and abilities</i>		
Ability to perform work with high quality	4.92	.27
Ability to perform work with high quantity	4.56	.57
Work management and planning	4.66	.52
Sufficient academic ability for work	4.55	.54
Ability to increase work skills	4.61	.53
Ability to learn and apply knowledge for work.	4.57	.52
Judgment and ability to make a decision	4.65	.48
Thai communication skill	4.51	.72
English communication skill	4.33	.83
Third language communication skill	3.04	1.33
Ability to summarize data and make a presentation	4.50	.67
<i>Work responsibility</i>		
Responsibility	4.92	.27
Punctuality	4.96	.20
<i>Work enthusiasm and care for service receiver</i>		
Interest in and attention to work	4.89	.31
Strong determination for success	4.84	.42
Care for service receiver	4.78	.46
<i>Relationship with colleagues</i>		
Ability to work with other people	4.92	.27
Proper behavior	4.87	.34
Good human relationship	4.95	.26
<i>Initiative</i>		
Ability to learn and perform the work	4.74	.44
Initiative and creativity	4.62	.53
<i>behavior and personality</i>		
Willingness to take order, advice, and criticism	4.88	.33
Leadership	4.37	.64
Maturity	4.50	.52
Good work attitude	4.66	.52
Self-confidence	4.26	.66
Adaptability to work	4.73	.47
Discipline	4.97	.17
Modesty	4.82	.43
Ethics	4.85	.36

(1=very undesirable, 5= very desirable)

Table 6: Courses desired by employers

Courses desired by employers	n	%
Business fundamental	87	86.1
Statistics and data analysis	76	75.2
Marketing research	65	64.4
Supply chain and logistics	32	31.7
Strategic marketing	36	35.6
Marketing for innovation in agriculture and food industry	13	12.9
Marketing for innovation in energy and environment	10	9.9
Marketing for innovation in medicine and health	11	10.9
Marketing for innovation in sport, tourism, and recreation	7	6.9
Local and global marketing	9	8.9
Marketing for society and non-profit organization	8	7.9
Marketing for small, medium, and large enterprise	21	20.8
Cross-cultural marketing	18	17.8
Service marketing	72	71.3
Selling techniques and negotiations	79	78.2
Current issues in marketing	45	44.6
Consumer behavior	48	47.5
Marketing management	49	48.5
Strategic branding and pricing	24	23.8
Integrated marketing communication (IMC)	15	14.9
Seminar in marketing	45	44.6
Marketing consultancy	34	33.7
Direct marketing and electronic commerce	13	12.9
Modern retailing	26	25.7
Others	6	6.0