

# **Constructing the value of a British postgraduate qualification: Perceptions of alumni from marketing programmes**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This pilot study explores the value of a British postgraduate marketing qualification by examining alumni's perception of their education and its consequences and discuss possible implications for postgraduate marketing education.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Primary data were collected from 30 postgraduate marketing alumni of eight countries using a Likert-scale questionnaire followed by structured interviews.

**Findings** – The results indicate that although alumni reflect favourably on the acquisition of knowledge, development of personal characteristics and the self-actualisation aspects of their education, they are less happy with the level of practical marketing experience and quality of skills they possess. The findings indicate that marketing educators might not have forcefully delivered what they largely agree in the sense that marketing education should have an explicit focus on developing students into practitioners.

**Research limitations** – This pilot research intends to encourage debate about the purpose of postgraduate marketing education. Further research using a bigger sample is desired.

**Practical implications** – This study indicates that a realignment of curriculum design by postgraduate marketing education providers is needed to produce highly skilled graduates and remain competitive in the market.

**Originality/value** – This study reveals postgraduate marketing alumni's perceptions of the value of their British qualification. The findings should be of immediate interest and practical value to marketing educators and marketing programme leaders.

**Key words** postgraduate marketing education, marketing curriculum and employment connections, international students, UK

**Paper type** Research paper

## **Introduction**

Internationalisation and growth in student mobility have altered the landscape of postgraduate marketing education in the UK during the last decade. There have been significant changes in not only the demographic make-up of the student body but the students' motives, expectations and preparedness for postgraduate marketing education (Liu, 2010). What is particularly notable has been the growth in the number of international students on UK taught programmes and, more recently, increased competition for these students from European and American institutions (British Council, 2009). As a result, British higher educational institutions are increasingly expected to consider themselves part of an educational marketplace, by responding to changes in the funding and by making efforts to secure their place in the international market of higher education (Baker, 2010). Furthermore, the quest for value from a British postgraduate qualification has intensified with employers of postgraduate students suggesting that more could be done to ensure that postgraduates get maximum benefit from their investment in a postgraduate education and are well equipped to succeed in their chosen career (Universities UK, 2010).

The postgraduate marketing education community have responded to the above developments by changing the structure, content and delivery of their marketing programmes. Although there have been commercial successes, there are substantial questions about the relevance of their educational product (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Bruce and Schoenfeld, 2006). Some of the programme developments are seen as production-led and a department of marketing has been found to teach what it can, perhaps influenced by what is being offered at other institutions and only marginally by input from practitioners and past and potential students. This has led to a perceptual gap between students' expectations and their perception of higher education services in the UK, "particularly when asked about their confidence on the money spent on higher education" (Centeno *et al*, 2008 p.562). The findings largely concur with the findings of Universities UK (2010) that, although the taught postgraduate market has in many ways been a success story – expanding substantially to meet demand and generating significant fee income for higher education institutions, there are some areas where the mechanism of the market does not work effectively, and where supply does not meet demand.

Against this background and situated in the theoretical context of the theory and practice balance in marketing education, this study attempts to explore the value of the British postgraduate marketing education perceived by alumni, and, in doing so, contextualise the role of postgraduate marketing education in relation to employment. The questions asked specifically in this study are:

- To what extent are alumni satisfied with their programme of study?
- In what way do they feel they have improved through their marketing education?
- Which part of the programme do they find useful, not useful or distantly useful in relation to their employment?
- What is the relative placement (content, exchange and self-actualisation) of a British marketing qualification?
- To what extent does the congruity and continuity of the qualification exist in relation to employment in alumni's perception?

The remainder of the paper discusses the theoretical and methodological context of the study, analyses the results and discusses the ways in which postgraduate marketing education could be made more relevant to students' educational needs.

## **Marketing curriculum and employment connections**

Traditionally, the educational functions of higher education in their relationship to employment are conceived as general, professional or academic and higher education is

perceived as to serving the general enhancement of knowledge and possibly a cultivation of values, attitudes and the personality of the students in general (Teichler and Kehm, 1995). More recently, Saunders (2006) grouped the major theory narratives into three types: structural theoretical; aspirational; and situational or contextual". The "structural theoretical" type does not connect "very strongly in terms of the technical dimension of the jobs people end up in, but connects quite strongly in terms of who does what job and how they might do them as social or interactional practices in the workplace" (p.19). Derived from the liberal and progressive narratives, the "aspirational" type focuses more on what educational practice should be about and its relationship with work than on the connectedness between education and work. The third type, "situational" or "contextual", focuses primarily on the "situation or context of practices that embody a work-learning connection" (p.19) and emphasises the learning process, the connections between learning and practices and the integration of learning and working. Saunders concluded by suggesting an "integrative" perspective on education and work that integrates aspects of the emerging narratives in the discourse of contemporary UK policy and EU initiatives such as information and communications technologies and knowledge transfer partnerships.

Saunders's study represents a significant contribution to the theorisation and understanding of the education and work connection. However, it did not examine any variations in the link in relation to subject specialism (e.g. social and natural science subjects), level of study (e.g. undergraduate and postgraduate) or various types of British universities (e.g. civic, new, post-1992 and tertiary colleges).

Research in business and management education during the past decade largely echoed Saunders's theorisation of the major narratives and debated the balance of management theory and practice (e.g. Stringfellow *et al*, 2006; Brownlie *et al*, 2008). The British educational policy is seen as being driven by the idea that the value of education lies in the instrumental benefits with increased productivity in the workplace being the main aim (Clarke *et al*, 2006) echoing calls for a more market-oriented approach to understanding the knowledge economy (Brownlie *et al*, 2008). Graduates should not only acquire skills and learn rules but be capable and motivated to question established professional practices (Teichler and Kehm, 1995).

Research in marketing education debated the role of marketing education and the theory and practice balance in the marketing curriculum (Brennan, 2004; Centeno *et al*, 2008). Marketing professionals debated rigorously about what skills, knowledge and competencies graduates should be equipped with to transform into competent marketing practitioners (Gray *et al*, 2007; Walker *et al*, 2009). Various avenues were explored to produce successful marketing graduates, including the development of skills and competencies (Walker *et al*, 2009); evaluation of students' classroom experiences from the eyes of the recruiter (Barr and McNeilly, 2002); gap analysis of the relevance of a marketing curriculum to a graduate's work environment (Davis *et al*, 2002); and skills development through revised learning outcomes (Duke, 2002).

One of the key questions asked in these researches was whether marketing education should meet the employers' perceived needs or whether it should focus on the achievement of general educational aims. Earlier research detected a relatively narrow perspective among employers, with an emphasis on generic skills (e.g. numeracy, literacy) and attitudes (e.g. punctuality) and least emphasis on general knowledge (Garneau and Brennan, 1999). More recent literature pointed towards an academic practitioner divide in the marketing curriculum caused by failures in various areas including mismatched agendas for knowledge creation and application (Brennan, 2004). Graduates were found to be underprepared in skills and over-prepared in designated knowledge areas (Davis *et al*, 2002) and lack skills to organically fit their employing organisation (Walker *et al*, 2009).

Other research draws out the perceptions of major stakeholders in marketing education. Students were found to have a relatively instrumental view of education focussing on the combination of skills and practical knowledge which enable them to do the job (Stringfellow *et al*, 2006; Crisp and Carrington, 2005). Many marketing graduate recruiters appear to hold the view that skills such as criticality are unattainable in the classroom setting and increasingly look at graduates' extracurricular activities and work experience for an indication of these skills (Barr and McNeilly, 2002).

Overall, the marketing education community appeared to acknowledge a disconnection between marketing education and marketing practice (Bruce and Schoenfeld, 2006; Stanton, 2006; Baker, 2008). There has clearly been a call for a more practitioner-oriented approach to marketing education which should equip students with the sort of transferrable skills and competencies required by the marketing profession. As such, marketing education should primarily aim to prepare students for a career in marketing and this requires an explicit focus on developing students into practitioners (Helgensa, 2009). However, the reality of marketing education today may be rather different. The theory and practice divide might have widened as a new generation of academics join the marketing education profession with limited or no direct practitioner experience (Cox, 2006) and little or no interest in marketing practice itself (Baker, 2008). They tend to take a broader perspective with more emphasis on underpinning theory (Stringfellow *et al*, 2006) which might have led to the marketing discipline losing its focus and distinctiveness and the opportunity to improve practice and drive relevant knowledge forward (Cox, 2006).

These earlier studies raise important questions about the status of today's postgraduate marketing education. However, very few studies have attempted at contextualising postgraduate marketing education in relation to the education and work connection link against the changing education and market environment outlined at the beginning of this paper. Furthermore, past studies have largely focussed on undergraduate students during their course of study rather than postgraduate alumni who have not only invested their time and resources in marketing education but also utilised their acquired qualification and competences in working life, as a result of which, they know what is required of them in real business life and how well they have been prepared for it (Baruch and Leeming, 1996). This research aims to address these gaps.

### **Methodological context**

This pilot research is of an exploratory nature with primary data collected through two phases. During the first phase, a Likert-scale questionnaire was used to survey alumni of marketing programmes who now live in eight countries. To strive for a more balanced picture across the sector, the universities sampled included the major types of British universities (one from the Russell Group, one civic university and two from post-1992 institutions).

The questionnaire was designed to gauge the opinions of alumni regarding their postgraduate education and its consequences including the relative placement of the qualification in the market place and the development of knowledge, skills and abilities. The questions asked were divided into five sections. Section One asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they have benefitted from their postgraduate marketing education by indicating their agreement or disagreement with each statement provided by ticking the box which best reflected their views. The benefits listed can be broadly categorised into those of intrinsic and instrumental nature. In Section Two, respondents were offered a list of knowledge, skills and abilities and were asked to evaluate the extent to which these have been improved by their education in the UK. The inventories of skills and abilities were drawn from the UK Quality Assurance Agency benchmarks, the Corporate Recruiter Survey studied in Bruce and Schoenfeld (2006) and relevant academic literature (e.g. Nguyen, 2005, Liu,

2009). Section Three asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they are satisfied with their programme of study in the UK. The aspects of the programme evaluated are in the areas of curriculum design, learning, teaching and assessment, personal development and career enhancement. Section Four asked respondents to identify the retrospective needs they felt left unmet by their programme of study. Section Five gathered general information on respondents including their programme title, year and mode of study as well as their nationality and employment status.

Due to the wide geographic spread of the alumni sampled, e-mail was selected as the primary means of questionnaire distribution. In total 33 alumni responded out of 90 e-mail requests representing a response rate of 37% which is consistent with other web-based rates such as Sheehan (2001) and Buchanan *et al* (2007). Among the returned questionnaires, 30 were deemed as valid and analysed for statistical significance using Stat Direct.

During the second phase of data collection, 11 of the 30 respondents studied in Phrase One were contacted for structured interviews through telephone or written responses to the interview questions. Their views provided the research with valuable insights in the form of qualitative data.

### **Emerging themes from the data**

Table 1 shows the general information of the respondents. Of the total 30 respondents, 87% studied full time and 53% were sponsored by their parents. Their ages were almost evenly spread among the four ranges of 21-25, 26-30, 31-35 and 36-40. Their nationality consists of 47% from China, 23% from UK, 13% from other EU counties, 10% from Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region of China) and 7% from other countries/regions.

**Table I.**  
**General information of the respondents**

		<i>Numbers</i>	<i>%</i>
Mode of Study	Full-time	26	87
	Part-time	4	13
Study financed	Parents	16	53
	Myself	12	40
	Employer	2	7
	Other sources	0	0
Age groups	21-25	7	23
	26-30	10	33
	31-35	7	23
	36-40	4	13
	41-45	0	0
	46-50	2	7
	Over 50	0	0
Gender	Male	14	47
	Female	16	53
Nationality/home country	UK	7	23
	China	14	47
	Hong Kong	3	10
	Other EU countries	4	13
	Others	2	7

### ***Respondent satisfaction with their education***

It was found that overall the respondents were satisfied with their study in the UK (Table 2). Further analysis reveal that the respondents were more satisfied with the knowledge, support and empathy of lecturers (mean at 4.32), the learning and teaching resources (4.11) and the

development of personal characteristics (3.96) but less so with the more work-oriented aspects of the programmes such as the development of practical skills (3.33), association with professional bodies (2.75) and practical experience and link with industry (2.54).

**Table II.**  
**Respondent satisfaction with their marketing educational experience**

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Rank</i>
The theory and practice balance in the curriculum	3.51	1.00	9
The teaching methods used	3.93	0.84	3
The assessment strategies	3.79	0.73	6
Assessment criteria and grading methods	3.72	0.75	7
Practical experience through fieldwork/company visits	2.48	1.12	13
Knowledge, support and empathy of lecturers	4.31	0.76	1
Learning and teaching resources (library, information technology, facilities)	4.10	0.81	2
Preparation for your employment – course content	3.21	0.94	11
Preparation for your employment – practical skills (group effectiveness, management, leadership, communication)	3.29	0.95	10
Association with professional bodies	2.80	1.07	12
Improvement of your English language abilities	3.71	0.94	8
Development of your personal characteristics (e.g. motivation, confidence, creativity, ambition)	3.93	0.81	4
Your development as an independent, lifelong learner	3.86	1.14	5

The above findings were further confirmed by respondents' views gathered in the second phase of the study. Pam from Hong Kong said, "Although theory is the footstone, practical experience is more crucial in my career. I wish I had more practical experience through fieldwork or company visits during my study." Ke Lin from China seemed to concur stating that his programme of study could have made more effort in putting theory to practice. He felt that the curriculum design was mainly based on the theoretical side of marketing and argued that confidence and experience could not be built by writing academic papers only.

Home graduate Ben expressed a need for more practical understanding of how a marketing team functions within an organisation and insisted that such an understanding would have helped him to acclimatise quicker when entering the world of work and enabled him to "gain a closer and valuable insight into the dynamics of the professional world of marketing." Such views suggest a lack of practical experience in the postgraduate marketing curriculum which respondents saw as important for employment.

### ***Respondents' perception of improvement through education***

The level of improvement perceived by respondents is shown in Table 3. Overall, respondents felt that they had improved to a large extent in nearly all areas measured with the higher level in the acquisition of marketing theory (mean at 4.46), skills (written presentation at 4.14 and research 4.04), and abilities (strategic thinking at 4.07 and critical thinking at 4.04). In comparison, lower level of improvement was found to be in project management (3.33), creative problem solving (3.32) and information technology skills (3.00).

**Table III.**  
**Perceived improvement through postgraduate marketing education by respondents**

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Rank</i>
Understanding of marketing theories and concepts	4.44	0.59	1
Application of theory to practice	3.69	0.98	8
Identification of marketing problems	3.66	0.63	9
Strategic thinking	4.07	0.62	3
Critical thinking	4.04	0.64	5
Cultural sensitivity and awareness	3.93	0.84	6
Written presentation	4.13	0.99	2
Oral presentation	3.48	1.04	12
Time management	3.34	1.12	14
Information technology and computing skills	2.93	1.20	18
Research skills (information gathering skills/analysing, organising and interpreting statistical data)	4.07	1.10	3
Group effectiveness (interpersonal, negotiating , teamwork)	3.59	0.96	10
Leadership and management skills	3.28	1.19	15
Creative problem-solving	3.24	1.19	17
Project management	3.35	0.92	16
Self-motivation and control	3.83	0.73	7
Entrepreneurship	2.93	1.12	18
Inquisitiveness	3.42	1.00	11
Long-term goal setting	3.48	1.12	12

Home graduate Liam wrote: “Gaining the MSc qualification, in addition to my BA degree has given me greater levels of personal confidence to perform to the best of my abilities in my workplace role. The qualification has made me a more analytical thinker and has provided me with best business practice and alternatives for solving workplace problems.”

However, not all respondents felt the same as Elena from Germany explained, “The one-year masters programme did not help me much. Knowledge is useful but not practical enough for us to apply to a real business setting.... My manager has a higher expectation of my work performance, in particular in the areas of oral and written communications.”

Could it be that skills are perceived to be more important than knowledge?

***Respondents’ perception of benefits of their education***

Alumni’s perception of the benefits from their marketing education was found to vary depending on their employment status and the desirability of their jobs. Overall, as shown in Table 4, respondents were found to have benefitted more from the intrinsic aspects (e.g. the development of intellectual abilities with a mean score of 4.04) and less from the instrumental aspects such as increasing earning power (3.32), establishing business contacts (2.62) and seeking employment in the UK for international students (2.47).

**Table IV.**  
**Perceived benefits of postgraduate marketing qualification**

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Rank</i>
I gained in-depth marketing knowledge in marketing	3.86	0.66	3
I acquired important skills to enhance my employability	3.79	0.92	4
My intellectual abilities were developed	3.97	0.68	1
I improved my self-belief and self-confidence	3.76	1.02	6
The qualification opened up new opportunities for me	3.79	0.96	4
Completing the course enabled me to get a good job	3.48	1.15	9
I started a new career as a result of the degree	2.96	1.41	13

The course met the education requirement of my career	3.69	1.15	7
Gaining the qualification increased my earning power	3.34	1.10	12
The qualification improved my professional status at work	3.46	1.01	11
The qualification increased my chance of promotion	3.50	1.14	8
I established new business contacts through the course	2.56	1.12	14
A British postgraduate degree is seen as a sign of abilities	3.48	0.90	9
My English language skills were much improved	3.88	0.96	2
Gaining the degree enabled me to secure employment in the UK	2.40	1.26	15

Liam felt that the “true measure of added value” of the qualification lay in his ability to apply knowledge into practice rather than in the qualification itself. He added: “You become more professional in that you are more aware of the best business practice and solutions to workplace problems that those without the qualification cannot appreciate or understand.”

Pam commented on the intrinsic benefits she had gained: “The knowledge from the course was less useful as market environment changes so rapidly. But the concepts such as lifelong learning, understanding self, self-confidence, self motivation and time management will benefit me for life.”

Ben wrote: “Overall, I think my MSc degree developed many of my skills which have been put to practice throughout my working career so far. Much of the strategic teaching has helped me to adapt quickly to the dynamics of an organisation and certainly given me a head start over many other working professionals who do not hold the same qualifications. The other beneficial aspects of the course which have been invaluable to me include: Report writing and structure, CRM and database management systems and Strategic marketing and strategic management”.

The views held by international respondents appear to emphasise the exchange value of the British qualification. Cheng Yuan from China felt that managers tended to have a more positive first impression towards her during the interview when she mentioned that she had studied at masters level in the UK. She also felt that studying abroad allowed her to have an exposure to different cultures and as a result she is able to share her experience with her overseas clients which help their relationship building. She considered her British education as highly valued, “an admission ticket to the job market” and “a good investment.”

Wei Wei from China stated: “I used the qualification as sound and convincing evidence of my educational background in my CV and during interviews. Generally speaking, companies consider the qualification to be of high relevance in domains of general management, marketing and sales.... My colleagues admire my masters qualification and my overseas educational experience. However, their evaluation of me at the end of day is based on my work performance and hardworking attitude.”

### ***Retrospective needs of respondents***

It was felt during the research design that identifying retrospective educational needs of alumni could offer valuable information on how to the existing marketing provision. A frequency report (Table 5) revealed an overwhelming demand for “live” projects, practical experience, and transferrable skills. Ben commented: “Having working in public relations for 12 months, I would have liked the opportunity to hone my creative writing skills by writing copy for press releases and campaign material – something which is now an integral part of my job as a marketing manager! I know the course wasn’t focused on public relations and communications but I see many of my marketing colleagues who do not have high standard of writing skills and I think all marketing degree courses at all universities should help students to develop their creative writing skills.”



**Table V.**  
**Retrospective educational needs identified by respondents**

<i>Retrospective needs identified</i>	<i>Frequency from 30 returns</i>	<i>% of 30 returns</i>	<i>Rank</i>
Practical experience	27	90	1
Oral presentation	9	30	2
Career planning	6	20	3
Creative problem solving	6	20	3
Team work	6	20	3
Computer skills	5	17	4
Project management	5	17	4
Research skills	5	17	4
English language proficiency	3	10	5
Critical thinking	3	10	5
Entrepreneurship	3	10	5
Negotiation	3	10	5
Risk management	3	10	5
More interaction in class	3	10	5
Strategic thinking	3	10	5
Theory and concepts	2	7	6
Time management	2	7	6
Leadership	2	7	6
Interpersonal skills	2	7	6
Vocational skills	2	7	6
Financial reporting and analysis	2	7	6

In summary, the emerging themes can be captured graphically in the following matrix:

	<i>Satisfaction</i>	<i>Improvement</i>	<i>Added benefits</i>	<i>Retrospective needs</i>
<i>Knowledge/theory</i>	high	high	high	low
<i>Practice</i>	low	low	low	high
<i>Skills</i>	low	medium	medium	high
<i>Personal characteristics</i>	high	medium	high	low

### **Discussions and conclusion**

The study set out to determine the value of a British postgraduate marketing qualification by studying alumni's perception of their educational experience and its consequences in the context of the work and education connection and the theory and practice balance in postgraduate marketing education. The results suggest that overall the respondents reflected favourably on their education in the UK and that the British qualification is held in high esteem in some of international alumni's home countries. A British postgraduate marketing qualification has provided alumni with a convincing competitive advantage over their contemporaries who have not received overseas education.

Respondents recorded high level of satisfaction and improvement in the acquisition of marketing knowledge, understanding of marketing concepts and development of personal attributes. They found their education rewarding in both intrinsic and instrumental terms. In comparison, they were less happy with the lack of practical marketing experience in their education and the improvement of transferrable skills. The respondents shared the view that marketing education should prepare graduates for the practical side of the business and

generally favoured a more work-oriented education that furnishes them with a combination of skills and practical knowledge which enable them to do the job, echoing the “situation or context” narrative that embodies the work-learning connection (Saunders, 2006).

The findings in this study also reveal a demand for the development of broadly-based generic skills in information technology, oral presentation, English language abilities for overseas students, problem solving, team work and time management. They support the “integrative” perspective (Saunders, 2006) on education and work which integrates aspects of the emerging narratives in the discourse of contemporary UK policy and EU initiatives.

This study had extended the theorisation of the work and education connection (Saunders, 2006) to a subject- and programme level-specific context and increased the understanding of the education and work link in an occupationally-oriented, social science discipline. In doing so, it has identified a number of gaps between alumni satisfaction and postgraduate marketing education offerings. The findings in this study indicate that occupationally-oriented programmes may have a particular problem with general education and instrumentality. There is evidence in this study to suggest that marketing educators might not have forcefully delivered what it had largely agreed on, that is marketing education should have an explicit focus on developing students into practitioners. It is thus important that business schools take action to provide students with not only knowledge and theory of marketing but practical industry experience for instance through placements, company visits, “live” projects and use of practitioners in lecturing staff . Efforts could also be made to improve students’ transferrable skills through a more “relevant” curriculum that aims to develop students’ skills and competencies.

This study also reveals the very “international” and culturally diverse nature of the postgraduate student population. There has been a significant shift from post-experience, part-time students to pre-experience, full-time students in the postgraduate student body. It is important to note that respondents’ acute need for practical skills and overwhelming desire for industry experience may be attributed to the fact that many of them entered full-time postgraduate studies directly from university prior to gaining any work experience in marketing. This significant shift suggests that a reshaping of the postgraduate marketing curriculum and realignment of various support activities for international students on the part of the UK business schools are needed in order to cope with the demographical changes in the student population.

### **Limitations and further research**

As respondents from different world regions may differ in their needs, their perception might have been influenced by their respective cultural and educational background. Further research using bigger samples could investigate the impact of these influences on their needs.

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