

THE SUCCESSFUL PREPARATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF FUTURE MARKETING PROFESSIONALS: A RECOMMENDED METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a methodological approach that assists program administrators interested in improving marketing's contribution to the successful preparation and development of future business professionals. The behavioral analysis used in this paper provides administrators with an understanding of the scope of marketing as seen by academics and a framework to determine how well (or poorly) current curricula designs meet practitioner needs. Recommendations are provided to assist educators to further promote the skills required for graduating students. This paper concludes by illustrating how the technique used in this paper can be adapted in other education markets to help decision makers improve the marketing curriculum and ultimately, recruitment and retention rates.

INTRODUCTION

The knowledge base of management disciplines is evolving at a rapid pace. For university students, a major implication of this is that discipline-based knowledge is no longer sufficient to guarantee relevant employment on graduation as this knowledge has the potential to date quickly. One consequence of this trend for university curricula is the need to change the focus of pedagogy away from a demonstration of knowledge to an acquisition of skills.

A major objective of business degree programs is to ensure that graduates are work ready however there is considerable evidence from industry that this objective is not being achieved. While the term "work ready" can be variously interpreted, for the purposes of this paper it is defined as a demonstration of the mastery of the skills and knowledge required in a discipline to effectively contribute to employment within that disciplinary field.

Due to the breadth of courses and disciplinary areas taught within a business degree program, we decided to concentrate on one specific field of study – marketing. The reason for choosing marketing is twofold. First it is a compulsory core course for business and commerce degrees. A working knowledge of marketing is considered an essential element of any well-rounded business education whether at the undergraduate or post-graduate (MBA) level. Second, anecdotal comments amongst marketing academics in Australia suggest that marketing is a popular

discipline that attracts many students to its courses. This paper focuses on the extent to which the learning outcomes of undergraduate marketing courses are meeting the objective of work readiness amongst graduates.

The sample for this study was drawn from Australian universities. Education is Australia's fastest growing export. In 2002/03 education exports were valued at \$4,172 million, more than the traditional export of wool. Including the contribution made to the economy by students, international education is currently estimated to be worth approximately \$1 billion to the Australian economy (ABS 2003). The Australian education industry is part of the world education community with a strong focus on internationalization. The trend in Australia toward successful accreditation from international bodies including AACSB, EQUUS, and AMBA highlights the relevance and similarity of Australian business education to international standards thus the findings from this study are globally applicable.

This study compares the learning outcomes stated for core (or required) marketing with the desired skill sets for graduates as determined by the Federal Department of Education, Science, and Technology (DEST). These standards were developed as a result of extensive research into employer needs by DEST. While the employers involved in the study were based in Australia, the global nature of the Australian economy means that foreign owned businesses contribute significantly both to the economy and the workforce. A recent study by the Australian Bureau of

Statistics (2004) examined the foreign ownership characteristics of a wide range of businesses engaged in economic activity in Australia in 2000–2001 and found that majority foreign-owned businesses made a significant contribution to the Australian economy overall (21%), with notable contributions in the mining and manufacturing industries where they contributed 45 percent and 34 percent of industry value added, respectively. The skills required by the surveyed employers therefore are reflective not only of Australasian, but also international expectations for graduates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research, some dating back to a decade ago, indicates (1) that employers feel undergraduate students are entering the business world without some of the necessary knowledge, skills and experience to allow them to function effectively when employed following graduation (Scott and Frontczak 1996) and (2) that marketing

educators are over-emphasizing knowledge rather than developing student's skills (Crowe 2002; Davis 2002). This leads to the first research question.

RQ1: What knowledge and skill outcomes are expected in marketing courses?

A classification of employability skills¹ derived from industry research (DEST 2002) and supported in other research (Association of Graduate Recruiters 1995) is used in this research. The DEST research identifies eight key employability skills for university graduates. Sample stated course objectives for each of the eight skill areas are summarized in the following Table.

This framework was used to develop research questions two and three.

RQ2: Which of the eight identified employer required skills are represented in core marketing courses?

RQ3: What is the extent to which the combined core courses from each university includes the eight identified employer required skills?

TABLE I
SAMPLE STATED COURSE OBJECTIVES

DEST Skill	Objective
Communication	To develop an ability to communicate ideas and decisions clearly, concisely and logically both verbally and in writing.
Teamwork	- Work in a team. - The ability to work with others.
Problem-solving	- To attain skills related to; the process of problem identification, diagnosing, measuring and exploring marketing problems. Analyze marketing strategies in different contexts.
Initiative and enterprise	- To develop creative strategies when analyzing issues. - Identify the role new technologies can play in marketing research.
Planning and organization	- Be able to gather relevant data on market trends. Assess and interpret collated intelligence for management to aid in their strategic decision processes.
Self-management	Demonstrate the ability to organize themselves to competently complete the required tasks on time.
Learning	Develop the capacity for ongoing learning through observing and reflecting on their own behavior.
Technology	To acquire an awareness of, and experience with, particular technology such as computer spreadsheets, stats packages, databases and the internet and how they can valuable tools for marketing managers.

To date research on business curricula has largely been based on the perceptions of academic, managers and students in industries relating to agribusiness (Boland et al. 1999; Boland, Lehman, and Stroade 2001), HR/IR (Way 2002), tourism (Ernawati 2003), and management (Chung 2000; Contractor 2000). Some researchers (see Boland et al. 1999; Boland, Lehman, and Stroade 2001) have used a more behavioral approach based on content analysis (observation of courses offered) to compare agribusiness and tourism curricula.

While perceptual research provides insight into the tasks required in academic curriculum, it is open to response bias and bias where the respondent attempts to provide the researcher with the “ideal” or expected responses. Observation, an unobtrusive method of measurement that is not reliant on perceptions or respondent bias (Harris 2001) provides an alternative approach to identifying the focus of curricula. Observations yield information on what universities, are doing rather than what individual academics, students or marketers think is happening.

Within the marketing domain research has been based on perception with the perceptions of alumni (Davis, Misra, and Van Auker 2002); academics (Stern and Tseng 2002), managers (Ernawati 2003; Way 2002; Stern and Tseng 2002; Gray, Whitan, and Knightbridge 2002) and students (Gray, Whitan, and Knightbridge 2002) being surveyed. This suggests there is a gap in the literature with an opportunity to use observation data rather than perceptual data to examine the marketing curriculum.

METHOD

Sample

The present study’s primary objective was to analyze undergraduate core marketing curricula in Australian Universities. There are 44 self-accrediting higher education institutions in Australia (Office of Higher Education). Course outlines were publicly accessible for 14 of these universities (32% of the population). These universities represent each state in Australia and included both regional and metropolitan-based institutions.

Core marketing course outlines were obtained via the Internet from the 14 universities that published their course outlines on the web. A total of 293 course objectives were derived from the 59 course outlines obtained from the different university websites.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was selected as a method as it is useful to quantify previously identified attributes such as knowledge and skills (Neuman 1997). Two of the authors adopted the role of raters for this study. It was decided to

use the authors rather than research assistants to perform the role of raters. This aim was to obtain acceptable reliability based on their knowledge of the field of marketing education and familiarity of the coding schemes. The raters were given two coding tasks. First raters had to classify a course objective as a skills or knowledge objective. Then raters were asked to classify the skills objectives. To ensure reproducible reliability we used independent raters to code the 293 course objectives. These ratings were then compared to determine the inter-rater reliability co-efficient. The inter-rater reliability co-efficient is the proportion of codings where there is unanimous agreement and should be greater than 70 percent (Harris 2001). The characteristics used to differentiate between skills and knowledge objectives are outlined as follows.

Learning Outcomes: Skills Versus Knowledge

Our raters had to determine whether a course objective was knowledge-focussed, skills-focussed or contained both skills and knowledge (see Table I for course objective examples). Knowledge objectives contained words such as “understanding,” “concepts,” “theories,” “frameworks.”

Skill objectives contained words indicating the abilities detailed in the DEST employability skills framework such as “communication,” “teamwork,” “problem-solving,” “evaluating,” “analyzing,” “collecting,” “adapting,” “applying,” “planning,” “organizing,” “self-management,” “learning” and “technology-literacy.”

Learning Outcomes: Employability Skills

Once the first task was completed our raters classified the skills objectives into one or more of the eight employability skills identified in the DEST (2002) report. The classifications were counted again to identify which skills were dominant across the course outlines.

RESULTS

The inter-rater reliability of the coding was 0.84, which exceeded the threshold requirement of 0.70 (Harris 2001). A face validity check indicated that the results appeared to be both reliable and valid.

The results displayed in Table II address RQ1 “what is the balance of knowledge and skills in core marketing courses” and suggest there is some balance between knowledge and skills across Australian core marketing courses. Courses in core or required marketing programs appear to be focused toward either knowledge or skills indicating a diversity of objectives and positioning strategies across universities. This also indicates that academic perceptions of where the emphasis should be, varies considerably across universities and across courses de-

TABLE II
SUMMARY OF FOCUS OF OBJECTIVES IN CORE MARKETING COURSES

Details Objectives	Number	%
• Number of skills objectives	144	48.12
• Number of knowledge objectives	146	48.81
• Number of objectives referring to both skills and knowledge	3	1.02
Total objectives	293	100.00

pending on institutional objectives and personal preferences.

At first glance, the results appear to indicate that core-marketing courses at Australian universities have determined that both skills and knowledge are important for marketing students. Approximately one-half of the objectives analyzed were knowledge focused and approximately one half are skills focused (see Table II). However, the results displayed in Table III indicate that there is a great deal of variation in the proportion of skills and knowledge objectives across various core-marketing courses.

Market research and marketing management courses provided the greatest emphasis on skills development for undergraduate marketing students in Australia. Courses such as strategic marketing, consumer behavior and marketing communication emphasized both knowledge and skill development. Finally, e-marketing, international marketing, services marketing and channels/logistics courses emphasized knowledge development.

Research questions 2 and 3 both relate to the skills focused objectives and are able to be addressed by the evidence:

RQ2: Which of the eight identified employer required skills are represented in core marketing courses?

RQ3: What is the extent to which the combined core courses from each university includes the eight identified employer required skills?

The employer-required skills of problem solving, communication, planning and organizing are the best represented in core marketing courses. However while there is evidence of all skills being represented across the universities, very few universities have a core of marketing courses that contain all employer-required skills. Figure II, illustrates that few individual courses (approximately 3%) contain all eight DEST skills. A figure of 3 percent is not really surprising for an individual course (not an entire marketing program) because one course cannot be expected to cover all skills in addition to knowledge in a manner that allows students to learn

effectively.

The objectives identified as containing a skill were coded using the eight employers required skills in the DEST (2002) classification. These were communication, teamwork, problem solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organizing, self-management, learning, and technology. The 59 course outlines were dominated by problem-solving skills with communication and planning and organizing skills well represented (see Figure 1). The remaining skills were represented sporadically in individual courses or individual universities.

More than one in ten core marketing courses do not require learning outcomes that assist students to develop skills to better meet industry needs.

It is interesting to note that seven course outlines (12%) did not contain any of the employability skills desired by industry. Another notable point is that an average 4.6 skills were included across the marketing curriculum within each university, with approximately two-thirds of the courses emphasizing one or two skills. One explanation for this finding may be that work ready skills are embedded in other places of a traditional business curriculum (e.g., management, accounting, finance, economics, etc.). If work ready skills are embedded across traditional business curriculum it may not be necessary for the marketing degree to emphasize each skill.

This research provides evidence that not enough has been done by educators to address employer concerns. Despite research into employer perceptions that uncovered disparities and problems a decade ago Australian employers remain unhappy with graduate's skills in the following areas – the ability to write, to speak, to work in groups and to solve problems (Eunson 2002 quoting four government reports). Today employers feel the one great weakness of undergraduate courses is that it is rare to come across a marketing graduate who is industry ready (Cincotta 2003).

The perceptions of industry suggest that marketing educators need to place more emphasis on the development of (at least) problem solving, communication and

TABLE III
PROPORTION OF SKILL AND KNOWLEDGE OBJECTIVES PER COURSE

Course	Skills Objectives		Knowledge Objectives		Both K&S Objectives		Total Objectives	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Marketing management	13	61.90	8	38.10	0	0.00	21	100
Consumer behavior	24	47.06	27	52.94	0	0.00	51	100
Market research	39	65.00	20	33.33	1	1.67	60	100
Strategic marketing	13	48.15	13	48.15	1	3.70	27	100
Marketing communication	18	47.37	20	52.63	0	0.00	38	100
E-marketing	3	21.43	11	78.57	0	0.00	14	100
International marketing	11	39.29	17	60.71	0	0.00	28	100
Logistics/channels	3	21.43	11	78.57	0	0.00	14	100
Services	4	26.67	11	73.33	0	0.00	15	100
Market analysis	2	66.67	0	0.00	1	33.33	3	100
B2B marketing	4	57.14	3	42.86	0	0.00	7	100
Selling	3	75.00	1	25.00	0	0.00	4	100
Advanced marketing	7	100.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	7	100
New product development	0	0.00	4	100.00	0	0.00	4	100
	144	49.15	146	48.81	3	1.02	293	100

FIGURE 1
PROPORTION OF DEST SKILLS CONTAINED IN CORE MARKETING COURSE OUTLINES

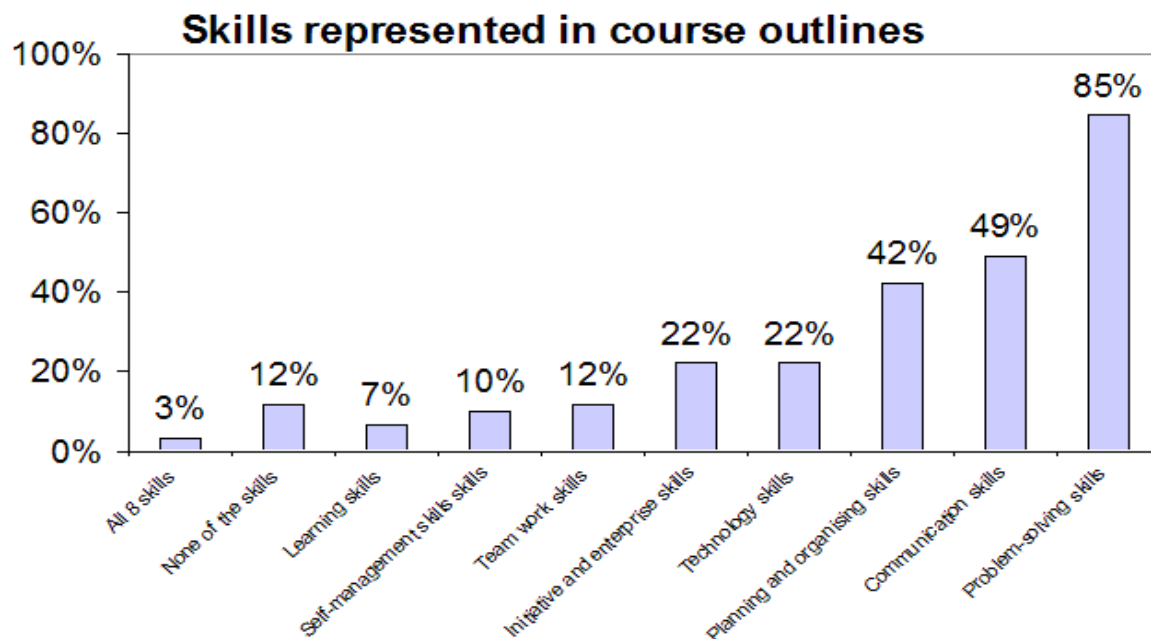
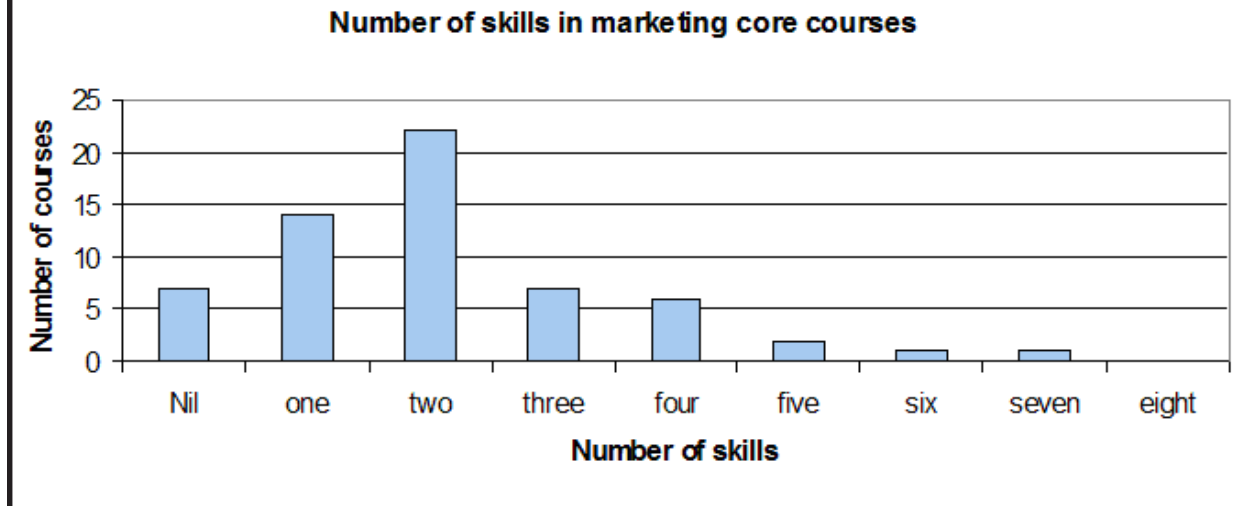


FIGURE 2
NUMBER OF SKILLS IN CORE MARKETING COURSES



the teamwork skills of marketing graduates. While problem solving skills and communication skills are well represented in undergraduate marketing courses continued, commentary from the marketing industry suggests there is clearly room for improvement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING AND EDUCATION

This paper provides a starting point for marketing and business educators. Analysis of course objectives suggest that marketing educators are largely requiring one or two skills to be developed as a learning outcome for their students yet industry and government research suggests that employers remain dissatisfied with marketing graduate skills (Cincotta 2003; Eunson 2002 quoting four government reports). What can educators do to provide learning outcomes that better meet industry needs?

Implications for learning and education arise for each of the three basic educators' tasks.² A brief summary containing recommendations for educators is provided in the following table and each recommendation will be discussed in turn.

Determination of Course Objectives

The results of this paper suggest that marketing educators are currently meeting industry needs for undergraduate skills only half way. Marketing and business educators need to ensure the skill areas required to function effectively in a discipline are developed in undergraduates completing a major in that discipline. To do this, coordination by educators in a major is required to ensure that each skill is developed and emphasized through-

out the major. This may involve each core course in a major taking ownership of one required skill.

Appreciation of the Importance of Clearly Stated Learning Objectives

Course objectives form the central pillar for a course and they should express what marketing educators want the students to understand after the course has been taught (Biggs 2003). This research revealed insights into Australian marketing educator's lack of appreciation for the importance of clearly stated learning objectives for assessment purposes. Objectives are concerned with the students learning activities, not the teacher's activities (Biggs 2003). According to Biggs (2003) a course objective often used in Australian marketing courses, e.g., "understand the theories of consumer behavior and their implications for strategic marketing decisions" are inappropriate. Educators must express course objectives in terms of the constructive activities that are most likely to achieve an understanding of the theories of consumer (www.markstrat.com), ServiceSim or Country Manager (http://www.interpretive.com/). In the course of solving the marketing problems presented in the simulation the student has to acquire the knowledge, the content-related skills, self management skills, teamwork skills, attitudes and know-how: in a word the professional wisdom. Problem-based learning encourages learners to become active and seek a knowledge base to apply to the problem(s) at hand (Biggs 2003).

Innovative approaches to assessment that further promote the development of the key skills required for the marketing industry without providing too much distraction from the key knowledge requirements must be con-

TABLE IV
KEY IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING EDUCATORS

Key Tasks	Implications for Educators
Determination of course objectives	• Coordinate the delivery of skills across the curriculum to ensure that all skills required in the discipline are covered across a major. • State learning objectives clearly. • Ensure that a specific skill to be developed is an objective of a core course. • Ensure objectives are specific, e.g., improve the student's teamwork ability.
Teaching and learning experiences	• Set relevant assessment tasks that involve problem-based learning. • Where possible set a wider range of tasks using peer review techniques to avoid issues with marking loads in larger classes. • Ensure that adequate emphasis is placed on skills in marking when setting marking criteria. • Build skill development into the curriculum. That is, business educators must teach skills, along with knowledge. • Design teaching activities that provide an opportunity to practice skills in the classroom.
Determine which objectives are being attained	• Consider the use of testing techniques to examine whether stated skills objectives are translating into a learning outcome.

sidered. Examples may include tape recordings for activities such as market research interviews, student presentations, mock sales presentations, or role-plays – all of which are relevant to marketing.

To ensure sufficient tasks are set for students without increasing the marking load, it is recommended that educators consider the use of peer review³ (see Biggs 2003 for elaboration). For example, students may be required to submit tasks for peer review on a weekly basis. The educator must provide a how to mark sheet. Tasks are then redistributed at random, with the how to mark sheet. No further instruction needs to be provided and monitoring does not need to take place (Biggs 2003). Students are to mark the tasks provided and the tasks are returned to the owners with along with the feedback. Marks do not have to be recorded and hence do not contribute toward the final grade. If necessary a requirement can be set that students have to complete a set number of tasks or they fail. Students can benefit from peer review tasks (Gibbs 1999). Firstly, students have to spend more time out of class on skill development tasks such as problem solving, written or oral communication, self-organisation and the like. The activities are required by the course and provide students with an opportunity to see how other students might solve a problem – some will be better and some will be worse. Students receive feedback on their own work at the end of each session without experiencing delays.

Finally, students learn to judge their own performance and the performance of their peers.

Teaching Activities

Skills cannot be taught in an embedded way, i.e., skills cannot be presumed to be picked up along the way. Teamwork skills, for example, cannot be assumed to be taught simply because group work is set. Skills must be taught directly, with classes, texts, and specific evaluation. Educators must provide students with tasks, such as case studies, texts, papers, skills training and industry speakers to enable undergraduate students to develop skills. Learning where to acquire knowledge is far more beneficial for a student than lecturing or telling students what they should know because learning where to acquire knowledge involves the active participation of a student (see Biggs 2003 for a detailed discussion).

Determine Which Objectives Are Being Attained

Course objectives contain the explicit priorities of the course and are the benchmarks against which the course should be measured (Biggs 2003). A course objective should clearly state the outcomes a student should expect upon the successful completion of a course. Grade distributions and teaching rating instruments may not be the

best way to measure the diverse objectives that are stated in core marketing course outlines. More attention needs to be given to measuring and reporting each objective.

Educators must ensure that they determine which course objectives are being attained. Skills testing can assist to determine if students have developed a target skill during a course of study. Educators can test students at course commencement and conclusion to determine if the course has possibly developed the skill during the course of study.

IMPLICATIONS FOR UNIVERSITIES

Two of the key marketing benefits for undertaking research that identifies how well an institution's stated learning outcomes relate to the required graduate attributes are competitive advantage and employment of students. Institutions that can demonstrate their stated learning outcomes/course objectives reflect the skills and attributes desired by an accreditation organization or industry will be equipped with a powerful marketing advantage as their graduates are more likely to be employed. The ability for an institution to state in promotional material that it provides graduates with job-ready skills, and hence improve employment prospects, is likely to raise its desirability as a preferred institution both for students seeking to enrol and organizations seeking to employ job ready graduates. The net effect of producing job-ready high quality graduates is that they are more likely to be employed and employment ratios of students are one of the decision criteria for many students when selecting an institution. Linking learning outcomes to accreditation or industry standards is likely to play an important role in the financial success of business schools globally.

Another benefit of graduating work ready marketing students are an evolving elevation of standards, activities, and expectations. Marketing is often thought of in a negative light. Better prepared students become better prepared marketing managers and executives, which not only enhances a business school, but the marketing profession.

FUTURE RESEARCH

While the research that was undertaken in this study was focused on the Australian education system, the relevance of the research is international. In an era of increasing globalization, academic institutions worldwide need to be conscious of three things. First, the trend toward international accreditation for business schools means that the curricula worldwide are becoming increasingly compatible. Standardization of core learning objectives can assist in ensuring that all marketing graduates, irrespective of country of study, are entering the work force with a standard set of skills and knowledge. Second,

many graduates of business schools, even when employed in their home country, are employed by international firms. The need for a common understanding of the skills and knowledge of graduates is essential to allow for the effective international mobility of the international work force. Third, improved living conditions and increased levels of education worldwide, means that more people than ever learn the basics of the business practice in universities rather than "on the job." Industry is having a stronger influence on the development of curricula to ensure that their needs are met, not only in Australia but worldwide. Learning objectives guide the teaching of the curriculum and the assessment of students. If these do not reflect the stated needs of industry then the resulting skills gap will ultimately act against the best interests of students, academia and industry.

In light of these three issues the research here provides a framework for educators working in other systems to replicate the research and determine the extent to which the courses that are taught reflect the needs of business. Marketing education does not operate in a cultural vacuum. The methodology used here can be applied across cultures to determine the extent to which the international marketing curriculum both reflects the stated needs of industry in relevant countries and also the extent to which the curricula are compatible across different education systems.

The methodology used in this research provides a framework, which can be used by business institutions in other countries to identify how well (or poorly) their stated learning outcomes/course objectives meet required graduate standards. In applying this approach, cross-cultural research should first identify the key stakeholders and their graduate requirements. The requirements for graduates can be obtained either directly through surveying stakeholder requirements or indirectly through relevant organizations (e.g., industry associations or organizations involved in university funding) that have surveyed stakeholders.

Some of the skills required by employers that have been presented in this paper are issues that have existed in academia for decades now. It is possible that institutions whose primary focus is to comply with the requirements of accreditation institutions such as the AACSB may run the risk of being side tracked from what employers really want to see in our graduates. When planning curriculum institutions must focus on both the requirements of accrediting bodies and the requirements of stakeholders. In Australia, stakeholder requirements could be accessed through the Department of Education, Science and Technology (DEST). DEST had previously undertaken a survey of industry requirements of graduates and developed a list of graduate skills. This meant this research surveying industry to ascertain skills and knowledge requirements were not necessary for this research. An equivalent organization in the United States of America is the Council for

Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), a national organization that co-ordinates accreditation activity in the United States. Two of the six recognition standards required by CHEA (2004) are that institutions advance academic quality (makes explicit reference to the use of student learning goals) and demonstrate accountability. In the United Kingdom, the Department of Education and Skills has recommended the development of Sector Skills

Councils whose role it is to identify the graduate skills required by specific industries and help “employers to act as intelligent customers of universities so that courses that have the needs of employers at heart are developed and successfully marketed.” Finally, stakeholder requirements could be informally or formally accessed through a universities advisory council, which usually contains representatives from the business community.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The study acknowledged that the relative importance of each would vary depending on the industry sector and organisation.
- ² Educator tasks have been identified as (1) determination of course objectives, (2) selection and organization

of learning experiences to attain the objectives and (3) determination of the extent to which objectives are being attained (Tyler 1949, quoted in Ingram and Howard 1998).

- ³ Peer review involves the submission of tasks by each student with a name or student number for return to the student at the end of the session.
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