

Postgraduate Preferences: A study of factors contributing to programme satisfaction amongst Masters students

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Abstract

Background: Universities have a vested interest in attracting and encouraging enrolment of as many high calibre students as possible. With greater frequency, universities are using marketing techniques to do so.

Aims: The study reviewed current student opinions of a programme within a UK university to discover its shortcomings and strengths. Topics investigated were why the programme was selected by the participant pool, programme worth, impressions of modules, lecturers, and materials, how to increase the appeal of the programme to potential applicants, whether the current students regretted enrolment, and whether the student would recommend the course to a prospective student.

Sample: Eighty-one participants who took part in the study. They are Computing Science MSc students who were given a questionnaire during their classroom sessions.

Method: An 11-item questionnaire was used to determine student demographic information, opinions of marketing and usefulness of the MSc in Computing Science programme. Questions regarding why the programme was selected, whether it was worthwhile, impressions of specific aspects of modules taken to date, how to increase the appeal, regret of enrolment, and whether the student would recommend the course to a prospective student were asked. Questionnaires were distributed to all students in the spring of 2005.

Results: Analyses indicate that greater flexibility of studies and increasing ease of manoeuvring through administrative matters would enhance programme value.

Conclusions: Universities should consider modifying some aspects of programmes to best appeal to student needs, e.g., increasing flexibility. Students should be provided with information to better understand the potential career paths of those who graduate with a particular degree. Involving alumni in recruiting new students might be a worthwhile endeavour. Recommendations to alter the programme and marketing strategy to highlight how the programme meets the needs of students were developed.

Keywords: higher education, marketing, computing science

Acknowledgement: Thank you to Dr. Xiaohong Gao for her help with translation.

As higher education attempts to meet the needs of its constituent groups and attract students, there is an obvious use for marketing strategy (Goldgehn, 1982; Litten, 1980; Mulnix, 1989; Uehling, 1980). Marketers working on behalf of a given university must isolate what is important and then inform students as to how the university meets those expectations. The current study investigates how students think about their computer science programmes and whether the programmes could be marketed differently to attract students best suited to it.

In marketing terms, Patterson, Johnson and Spreng (1997) show a strong link between satisfaction of the customer (i.e., student) and repurchase intentions (i.e., returning of a second year of study). In the case of the current study, 'repurchase' may not have as much value as 'purchase.' 'Purchase' is what gets a prospective student interested in the programme initially; purchase because how a current satisfied student may encourage enrolment of prospective students. According to Bolton, Kannan and Branlett (2000), repurchase is based on the assessment of a number of underlying service dimensions (e.g., interaction with staff, self-esteem/success).

Interest in how universities market themselves to their consumers has been customary since the 1980s (e.g., Buell, 1986; Mackey, 1994; Schartz, 1993; & Rogers, 1998). It should be noted that higher education cannot simply take marketing strategies for consumer products as their own to sell a given university (McGrath, 2002). Rather, higher education should be marketed as a service industry (Brooks & Hammons, 1993; Canterbury, 1999; Cheng & Tam, 1997; Liu, 1998).

Administrators are beginning to realise that they must work more like a business and market their schools using sound techniques (Hancock & McCormick, 1996). Organizational models that include marketing have been proposed for higher education institutions (HEIs) by Caren and Kemerer (1979) and Kotler (1982). In response, higher education marketing has

begun to view itself from a true marketing perspective. For example, universities with a high percentage of international students are called “export industries” (Gatfield, 1998). New delivery methods, such as the Internet, are oftentimes called “distribution methods” (Gatfield, 1998) and other HEIs are considered to be the university’s “competitors” (Landrum, Turrisi, & Harless, 1998).

Emphasising different aspects of universities for recruitment and retention purposes might prove useful. For example, recruitment marketers should address characteristics of the educational experience that have the highest level of perceived importance to students while retention activities need to be focused on keeping current students satisfied so that they return year after year (Elliott & Healy, 2001). Thus, marketing of HEIs must be dynamic depending on the target audience. HEIs may need to consider their strengths and potential students when considering how to market themselves. To get the strongest applicants for the particular programme, it is useful to provide reliable information which accurately represents the ethos of the programme (Hesketh & Knight, 1999).

When looking at how best to appeal to prospective students, marketing teams should understand what their competition is. As the challenge to recruit students increases, more universities are beginning to employ basic marketing tactics. At least half of the HEIs in the US with marketing activities conduct market research, although much of it is considered in house (Gyure & Arnold, 2003).

Depending on the type of HEI, marketing strategy may vary widely. In the UK, there is a distinction between two types of universities. ‘New’ universities are those that, prior to 1992, were classed as Polytechnics. While it might be logical to assume that students would look either at new or old schools, Dawes and Brown (2004) found that just over 81% of their UK sample looked at both when applying for a place. Thus, at least some new universities

must have enough appeal in their marketing materials to be able to attract students away from attending a traditional (old) university.

Both old and new universities may have postgraduate programmes. When students are looking to apply to a masters programme, many of the same strategies are used as when applying for undergraduate programmes. Students have the ability to find a programme that has an appropriate focus and may look at several programmes in a number of different geographic locations.

Literature Review

Perceived quality of educational experience is a result of student satisfaction (Athiyaman, 1997). According to Kotler and Fox (1995), students are generally satisfied with their academic programmes but are not as satisfied with advice and career counselling aspects of the university. There is a discrepancy between what students rate as being most important to them overall in their educational experience and overall satisfaction with their educational experience (Elliott & Healy, 2001). Thus, a programme may provide a positive educational experience even though it was not fully satisfying or vice versa (e.g., satisfying because the student received a job following graduation but not overall rated positively by the students because s/he did not have friends at the university or good relations with lecturers). Nevertheless, identifying aspects that students rank as having the highest levels of importance is critical for recruitment and therefore, marketing strategy (Elliott & Healy, 2001).

As is true with all marketing organizations, not every product (or university) will suit each customer (student). In a study using the College Student Satisfaction Questionnaire, the following were revealed as important dimensions for student satisfaction: educational quality, social life, student living and working conditions, study pressures, and recognition of the HEI (Schertzer & Schertzer, 2004). Undergraduate students place a high value on academic

instruction (e.g., staying current in their field). In fact, this variable accounted for 30% of the variance in a study by Gatfield (2000). The other factors assessed, including quality of materials, guidance, campus and recognition of the HEI, accounted for far less variance. International students especially consider recognition of the HEI to be significant. Students claimed that good teaching (i.e., not teaching from the text book and having the ability to be a bit flexible in the teaching plan) and teaching support facilities (i.e., resources teachers may use such as technology) are also important to students (Hesketh & Knight, 1999). Capitalising on those aspects on which students place value may be useful for marketing strategists.

A number of factors have an impact on student performance at university (family background, social status, values, expectations, sex, race, ability, GPA, academic and social attainments) (Tinto, 1975). Student commitment to the institution is positively related to retention and negatively related to dropout and transfer. The more the student is attracted to the HEI, the greater the persistence and commitment from the student and the less likely the student is to drop out. In fact, the more interaction with teaching staff, the stronger the personal and HEI commitment, the less likely a student is to withdraw (Pascarella, 1980). Although the current study considered postgraduate programmes, it is relevant to look at factors for undergraduate programmes as there is overlap. Many aspects of what is important at the undergraduate level are also relevant at the postgraduate one.

Work on gender (Mackinnon & Brooks, 2001) has been done considering the role of females in the university. The authors surmise that the corporate university environment is quite masculine and that the future in these institutions might mirror the past. At the student level, female students tend to interact less with the lecturers as compared with male students (Drew and Work, 1998). This is important because interaction with university staff is related to how readily a student would recommend the university to a friend or relative (Browne,

Kaldenberg, Browne, & Brown, 1998), or in other words, how satisfied they are with the institution. The quality of the school, the practical use of the academic experience, the student-school fit, and loyalty to the school were more predictive of persistence than was correlation between student-school values (Nora & Cabrera, 1993).

Specifically for postgraduate programmes, Hesketh and Knight (1999) argue that prospective students want to have more information about the programmes while they are making enrolment decisions. Woods, Bagley, and Glatter (1998) believe personal, social and pastoral components of a postgraduate programme are crucial in providing a basis by which potential students may make decisions. Information offered in prospectus materials may not provide an accurate representation of what a programme is truly like (Kennedy, 1997). Furthermore, a review of prospectuses from 50 UK universities found that postgraduate programmes, regardless of how different they each were, managed their public image using similar methods (Hesketh & Knight, 1998). The programmes also varied dramatically, even in the same field and using similar promotional techniques. Harris (1996) advocates for marketing materials to become more standardised as the number of contact hours, the length of the programme, fees and requirements are vary. Information about what graduates of the programme achieve, both in their career path and salary, was even more rare to find.

Three sources were suspected to be used regularly by prospective students: 1) directories, 2) career services and 3) prospectuses. Directories were not found to be particularly useful, prospectuses were not trusted, and career services were not widely used (Hesketh & Knight, 1999). The reason for enrolling on a postgraduate course was found to impact the method by which students choose a programme. Some may choose to enrol based on employer recommendations, pure interest based on marketing materials or anticipated career path and what the programme claims to offer.

Research has found that British students do not necessarily consider fees to be a major factor in their postgraduate programme decision making; few full time students even chose their programme based on rational economic decision making. Prospective students do tend to rely on word of mouth, preference of a current employer for a particular programme, and knowledge of the programme (i.e., living in the area and knowing people who have successfully completed may aid in new enrolments) (Hesketh & Knight, 1999). Specifically in North America, students reported that a poor quality website would dissuade them from attending a programme.

According to Hesketh and Knight (1999), once in the programme, students feel that certain aspects of it are more desirable than others. Students wish to have a good working relationship amongst themselves. Similarly, they hope that there is commitment and interest from supervisors on students progress. Lecturers who were thought to be accessible, caring and supportive were thought of more highly than those who did not exhibit those traits. Confidence and ability to not teach directly from the text book materials also raised student opinion of a lecturer. Students expressed interest in well-structured programmes, although describing what those encompassed proved difficult.

Findings seem to indicate that students who are strongly attracted to their postgraduate programme for any or all of the reasons listed above are likely to show more persistence in their studies, to perform better and to be more satisfied with their programmes. It aids the programme marketing-wise to have the students feel satisfied, perform well, and persist in their education. The current study is an exploratory one to determine what factors current students think should be promoted when trying to attract **new** students to a programme. The research questions address the following:

- Reasons for doing a postgraduate programme
- Why the current programme was selected

- Views of the programme (including assignment challenge, topic relevance, pace/difficulty of programme, approachability of staff and quality of the lecturers/lecturing material)
- Worth of programme
- Factors that would increase programme appeal
- Willingness to advise a prospective student to enrol

Because there is no work that was previously reported that is similar to the premise of this work, the study does not have any pre-set hypotheses.

Method

Participants

The participants who took part in the study were drawn from a population of full-time (one year programme) and part-time (several years programme) students enrolled on one of two Masters programmes delivered in a Computing Science department. Eighty-one questionnaires were distributed to postgraduate (MSc) students enrolled on a Computing Science programme. Fifty-three of the participants are male, 13 are female, and 15 did not report their gender. Forty-one are between the ages of 20-25, 24 students between 26-30, 11 between 31-29, one is above 40, and 4 did not report on their age. Students were given a questionnaire during their classroom sessions and there was a 100% return rate. Sixty-eight full-time students in London, three part-time students in London, seven part-time students in Singapore (who use a blended learning format), and three who did not report their programme location/type completed the questionnaires. Within the School of Computing Science, there are currently 12 masters level programmes on which a student may enrol. Of the 81 MSc Computing Science students in this study, 64 were enrolled on the Masters in Business Information Technology (BIT) and 8 on the Masters in E-Commerce (E-Comm). The former has its emphasis on the development of crucial skills for supporting the growth and competitiveness of modern business whilst the latter teaches skills needed to work on projects based on sound economic analysis and have the technical and practical skills to

implement and manage electronic commerce. The rest did not report the name of the programme on which they were enrolled.

Materials

An 11-item questionnaire was used to determine student demographic information, opinions of marketing and usefulness of the particular Masters programme. As the researchers interests in this programme were specific, no pre-existing questionnaire could be found to serve the required purpose. Therefore, the researchers developed their own questionnaire. Questions as to regarding why the programme was selected, whether it was worthwhile, impressions of specific aspects of modules taken to date, how to increase the appeal, regret of enrolment, and whether the student would recommend the course to a prospective student were asked.

Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed to all students in the spring of 2005. The questionnaires were either provided to the lecturer to disseminate and collect during the lecture session or the principal researcher attended a session to collect the data. Completion of the questionnaires took approximately 10-15 minutes.

Results

Descriptive statistics provided the breakdown of the participant pool. These are, for the most part, listed in the “participants” section of the method. They are also illustrated in Tables 1- 4.

Pearson correlation analyses were also run. This was done in an effort to look at the relationships between different sets of variables. It was thought that there might be instances

in which students felt that enrolment in the programme was important to further their career and to stay current with technology. If these two variables, for instance, are related, then it might be useful in determining how marketing a particular programme to a given target group could be done most effectively. If a significant proportion of students ticked the same boxes, indicating a relationship between two variables, then a correlation would be significant and positive. For example, if a significant number of students ticked the boxes “convenience of location” and “mode of study” as best aspects of the programme then a significant positive correlation between those two factors would surface. If only a few students felt that those two aspects were important, then they would not be significantly related and there would be no Pearson correlation described.

In some instances, regression analyses were conducted. This type of analysis will provide information about the relationship between variables, as does the correlational analysis, but further gives information on the direction of the relationship. This is described in greater detail below.

Reasons for enrolment

Participants’ reasons for selecting their programme are as follows:

Table 5

Reason students enrolled in MSc programme

<i>Reasons for enrolment</i>	<i>Number of responses*</i>
Stay current with technology	39
To get a job	30
To change career	16
For future at current place of employment	34
Other	5

*note that students could tick more than one response and only one student did not respond to this question. For each of the boxes, the number of responses is based on a total of 80 (i.e., in ‘stay current with technology’, 39 ticked the box out of 80 rather than 81).

“Other” were items such as “finding things to do in spare time,” “road map to PhD” and “personal happiness.” Some of the reasons for enrolment are related to each other. Pearson correlation analyses yielded findings that “to get a job” and “for future at current place of employment” are negatively related at $r = -.342$ ($p < .01$). That is, the more participants responded that they chose to enrol in an MSc to get the job, the less likely they were to have enrolled in the Masters to alter their future at their current place of employment. Similarly, there is a negative relationship between the responses of “for future at current place of employment” and “to change career”, $r = -.233$ ($p < .05$) with participants who claimed they enrolled on the course to change their career did not think that the course would help them in their current place of employment. Further correlational analyses were conducted comparing the reason to enrol with whether students regret their decision to attend the university. There was a negative correlation between “staying current with the technology” and having “cause to regret the decision” ($r = -.272$, $p < .01$) such that those students who chose to enrol in an effort to stay current with the technology did not have cause regret their decision.

Best aspects of programme

Students were given five options to select indicating why they like the programme. They could choose more than one option. Table 6 provides information on how many students selected each option.

Table 6
Best aspects of the MSc programme

<i>Best aspects</i>	<i>Number of responses*</i>
Quality of learning resources/course content	37
Status of the degree	34
Mode of study	18
Convenience of location	32

Other	5
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*note that students could tick more than one response and three students did not respond to this question quantitatively (although one non-quantitative respondent did provide a qualitative response.) The total numbers in the boxes then is based on a possible total of 78.

In the “other” category, students indicated that they liked the low “tuition fees,” “foreign degree,” “modern way of study” and “subject area covered.” Analyses using a Pearson correlation found a negative relationship between “status of the degree” and “convenience of location,” ($r = -.278, p < .01$) and a positive correlation between “mode of study” and “convenience of location,” ($r = .236, p < .05$). This indicates that there is a relationship, although the direction is unclear, for mode of study and convenience of location. It is likely, although not confirmed through correlational analyses, that the blended format provide the students with convenience of location for study. Students found the status of the degree to be important even if the location was inconvenient for the students. It might be worthwhile for postgraduate programmes considering their marketing strategy to emphasise programme prestige and blended or distance learning availability.

Specific aspects of course

Students were asked questions on the quality of their lecturers, how approachable they feel the staff are, whether the topics taught are relevant, the pace and difficulty of the programme and the challenge of the assignments. A regression analysis was conducted along with a Pearson correlation. With respect to the regression analysis, the significance was found via a negative relationship between the “challenge” and the “worth” of the programme ($F = -2.31, p < .05$). The direction of this relationship is misleading and requires an explanation; as the programme becomes more challenging, the worth of the programme increases. The correlation data reveals several significant relationships. They are illustrated in Table 7. By way of explanation, the first row indicates that there is a positive relationship

between the lecturer and the staff being viewed as approachable. The more the participant liked the lecturer the more approachable the student felt the staff (finance, administrative) was. Another example is the positive correlation between topic relevance and assignment challenge. Students who felt the topic was relevant to their own life also felt that the assignments were challenging. All of the relationships below are positive, indicating that the more a student agreed with the first aspect (lecture being viewed as positive, staff being approachable, topic being relevant, etc) the more the student agreed with the second aspect (pace/difficulty of programme being good, assignments being challenging, topic being relevant, etc).

Table 7
Correlations of specific aspects of course variables

<i>Variables</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>p</i>
lecturer and approachable staff	.59	.01
lecturer and topic relevance	.51	.01
lecturer and pace/difficulty of programme	.41	.01
lecturer and assignment challenge	.52	.01
approachable staff and assignment challenge	.40	.01
approachable staff and topic relevance	.47	.01
approachable staff and pace/difficulty of programme	.33	.01
topic relevance and pace/difficulty of programme	.29	.01
topic relevance and assignment challenge	.53	.01
pace/difficulty of programme and assignment challenge	.40	.01

Enhancing appeal

With respect to asking what could enhance the course, students could choose as many options, out of six, as they wished. Table 8 provides information on those results.

Table 8

Increasing programme appeal

<i>More appealing aspects of the course</i>	<i>Number of responses*</i>
More flexibility for time	43
More flexibility for pace of study	33
More flexible payment options	20
Difference modules	14
Higher rating or status of university	36
Other	7

*note that students could tick more than one response and one student did not respond to any of the prompts for a total of 80 respondents to this question.

The “other” responses included providing more practical experience, either in a job environment or practical work within the school setting, and more difficult course content. Pearson correlation analysis revealed that there is a correlation between the variables to “increase the appeal of the programme” with “more flexibility for the pace of study,” ($r = .33$, $p < .01$). This indicates that the more able a school is to be flexible with study (part time, full time, time of lectures, blended learning) also means that students see the programme as more appealing. Some students felt that more flexibility for time to complete work would be advantageous yet they did not provide any suggestions as to how to achieve that goal.

Worth of programme

Several questions were asked regarding how worthwhile the programme is for the current students. Fifty students reported that the programme was worthwhile, four said it was not. A remaining 27 students neglected to respond to this question quantitatively. From the qualitative data, it may be gleaned that there were six negative responses (these responses include qualitative data from the four students who responded negatively to the quantitative data as well as two additional students who did not answer the worth question using the quantitative response method). This means that there are 50 positive responses, 6 negative responses, and 25 non-responses. There were 32 positive qualitative responses indicating that some of the 50 students who responded to the quantitative question (yes/no response option),

did not feel a need to further clarify their responses. For the purposes of this study, the negative responses are of most interest. They include phrases such as “too little time to learn everything,” “don’t find self challenged completely by courses,” “more technical than business oriented,” “didn’t get what thought would get” and “could have been better with more relevance between modules.” A Pearson correlation revealed a significant positive relationship between the worth of the programme and whether the student would advise a potential student to enrol in the programme, $r = .30$ ($p < .01$). Although direction of the relationship cannot be determined from correlational data, it seems that those who do think the programme was worthwhile are also likely to advise a potential student about the worth of the programme. Participant sense of worth of the programme was positively related to allowing more flexibility in the pace of study ($r = .26$, $p < .05$), meaning that the programme worth could be perceived more positively if there were greater flexibility in study pace.

Regret enrolling in programme

Students were asked two questions about whether they regretted, or have at any time regretted, enrolling in the programme. While 60 students reported that they never had cause to regret their decision, a surprising 18 did at some point regret enrolment in the programme. Three chose not to answer the question. Seventeen students followed-up their response with additional information. Twelve of the responses were negative, and the remainder were positive. The negative responses, that is, the students who had cause to regret their decision, claimed that: “it’s hard,” “business grad[uate modules] are hard to cope with,” “online database module- specific tasks weren’t taught but students were expected to know how to do,” “besides management support system [module I] didn’t feel challenged,” “MSc too broadly focused, a[n] MSc should specialise in field,” “sometimes felt module wasn’t being taught as well as at seminar [students attend both a large lecture and smaller, more applied

seminar for each topic],” “too many modules, more than any other programme,” “taught modules are so difficult and lots of coursework,” “[regretted decision] because didn’t get what thought would,” “MISIS system [integrated student information system through which students may access their information on modules, personal information, etc] problems” and “not enough computers.” It is difficult to generalise from this information to marketing strategies for masters programmes on the whole. It seems that having facilities that work with regularity and are user friendly are essential but not sufficient. It might be the case that allowing for more personalisation within the programme (i.e., allowing students to work on projects for courses that are directly in line with their interests, having more narrowly focused classes and allowing students to choose elective classes that match with their focus) would aid in lowering levels of regret for enrolment. This is important as students who are satisfied with the programme may also be more willing to advise other students about it, thereby increasing the marketing capability by using current students as spokespeople.

Advising a prospective student

Both quantitative and qualitative questions were asked regarding whether the student would advise another about whether to enrol in the programme or not. Unfortunately, 20 students chose not to answer the quantitative question. Of the remaining 61, 16 would not advise a student to begin this programme while the remaining 45 would encourage a student to enrol in the programme. In addition to the 16 students who said they would not advise a student to enrol, one additional student provided qualitative data (this is one of the students who chose to not answer the quantitative question). Thus, there were a total of 19 non-responses to this question. Students reported that the following concerns led them to question whether they would advise another student to begin the programme: “drop in rank in a newspaper rating of the university in the 2004/05 academic year”, “high fees for international

students”, “unsuitable residential accommodation halls”, “disorganization of administrative staff”, “lack of helpfulness to foreign students”, “poor course design”, “lack of sufficient information about a module before beginning it”, “the operational structure at one of the distance campuses causing confusion”, and “not enough computers.” This is an important aspect when considering marketing a programme as the current students likely provide a good deal of the realistic aspects of what a course is truly like. If students suggest that they would not advise another student to enrol on the programme, it might damage the ability a programme has to recruit new students.

Discussion

As would be expected, most students chose the MSc programme for career-related reasons, perhaps corroborating Gatfield’s (2000) premise that students place a high value on academic instruction since it may lead to enhanced career opportunities. While it might have been specifically to stay current with technology, to get a new job, or for their future at their current place of employment, the vast majority of responses in this study were related to ‘career.’ Out of the 124 responses on this topic (this includes all of the responses in Table 5 as respondents could select more than one option), 103 were related to career. At the Masters level, this is an expected finding. The correlation data further supports the idea that ‘career’ is a general category for which students undertook Masters level education.

It is logical that students would look at several universities prior to selecting the one they ultimately attend. What is interesting to note is that students did not only look at old and new universities (new universities were considered Polytechnics until 1992) as reported by Dawes and Brown (2004) but also considered attending university in a variety of other countries. A number of the students are foreign, but still they considered possibilities outside of the UK and not in their home country (e.g., USA masters programmes).

Participants were a bit more divided on the best aspects of the programme. While the majority chose, as Gatfield (2000) posited, quality of learning resources and course content, a large number also selected convenience of location. This indicates that a number of local students, those living within the general vicinity of the university, might have selected it simply because they like where it is located (close proximity to London but not in the city). A substantial proportion of responses (34 out of 81) rated the status of the degree from the school as its best feature. There was no significant correlation between the status of the degree and the quality of the materials, indicating that a degree viewed positively may not always have resources that are well perceived, or vice-versa. Interestingly, there was a negative relationship between the status of the degree and the convenience of location, indicating that students who chose the university because of its location are particularly attuned to it not being the best one they suspect they could have attended. Perhaps this is a defence mechanism; that is, the students justify attending a school they do not deem to be of high quality because of its convenience (Bootzin, Acocella, & Alloy, 1993).

With respect to some of the specific aspects of the course that were assessed, 1) quality of the lecturer, 2) approachability of the staff, 3) relevance of topics taught, 4) pace/difficulty of the programme and 5) the challenge of the assignments, it is encouraging to note that there are correlations among the vast majority of the variables. It seems helpful for HEIs to understand that even if there are problems, some routes may be taken to alleviate the student's frustration. For example, if the lecturer is easy to approach, even if the administrative components of the school have not been ideal, it may leave the student with a better impression of overall approachability of those working at the university or vice-versa (Hesketh & Knight, 1999). Similarly, a positive impression of a lecturer is connected to students reporting greater levels of course relevance, challenge in the topic, and a good pace of the lectures. If the staff are easy to approach, students feel that the assignments are

challenging and there is a good pace of study. The relevance of the topic, the challenge of the assignments and the pace of study are all positively related to each other. It seems, therefore, that if one aspect of the course is of perceived high quality, other aspects may also be viewed positively (Athiyaman, 1997). These findings corroborate the work of Hesketh and Knight (1999). They argue that rapid, direct contact with lecturers provided prospective students with the information they likely want. At the current student level, engagement with the lecturing staff yielded higher satisfaction. In marketing terms, higher levels of satisfaction of current students is likely to elicit more positive support of the programme and better informal marketing for it (word of mouth, for example).

With the above said, students still rated increasing flexibility for time and pace of study as methods of enhancing the appeal of the programme. This is something that previous research has not reported and may be indicative of a changing medium of teaching. Another important factor was the overall rating of the university as most students would obviously like to graduate from a top university. As for increasing flexibility, it is not necessarily paradoxical that students positively connected the ‘specific course aspects’ such as pace/difficulty of the lecture with the other variables which were considered good quality university features but then requested more flexibility for pace of study as a way to enhance appeal. That is, students may feel that the pace is fine and when related to the other factors such as the lecturer, approachability or topic relevance a strong point of the programme but more flexibility could still be better. Flexibility of the programme and its appeal should be explored further as previous literature has not reported on it. In an Internet age may become more and more relevant. A relatively small proportion of responses, 20 out of 81, suggested more flexible payment options indicating that the university caters well to its students’ financial needs. An even smaller proportion, 14 out of 81, suggested having different modules taught as a way to make the programme more appealing.

The vast majority of respondents felt the programme was worthwhile. Naturally, there was a positive correlation between students reporting on the programme in a positive way and willingness to advise another student to enrol in it. Again this is useful in marketing as Hesketh and Knight (1999) point out that direct contact between prospective and current students is advantageous for marketing of a postgraduate programme. The more challenging the programme, the more worthwhile the students reported it as being. This makes sense because students will want to justify working hard and may do so by stating how worthwhile the programme is for them (*vis-à-vis* cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957)). Students noted the connection between the worth of the programme and its flexibility, indicating that either the programme becomes more worthwhile if there is more flexibility or vice versa. Even though students critiqued the programme and suggested that some aspects of it be different, they still found it fairly worthwhile. This finding may corroborate the work of Elliott and Healy (2001).

Although the majority of students reported that they never had cause to regret their decision to enrol, 18 students did report such views. Those students are of particular interest at a time when universities in the UK are attuned to issues of retention. The reasons, listed in the results section, provide some insight into what the problems may be. A number of the students' concerns are ones that may arise at many institutions and could be fixed relatively easily. For example, the university could provide several more computer labs and/or extend the hours of those they currently have. A more user friendly student system to access account information may be developed by university staff. Furthermore, this may be useful for marketing. If prospective students were invited to the campus prior to selecting a particular programme, they may request a tour of the facilities (Hesketh & Knight, 1999). If students were working on modern computers, which were all operational, and long hours of operation were posted on the doors, that may speak volumes for the programme. Positive marketing

would then be accomplished almost silently as aspects of the programme benefiting current students may also increase appeal to prospective students visiting it.

A minority of the respondents, 16 of 61, would not recommend the programme to another individual considering enrolment. It might be the case that students simply get frustrated with their programme due in large part to the experience of things not working (although if they were at another university the case may be the same). That is, they have ‘the grass is always greener at another university postgraduate programme’ mentality. Of the reasons the programme would not be recommended, a number could be dealt with readily. For example, again the issue of lack of computers arose. The foreign students felt that they did not have the support they needed. To remedy this, a training course at the university for staff dealing with foreign students could be implemented. The university could enlist the help of an architect or interior designer to assist in making the accommodation halls more suitable places for living as this was a complaint. Lecturers could provide more information about their modules, for instance on their website and perhaps a reading list, prior to the module enrolment deadline to assist in alleviating student frustration with feeling they do not know what the module will be about. Again having a good website and information about the course available prior to enrolment is not a new marketing strategy. Accurate representation of classes that are available in any given year and what the class involves has been suggested as a way to alleviate frustrations of newly enrolled students (Hesketh & Knight, 1999).

Finally, most of the current sample was male. According to Drew and Work(1998), females tend to interact less frequently with lecturers. It may be the case then that the findings are helpful when marketing to a male population, but must be reconsidered when thinking about prospective female students. In addition, research by Mackinnon and Brooks (2001) indicates that female staff may also face some level of discrimination which could

impact on how female students are treated and/or marketed to. Universities should think about marketing strategies which effectively target both genders or strategies which, although different, appeal to both genders.

Recommendations

Certainly universities should not advertise that they have what they cannot deliver (Kotler, 1991). However, if a programme has flexibility, for example in terms of location of study, ability to take modules online, elective modules, etc, it may be well served to highlight those features in marketing materials. Repeatedly and in different ways, students highlighted those factors as being important ones in their initial decision and also in their satisfaction with the programme. If students are provided with a core set of classes to take but then allowed the opportunity to take classes in areas in which their specific interests lie, programmes may be able to attract more students.

Additionally, it is important that prospective students understand the potential career path they may have upon graduation. As many students entered the programme with an eye towards their career (either within job promotions or new careers) it is necessary to accurately portray what a degree may or may not offer students. It would also be useful to acknowledge what technology is used and how students will be trained using current technology as students reported that this was part of what they wanted to gain from enrolling in a postgraduate programme. Furthermore, it is important to understand the career paths and commitments of prospective students such that marketing can promote the time and pace of study flexibility that the particular programme offers. This was something of interest to the cohort of students and it is worthwhile to capitalise on that and blend it into the marketing materials. Marketing then can be targeted directly to prospective students who are likely to enrol and complete a degree. They may then also be more likely to recommend the

programme to other prospective students which provides, in a sense, free marketing via word of mouth. As some argue, the quality of the current student experience is relevant for marketing and increasing prospective student interest (Hesketh & Knight, 1999).

A third recommendation is to elicit student or alumni assistance in recruiting new students. If university fairs or open days are held, it would be useful to have those who have been through the programme explain why it was good, what the prospective student may get out of the programme, and the weaknesses of it. Students may also benefit if documentation were provided at the outset explaining what administrative staff can and cannot do. This way, students will not feel let down by an institution when it cannot provide things the student expected it would do (e.g., letters of support to open a bank account). In the qualitative data, a number of students reported that the day to day functioning of the programme let them down. That is, they seemed to be expecting something more than just an education and felt that the programme did not provide that. If current students were used to give insight into what the programme is truly like, prospective students may enrol with more realistic expectations. Current students are undoubtedly one of the best marketing tools. They are seen as similar to prospective students, have little in anything to gain by encouraging enrolment in a programme, and are able to tell a prospective student about the current student's experiences in the programme. Marketing materials though should be reflective of what support staff are able to provide as a great number of students were hoping for more day to day and life support than they got (e.g., support on arranging accommodation). The notion of repurchase (returning for a second year) may not necessarily apply to this programme. However, the idea of purchase in the sense of word of mouth marketing for the programme is relevant and useful.

Above are just some suggestions of what could be attempted in marketing tactics to increase the satisfaction and appeal of the programme. While there is still much information

to be gathered, these findings present a place to begin working with the students to help them, and help the school, make it a better place to receive an MSc.

Limitations

There are at least two limitations to this study. First, the sample assessed only two programmes within one university. While the findings will certainly be of use to those working within those programmes, the generalisability of the findings are limited. It would be worthwhile to attempt to collect data from several universities in an effort to understand if they face similar problems regardless of reputation, etc.

Second, minimal demographic data were collected from the students. Therefore, it is difficult to draw some conclusions. For instance, if students chose the university because of convenience of location, it is assumed they are students from close by. However, it might be the case that some students who came from abroad were particularly interested in living in London in which case the convenience of location was related to desire to live elsewhere, rather than to remain close to home. For this reason and others, demographic data must be looked at in conjunction with marketing data.

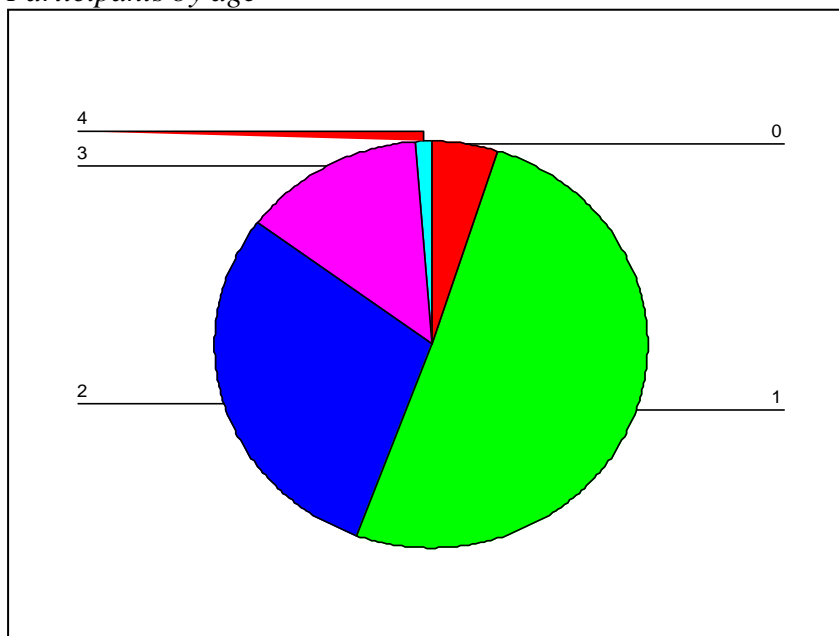
Future studies

This study should be extended to students who are at other universities to see if students are equally willing to complain and praise regardless of the fine details of their programme. That is, if top rated, middle rated, and low rated universities receive similar reports from students, then it might be worth reconsidering how to alter a programme to make it more desirable to its students.

A similar study could be conducted collecting more demographic data so that a university may truly determine how different components of its student body view their

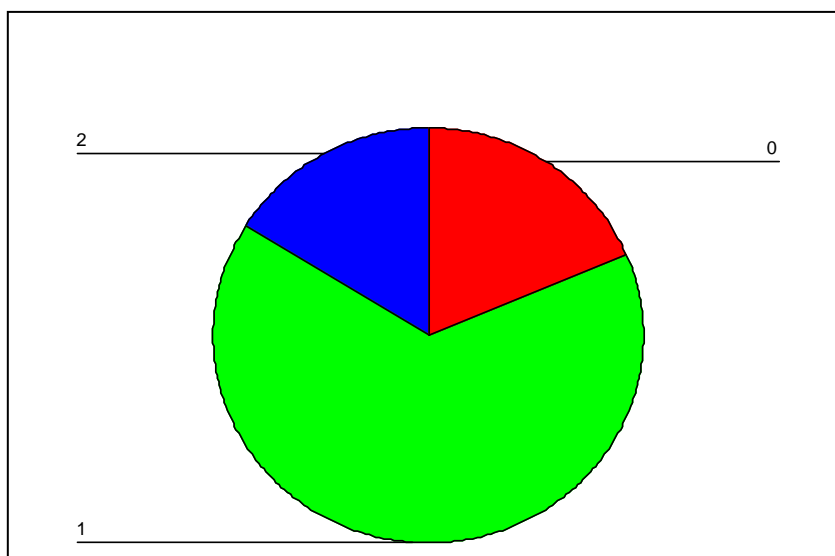
programmes. This may aid the university administrators in marketing the programme to prospective students in appropriate ways.

Table 1
Participants by age



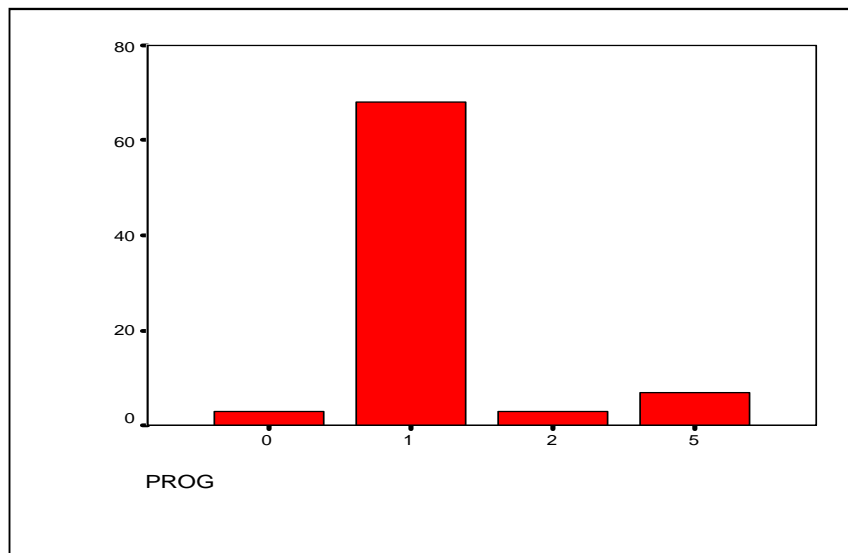
0 = unreported
 1 = 20-25 years
 2 = 26-30 years
 3 = 31-39 years
 4 = 40+ years

Table 2
Participants by gender



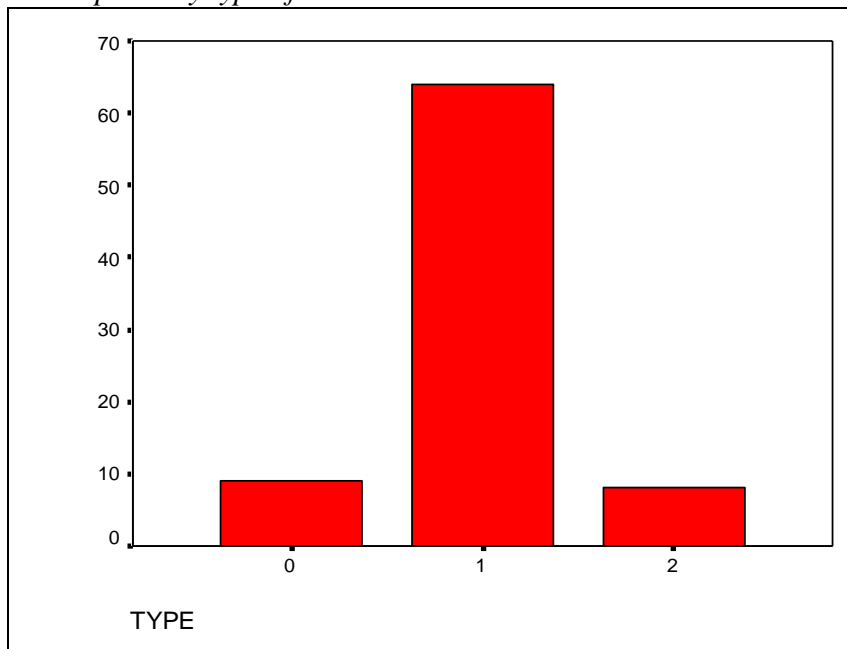
0 = unreported
 1 = male
 2 = female

Table 3
Participants by programme type



0 = unreported
 1 = London full-time
 2 = London part-time
 3 = other

Table 4
Participants by type of MSc



0 = unreported
 1 = business information technology
 2 = E-commerce

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