

# **Exploring Student Preferences for the Master of Marketing**

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## **Abstract**

Student preferences for discipline specific post graduate degrees have received limited attention. This study responds to this gap and seeks to explore student preferences for a Master of Marketing degree. More than half of the student cohort, that are currently enrolled in a large Australian university were surveyed to understand their preferences. In contrast to previous studies, the current study was designed and administered by a student thus providing a student view rather than an educators' view of student preferences. Student's indicated a decision to study a Master of Marketing degree was motivated by a desire to enhance their career. Areas for improvement were identified. One issue that is of a concern is the majority of factors are beyond the classroom and hence marketing educator's direct control.

## **Introduction**

Education services in Australia are the third-largest export industry (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations DEEWR, 2008) and as such provide a significant contribution to the Australian economy through the direct services provided and the flow on spending effects for students seeking to study abroad. The efforts of higher education providers underpin 60 per cent of the earnings from this industry (DEEWR, 2008). According to the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations' International Student Enrolment Data (DEEWR, 2009) International students in Australia on student visas numbered 631,935 in 2009 and this represents a 16.8% increase on 2008 figures. The vocational education and training sector (VET) ranked first by amount of enrolments. It was also the fastest growing sector with a 33.3% increase in enrolments. According to DEEWR the higher education sector is the second by volume of enrolments and it increased by 12.1% to 203,324 students in 2009. Asian countries are the biggest representative with 83.2% of all enrolments in the higher education sector.

Consistent with many Universities in Australia the Business School in the University studied has doubled in size with a large proportion of this growth attributed to an influx of international students. In 2010, International students account for approximately half of the business cohort of students. Since 2005, a consultant report commissioned for the University indicates the satisfaction rating amongst Business students has been steadily declining. This decline has been in the areas of teaching and overall satisfaction.

This research explores student preferences and perceptions and seeks to understand what can be done to improve a Master of Marketing program from the student perspective. This is a student driven study that was designed, implemented and analysed by a Master of Marketing student who is currently enrolled in the program. As such, this paper offers an alternate lens through which to view student preferences for their degree. Rather than an educator or consultant imposing their view onto the issue which may act to make attributes more salient this study represents the student's point of view.

## Literature Review

Student preferences are garnering support in the higher education and marketing education literatures where a facilitating model involving marketing professors acting as “guides on the side” is being promoted by researchers (Brockbank & McGill, 1998; Hopkins & Duke, 2004; King, 1993; Slunt & Giancarlo, 2004; Thomas & Gosling, 2009; White-Clark, DiCarlo, & Gilchrist, 2008).

Student preferences have received a considerable amount of research attention. There are myriad studies seeking to understand student preferences for MBA degrees and university education in general (Athiyaman, 1997; Souter, Turner, 2002), student satisfaction in higher education (Navarro *et al*, 2005), cross-cultural values (Gray, *et al*, 2003), skills that MBA students need to gain (Arora and Stoner, 1992), and postgraduate business students’ satisfaction (Arambewela and Hall, 2009) to name a few.

A review of the literature indicated few studies (see Edgar *et al*, 2007) that have been undertaken to understand student preferences for Master of Marketing programs. Notably, East has proposed that Universities should view students as customers and this study presented findings about undergraduate and postgraduate students’ expectations and perceptions (East, 2001). The Edgar study was conducted in 2007 in the UK while the East (2001) study was conducted in Australia. Given the rapid growth in terms of size and International student numbers there is a need to update our understanding of student expectations and perceptions in Australia and to extend our understanding of student preferences for Master of Marketing programs. This paper will explore student expectations and perceptions about the Master of Marketing.

## Methodology

The data was gathered from questionnaires administered in class in Master of Marketing courses during the first half of Semester 1, 2010. One hundred questionnaires were distributed to postgraduate students attending the Master of Marketing across the two campuses where the Master of Marketing is provided. Of the 100 questionnaires 98 were completed, one was incomplete and one was completed by a Master of Business Administration student and thus was removed from analysis.

According to University records in Semester 1, 2010 183 students were enrolled in the Master of Marketing Coursework and Honours programs. Eighty four were enrolled at Campus A and 99 were enrolled at in Campus B. One quarter of the cohort at Campus B were domestic students while only 7% of students enrolled in Campus A were domestic students. There are 66 International students in Campus A, 83 in Campus B. Two Honours students were enrolled at each campus. Students completing the survey were evenly distributed and proportionate with student enrolment records. Over one half of students (53%) currently enrolled in the Master of Marketing participated in this research and as such the results of this study are expected to be representative of students currently enrolled in the Master of Marketing at this University.

Student motivations to study at the University, willingness to recommend the University, perceptions of services offered by the University and perceptions of the Master of Marketing program were measured in the questionnaire along with key demographic factors. To measure students’ satisfaction for the services provided by the University 5 point Likert scales were used (where very bad=1 and very good=5). Likert scales were also used to

measure students perceptions for the Master of Marketing (where strongly disagree=1 and strongly agree=5). Chi-square and t-tests were used to analyse the data.

## Results

Reasons for enrolling in a Master of Marketing were first explored to gain insights into student motivations for undertaking a Master of Marketing degree. Chi-square tests indicated no significant difference between reasons for domestic and International students. However, significant differences,  $\chi^2 = 9.32$ ,  $p = 0.05$ , were found between student motivations between the two campuses and these are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Reasons for studying the Master of Marketing by Location**

The reason	Campus A (n=41)	Campus B (n=55)
For career	61.0%	64.8%
Prior study at the University	9.8%	14.8%
Other	2.4%	9.3%
Personal interest	26.8%	7.5%
The University's reputation	0.0%	3.7%

The main reason students choose to study a Master of Marketing is for career development. Interestingly, one in ten undergraduate students chose to continue into a Master of Marketing degree to acquire additional marketing skills and knowledge following their study in the University's Bachelor of Marketing. Students at campus A were more likely to chose to study a Master of Marketing for personal interest when compared with Campus B, while students were more likely to choose the University based on its reputation and other reasons at Campus B.

The results of this study show that the Master of Marketing met 74.7% of students' expectations suggesting there is considerable room for improvement for one quarter of the Master of Marketing student cohort. Twenty perceptions relating to University services and the Program were next analysed to understand which services were failing to meet student expectations. T-tests were undertaken to compare campuses and domestic and International students. Few differences were found between campuses (see Table 2) and only two significant differences were found between domestic and International students. International students were less satisfied with bus and transportation services ( $M=3.0$ ) when compared with domestic students ( $M=3.6$ ,  $t(87)=2.5$ ,  $p=0.02$ ) while domestic students were less satisfied with food ( $M=2.0$ ) when compared with International students ( $M=2.6$ ,  $t(92)=2.07$ ,  $p=0.04$ ).

**Table 2: Key student perceptions**

Perceptions relating to University service element or program	Campus A (n=41)	Campus B (n=55)	Sig.
Online services	4.0	3.8	-
Library	3.9	4.0	-
Computer laboratories	3.9	3.4	p=0.01
Size of the lecture theatre	3.9	3.9	-
Job club	2.7	3.1	-
Scholarship availability	2.7	3.3	-
Public transport services	2.6	3.5	p<0.001
Food services	2.3	2.6	-
Car park availability	1.8	2.5	p=0.01

On average students perceived class sizes, the size of lecture theatre and teaching quality to be good along with a range of University services including online services and the library. On average students considered car park availability and food services to be bad.

Further perceptions relating specifically to the Master of Marketing program were analysed. Once again, campuses and student cohorts were analysed using t-tests.

**Table 3: Key student perceptions for the Master of Marketing**

	Domestic	International	Sig.
Master of Marketing will help my career	4.6	3.8	p=0.002
Good quality education	4.1	3.4	p=0.005
Degree is designed to fulfil student needs	4.1	3.4	p=0.001
Aims to provide the best education	3.9	3.3	p=0.01
Strategic Marketing is important	4.3	3.7	p=0.05
Branding is important	4.2	3.8	-
Market Research is important	3.9	3.8	-
Integrated Marketing Communications is important	3.8	3.6	-
Marketing Theory is important	3.7	3.2	-
Globalisation and corporate social responsibility is important	3.2	3.4	-

Significant differences in perceptions were found between student cohorts and campuses for perceptions relating to the Master of Marketing. Interestingly, domestic students felt more strongly than International students and this may suggest that students already employed in Marketing or Management related roles have different perceptions than students without work experience. Students currently enrolled in the Master of Marketing considered the multi-cultural student cohort experience, the friends made during their program and the teaching and learning to be the best things about studying at this University. They considered the campus facilities to be the worst part of studying at this University.

Students were asked to indicate which of the courses that are currently offered in the program were most important. Students agreed that strategic marketing, branding, market research and integrated marketing communications was important. Students did not feel as strongly about globalisation and corporate social responsibility.

## Conclusions, limitations and future research directions

The results of this study must be viewed in light of some limitations. Firstly, this study focussed on the cohort currently enrolled at the University and can't be generalised beyond this context. Future research should consider recent graduates and students who are enrolled in other Universities in a Master of Marketing program. Secondly, it was discovered during the research students from different back grounds have different expectations. The birth country, work experience and educational background of the students should have been asked to ascertain additional insights into student preferences. For instance, while the course content may be too simple for students who have a bachelor degree in marketing or in related areas such as advertising and public relations, students from different educational backgrounds state that they need basic marketing knowledge in order to advance. *In addition, in the light of Stakeholder Theory all stakeholders of the university/master of marketing namely, parents, employers, alumni, policy makers, academics and faculty administrators could be monitored to understand their expectations towards Master of Marketing that gives a better understanding us what should be teaching in the Master of Marketing.*

It could be argued that university students should not be viewed as customers. At the 1999 Australian International Education Conference (Qinglin 1999) it was claimed that 'full-fee paying international students expect to be treated like customers and to receive high quality service.' Qinglin later states that, his study shows that 'education has been treated as an industry but students are yet to be treated as customers in some cases.'

Traditionally universities' role is knowledge provision. Students see universities as a provider of necessary professional skills and knowledge for business life and businesses expect a similar role from universities both for training their labour force and providing necessary knowledge or research for their business development. Consequently, Universities are faced with a dilemma. Namely, serve or educate? Students want to be assured of the quality of the teaching and want the University to respond to their educational needs. However, it is important to note that domestic and full-fee-paying-students may have different metrics because domestic students in Australia are government founded and they do not pay fees upfront. However, full-fee-paying-students pay upfront (approx \$9,000 AUD per Semester or \$20,000 AUD per annum including fees and text books excluding living expenses). As such it is likely there is a correlation between monies invested in education and expectations. For this reason, Universities may need to move beyond considering themselves as knowledge providers towards a model where they consider their students as customers. In 1998 Kemp the then Australian Higher Education Minister suggested that university education be considered as a financial investment and identified students as customers shopping for value for money. Competition for these student 'customers' is claimed to result in better support for students. If the majority of the students are international (81.6%), they may need to be treated as paying customers and consequently Universities need to provide service standards to meet their expectations (in this case parking, food services and better transport infrastructure). Further, if the majority of students are studying the degree to further their career thought needs to be given to employability of graduates. Universities, where possible, need to provide experiential learning opportunities for students and/or work experience.

When viewed through a student lens it is clear that students want to gain practical skills and they want to have a competitive advantage upon graduation from their Master of Marketing Degree. Australian Universities are particularly attractive for overseas students, and it is obvious that there are big players in the game for the same market segment, for example, the UK and the USA.

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