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Abstract
There have been many empirical investigations into industry requirements regarding the education of marketing graduates. These studies have been conducted in many countries, in many different industries and from many perspectives. While the emphasis of the present study still lies on understanding what the industry wants from marketing graduates, an additional aspect is explored: the existence and nature of sub-groups of recruiters who prioritize different aspects of the candidate's qualifications. An empirical study is conducted in the larger Sydney and Illawarra region. Groups of recruiters with different views on what graduates should deliver were constructed and described.

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Are Australian Practitioners Homogeneous with regard to their Expectations of Marketing Graduates?

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Abstract

There have been many empirical investigations into industry requirements regarding the education of marketing graduates. These studies have been conducted in many countries, in many different industries and from many perspectives. While the emphasis of the present study still lies on understanding what the industry wants from marketing graduates, an additional aspect is explored: the existence and nature of sub-groups of recruiters who prioritize different aspects of the candidate's qualifications. An empirical study is conducted in the larger Sydney and Illawarra region. Groups of recruiters with different views on what graduates should deliver were constructed and described.

Introduction

Offering a good education to marketing students has to follow the same rules the students are taught themselves in strategic marketing: try to satisfy the market's demand. The market demand means the requirements of companies that are potential target employers for marketing graduates. The aim of this study is to investigate prior findings in the area and to conduct a study in the larger Sydney area to determine the factors of high relevance to employers that should therefore be emphasized by students in their learning choices. Furthermore, in a novel approach to the area, this study will investigate the existence and nature of homogeneous groups of recruiters who might have different expectations or selection criteria when hiring marketing graduates.

Prior research

The job market continues to be fiercely competitive as new graduates compete not only with each other, but also with graduates from previous years. Yet despite the large number of applications for each position, employers report difficulties recruiting graduates of the desired standard, often the result of a mismatch between graduate expectations and the skills demanded on the job (Gabb 1997, Pickard 1999, Scott and Frontczak 1996, Tobias 2001). As Government reforms impact on University funding, and students face higher tuition fees or larger HECS debts, students would be expected to maximize their employment opportunities by studying degree courses that will provide superior preparation for the workforce. Thus careful consideration must be given to the content of various marketing education programs in order to best equip students for their transition into the business world.

Previous studies seem to centre on the perspectives of academics, students or a particular industry sector. Academic stakeholders have tended to focus on curriculum content in terms

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of marketing knowledge areas or job specific course work (Gray et al. 2002, Scott and Frontczak 1996). More recently in Australia, Universities have been encouraged to produce explicit statements of the desired education outcomes of graduates. These outcomes list the qualities, attributes, capabilities and skills developed by students during their study and have been generated mostly from literature in psychology, education and management (McMullen and Braithwaite 2002). Marketing professionals could use these educational outcomes to develop expectations of graduates, yet there remains the possibility that these may not match industry requirements for entry-level positions.

Expectations of graduate employers have been investigated in Australia, New Zealand, the UK and the USA and show a consensus that graduates are lacking written communication skills (Eagle and Hunt 2002, Gabb 1997, Gray et al. 2002, Pickard 1999). The expectations of graduate employers within particular industries have also been examined. Employers within Advertising, Market Research and IT sectors have all concurred that graduates should possess a generic range of basic skills and capabilities and that graduates lack business know-how and real-world experience (Scott and Frontczak 1996, Tobias 2001, Turtle and Katryniak 1992).

Given that the consumers of educational courses are students seeking to obtain maximum advantage for future employment, more market research is needed to determine the characteristics demanded by employers for numerous entry-level roles across a wide range of industries. Previous research has either focused on a particular industry or assumed homogeneity among recruiters from various industry sectors. This study was designed to investigate the attributes expected by graduate employers representing a large variety of organisations situated within a particular geographic area, and to explore the existence of heterogeneity among recruiters, which represents a novel approach in this area of research.

Empirical study

An empirical study was conducted in the autumn session 2003 within the framework of an applied marketing research subject for third year marketing students.

An interview guideline was designed for administration in face-to-face interviews. The first section of the questionnaire covered demographic information of the interviewee. This section included items about the extent of the interviewee's involvement in the hiring of marketing graduates. These were included in order to ensure respondents had the relevant knowledge of criteria used in selecting graduates.

The attributes of marketing graduates formed the basis for the next sections of the interview. The relevant attributes were chosen based on secondary data research detailed above, examination of recruitment advertisements and an exploratory prestudy with company representatives at a Careers Fair. These attributes were grouped into four major categories with 8-14 attributes per category. Respondents answered a binary question for each attribute in the category indicating whether or not the attribute would positively influence the decision to hire a marketing graduate. Each respondent was then asked to indicate the importance of each attribute that they had indicated would positively influence the hiring decision. This question required the interviewee to assign a percentage representing the importance of the attribute with the restriction that these should sum to 100%.

The first category of attributes was titled "Formal Qualifications" and consisted of items relating to Degrees, Majors and Work Experience. "Skills" was the next category and encompassed a wide variety of skills ranging from Leadership and Communication Skills to

Project Management and Computer Skills. The third category of attributes was named "Work-related Personal Characteristics" and items included Hard-working, Ambitious, Motivated and taking Initiative. The final category "Personal Characteristics" covered traits such as Confident, Creative and Sociable.

Respondents were then asked to assign each broad category a percentage to indicate the contribution of each area to the hiring decision, with the contributions totalling 100%. The final items of the questionnaire asked the respondent for demographic details of their organization.

A judgmental sampling procedure was utilized to recruit 250 respondents working in organisations relevant to the recruitment of marketing graduates in Australia, with a focus on the Sydney metropolitan and Illawarra regional areas. The final sample size was reduced to 185 respondents (74%) after the exclusion of respondents indicating that they were not responsible for hiring new staff. Entry-level marketing graduates were typically employed by these companies on continuous contracts and on a full time basis as indicated by 82% and 85% of respondents respectively. The majority of respondents (55%) worked in organisations located within the Sydney Metropolitan area, 29% of organisations were situated in the region of Wollongong and 4% from across regional New South Wales, with the remainder located in other areas. The sample featured a large range of organisations with respect to size with 31% of companies employing up to 25 people, 30% of companies had more than 200 staff and 10% of respondents indicated more than 2000 people were employed in their firm.

The organisations represented in the study were engaged in business across a wide range of sectors. The largest proportion of respondents at 22% worked in the Services Industry, followed by 12% of respondents from the Retail Sector. A total of 8% of respondents indicated that their organisation was engaged in pure marketing. Advertising, Consumer Goods and Recruitment sectors each comprised 7% of respondents. Additional Sectors in the sample included Manufacturing, IT, Finance, HR, Real Estate, Education, Government, Research, Sales and Consulting.

Respondents represented a cross section of levels of seniority and a range of roles as indicated by their position title. Forty-eight respondents were Marketing Managers, making this the largest job category among respondents. There were 24 Senior Executives including CEOs, Executive Directors and Managing Directors. At a slightly lower management level, there were 19 Managers of Marketing Subdivisions. The lower levels in organisations were also represented with 13 Marketing Assistants. As professionals involved in hiring marketing graduates was the major criteria for participation, a total of 38 respondents were working in Human Resources or Recruitment. These included HR Consultants, HR Managers and HR Officers together with consultants from Recruitment agencies. Other commonly listed positions were Sales Manager, Advertising and Promotion Manager and other management and sales positions.

Field Work took place over a two-week period in May 2003. Interviews were conducted by third year applied market research students in face-to-face settings, over the telephone and via email.

Results

There was a large degree of consensus among respondents with respect to the set of characteristics that would positively influence the hiring decisions. All respondents agreed

that an applicant should be motivated with communication skills and a hard working attitude indicated by 99% and 98% of respondents. There was 96% level of agreement that willingness to learn continuously, capable of teamwork, presentation skills and problem solving skills would each positively influence decisions. Marketing-related work experience and appearance was deemed an influencing factor in 95% of cases. Overall, the majority of factors listed were agreed to influence the hiring decisions by 80% of respondents. This was consistent across industry sectors and gender of recruiter. Chi Square test based on Cross-tabulations of influencing factors and company locations revealed that responses to only one item showed significant differences in agreement based on the location of the company. A Bachelor degree was considered influential by 92% of companies in the Sydney metropolitan area however just 74% of organisations in Wollongong and regional NSW agreed that it would positively influence the hiring decision (p=.016). Clearly, this information gives only limited insight, as these questions did not require respondents to make a trade-off between graduate attributes. This explains the high level of agreement to each influencing factor, which weakens the information value. We therefore asked respondents to assign a percentage to each area reflecting its contribution to the hiring decision.

An examination of the relative importance of each characteristic showed that average percentage weighting of marketing work experience at 27% was the most important single characteristic with average weightings between 4.4% and 16.5% for other characteristics. There were no significant differences between the ratings of any of the attributes across industry sectors, company locations and gender of recruiter.

The second part of the analysis focussed on the broad categories of influencing factors: Formal Qualifications, Skills, Work-related Personal Characteristics and Personal Characteristics. An examination of the percentage weightings assigned to each category showed no significant differences between the average importance of each category to the overall hiring decision across the whole sample. A cluster analysis was then performed on 152 respondents with valid data on these measures (k-means procedure using Euclidean Distance). The results indicated 3 distinct groups of recruiters (Figure 1).

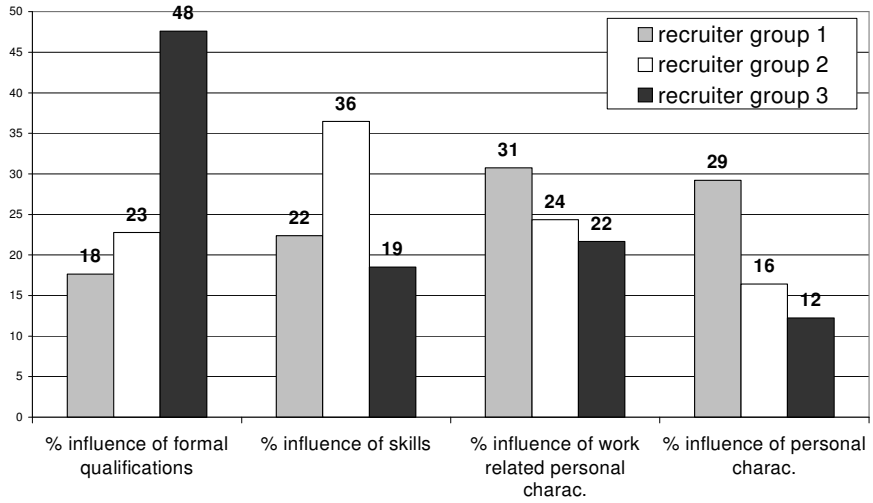

Figure 1: Recruiter Groups

Recruiter Group 1 represented 38% of the sample and placed highest weighting on Work-related Personal Characteristics (31%) and general Personal Characteristics (29%), with lower average ratings of 22% for Skills and 18% for Formal Qualifications. Recruiter Group 2 was

the largest group, representing 44% of the sample. This group emphasised Skills as the category of most influence on the hiring decision with an average weighting of 36%, followed by similar levels of importance for Work-related Personal Characteristics and Formal Qualifications at 24% and 23% respectively, but stated that Personal Characteristics contributed an average of only 16% to hiring decisions. Recruiter Group 3, the smallest group at 18%, were very strongly influenced by Formal Qualifications and indicated that this category contributed 48% to their decisions. On average, this group placed a significantly higher emphasis on Qualifications than the other groups (p=.000). Work-related Personal Characteristics and Skills were the next most important areas to Recruiter Group 3 (22% and 19% respectively), with Personal Characteristics influencing at a 12% level.

These results indicated that each Recruiter Group placed highest importance on different aspects of the candidate. The analysis proceeded to examine whether the influence of any specific attributes were significantly different between the Recruiter Groups. For the first category of attributes, Formal Qualifications, Recruiter Group 3 was influenced at a significantly higher level than the other groups by a candidate possessing a Bachelors Degree (p=.005), their grade average (p=.001) and by marketing-related work experience (p=.012). Communication Skills exerted significantly more influence over the recruiters in Group 2 than the other recruiters (p=.005). This corresponds with the greater emphasis placed on the Skills Category by this group of respondents. As discussed above, Recruiter Group 1 placed most value on Personal Characteristics and Work-Related Personal Characteristics. In the category of Work-Related Personal Characteristics, Recruiter Group 1 rated "Hard Working" as a significantly more important trait than did the other recruiters (p=.006). However Recruiter Group 3 was the group most highly influenced by "Confident" from the list of Personal Characteristics (p=.007).

The composition of the Recruiter Groups was examined with regard to distinguishing characteristics of both the interviewees and their organisations. The only classifying feature on which the three Recruiter Groups differed was on the average number of graduates hired. Recruiter Group 2, who had stressed the importance of skills, had hired an average of 4.34 marketing staff, a significantly lower number than the other groups (p=.001). There was not a significant difference between the average 10.6 and 12.42 marketing staff hired by Recruiter Group 1 and 2 respectively. The composition of the three Recruiter Groups was equivalent with respect to other features such as gender, size of the organisation, geographical location and starting salary of the position.

Limitations, conclusions, and future work

The importance of factors not typically taught at university is strongly underestimated in curriculum development. Although there exists a group of recruiters that place most importance on Formal Qualifications, this corresponds with a high level of importance of work experience, which was the outstanding influence on hiring decisions across all respondents. It has been argued that work experience can form part of the university curriculum in the form of structured vacation placements, cooperative education programs and internships (Pickard 1999, Powell and Brace-Govan 2002, Scott and Frontczak 1996, Tobias 2001). These initiatives can help bridge the gap between classroom learning and practical on-the-job training (Bruce 1993) while also providing benefits to the company through an opportunity to examine the work performance of future graduate recruits, enhancing the likelihood of hiring suitable employees and retaining them (Gabb 1997).

With regard to the existence of recruiter groups it is found that a reasonable grouping can be constructed into three sub-groups that strongly differ in their expectations of graduates. Skills were the largest area of influence for one group of recruiters (the largest one), and featured in the top three areas of influence across all sub-groups. The one recruiter group that placed most emphasis on formal qualifications, turned out to be the smallest in size. The third recruiter group, representing slightly more than one third of the respondents, have a strong interest in the candidate's personal characteristics.

Communication skills were specifically demanded by 99% of respondents, and presentation skills, problem solving skills, a customer focus and time management skills were all expected by at least 91% of all respondents. This finding is consistent with previous studies and recommendations to integrate further written and oral communication tasks into existing courses (Scott and Frontczak 1996). It would be advantageous to design educational courses that simultaneously facilitate the development of these skills and provide students with real-world experience. Experiential Learning where students, often as part of a team, complete projects for non-profit organisations or local SMEs is one possible method to achieve these aims (Pickard 1999). Although some institutions have begun to implement Work Placements and Internship Programs, these efforts are often impeded by an insufficient number of cooperating employers.

This study was conducted using a convenience sample confined to the Sydney and Wollongong regions. A lack of co-operation from industry representatives, in terms of both participation rates and completion of all sections in the questionnaire, and a tight fieldwork schedule resulted in fewer personal interviews than expected. Together with the geographical restriction, this places limitations on the generalisability of these findings.

Future work on this particular data set will involve investigation of recruiter groups based on other criteria and an investigation of possible existence of underlying dimensions representing sets of attributes. Furthermore, due to the limitations of the present study, it is suggested that a two-stage replication of the study with in-depth exploratory research and longer interview timeframes be conducted.

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