

Chapter 77

The Mismatch between Undergraduate Marketing Education and Employers' Requirements in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

The debate on what should be offered by universities concerning their marketing education curricula in order to serve the market needs, specifically the employers' has been widely present in the literature. Its relevance derives from the fact that employers are one of the most important stakeholders of higher education institutions, given their responsibility in the career of graduate students. In this chapter we intend to contribute to the understanding of the state of undergraduate marketing education offered by Portuguese universities and assess whether there is a mismatch between marketing education and market needs. A better understanding of the mismatch and its implications can lead to better marketing education programs, increasing not only the acceptance and employability of students but also the transfer of innovative marketing knowledge to companies. The findings show that there is indeed a gap between what is being offered by the academia and what is requested by the job market, in terms of marketing, that could be higher than 50% of the requirements expected by employers.

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INTRODUCTION

It is universally accepted that higher education plays a fundamental role in the development of a region or country (Cox & Taylor, 2006; Thanki, 1999). This is due to the fact that universities contribute largely to increase knowledge and productivity (Andrews & Higson, 2008), to create new business opportunities, to leverage entrepreneurship and, in general, to encourage competitiveness (Pestonjee, Spillan, Song, & Virzi, 2010). To be able to participate more successfully in this process, universities should have a deep understanding of the community in which they operate. This harmonious integration is not easy to achieve. One possible way to achieve it would be by allowing the participation of civil society in the university life, reinforcing the interaction with external actors, the so-called *stakeholders* (Björkquist, 2008). Employers are a major stakeholder (Mainardes, Alves, & Raposo, 2010, 2013). Therefore, universities should look at employers as clients of the “product” emerging from the education process. The acceptance of this particular perspective would compel universities to take into account employers’ needs and requirements when designing the program curriculum. If what is taught to students does not meet the expectations and needs of the labor market, the cooperation will be more difficult and there will be problems to solve at different levels.

Although this question seems quite clear from the outset, it is important to note that the primary goal of education, in any area, is to train people so that they can develop their professional activity and face the market as prepared as possible (Sampson & Betters-reed, 2008). Several authors from different areas have reported in previous studies the existence of a gap between what students learn in their academic journey and what employers expect of them in terms of knowledge and skills (Breen, 2014; Fechheimer, Webber, & Kleiber, 2011; Hunt, 2002; Stringfellow, Ennis, Brennan, & Harker, 2006; Wellman, 2010).

Marketing is no exception, and in order to bring universities and employers closer, it is very important to understand the needs, requirements, and objectives of both parties and find solutions to overcome the mismatch between employers’ expectations and the learning outcomes provided by undergraduate marketing programs.

The debate between the marketing taught at the academia and the companies’ practice is not new (e.g. Done, 1979) and has been widely discussed by several studies (Finch, Nadeau, & O’Reilly, 2012; D. M. Gray, Peltier, & Schibrowsky, 2012; Harrigan & Hulbert, 2011). The main issues being discussed are the concerns related to the development of marketing curricula and its adequacy to labor market needs, given the constant change and evolution (Harvey, 2000). As a result, “‘closing the gap’ or ‘bridging the divide’ between marketing taught in academia and in practice marketing has been one of the most discussed items in marketing” (Hunt, 2002, p. 385). A simple literature review reveals numerous authors who have conducted research aiming to better understand this gap and find ways to overcome it (Hunt, 2002; Stringfellow, Ennis, Brennan, & Harker, 2006; Wellman, 2010).

Another concern arising frequently in the literature is how to provide marketing students, by means of the curriculum, with the necessary knowledge, skills and tools to cope with the market demands in the best possible way (Burger & Schmidt, 1987; Miller, Holmes, & Mangold, 2007; Miller, 1985; Pefanis Schlee & Harich, 2010). The extensive discussion focuses primarily on a set of issues, such as: determining which subjects are fundamental to students (Wellman, 2010), what they should know, what skills they should have when they graduate, what learning levels they must demonstrate, what future employers may expect from these graduates (Sampson & Betters-reed, 2008), if the curricula should be more pragmatic and professional or more academic and intellectual and if marketers should be educated or trained (Clarke, Gray, & Mearman, 2006).

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