

Paper 16

Open Enrolment Programmes at Salford Business School: challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

The vision of the recently established Salford Business School (SBS) includes the improvement of open enrolment programmes to provide executive education. Open enrolment programmes differ from traditional credit bearing programmes in that they do not normally lead to an award and their participants do not need to have prior qualifications. The programmes are taken up by learners primarily to advance their knowledge and skills in order to proceed their careers (Schaap, 2008). In a Business Schools' context these programmes are offered in management and leadership related subjects (Maes, 2003). It is a challenging move for SBS due to the existing competition between such programmes across the UK, but there are a number of drivers that highlight the need for developing such programmes including the business school rankings (Peters, 2007) and the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF) that will measure the economic impact of research as part of future research funding allocations.

The current paper is part of an ongoing action research project by the open enrolment programmes development team within the SBS. The objective of this research is to improve the provision of open enrolment programmes across the SBS. This paper discusses lessons learned from the first action research cycle of a two-day pilot course in Search Engine Marketing Management. The research is based on the reflections of the course delivery team and feedback on the processes undertaken and on feedback from course participants. The findings of this study suggest that the development and delivery of research inspired open enrolment programmes can and should lead the way in the development and provision of executive education. Positive impacts of this include the improvement in Business School rankings, favourable REF assessment, generation of additional income for the course facilitators and the School and the enhancement of the reputation of the School as a benefit to other undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.

Despite positioning itself as an enterprising university, this study illustrates a number of university wide issues, which actually reduce the competitiveness of the institution in the executive education market. Recommendations for improvement include the development of physical space for the delivery of open programmes; streamlined course development and delivery processes; high level support for academics interested in developing and delivery of short courses and the development of effective marketing channels.

Introduction

The University of Salford (UoS) traces its origins back to 1896, acquiring university status in 1967. The mission of the University is to be an enterprising university, achieving internationally recognised excellence in Education for capability, Research for the real world and Partnership with business and the community (Harloe and Perry, 2005). The UoS has a long-standing record of working with employers and industry, and engagement with business and industry is embedded within the University Strategic Framework 2005 -2015. The UoS is now seen as one of the UK's leading universities for enterprise (Mandelson, 2009).

The University of Salford's Business School (SBS) was created on 1 August 2006, from the merger of four schools. The merger created one of the largest business schools in the United Kingdom with approximately 200 staff and a budget of £18m. SBS launched an ambitious Vision 2017 strategy with the aim of turning SBS into an international learning community. Salford Business School aspires to become a top twenty business school in the UK (currently 68th) and to be in the top 10% in Europe (currently not listed) by 2017 (Conway et al., 2008). One of the key strategic aims outlined in SBS's 2017 Vision strategy, is to become one of the largest providers of business and management education in the UK. To achieve this strategic goal, SBS have established the Enterprise Hub. The Hub was formed in 2008 to

enable industry and public bodies to access all the services that SBS offers. These include four key services: executive education, consultancy, knowledge transfer and innovation.

One of the key aims of the recently established Enterprise Hub includes the improvement of open enrolment programmes (open programmes) to provide executive education. Open enrolment programmes are different from traditional credit bearing programmes since normally they do not lead to an award and their participants do not need to have prior qualifications as would be the case for traditional undergraduate or postgraduate programmes offered by Universities. Open programmes are taken up by learners primarily to advance their knowledge and skills to proceed their careers (Schaap, 2008) and are differentiated from in-house or customised programmes where the physical teaching and delivery of the programmes take place at the organisations' premises. The Open Programmes strategy aims to bring the amount generated by 2012 to \$2 million which would allow Salford Business School to be registered in the Financial Times Executive Education league table (Heinze, Wells, and Kalantaridis, 2009). This is a challenging move for SBS due to the existing competition between such programmes across the UK, the "credit crunch" and subsequent economic recession and not least the internal issues associated with restructuring Salford Business School itself. However, there are a number of drivers that highlight the importance of developing such programmes including the business school rankings (Peters, 2007) and the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2012, that will measure the economic impact of research as part of future research funding allocations (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2009).

Open Programmes in the Salford Business School include two major externally recognised and designed programmes: the Institute of Directors (IoD) and the Leadership and Development Programmes (LEAD), these two combined can potentially generate nearly £1million in turnover annually. The focus of this study is a small-scale short course, which would be delivered by an academic working on a cutting edge research topic that could benefit local economy and generate the 'Impact' that is necessary to meet the REF criteria. The current paper examines the challenges and opportunities encountered in developing and delivering an Open Programmes short course in Search Engine Marketing Management (SEMM). It is a new short course and is used in this paper to illustrate lessons for future courses that may be offered as part of the Salford Business School's open programmes.

The paper is structured as follows: firstly, the wider literature is outlined focusing on the need for the engagement of employers and organisations in higher education. Secondly, the case study of the Search Engine Marketing Management course will be presented. Thirdly, the lessons from the case study will be discussed in relation to the themes identified in the literature. Finally, conclusions and recommendations on future short course provision will be proposed.

UK Higher Education Context

Over the last thirty years, there has been a huge change in the role that Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) play in terms in economic and social development across the UK. This has seen a shift away from traditional views linking Higher Education with teaching and research, towards a new strategy of university "wealth creation" through employer engagement. Employer engagement is assumed in this study to be any commercial activity that a HEI engages in with external organisations, which does not concern conventional undergraduate or postgraduate teaching and research. For example, employer engagement encompasses the development of Open Programmes such as IoD, LEAD and short courses such as Search Engine Marketing Management. These activities are viewed as a third mission for universities that involve forming close links with business and are strategically encouraged in the UK by funding bodies (Ashcroft, Bebb, Kalantaridis, Heinze, and Lawrence, 2009).

In (2003, the Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration stressed the economic need for a better flow of innovation and ideas between business and universities. Following this, the Leitch Review (2006) identified employer engagement as a key element in its recommendations of how to increase

investment in skills in businesses. Both these reviews have acknowledged the economic development potential of Higher Education Institutions in the UK. The rise in importance of the knowledge economy has made the role of HEIs even more vital. At a policy level, there has been clear acknowledgement of the economic and social development potential of HEIs, especially in the context of the knowledge economy. Policy design and discussions have been based around developing a ‘partnership’ between the state, employers and individuals, with all expected to ‘play their part’ in up-skilling the nation (Brown, Clarke, Johnson, and Hewitt, 2004: 45). Also, at operational level, this recognition has resulted in the recent merger of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) and the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) resulting in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) created in June 2009 (number10.gov.uk, 2009).

It has been emphasised that UK HEIs must conduct their business of teaching and learning significantly differently if they are to meet the skills requirements of the workforce market that is recommended in the Leitch report (Wedgwood, 2008). These views are echoed in the recent reports that highlight the government’s ambitions for Higher Education with financial support, which has doubled the investment in higher education since 1997 (Mandelson, 2009). Not only does the investment cover traditional qualifications but also the opportunities for companies to benefit from a grant by their attendance on open programmes in schemes such as TrainToGain (traintogain.gov.uk).

The ongoing theme of these developments is the significant change recommended by Leitch (2006) that the provision of vocational education and training should be demand-led, adaptable and responsive. However, despite HEFCE employer engagement funding being made available to Universities, many employers have little experience of working with higher education. They are unaware of what is on offer and of the developments that have taken place within the HE sector. According to HEFCE the barriers to employer engagement in HEIs that need to be addressed are as follows –

- “the role of HE in improving productivity is not sufficiently promoted in policy discussions, and is poorly understood by employers and employees;
- outside certain disciplines, the workplace is not yet widely valued as a place of HE level learning;
- there is a lack of a shared language between employers and HE that could help to make clear the relationship between HE learning and skills and competence;
- the HE sector lacks the capacity, and possibly the incentives, to engage in riskier markets linked to employer needs, when traditional young entrants continue to represent a safer investment;
- we need to develop quality assurance systems that are sufficiently flexible to meet the special needs of workplace delivery of learning (there are lessons to be learned from the experience of foundation degrees).”

(Higher Education Funding Council, 2006:7)

The UK’s CBI (Council for Business and Industry) and Universities UK have issued a report, *Stepping Higher: Workforce development through employer-higher education partnership* (Lambert and Trainor, 2008). The report looks at how the two sectors can cooperate more closely in developing the workforce. The findings include that many employers and universities are already working together to develop employees. There are an increasing number of universities and higher education colleges who see engaging with employers as an essential institutional activity. However, the report emphasises that there are many improvements that still need to be made. For example, the research found that most employers interviewed for the study were not confident that there will be enough skilled people to meet their future needs although this doesn’t mean increasing the amount of traditional undergraduates going into the workplace. It was discovered that employers need more people who are already in the workforce to develop higher-level skills. The message is that Universities need to increase their share of the training and professional development market. Universities can play a key role in growing the market, by encouraging more employers to recognise the benefits of higher-level skills. The report discovered that

“nearly half of training is already delivered by outside training companies or providers, but less than half of employers use a university for workforce development”. (Lambert and Trainor, 2008:10)

The above statement is positive in that it highlights that external training is becoming more commonly accepted by organisations, however, the fact is that universities are contributing less than half towards this trend.

Search Engine Marketing Management

To reflect upon the developments in Open Programmes in the Salford Business School, we will use the development and delivery of a course in search engine marketing management. The following table outlines the key activities in the Search Engine Marketing Management course and the planned and actual dates of their completion.

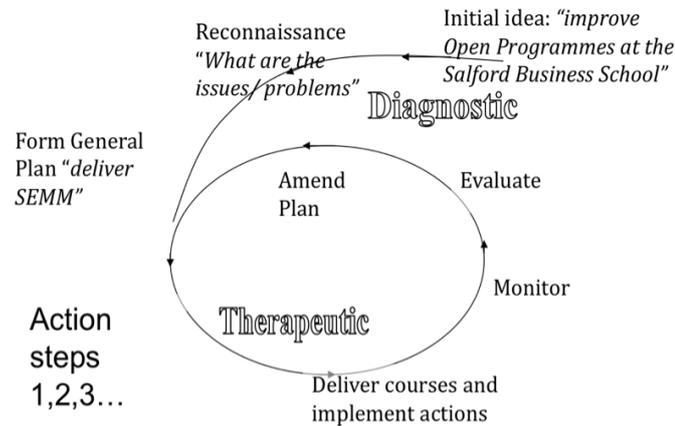
Table 1: Key activities in developing the Search Engine Marketing Management course

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Planned Due Dates in 2009</i>	<i>Actual dates</i>
<i>a) Develop material</i>	<i>30 January</i>	<i>Feb – July</i>
<i>b) Develop marketing material for the short course</i>	<i>28 February</i>	<i>May</i>
<i>c) Advertise the Short Course Pilot</i>	<i>March-April</i>	<i>May-ongoing</i>
<i>d) Recruit at least 20 participants</i>	<i>April - May</i>	<i>July</i>
<i>e) Pilot the Short Course at Salford Business School</i>	<i>April - May - July</i>	<i>June/ July</i>
<i>f) Evaluate the material of the short course</i>		<i>July</i>
<i>g) Evaluate the processes of marketing and short course delivery</i>	<i>July - August</i>	<i>Ongoing</i>
<i>h) Disseminate the findings to a wider audience</i>	<i>September</i>	<i>Ongoing</i>

As can be seen from the table above, the project of developing and delivering the course to a commercial audience was subject to a delay of at least a month in most cases. The main discrepancy was the recruitment of participants to the course and the consequent delivery dates, which were later than anticipated. This was largely due to difficulties in recruiting enough participants to make the course viable.

Work done

The course was undertaken within an action research framework, which directed the Open Programmes' team to focus on potential improvements in terms of programme development and delivery. Since the project lead is also the Director of Open Programmes within the Salford Business School, and another key member of the project – Stuart Wells is the Enterprise Development Manager, it was their joint intention to use this project as a pilot for other courses, which could be delivered by Salford Business School. The following diagram (Figure 1) illustrates the Diagnostic and Therapeutic stages undertaken by this project. First of all, the Open Programmes delivery team started with the desire to improve Open Programmes at Salford Business School and in order to identify potential improvements the issues were firstly experienced by the team and then reflected upon.



Lewin's cyclical model (Burns, 2000)

Figure 1

The current paper focuses on the first provision of the course in July 2009. The course attendees included members of five local organisations all of whom have had some previous dealings with the University of Salford. Two of the participants were business directors, two were employees in online marketing related roles and one works for a charity. The course evaluation is based on staff observations and reflections and course feedback questionnaires.

As part of the wider issues encountered by the Open Programmes team, the following infrastructural factors of the current university systems such as: catering, room bookings, and finance are highlighted and explored in more detail below:

Catering

The university based catering team required one-week's notice for any catering provision. This makes sense for internal meetings, but in the case of commercially offered courses, where participants could potentially book giving only a days notice, it makes it difficult to confirm order numbers. This requirement was eventually negotiated down to three days with the catering team, but still remains a problem – why can the final order numbers not be made on the morning for the lunch provision, as is the case in commercial operations? Our competitors set this standard and our customers would be looking to receive a similar service and would be perplexed as to why this cannot be provided.

Room bookings

Despite the wide range of computer labs on the University of Salford campus, there are few rooms that are suitable to accommodate a professional audience. To deliver the course effectively, a computer suite, break out areas and adjacent refreshments room are required. The rooms that were identified as being potentially viable were unfortunately subject to demolition due to the increasing need for office space and hence were not available due to the restructuring of the University of Salford. In particular, since Salford Business School was offering the course it would have been particularly useful for the participants to attend and see the business school building and for them to be immersed in the "business school environment". However, the actual physical location for the course was the University library building.

Finance

The cost model of the course was designed to meet the requirements of the TraintoGain funding criteria and was pre-approved by the North West Development Agency and the relevant TraintoGain broker from Business Link. The experience of working with government agencies such as Business Link and the training brokers supports the views reported in the literature that there is a major shift in providing support to companies in helping them to access training. Those companies that were able to comply with the relevant criteria have successfully benefited from the grant offered.

Marketing and the challenges of employer engagement

The marketing and selling of the Search Engine Marketing Management course was unsurprisingly most effective where a relationship between the course participant and the University of Salford already existed. Four out of five participants on the first course were already aware of the University of Salford. Therefore, establishing the initial links is a challenge in the context of higher education policy in terms of employer engagement.

Our experience shows that those individuals who have experienced higher education of some sort are more likely to engage with the university. However, those who have never been to a university before are unaware that a university could offer courses that are relevant and could be of benefit to them, and tend to be sceptical. This was highlighted by the telephone appointment making exercise. The stereotypical image that an HEI only offers academic knowledge and is an “ivory tower” where only research and high level learning take place has a detrimental effect on the successful marketing of commercially oriented courses.

Marketing channel

A number of strategies for marketing the course were used; these included a trial of telephone sales and appointment making. This was a disappointing result with these efforts not achieving any returns. Over 600 telephone calls were made by the marketing agent yet not a single individual was interested in booking an appointment with a representative from Salford Business School. However, on the other hand a simple email to an existing contact resulted in a conversion to an attendee. This highlights the importance of developing relationship marketing and building up networks of potential course attendees through alumni management.

Bureaucracy and priorities

The University of Salford seeks to be enterprising and recognises “academic enterprise” activities in its mission. However, in delivering open programmes, Salford Business School is facing similar market conditions to those commercial organisations operating in the management and leadership training and development market. The internal processes of Salford Business School involved in developing a course for £15k are the same as where they offer a course at £100k level, making it much tougher for the university to compete in an extremely crowded and price sensitive market place. For example, every order form has to be signed off by at least three different people irrespective of the monetary value of the items involved. This is just another aspect, which is repeatedly highlights in the literature where large organisations engaging in dynamic markets and the challenges they face (Kanter, 1989).

Resources allocations

The priorities of staff in dealing with courses at lower cost level in terms of devotion of time are also naturally lower than to the main income generators such as the LEAD or Institute of Directors programmes or the delivery of undergraduate or postgraduate teaching. At this point in time, the major opportunity in involving more academic staff who could potentially be interested in communicating their research findings to local commercial community is not the main priority for Enterprise staff.

Academic members of staff are less likely to devote their time to developing short courses if they are not offered considerable support from the Open Programme team. Engagement in these activities is “above the workload” and the financial incentives can be achieved in other less time consuming ways. This highlights the need for the Open Programmes team to offer excellent service to internal stakeholders such as academic staff if sustainable programmes offerings are to be developed.

Conclusions

Salford Business School is making good progress towards realising its vision 2017 in the area of enterprise development. However, this is not because of the university wide infrastructure but in spite of it. The main drawback is that the processes and procedures at operational level are geared up to substantial projects of £100k+ value and not to those that involve a couple of thousand pounds. This observation goes some way towards explaining the findings identified in the CBI report when it comes to universities provision of employee development – that universities do not have the efficient and effective infrastructural frameworks to deliver competitive options to employers. The standards set by commercial providers in terms of processes and facilities are very high, making the only competitive advantage of universities, the knowledge that is being offered.

Overall, the Search Engine Marketing Management course project was a success, with several local SMEs attending the course. The development of the course involved an extensive study, which piloted the way for short course development processes in the Salford Business School. The feedback from the participants was very positive, in particular highlighting the cutting-edge knowledge aspect that made the course attractive to them. A comment made by one of the participants supports the views that the knowledge offered at a university is of interest to organisations:

“...the course was aimed at businesses looking to find out how to help them achieve website optimisation, delivered with a hands-on approach with all cutting edge knowledge and from a leading business university.”
(Chadwick, 2009:21).

Future work

As identified in the marketing experience, the building of a reputation by the university, where it is identified and perceived in people's minds as offering commercially focused Open Programmes, is most easily achieved where individuals know the University from previous positive experience. Alternatively, where potential clients are able to meet academics in other settings for an informal chat, this helps to dispel preconceptions that ‘universities have nothing to offer me’. Hence, Salford Business School has taken over the ownership of a local meet-up group – North West Small Business Meetup Group (www.meetup.com/NW-Small-Business-Meetup-Group). This ‘meetup’ will be the vehicle for encouragement of and engagement with local small businesses where in an informal environment people can meet the Open Programmes team and engage in what could be the first step to many interactions with the University of Salford. Additionally, Open Programmes Open days aimed at those who have never heard about the University of Salford and the open programmes that it offers, will be facilitated. These are also great opportunities to market Open Programmes to internal stakeholders such as staff who might be interested in communicating their cutting edge research knowledge to commercial organisations.

The team will be building strategic partnerships with local agencies and business groups such as the meet-up groups and the Chapel Street Business Group, which have proved useful for marketing and sales. The Salford Business School Executive Education Needs analysis (SEEN) for the North West of England will be developed to further understand the market of executive education and how we as a Business School can develop programmes and courses in this area.

Recommendations

Whilst the above future work is within the control of the Open Programmes team, two factors are beyond their control: physical space and fit for purpose University wide administrative support and resources. For the Salford Business School to offer high quality experience and support to its staff in delivering Open Programmes, it is of high importance to have the physical space that offers the equivalent to those standards set in the commercial sector. The course development and delivery processes must be streamlined to allow a high level of support to academic staff involved in the delivery. The frustrating level of bureaucracy makes the experience of new programmes development very difficult.

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