The Future-Proofed Practitioner: A Service-Centred Marketing Curriculum

Toni Hilton, Ravi Bhat, Unitec New Zealand
Kenneth F. Hyde, Yingzi Xu, AUT University

Abstract

Hilton, Hughes and McDowell (2007) suggest that the core marketing curriculum as currently delivered within many UK business schools is failing to prepare marketing students for the types of organisations they are likely to work within. Specifically they claim that the core marketing curriculum does not reflect the growing importance of service industries nor does it reflect a service-dominant logic in marketing. A Relationship-Driven model of marketing education is presented which proposes that development of the marketing curriculum is an interactive and ongoing process involving three parties: marketing academics, marketing students, and marketing practitioners. The paper proposes a research agenda to explore the dynamic processes of development of the marketing curriculum in New Zealand, and to address knowledge gaps arising from the Hilton, et al. (2007) study.

Introduction and Rationale

This paper considers whether the content of the current marketing curriculum delivers the knowledge students will need to put into practice. The discussion commences with a brief review of the current debate surrounding general business education and practice before considering the specific context of marketing education and practice. When questioning the relevance of the current marketing curriculum for practitioners we are, in this instance, considering the growth in the service industries sector.

A growing 'knowledge-practice' divide has been noted by a number of academics who are critical of the approach towards the academic study of business adopted by many business schools (Argyris and Schon 1974; Huff, 2000; Starkey and Madan, 2001; Hatchuel, 2001). In contrast to professional schools such as law, social work, medicine, architecture and engineering, it is claimed that Business Schools have developed independently from the profession they serve (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002) such that "so much of what continues to be taught on mainstream business and management courses revolves around disciplinary content and mainstream academic research, without any meaningful dialogue with or input from business and industry about the skills and attributes they believe graduates should possess" (Forster, 2007, p.25).

Current academic debate within the marketing discipline reflects these comments (e.g. Tapp, 2004; Piercy, 2002) with 44% of UK academics describing the need to integrate theory and practice as a critical issue for academic marketers (Baker and Erdogan, 2000). Modern economies have moved from being primarily manufacturing-based to being primarily service-based. Vargo & Lusch (2004) argue that this shift in the practitioner environment, from the exchange of tangible goods towards the exchange of intangibles, specialized skills and knowledge and processes, needs to be reflected in a more service-centred marketing curriculum. A marketing curriculum based on an FMCG marketing mix model appears outdated if business schools need to prepare graduates for employment in service industries

such as banking and finance, computer and information technology, telecommunications, hospitality and tourism.

Processes of Curriculum Development

In order to embed the core marketing curriculum with a service orientation, it is necessary to understand the processes of curriculum development in business schools. Equally important is the identification of all parties involved in curriculum development. Are students customers, or are they the products of education? Are the organisations that employ graduates the primary customers? Do the faculty and administrators of business schools control curriculum development or do students and organisations also have a role to play? It is important that these issues are raised and addressed.
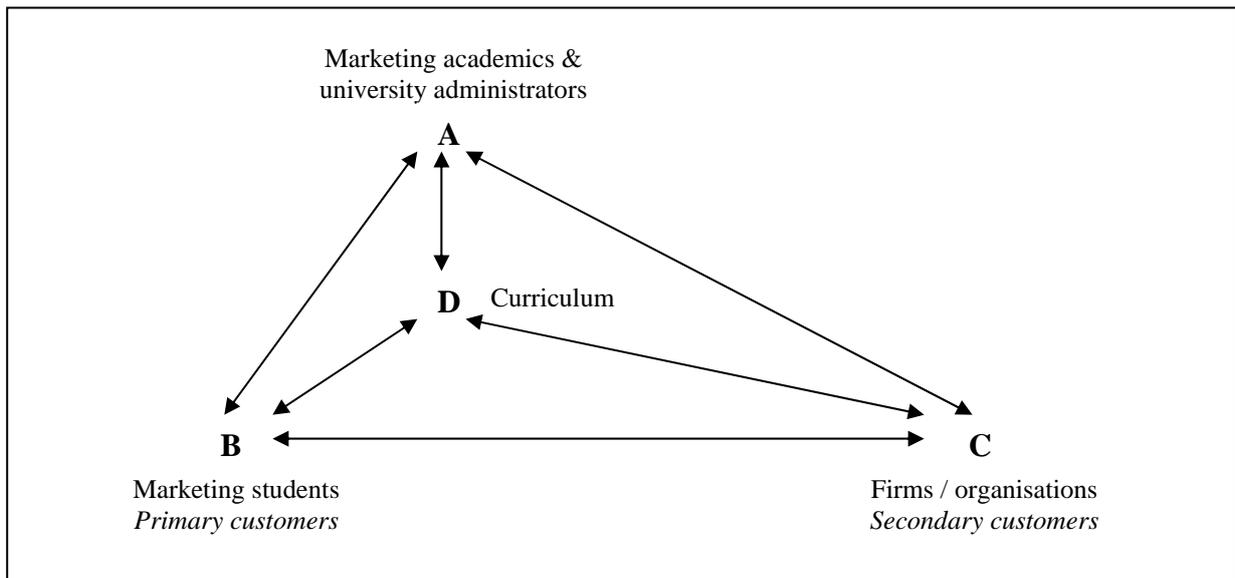
Figure 1 - The "Student as Customer" Model of Marketing Education
(Adapted from Lovelock, Patterson and Walker, 2001)

Figure 1, adapted from Lovelock, Patterson and Walker (2001), presents a "student as customer" model of marketing education, with three parties that have a stake in the marketing curriculum. As service providers, marketing academics and university administrators (node A) have primary responsibility for the creation and delivery of the marketing curriculum. Marketing academics in turn have two sets of customers – the students (node B) as primary customers attending the university in order to become marketing professionals, and industry and organisations (node C) as secondary customers, that will employ the university's finished products, that is employ the marketing graduates. The scalene triangle shows the centre of activity shifted towards node B, to reflect the student focused nature of curriculum development. This "student as customer" approach is evident in that many business schools are required to formulate marketing plans and organise marketing promotions to attract students, and evident in that "student customers" evaluate their lecturers' performance (Hugstad, 1997; Klasson, 2000; Magner, 1997).

Adopting a "student as customer" approach does have advantages for a business school, since funding at both the institute and departmental level is often based on the generation of student enrolments. However, there are also potential negative consequences inherent within a "student as customer" approach. It may encourage a myopic perspective that supports high

pass rates amongst student customers, the "easy A" or "grade inflation" (Clayson and Haley, 2005). There is also evidence that programme structures and curricula may be compromised to facilitate students graduating as quickly as possible (Clayson and Haley, 2005).

A Relationship-Driven Model of Marketing Education

We propose Figure 2 as an alternative to the "student as customer" approach. The figure proposes a "relationship-driven" model where the institution (node A) and the student (node B) are partners in education along with other stakeholders (node C). This model can also provide a "process framework" for marketing curriculum development. Marketing academics may have primary responsibility for the development of curriculum, but the relationship-driven model suggests there are other parties and processes that contribute towards the development of the marketing curriculum. The equilateral triangle suggests a balance in the influence of all three parties, on curriculum development.
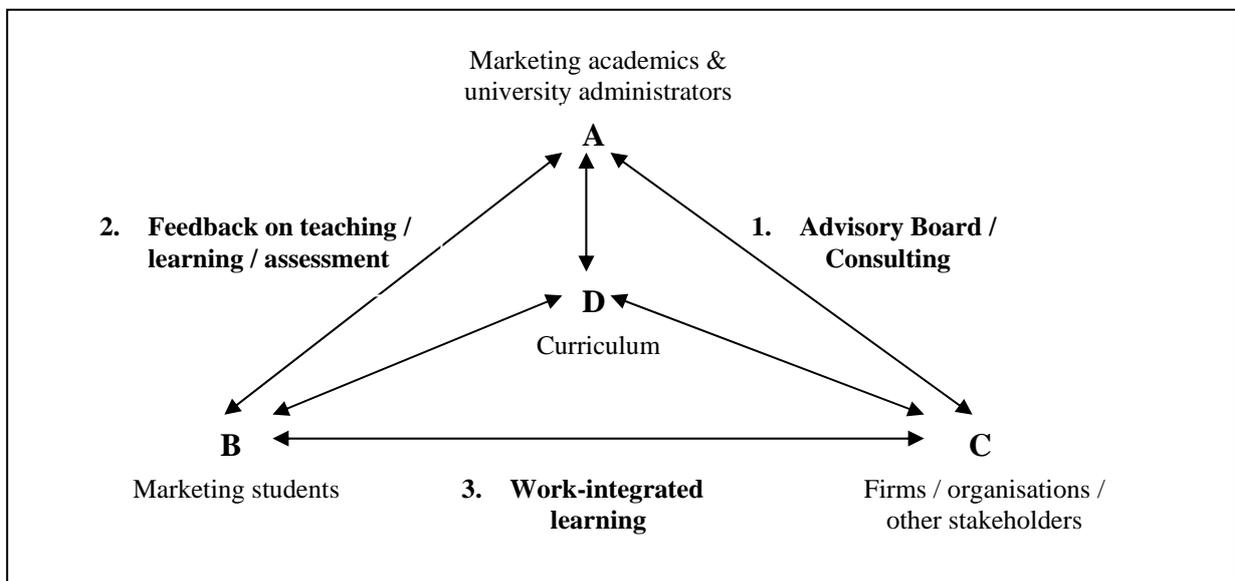
Figure 2 – Proposed Relationship-Driven Model of Marketing Education

First, advisory council meetings with academics contribute towards maintaining the relevancy of the curriculum for future employment of students (path AC in the figure). Individual academics also provide consulting services to industry thereby maintaining currency with industry practice. Secondly, academics research, publish and attend conferences which provides input for curriculum development (path AD). Thirdly, students provide feedback to academics and university administrators via course evaluations which prove to be especially valuable in the teaching/learning/assessment component of the curriculum (path AB). Fourthly, professional bodies require a body of knowledge to be included in the curriculum (path CD). The fifth process (path BC) is attaining increasing importance as many students wish to gain industry experience as part of their marketing studies. Work-integrated learning provides students with the opportunity to compare theory with practice and give feedback on the relevance of the curriculum (path BD).

As a service, marketing education may be viewed as being co-created by the academic and the student in the classroom (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). In some instances, such as the provision of industry-based learning experiences, marketing education may co-created by the student and industry and academia, working collaboratively.

Hilton, Hughes and McDowell (2007) claim the purpose of their paper was *"…to share ideas and insights with colleagues as we explore the possibilities for the development of the marketing curriculum to reflect the lived experiences of our students and the theoretical knowledge they will need to apply to operate within the marketing environments that will employ them."* However, the Hilton et al. (2007) study did not include a student perspective to measure the extent to which marketing students who work part time are *"working within service industries such as telesales, fast food outlets or retailing."* Nor did they analyse how many industry-based learning positions undertaken by marketing students are set in service industry contexts as opposed to product manufacturing contexts. Finally that study did not follow marketing students into their careers to determine the prevalence of service industries when entering practice. Thus gaps exist in our knowledge of the process of developing the marketing curriculum, especially an understanding of the perspectives of students and industry.

Proposed Research Agenda: Three Perspectives

Study One – New Zealand Academics

Study One will examine the perspectives of academia. Specific issues that will be addressed are:
1. who has ownership and control of the marketing curriculum?
2. perceptions of the extent to which the marketing curriculum should reflect the interests and priorities of academia, the needs of marketing graduates, or the needs of industry and employers of marketing graduates
3. the extent to which a services perspective is currently presented in the marketing curriculum
4. perceptions of the extent to which a services perspective should be incorporated in the marketing curriculum.

Study Two – Marketing Students and Marketing Graduates

Study Two will be to measure the extent to which the undergraduate marketing curriculum reflects the work experiences of marketing students. Consequently this study seeks to measure four aspects of the teaching-practice nexus:
1. the extent to which the undergraduate marketing curriculum prepares students for entry level marketing jobs once they graduate
2. the extent to which the marketing curriculum enables current students to make sense of their employment experiences prior to and concurrent with their marketing studies
3. the extent to which current students are able to apply new learning, gained from their courses, to their immediate working environment
4. the extent to which the industry-based learning experiences undertaken as part of the undergraduate curriculum include service oriented activities.

Study Three – Industry and Employers

The purpose of Study Three will be to determine how effective the undergraduate marketing curriculum is in preparing students for the workplace, from the perspective of employers. A survey will be undertaken of employers of marketing graduates. The survey will investigate:
  1. the extent to which the undergraduate marketing curriculum prepares students for entry level marketing jobs
  2. the extent to which graduates are able to apply marketing theory gained from their degrees to their working practice
  3. the extent to which a services perspective should be incorporated in the marketing curriculum.

Discussion

The Relationship-Driven Model of marketing education proposes that three parties - marketing academics and administrators, students and business organizations - are involved in the design and development of the marketing curriculum. The process of marketing curriculum development is the result of a knowledge-building process which comes from dialogue between these parties.

This model also indicates an interactive and ongoing process: industry demands graduates who can apply their marketing knowledge in their jobs. Consequently, students need to gain relevant knowledge and skills for their future work. This requires business schools to provide a curriculum which fits students' needs and reflects changes occurring in business practice. Graduates also evaluate the relevance to their work of the marketing courses they have studied. The question is to what extent academics consider the feedback from their graduates when developing the marketing curriculum.

Undoubtedly there exists a growing service economy with more jobs in the service sector for marketing graduates. Many of the business schools in the Hilton et al. (2007) study had adopted an approach of combining traditional marketing courses with an optional services marketing course, which makes services marketing courses merely additional to the core / foundational course. Thus a gap was identified between the current marketing curriculum and the needs of students and industry among business schools in the UK. In this research we intend to investigate the situation among business schools in NZ. We aim to explore the factors contributing to the gap between the marketing curriculum and the needs of students and industry from the perspective of each of the three parties involved, rather than limiting ourselves to the perspective of academics.

Industry is the real laboratory in which marketing graduates apply the knowledge and skills they have gained in the classroom. Employers test the quality of graduates, and are able to provide first-hand information regarding innovations in industry. The link between academics and industry can be weak, in terms of cooperation in the development of the marketing curriculum and maintaining a balance between marketing theory and marketing application.

Identifying the causes of the gap between marketing curriculum and the needs of students and industry is not an end in itself, but merely a beginning. The more challenging question for service marketing academics is how to maintain the currency and relevance of knowledge

within the marketing curriculum to meet the needs of students and the fast-growing service economy.

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