

**The Case for and Against Undergraduate Marketing Subject
Benchmark Statements: A Paper for Consideration by the Academy
of Marketing Executive**

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Undergraduate Marketing Subject Benchmark Statements

Introduction

This paper investigates the issues surrounding the potential development of undergraduate Marketing Subject Benchmark Statements (Marketing SBS) for consideration by the Academy of Marketing's Executive.

The paper draws on a general review of the subject benchmark statements together with the relationship between subject benchmarks and contemporary student numbers in the higher education community. Issues with regard to the role of subject benchmarks in guiding the development of marketing programmes (particularly as they become more specialised), student and employer expectations and the overall governance of marketing programme development are explored.

The paper outlines the headline results of an exploratory survey amongst the business school community with regard to their views on subject benchmarks and the case for and against developing Marketing SBS.

In conclusion, the paper presents four potential options in taking this issue forward. *The Academy of Marketing's Executive are invited to reach a consensus view on the matter and thereby make a formal recommendation to the July 2008 AGM as to whether or not to make a formal application to Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to develop Marketing SBS in consultation with the Association of Business Schools (ABS).*

Background

Currently there is one generic set of Business and Management benchmark statements which Marketing academics generally uses to underpin the development of undergraduate marketing programmes within UK business schools. This has created a set of issues which relate to:

- Fit of Marketing programmes within the more generalist business and management subject benchmark statements given the increasing maturity and specialisation of Marketing as a discipline;
- The expectations that students and employers have with regard to the knowledge, skills and competences developed in Marketing programmes delivered by and for higher education;
- The development of alternative benchmark statements in other discipline areas which provide more detailed guidance in relation to Marketing than the current business and management benchmarks (most notably the recently published Art and Design benchmark statements (QAA 2008));
- The development of very detailed and complex statements of competence developed by other agencies including the CIM's professional standards;

- The move to develop benchmark statements by related parts of our community e.g. a case is currently being developed by the Consortium of Retail Universities UK to develop retail benchmarks statements;
- The future governance of undergraduate marketing programmes, which are increasingly being developed beyond the traditional HE business school community, in terms of which benchmark statements are applied and how they are applied.

Subject Benchmark Statements

Anyone who has ever been involved in the development of an undergraduate or postgraduate degree scheme in the UK will be familiar with subject benchmark statements (SBS). Such statements act as guidelines for the development of programmes in terms of setting out expectations of standards; defining what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the skills and abilities needed to develop understanding or competence in the subject; and, crucially, describe what gives a discipline its coherence and identity and thus comparability throughout the UK (www.qaa.ac.uk). Indeed, "Subject benchmark statements may also be of interest to prospective students and employers, seeking information about the nature and standards of awards in a given subject or subject area" (QAA, 2007:iii).

Currently there are no undergraduate subject benchmark statements for degrees in Marketing. Course designers use instead a range of other subject benchmark statements, though typically in practice this tends to be the Business and Management statement (for Marketing courses developed in business schools). There are a range of subject disciplines which can be broadly described as falling under the umbrella of general business and management such as Marketing, Accounting, Finance, Human Resource Management etc. Some of these have their own subject benchmark statements (e.g. Accounting and Finance) and others, such as Marketing and HRM, do not.

Currently there are 53 undergraduate benchmark statements, 5 of which were newly created in 2007 (www.qaa.ac.uk). The statements explicitly related to business include: Accounting; General business and management; and Finance (new for 2007). (Economics is contained within the 'Social Studies' JACS code.) Interestingly four other benchmark statements may be of particular interest for those developing courses in Marketing as they actually contain at least, or more, explicit reference to Marketing and related areas:

- Agriculture, forestry, agricultural sciences, food sciences and consumer sciences;
- Hospitality leisure, sport and tourism;
- Communication, media, film and cultural studies;
- Art and design/ History of art, architecture and design.

Student Numbers

Student numbers in the UK are grouped into 19 subject based areas based on JACS codes (UCAS). According to figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in 2006/7 there were 204815 undergraduates in the general area of 'business and administrative studies'. This is the second largest group of undergraduate numbers in the UK: 'Subjects allied to medicine' contain 253755 students, but over 90,000 of these are studying nursing. Some subject based areas fit very closely to subject benchmark statements. For example, Veterinary Science is both a student number group and an individual subject benchmark statement. The Business and Administrative JACS coding group can be seen in table 1 (appended).

As already stated, Accounting, and Finance have their own SBS whilst Marketing, HRM (and others) tend to be based on General Business & Management SBS in the absence of dedicated SBS. It is interesting to note the numbers of students (for 2006/7 – the latest figures available) within some of the areas of business (and some other exemplar subjects), as shown in table 2 (appended). Finance and Tourism, for example, have less students and yet have dedicated SBS. Additionally, a selection of the total student numbers within a selection of *entire* JACS coding is presented in table 3 (appended). 8% of all undergraduates on business programmes are explicitly on Marketing programmes. This proportion has grown over the years as have absolute numbers, whereas there has actually been a reduction in student numbers in the more general areas of business (e.g. Business Studies). It is also interesting to note that all the non business subjects in table 2 (*) have directly corresponding subject benchmark statements. Many of these subjects have far fewer students studying them than Marketing.

In table 3 (appended), as well as highlighting student numbers associated with some exemplar subject areas, the table also identifies the number of directly relevant subject benchmark statements (BMS) associated with the subject area and present a quick ratio of the number of students in that subject area per BMS. Compared to other subject areas, Business and Administrative studies have far fewer associated SBS. Whilst it can be argued that all students need a general foundation in the subject area perhaps there is opportunity to develop further more specific SBS to reflect the growing maturity of certain subjects including marketing.

Based on HESA figures there are 16230 undergraduate Marketing students in the UK. However, this figure is likely to underestimate the *real* number of Marketing students as some will be classed under different JACS codes. For example some undergraduate programmes in Marketing are pathways through more generic programmes (e.g. BA Business Studies (Marketing)), or explicitly titled routes through more generic programmes. As such, additional Marketing students could be hidden within the General Business & Management JACS coding. As will be demonstrated later, a considerable number of Marketing students (and Marketing FTEs) are likely to be hidden within general Business/Management JACS coding or even entirely different JACS coding particularly in relation to the Art/Design.

From a simplistic point of view it may seem curious that given the very large numbers of students in Business programmes that there are not more explicitly related benchmark statements. In addition to basic numerical argument there is also the

sheer complexity of having so many different subjects covered within the General Business & Management SBS. Whilst this SBS has deliberately been written generically, in so doing, does such generic consideration undermine the very point of having SBS in the first place?

Exploratory Research

Methodology

The case for more specific Marketing SBS has been mooted on several occasions and an exploratory survey was carried out as part of this research. A questionnaire consisting of open questions seeking both factual information and opinions was circulated to Deans and Directors of Business Schools by the Association of Business Schools. Deans were asked to forward this to their Marketing Subject Group Leader (or equivalent) and their Head of UG programmes if appropriate. A number of face-to-face interviews were also carried out to elicit more in-depth responses and ideas and the Higher Education Academy's Business, Management, Accounting and Finance Subject Centre was included at this process.

Results

To date there have been 26 responses (19 new universities, 7 old universities) Out of the 26 responses 18 agree with the idea of having Marketing SBS, 5 do not agree, and 3 were unsure. Within those that agree, 14 stated that they are currently developing new Marketing courses and that such benchmarks would help. 11 of the respondents explicitly noted that they have internal competition in respect of different schools/faculties delivering Marketing courses. A variety of other responses were received in terms of why respondents agreed such as "long overdue"; "to aid consistency and clarity"; "yes, the field could benefit from a definition of marketing!". Some other interesting and considered responses revolved around reinforcing Marketing as a mature discipline and linking it closely to the business domain, but also in being cautious in their development.

"Having specific marketing benchmarks reinforces the position that marketing is a mature specific discipline within the business domain. I believe that this must be beneficial in reinforcing the importance of this subject area."

"Yes but need to be clear that 'marketing management' needs to be the lead perspective i.e. it needs to be a sub brand of business and management."

"In principle yes, but there is great diversity in provision which should be encouraged. [...] In principle a good idea, but they can lead to bland uniformity."

A typical response from a non-supportive respondent was that *"I think a general framework is better."*

Whilst the General Business & Management SBS explicitly states that: *[they are] not a specification of a detailed curriculum in the subject* (QAA, 2007:iii), their common use and interpretation often results in just that. A key significance of this is that whilst Marketing courses may benefit from ‘necessary’ underpinning concepts such as Finance, HR etc., there is less and less room in the curriculum to actually deliver the core subject – Marketing.

“Subject benchmark statements allow for flexibility and innovation in programme design and can stimulate academic discussion and debate upon the content of new and existing programmes within an agreed overall framework. Their use in supporting programme design, delivery and review within HEIs is supportive of moves towards an emphasis on institutional responsibility for standards and quality” (QAA, 2007).

The problem arises when such discussion is not stimulated and instead the General Business & Management SBS are used as a mechanism which in essence does force a ‘national curriculum’.

The Development of Niche Marketing Courses

As intimated by some of the survey responses, Marketing, as a discipline, is maturing and so fragmenting into more specific areas, such as: Marketing, Retailing, Advertising, but increasingly more sector specific Marketing awards are beginning to appear e.g. Fashion Marketing, Sports Marketing etc.. Would ‘traditional’ Marketing be best tied to the General Business & Management SBS and Sports Marketing to the ‘Hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism’ (QAA, 2000) SBS? Or, perhaps, such fragmentation suggests the need for a distinct Marketing SBS which can act as a platform for these new developments?

Expectations and Fit

Additional reasons for considering separate Marketing SBS revolve around the professional institute for Marketing in the UK – the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) and other related institutes; and the general fragmentation of the Marketing discipline over the years. The CIM have produced a set of ‘professional standards’ which provide a clearer route for Marketing competences than the generic SBS. A number of other institutes also have provided a series of Marketing competences e.g. related sector skills councils. This could be significant as the shift in UK HE funding is moving towards employers and employers are being increasingly encouraged to shape the HE curriculum as advocated by the Leitch Review (Leitch, 2006).

As mentioned earlier, Art & Design courses may also be hiding a significant number of Marketing students. Whilst there are 142635 students registered under the overarching JACS code of Creative Art & Design, this includes 54450 registered on ‘Design Studies’. This is significant as a number of Art/Design Schools offer Marketing programmes either as explicit programmes or as major components of other programmes. For example one northern Art/Design School offer a range of Marketing courses, or courses with significant amount of Marketing (and/or related areas e.g. Advertising). Three quotes from the course literature (reference withheld)

are presented below which demonstrate, from an employment perspective, that these graduates would largely be in exactly the same jobs market as Business School Marketing graduates.

“There are world-wide employment opportunities in the private and public sector dealing with media planning, PR campaigns, advertising campaigns, promotional strategies and communication planning.”

“By focusing on the business and management aspects of fashion and textiles, the courses recognise skills gaps and shortages in these areas and the exciting new employment opportunities now available.”

“In short you become more employable. Career opportunities are available in design, styling, merchandising, buying, selection, management, marketing and promotion, fashion journalism, product development and manufacturing.”

However, the curriculum within these courses does not include such fundamental Marketing topics as marketing research, buyer behaviour or strategic marketing. Art/Design Marketing courses seem to be especially light in the development of quantitative skills which is especially significant as the Marketing industry is calling for more ‘data-driven marketing’ skills in graduates (www.MSSSB.co.uk)

This raises interesting questions with regard to the expectations of both students and employers. Are Marketing skills clearly embedded in all Marketing courses – do some courses not provide what they are expecting – ‘what they say on the tin’? Indeed, this situation is exacerbated by schools other than business making use of non business subject benchmark statements. It is interesting to note the significant increase in reference to marketing, branding, advertising, as well as management and enterprise embedded within the recently reviewed subject benchmark statements for ‘Art& Design’ (QAA, 2008).

Governance

In not having distinct Marketing SBS programme designers must decide which SBS Marketing awards should be based on. There is a case, based on the above, to produce Marketing awards based on the Art/Design SBS (2008), and this is happening. Traditionally business school Marketing awards are based on the General Business & Management benchmarks. For largely historical reasons, as mentioned, there is actually more Marketing-explicit references contained within the ‘Agriculture, forestry, agricultural sciences, food sciences, and consumer sciences’ (QAA, 2002) SBS. With the absence of Marketing SBS, as well as the obvious question as to which SBS should be used, the issue of quality management emerges. If different schools/departments within a university are producing Marketing courses based on different SBS and managing them in their own way how does the university control the ‘Marketing programme brand’ and manage and assure its quality? This is becoming increasingly important as course data is increasingly being agglomerated at university level. For example, many universities now order their prospectus by course title rather than by school/faculty as this is seen as being more applicant friendly.

If this is an issue within one University, it is also a potential issue nationally. Business and Management SBS have traditionally been “owned” by the business school community and the Association of Business School’s CEO represents its interests with the QAA. It would appear that the Art/Design SBS actually now contain more marketing than the Business and Management SBS. This situation will continue whilst we operate within the generic Business and Management SBS framework.

Governance is also important in terms of better utilising the General Business & Management SBS. The number of students and courses that are contained within this area mean that programme validation and quality training could be more explicit for this SBS. It is not a ‘national curriculum’ or ‘tick box’ exercise to properly apply SBS, but an overarching guide. Perhaps some programme validation panels and quality management systems do not understand in sufficient detail that value of these SBS are in their generic nature and so perhaps there is a case for additional programme validation training in the general business and management area.

Conclusion

Consideration of the development of specific Marketing SBS is complex. Advantages include the production of a clearer reference point for course developers, an issue of increasing significance as the subject of Marketing as a discipline fragments in to other areas as it matures. Additionally, Marketing SBS may provide for a clearer set of expectations as to skill and competence development for students and employers. Disadvantages include the cost of developing and maintaining new SBS and the additional complexity of managing a portfolio of courses using a range of SBS. There is a danger that the cost and complexity issue could be exacerbated as other disciplines within the general area of business also seek to develop their own SBS.

In conclusion, in the spirit of guiding the Executive's decision, four options are apparent as follows:

1. Use existing SBS as they are generic enough

This reduces complexity in terms of course design and the associated costs of this complexity. It does not address the issue of internal competition within a single university, the issue of national governance in relation to traditional business and management disciplines or in terms of meeting student/employer expectations. Furthermore, other associated parts of the marketing discipline are also lobbying to develop niche benchmark statements e.g. Retail. If they are successful then the case for Marketing SBS cannot be ignored. If they are not successful then such associated academic communities would potentially welcome the development of Marketing SBS which would provide them with some opportunity to further benchmark their areas of specialism;

2. Develop Marketing SBS

This approach is costly and could lead to more SBS developments e.g. in HRM. Once developed the complexity and costs of keeping them up to date would also be incurred.

3. Use existing general Business & Management SBS but append with subject specific areas

This approach represents a “half way house” in that it would give subject communities the opportunity to develop some guidance with respect to development whilst reducing the costs and complexity of completely separate benchmark statements. However, in reality it might be that they simply build in cost and complexity without providing the benefits of specific guidance and governance.

4. Use existing general Business & Management SBS but append with reference to particular sector skills professional standards (which are agreed nationally).

The approach at first glance might appear to be an ideal solution. The Marketing academic community would have clear guidance to support development and governance without the costs and complexity of producing and updating Marketing SBS. Furthermore, there would be clarity with regard to student and employer expectations. However, these professional standards are very detailed and designed to benchmark competence within a focused professional setting. Within higher education programmes our aims are rather different. Detailed guidance with relation to specific competences could serve to confuse the development process through providing too much detail at one level and a far more narrowly focused underpinning than is desirable at another (training rather than education).

Although the results of the exploratory research findings presented here are limited *all* UK business schools have been invited to respond on more than one occasion and, as such, there would appear to be some support for making a case to the QAA to develop Marketing SBS. This case needs to be considered carefully by the Academy of Marketing Executive for recommendation to the July 2008 AGM in the first instance.

References and Appendix

www.hesa.ac.uk

http://www.ucas.ac.uk/he_staff/datamanagement/jacs/course_coding_system/

Leitch, S. (2006), Leitch Review of Skills: Prosperity for all in the global economy - world class skills, HMSO.

Quality Assurance Agency (2002), Subject benchmark Statement for agriculture, forestry, agricultural sciences, food sciences and consumer sciences.

Quality Assurance Agency (2007), Subject benchmark Statement for general business and management

Quality Assurance Agency (2000), Subject benchmark Statement for Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism

Quality Assurance Agency (2008), Subject benchmark Statement for art and design.

Appendix

Table 1 Business and Administrative Studies JACS Coding (from www.ucas.ac.uk)

N100	Business studies
N200	Management studies
N300	Finance
N390	Finance not elsewhere classified (please specify)
N400	Accounting
N420	Accounting theory
N490	Accounting not elsewhere classified (please specify)
N500	Marketing
N600	Human Resource Management
N700	Office skills
N800	Tourism, Transport and Travel
N900	Others in Business and Administrative studies (please specify)

Table 2 – Student Numbers on Business Programmes (from www.hesa.ac.uk)

Business studies	86570
Management studies	43515
Accounting	28120
Marketing	16230
Tourism, transport & travel	11305
Finance	10985
Human resource management	5185
* Sociology	27220
* Economics	23145
* Anthropology	3280
* Mechanical engineering	18310

* Pharmacology, toxicology & pharmacy	14445
* Chemistry	13675

Table 3 – Student Numbers in a selection of whole JACS codes (from www.hesa.ac.uk)

	Student Numbers	No BMS	Nos/BMS
Business & administrative studies	204815	4	51204
Physical sciences	62845	5	12,500
Mass communications & documentation	37560	2	18780
Mathematical sciences	27615	1	27615
Agriculture & related subjects	13245	1	13245