The Orientation of Australian Coursework-focussed Marketing Masters Degrees

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Abstract

Using content analysis, this paper examines the orientation of Australian coursework masters degrees in marketing by analysing data collected from 38 university websites on the entry requirements, degree structure and research opportunities of the programs. The findings indicate that there appears to be an attempt to offer programs aiming at a range of “outcomes”, i.e. training for PhD, advanced studies in marketing, or accreditation for those in the industry. The diverse orientation of the degrees offered means that Australian institutions are potentially facing a challenge, targeting programs at different market segments.

Key words: Curriculum design, Segmentation and Positioning.

Introduction

The curriculum design in universities may be determined by a number factors varying based on the segments being targeted. Universities therefore need to understand students’ expectations in regard to quality of education and study outcomes, if programs are going to meet these expectations (Nicholls et al, 1995, Coldrake, 2001, Arambewela, 2003). Segmentation literature suggests that different segments may be satisfied based on different sets of activities (Athanassopoulos, 2000) and thus targeting multiple target markets with one mix might result in customer dissatisfaction. Whether there is a clear positioning of the coursework masters programs in terms of their focus is therefore important and is the research question that is investigated within this paper. In other words, the investigation is directed to ascertain the differences in a program’s focus and is based on an analysis of the degree’s entry requirements and structure.

It has been suggested that positioning of programs generally occurs in regards to undergraduate programs, with past studies examining the structure of undergraduate marketing programs in the US (Butler and Straughn-Mizerski, 1998) and Australia (Polonsky et al, 1999). However, there has been no attempt to analyse masters programs in marketing on these issues despite their growing global popularity (Lamb, Shipp and Moncrief, 1995, Athanasou, 1997, Knight, 1997).

This study examines Australian coursework masters degrees in marketing, where students complete a number of subjects, in which there may or may not be a research component. The analysis will examine a number of components related to entry criteria and structural issues in regards to coursework Master’s degrees, which Athanasou (1997) identified as being important in defining the focus of such degrees. It has been suggested that at one stage masters were predominantly research based and designed to prepare students for undertaking a PhD (Jeans 1994), but that there has been a shift in emphasis to applied coursework programs (Glazer 1986; Spencer 1985; Athanasou 1997; Thorne 1997).
It is suggested that the role of coursework-focused masters programs is less clear than traditional research masters in that coursework-focused degrees can be used to build on knowledge gained in previous degrees (advanced programs); give people with other degrees an understanding of marketing (conversion degrees); or serve as an accreditation for practitioners (accreditation) (Thorne 1997). Some universities require students to complete a coursework-focused masters, prior to entering a PhD program. This is especially important if the student does not have a marketing/business background and may be essential to developing students’ research skills (Alpert and Kamins, 2004). There is also the suggestion that universities should move away from “prized theoretical culture and the employment of abstract empiricism as the principle means of advancing knowledge” (Carter, 1994, p22) to something that is more applied in focus. Such changes will potentially require the development or redevelopment of degrees, which would include structure, entry requirements and subject content. One would expect universities, like all organisations, would offer a diverse range of “products”, i.e. programs, targeting different segments. Thus this paper is examining whether degrees appear to be focused on meeting the needs of individual target segments or multiple target segments.

Method

A content analysis of published degree information of the 38 universities in Australia was undertaken, with limited input from course coordinators. Content analysis is well recognised within marketing literature (Kassarjian, 1977) and has been used previously in examining the structure of undergraduate marketing degree programs (Butler and Straughn-Mizerski, 1998; Polonsky et al, 1999). For the purpose of this paper MBA degrees with marketing specialisations, graduate diplomas, graduate certificates, etc. were not examined.

The study attempted to quantify multiple criteria into the broad areas identified by Athanasou (1997), including: the degree name, which serves to position programs; the entry requirements (past degree, work experience, flexibility), which relate to the type of students that are targets; the structure of the program (i.e. duration, number of subjects), which relates to the scope and possibly the depth of the program; and whether a research option was available, which will allow for students to have more focused study into an area and might serve as some degree of research training. The information obtained was objective and thus no inter-judge reliability measures were undertaken (Butler and Straughn-Mizerski 1998; Polonsky et al. 1999).

The information was evaluated and categorised in terms of three major foci identified by Athanasou (1997). These are Advanced Knowledge (AK), Accreditation (AC) or Re-Training (RT). Each of the criteria was subjectively evaluated to identify how each criterion “fit” within the three foci. For example, the requirement that students had a marketing/business degree for entry and a research focus was defined to be targeting Advanced Knowledge (AK), degrees that required industry experience for entry and were shorter duration were defined as accreditation (AC), and those that required a “non-business degree” for entry requirement along with industry experience were defined as retraining (RT). The number of times a program was evaluated as Advanced Knowledge (AK), Re-Training (RT) and Accreditation (AC) were then tabulated. Given that a criterion might identify more than one focus, the sum across the types of programs could be more than 7 (i.e. the number of criteria). An examination of the majority focus (i.e. emphasis) was then undertaken to identify the program’s orientation(s).
Results and discussion

It was identified that 25 universities offer 50 different coursework-focused masters in marketing. Of the 50 different programs, 17 focus on very specialised marketing areas, such as Masters of Wine Marketing, Masters of Marketing (Logistics), Masters of Electronic Commerce and Marketing; etc. and these were omitted from further analysis. This study therefore only examined the 33 “generalist” coursework-focused marketing masters offered across 25 institutions. As shown in Table 1, the names of these programs varied. If potential students perceive the names differently, then the name used could impact on marketing activities and enrolments.

Analysis identified that the entry requirements of the coursework-focused masters varied substantially (See Table 2). For example, students who seek to progress to a PhD program would likely to enrol in a Masters that requires some previous marketing studies, whereas those looking for accreditation within the profession might be looking for programs with an applied focus.

Table 1: Degree offerings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generalist Marketing Degree (25 Universities)</th>
<th>Number (%)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Master of Business (Marketing)/Masters of Business &amp; Industrial Marketing/Masters of Business in International Marketing</td>
<td>9 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Commerce in Marketing</td>
<td>7 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Management (Marketing Management)</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters of Marketing/Masters of Marketing Management/Masters of Strategic Marketing/Masters of Professional Marketing</td>
<td>15 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Generalist Marketing</td>
<td>33 (66%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialized Marketing Degrees (9 Universities) Not included in the study</td>
<td>17 (34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Programs</td>
<td>50 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A range of entry requirements were examined and in some cases the criteria might have been used interchangeably, thus creating “blurring” between programs. This may have implications for a degree's focus, especially if one program accepts heterogeneous cohorts of students all of whom have different base levels of knowledge, experience, and desired outcomes. As Table 2 shows, 24 of the 33 programs required students to have undergraduate degrees. The entry requirements for nine of these degrees included a minimum grade point requirement as well, and thus might select “better” students who have demonstrated a capacity for learning within a university environment.

Table 2: Specified Degree Entry Requirements for Generalist Degrees ( n-33)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Number (%)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A degree, in any discipline, required for entry</td>
<td>19 (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A degree in Marketing or Business required for entry</td>
<td>4 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A non-marketing degree required for entry</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A degree in any area may be required, but students with and without a Marketing are streamed into different subjects</td>
<td>8 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No degree required for entry</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra subjects can be taken for students without degree</td>
<td>4 (12%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Professional experience can be used to replace degree (9 not specified; 1 required 3+ years)

10 (30%)

Nineteen of the 33 programs (58%) did not specify the degree required as part of the entry requirement. This may translate into programs with diverse cohorts of students, which could limit a program's ability to explore advanced theory within an area of marketing theory and thus these programs may be categorised as more of a Re-Training in nature. Four programs required an undergraduate degree in marketing or business which allowed for more advanced material to be covered. Eight of the programs that did not have an explicit business degree required appeared to stream students onto different learning pathways, depending on their academic background (i.e. business/marketing non-business/marketing). Four of these eight programs also varied in the degree content requirements for marketing/business students and others, with the others taking more subjects to complete their award. Interestingly ten programs allowed students to substitute industry experience for a degree, and only one of these specified what length of experience was required (i.e. 3+ years).

While there is frequently an expectation that coursework-focused masters are designed to link practice and theory (Davis, 1997), only eleven of the 33 programs (33%) explicitly required at least two years of work experience. This may have serious implications for programs, especially if they are trying to provide students with a better understanding of practice and students do not have any, or only limited, practical experience. Not having work experience is less likely to be problematic if the degree focuses on covering advanced theoretical issues.

Most of the programs (24) appeared to last at least three semesters (full-time), with nine others taking only two semesters to complete. While we believe that examining the structure of programs may provide equivocal information into the focus of the degree it could be concluded that programs lasting more than three semesters have an orientation towards AK while those with less than three semesters focus more on AC or RT.

In regard to subjects offered, most programs (18) had 12 subjects required, two had more than 12 subjects, eight programs had eight subjects or less and the other five comprised 10-11 subjects. The programs also varied in terms of the electives offered. Again it is difficult to draw conclusions about a program's focus from this breakdown as it is unclear how much work would be required within each subject. Although, it may be safe to assume that a ten-subject marketing masters, completed in two traditional semesters might be more focused on AC or RT of students rather than preparing students for a PhD (i.e. AK).

Most (23) programs had research options available (i.e. a thesis or major project). This was required in five programs and an option within another six. In two of these eleven programs the research project comprised half of the overall program content representing a true hybrid of coursework-focused and research-focused degree. There were also less substantial subject based research options within other programs and in nine programs students to undertook research-focused subjects mostly as electives (for example Industry Project). As previously noted, without examining the composition of each subject it is not possible to determine the orientation of these subjects, however, it is assumed that “individual research subjects” would not necessarily provide opportunities for students to examine or test complex theory/issues, at least not to the same degree as in a thesis or major project. In this context, these programs, given their applied focus, may provide more of a retraining focus than a research focussed degree or that these are designed to give students without practical experience a more applied understanding of issues. If a program required a thesis or research component, it was
categorised as AK, those where a thesis or research component were an option were classified as AK/RT/AC and those where research was not an option were RT/AC.

In summary, the course characteristics indicated that all programs had criteria relating to each of the three orientations - AK, AC and RT - albeit with different emphasis. Table 3 shows that the average number of AK items, across all programs was 3.2 compared to 3.5 for AC and 5.1 for RT. Of the 33 degree programs, only two had a primary focus on AK, while three had emphasis on AC, 21 on RT. Fifteen programs had a shared focus with AK, AC and/or RT. Some programs did not have a given type of focus and had no criteria that might communicate such positioning. For example, all programs appeared to have at least one criterion suggesting there is a RT emphasis, whereas seven programs did not have any criteria that might be construed to represent an AK Focus and nine did not have any criteria that might suggest the program was focussed on AC. The majority of programs (26) seemed to have a single primary emphasis and seven programs seemed to have a shared emphasis, with one of these seven having a balanced emphasis across the three orientations.

**Table 3: Overall Degree Focus**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average number of criteria per degree</th>
<th>Degree Focus (Number of Degrees)</th>
<th>Degrees containing no criteria for:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Knowledge (AK)</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2 3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accreditation (AC)</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3 5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-Training (RT)</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>21 7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Implications and conclusion**

The paper analysed the coursework-focussed masters programs in marketing within Australia, on five major criteria. The results indicated there are three types of programs: Specialised programs providing Advanced Knowledge, possibly leading to a PhD, Conversion degrees providing Re-Training in the marketing discipline and possibly with some research opportunities, Accreditation for practitioners with industry experience offering the opportunity to gain an understanding of the marketing discipline with possible industry based research. These dimensions were consistent with the literature (Thorne, 1997). Re-Training appeared to be the major focus of the Australian course-work based masters programs with Accreditation increasing in importance (albeit still in early stages in Australia) as in the USA and Europe (Prince, 2003 & 2002) with the Federal Government supporting the concept of preparing of students for the workforce Nelson (2003).

It is unclear whether Australian institutions actively promote programs to specific types of student cohorts to meet their specific needs and objectives. With the increasing diversity of the student population, Australian universities are expected to cope with learning behaviour and expectations of ethnically and culturally diverse students. Is the current situation a response to rationalise programs and also to increase enrolments into university programs? Having mixed groups in a program, intentionally or unintentionally, might result in some (or even all) consumers being dissatisfied with the outcomes.

More research needs to be undertaken to identify whether there are in fact different expectations amongst students, i.e. are they selecting programs because of the different
approaches and if so do the institutions deliver these? Future research should also examine students’ perceptions of degrees and differences between them; student satisfaction with these programs in regards to structure and focus; and to evaluate whether the marketing of the programs is consistent with the structure/ objectives of these programs. This additional work will assist in identifying whether individual programs are indeed targeting the correct set of potential students.

References


