

Developing marketing and business consultancy skills in undergraduate students

Lionel Bunting



The University of Chichester Business School offers a series of open, optional, extra-curricular business and marketing events called 'The Marketing Forum', aimed at students and businesses. These events are designed to enhance the student experience and to bridge the gap between academia and the commercial world. They serve as an interface for learning by students and businesses, to develop, harness and apply students' knowledge of marketing, digital marketing and digital literacy, as well as wider aspects of business.

At the Forums invited businesses present issues or challenges they face to students, to generate ideas and possible solutions. This article details the evolution of the Forums, how they are structured, what aspects did or did not work well, and shares some experiences and feedback from participants. The format of the Forums can be adopted by almost all subject areas, and is offered to academics from other disciplines as a possible 'template' for facilitating direct access and an interface to businesses.

Keywords

Experiential learning, co-creation, marketing, consultancy, digital literacy, employability, business, smes, knowledge exchange, student experience.

Introduction

The Forums are a series of events for students and businesses that enable invited business to present a real life marketing issue for students to review, discuss and propose solutions for. It's a perfect way for businesses owners and executives to gain a fresh perspective on their business from the creative and enquiring minds of marketing and business students. The idea was something I had been thinking about for some time in response to increasing business needs for students to apply their knowledge in a commercial way and contribute to solving business problems, and also in response to a range of reports and findings on teaching, learning and employability.

Our current education system and business

A House of Lords (2015) report claimed that our current education system is failing our students in not effectively tackling topical issues and literacies for the future workplace. Although the report almost exclusively focuses on the use of technologies, it also emphasised aspects that were part of the government's industrial strategy of developing the integration of creativity, social skills, business skills and

entrepreneurship into education and training alongside digital literacy. The report by New Media Council (NMC, 2017) specifically supports the notion that developing digital literacy and digital capability (Jisc 2015; 2019) is a necessity for students to obtain and keep employment, with the onus on higher education institutions to equip students with these skills. And of course these skills need to be developed and used in practical situations and in the workplace (Jisc, 2014). The CBI (2011) amongst many others reported that employers wanted more employable graduates, and expected students to do more to prepare themselves for the workplace. An analytical mindset and problem solving, as well as the commercial context in which organisations operate, is necessary (BIS, 2015), along with technical skills and knowledge. Many businesses seem starved of marketing and technology ideas and solutions and struggle to understand the complexity of the new tech-savvy consumers.



Marketing Forum guest speaker: Millionaire entrepreneur Eleni Thompson

Higher education and business

In terms of higher education, much has been written about the ways in which digital technology specifically can support collective, creative and connected forms of learning and study (Henderson et al 2016). New technologies are widely seen to support students in the co-creation of knowledge with peers, yet there is little focus on the use, application and transfer of this knowledge to others and to business. A co-creative approach is, according to Carey (2103), a process driven equally by the academic and the student, embracing the student as a stakeholder in the learning process. This approach is taken a step further with the Forums, since the learning process involves a third component - real businesses. Businesses are a valuable component of the students' co-created learning approach, which involves action-based learning, an important mode of enquiry based on the premise that learning takes place among and through other people (Megele, 2014).

This body of research based academic evidence compels us to acknowledge that students are not being supported with topical issues, relevant literacies and other forms of preparation for a future workplace. Moreover, commercially, there are demands and challenges that are also not being met. For example, Glick (2018) reports that many organisations are complicit in failing to adopt a culture of continuous learning. As a result, digital skills in particular are foremost amongst barriers to employment. In addition, businesses have identified barriers to engaging with universities in their desire to have direct impact on, and communication with, students and academics in building relationships and meaningful knowledge exchanges.

A student perspective

Students, too, have barriers to building relationships with universities, especially in the case of part time or commuter students, who often feel excluded from extra-curricular activities, which often take place in the evening, when these students are likely not on campus due to other commitments. UCAS and HECSU (nd.) and Leeds University (nd.) report that more daytime provision is needed, as day students are disadvantaged from experiential opportunities more readily available to their counterparts who live at or near the university. Such findings urge academics to find ways to enhance the curriculum and improve student experience. Student experience is of course one of the key metrics of many university rankings (Locke, 2014), which have become extremely valuable mobility measures for prospective students and possibly even for higher education employees in a highly marketised sector.



Marketing Forum guest speaker: Bill Strohacker - Director of Strohacker Design School

Evolution of the Marketing Forums

Whilst principally intended to provide an experiential bridge between academic and business and to enhance student's learning through extra-curricular activity, the Marketing Forums could also help to address some of the wider issues evident across the sector. They can contribute to enhancing the student experience at the University of Chichester, with students learning beyond the formal teaching sessions, learning that is aligned to assessed modules but which is a co-created experiential based learning environment with no assessment, focused on personal development, knowledge acquisition and knowledge transfer.

Precedents

The idea of adding value to the student experience and learning by inviting guest speakers and business people into universities to speak to students is not new. At some universities, this is a formalised coordinated element alongside teaching; at others, it's more of an ad-hoc activity, whilst at some, it involves leaning on personal contacts and inviting them in at relevant points in a module/course timeline. As such, this latter approach is not widely publicised across the institution or externally. The University of Chichester Business School did not have a formal or centrally coordinated approach, which has led to students to perceive learning and opportunity imbalances across subject areas within the School.

While students were learning on their degree programmes and often working on subject-appropriate case studies, they did not often interface with businesses in more typical business style environments. Research (D'Abate, 2010; Wilson, 2012) supports the idea that developmental interactions and experiences prepare students better for the workplace, and lead to enhanced career development and progression. Accordingly, I proposed that a speaker's event would be established each semester that would appeal to students from all business subjects and would be scheduled to facilitate attendance, thus overcoming one of the barriers that had previously hampered guest speaker events and attendance numbers. These events were not necessarily the easiest to organise. Difficulties included the complexities of timetabling, rooming, securing good and relevant speakers, marketing the events, ensuring that students attended, and the management and stress associated with organising these larger events that I experienced.

Insights from the first two years of this experiment

A number of ideas were pursued to ensure the success of the first two years of these speaker events. Clearly, they attracted some very interesting guest speakers and were well attended by Business Students and Business School staff. However, one thing that came out of this quite strongly was that students wanted to interact more with the participating businesses and speakers, who in return wanted to have time to interact with students to gain insight and ideas from them. Conversely, feedback from students attending also showed that, despite their interest in the talks, it was after all **a talk**: several speakers were very didactic and it was challenging for students to remain interested and focused for the duration. It was this feedback, along with students' finding it challenging to develop and apply their digital literacy meaningfully, that prompted me to set up the Marketing Forums.

Smaller businesses in particular have found it difficult or impossible to engage with universities and participate in knowledge exchange that was largely financially beyond their mean. Many also wanted support with digital technology and innovation, digital skills and marketing, since generating awareness, reaching potential customers and generating sales was often their company's priority for survival.

More generally, businesses often struggle to interface with universities (Guardian, 2019), as historically there have been limited touch-points or vehicles for this to happen. Moreover, universities which are research focused often produce work that fails to resonate with management practice (Bansal et al. 2012), thus reinforcing the notion that universities are not business/management focused in practice, as reflected in the limited opportunities for meaningful exchanges between university and business. In some instances there are, as is the case with the University of Chichester, live projects for relevant assessed modules but these are in a minority and take time to set up and generate results.

Improving connectivity and reciprocal competitive advantage

In light of this, I reasoned that a more immediate platform was needed if businesses were to be encouraged to work more closely with our students. Drawing on many years' experience of working in the commercial sector, running businesses and through attending business networking events and involvement on external consultancy projects for the University of Chichester, it became apparent to me that the challenges smaller businesses faced could in part be addressed and supported by revisiting academic activities and processes to improve connectivity and even provide some competitive advantage for the businesses (and students) from doing so (Guardian, 2019).

Having experience in both the worlds of academia and business, I was aware that the behaviours, challenges and expectations of each world were different and not always congruent. I pondered how providing student involvement, removing financial barriers and providing a forum for businesses to engage with universities would make it easier for businesses to access knowledge, and deliver a unique bridging opportunity for students to explore and operate across both worlds. This approach, in part, had been adopted by Brenna University (Erickson & Laing, 2016) as part of their MBA Entrepreneurship programme, citing the round table networking and speaker series as one of its unique differentiators.



Marketing Forum guest speaker: Catkin Bodmer-Wemyss
Director of Bryt Skincare

Launching the Marketing Forums

In 2015 the Marketing Forums were launched as a regular series of shorter, focused business events scheduled across each semester at an appropriate time to appeal to the most students especially since many students did not live on campus. Various reports/research show that universities need to do more with their enhanced offering to students during the daytime, so that commuting and part-time students can gain the full university experience (UCAS, nd), whilst remaining sensitive to the needs of external speakers and businesses. A simple format of 5x20-minute blocks was used to structure each event and ensure the events were fast paced, held people's interest and kept things moving. The events were set as a series, on the same day of the week and at the same time and place on each occasion, so that they became more of a regular feature in the goings-on of a university, and firmly established in the minds of students, where a one-off event might not.

As the Marketing Forum events progressed, so too did the content. This ensured: that speakers provided highly appropriate talks for our students' learning, that activity elements enhanced students' skills and that the round table element enabled students and businesses to gain something meaningful from their exchanges. Reports, including those by BIS (2015) and Erickson & Laing (2015), often highlight networking, communication, business etiquette, commercial awareness and problem solving as highly sought-after skills, yet ones which are often lacking in graduates. So, in part, the Marketing Forums set out to address some of these deficits in students and to provide opportunities for them to observe, learn, share and practice a range of skills in a safe and managed environment. Any activities that get students more involved are, according to HEA (2015) *'a positive step towards improving the quality of student learning and ultimately engagement.'*

Grogan (2019) evidenced the future-looking position of the University of Salford's strategy and their development of exceptional industry partnerships to lead the way in real world experiences to prepare students for life in the world of work. He advocated moving beyond partnership to foster an approach that was co-creational and coproduced with students and external stakeholders, at institutional level and at course and modular level. Healey et al. (2014) evidence the benefits of partnerships in learning and teaching and provide evidence of these benefits in curriculum design and assessment.



Marketing Forum guest speaker: Wayne Hemmingway, MBE

Connecting the Forums and taught modules

Over time, assessment for two taught modules, on which I lead, became linked to the forums, ensuring the value of the events provided opportunity for students to develop their ideas, thoughts and practical skills and turning these into relevant and value-added content in the module assignments. This is an effective approach (e.g. Megele 2014). Although evidence has been available for some years linking engagement to learning gain and achievement, the HEA (2015) suggests that greater understanding is still needed on this relationship, given the attendant variables and complexity.

How the Forum works

The format was developed to be attractive and appropriate to both students and businesses, with a faster-paced approach reflective of a business environment and of business networking events. The idea was to introduce students to new ways of doing things and better prepare them for a range of events and formats for business events that are found around the country. Networking, digital literacy, agile mindset, problem solving and communications regularly make the top ten skills (Prospects, Targetjobs, 2018; Emarketer, 2019; CIMA, 2017; CBI, 2011; Jisc, 2019) that students need for the workplace and I felt it important to address these skill areas to support the formal teaching at University and better prepare students for placements and graduate roles. It is these extracurricular activities that, according to Wilson (2012) contribute importantly to the development of graduates' skills.

Process

These fast paced sessions have the following 5x20-minute block schedule.

- 20 minute networking, refreshments and welcome
- 20 minute guest talk
- 20 minute interactive activity
- 2x20-minute business consultancy rotations.

Although this is the prescribed format, it is easy to be flexible and responsive to change and individual demands, for instance if a guest speaker wishes to have 30-40 minutes or attending businesses want longer consultancy rotations.

For the consultancy element, invited businesses present a specific business issue or problem to a group of students with them in a round table format. The students would then ask questions, discuss previous activities of the business and put forward ideas that might assist the business to move forward.



Student round table consultancy

The aim is for students to draw on their academic learning, personal experiences and - where relevant - workplace experiences to propose appropriate ideas to address the business issue. Academic members of staff provide the expert voice for each business consultancy table and ensure that the discussion does not stagnate, enabling all participants to have a voice. At times, the expert academic might add value to the discussion to support student comments or to address gaps in the discussion. I provide the overall event management, introductory welcome, timekeeping and moving people through each component of the event and facilitating a roundup and feedback at the end of each session.

Guidance to students

Students are given information and advice on how to network, how to problem solve with businesses, how to present ideas and are provided with an overview of the consulting process to help in structuring these early sessions with businesses. They are encouraged not to simply throw out idea after idea, but rather to develop these with the business and think them through to implementation, considering the cost, risk and potential outcomes.

At the end of each forum, a round-up is undertaken, where participating businesses summarise the key learning outcomes and action points for their business. This helps to gain an idea of what may or may not have been useful in the discussion and provides a level of feedback for participating students. In classes following the Forum events, I discuss the event with students to ascertain their learning, eliciting what worked for them and how they might be able to approach things in different ways on another occasion.

Who has been involved?

Businesses and entrepreneurs

The Forums have attracted a wide range of businesses and entrepreneurs, either as speakers/facilitators or as businesses seeking enquiring minds on their challenges for the consultancy rotations. These businesses include tourist attractions, hospitality, food producers, retailers, education, arts organisations, local government, beauty salons and beauty product manufacturers, musicians and health & therapies. Guest talks have also covered a wide range of topics - not just focused on tactical marketing activities, but also aspects of marketing and business as a whole, including social media, digital marketing, content strategy, retailing, business start-up and business planning, customer segmentation, economic renewal, destination branding, events and sponsorship, social safety and security, managing people, organisational leadership, business networking, customer service.

Students

The Forums are largely promoted to undergraduate and postgraduate business students, although not exclusively limited to them. The use of social and digital media provides a wider reach, and attracted attendees from other subject areas and indeed interested individuals from outside the University, who are free to attend. The guest speaker and businesses for the consultancy rotations play an important role in attracting students, as – so far - there has been little interest from certain areas of the University. In part, this

is due to the Forums being labelled as 'Marketing' and hence perceived not to be relevant and also because of the dual campus setup of the University (Bognor Regis and Chichester), so that different subjects are based at each campus. Nonetheless, the Forums have attracted students from accounting, events management, tourism, human resources, computing and IT, marketing, musical theatre, English, psychology and sports management.

Evaluation

So far, I have not carried out any formal evaluation. However, I elicit informal feedback from academics and businesses at the close of the event. This has been a valuable element, so that everyone can see in the moment just what the initial reception has been by businesses, and what key points they are taking away with them to reflect on or act on. Most businesses have stated that the input from students far exceeds their expectations, with all stating that they were leaving the event with multiple points of learning, reflection and consideration. Feedback from students has been quite free flowing, some of them remaining after the close of the event to discuss their experiences with the academics and me, which was hugely interesting and revealing. The feedback from students does not stop there, many drawing on these experiences, interactions reflections in later taught sessions with me.

Later, I would e-mail students and business participants asking for feedback. This is principally to draw out thoughts after participants had time to reflect and consolidate, and - for businesses - possibly to implement ideas. Not every participant responded but many did and there were some really constructive suggestions: about what worked well and what didn't work so well, what had been learned, how valuable they had found the sessions and reporting some interesting outcomes as a result of participation. For reasons of space, I have not included the full extent or critical analysis of the feedback and comments in this article, but you are welcome to contact me for details.

Through discussion and feedback from students an interesting point came to light, with a number of students proposing the idea of linking the events to assessment in specific marketing modules, and clearly indicating the skills that would be developed or gained through the events and how this might positively impact the assessments. I took this proposal forward with a first year marketing module on social media marketing and this became one of the first co-created student assessments for the Business School, something that Healey et al. (2014) consider as an activity of the highest order in relation to student partnerships and student engagement. Engaging students in partnerships creates active learning and is meaningful for students, evidencing how embedding this in the curriculum speeds up learning and intellectual development and identifying that such activities elevate student performance and engagement (Healey et al., 2014).

What has not worked so well

Clearly, there have been some excellent benefits and outcomes for all stakeholders, but not every element has worked. One notable aspect that lacked involvement was the extremely limited use of social media by participating students, something that the organisers were hoping for, to raise awareness of and interest in

activities at the University. There were a limited number of non-marketing students attending, and this has since led to the renaming of the events from Marketing Forums to Business Forums to reflect the diversity of the content and businesses in attendance. The choice of participating businesses had a large impact on students' future attendance at an event. Where there were 'challenging' business people who were not overly receptive to student input and who created a tougher environment for them, this meant that some students were deterred from attending again as they felt their contribution, value and voice were not being adequately heard or appreciated and led to the self-questioning of their own value. Erickson & Laing (2016) found that there were inevitable culture clashes between academia and business and also that attendees needed to feel they learned something valuable. The two worlds collide in this environment, with each having differing expectations of one another but ultimately students need to work with both for skills development and to learn something from the interactions and speakers.

Benefits

Feedback from student debriefing sessions notes many benefits from the Forums. All welcomed the opportunity to meet and interact with a range of businesses in a familiar environment and experience the way that business networking events are organised. They feel better prepared to attend and engage in such events for future employers.



Student round table consultancy

Some students said that they didn't know how to introduce themselves appropriately to businesses or converse with them, and this was a barrier to their personal development. They found that the interactive task element of the Forums that includes activities such as networking skills, the personal verbal business card and working a room are all extremely useful in their personal skills development and understanding of business interactions.

Being able to work on real business problems was also deemed to be an excellent aspect of being involved in the Forums. Although some students would have had some experience of this in an academic setting, through assessed modules, the Forum environment was much more organic and required a different approach and mindset to helping the businesses attending. At first, students felt that their knowledge and skills were of little or no value to businesses, but with support and academic facilitation of the Forum events, students quickly gained their voices and established their value in relation to the business problems and how they can help to address them.

Developing consultancy skills

Both participating academics and students came to realise that, initially, student input was largely a series of ideas being fired at the business, thinking that this was what the businesses wanted. As sessions and students evolved, and with academics informally 'shaping' the approaches of the sessions and students, student involvement moved to more of an analytical or questioning approach and providing ideas that were more formulated, worked through with depth and applied to the business. Although this meant that there were fewer ideas, they were of a higher quality, more thought-through and useful ideas.

The businesses did find it extremely useful having young enquiring minds working on their business challenges, a demographic segment many of them wished to reach but one in general terms had struggled to understand and connect with. Of course, some of them did not always take on board these possible solutions and students expressed they were sometimes disheartened by this but acknowledged that the delivery of their solutions could be improved as too could refining their idea and providing a more in-depth explanation that was highly specific for each business. An interesting outcome from speaking with businesses was that their participation gave them some much-needed time before the event in preparing for it and during the event spending time looking at their own business issues and considering them from a different perspective which many stated was extremely valuable part of the process for them. However, it was not always clear what they took from the events and what, if anything, was implemented in the business as this was not always shared by them. Although I contacted the businesses via email and received some feedback and thoughts sometime after the events it did not always include content on what they went on to implement. Indeed students commented that they would like to know what businesses went on to do with their ideas after the initial event feedback. This information would enable the students to reflect, analyse and improve. Perhaps this is a future discussion with businesses prior to their participation, to enhance the longer term learning outcomes for students and mutual respective benefits from the process.

A high point: Instagram for Business

One notable student action and outcome came from a third year marketing student. The student provided a very quick Instagram training session with one of the businesses at a Forum event following a number of students indicating that the business would likely achieve much more from using Instagram than the social media they were currently utilising. The business took this on board, learned how to use it and did go on and develop this further and reported that the business has since monetised this channel. The student reflected on her intervention and developed a final year marketing dissertation on Instagram for business, using a live training workshop for businesses as the research focus. At the point of writing this article the student in question has secured a graduate level role for an international brand as their Social Media Manager.

Employability prospects

In terms of employability outcomes for students, several final year students indicated how the Forums had assisted in securing final year placements and indeed graduate roles. During interviews, these students have cited the forum events as examples to demonstrate networking and communication skills and also how they

have developed analytical skills working with businesses to solve real business issues; all highly regarded employability skills. Meeting businesses is a valuable learning experience, and one that has enabled students to build their professional networks, gain project work for assessed modules and secure placement and job opportunities. Students who attended from other departments across the University were also using the Forums positively as a way to demonstrate their exposure to business, business topics and problem solving – features which they stated were not as plentiful in their course as they would have liked.

There is some subjective evidence, from one specific cohort of marketing students, that those who participated achieved better grades in their assignments. In one specific module, their final assessment demonstrated higher order thinking and analysis, with much greater level of application than assignments submitted by other students who had not attended and their overall grade was notably higher because their work more appropriately addressed the assessment criteria. Of course one could surmise that these were simply the better students, more committed to their studies and more active in their own learning, and this may well be the case. Spending time with these students over the academic year, they were also able to showcase in class their thought process and problem-solving ability better in relation to questions and challenges in class. This was also evident with subsequent groups but a future project here for me might be to develop a suitable measurement and evaluation framework to ascertain in greater detail the impact and value for students of participating in the Forums.

Conclusion

According to NMC Horizons (2017) the student of the future is a 'maker' - someone who goes beyond critically understanding problems to being able to produce solutions. This is a view supported by HEA (2015) in stating and evidencing the value and impact of real world authentic learning experiences, as a high impact learning pedagogy, one that increases students' engagement. They suggest that there could be more opportunity and impact in developing this further into assessments within programmes. There are evidenced benefits for students and businesses and for universities too, in playing a key and fundamental role of an educational organisation for the benefit of the community it serves whilst contributing to economic development in its various forms. Academics can take from this a format that works, that involves and engages students, staff and external stakeholders for the benefit of all. The Forum is a simple model that can be implemented at low financial cost, it is easily adjusted to suit the particular academic department and university and elicits enormous benefits. As Erickson & Laing (2016) demonstrate, it can be used as a differentiator in the student recruitment process and can enhance business-university-student engagement, as well as the student learning experience.

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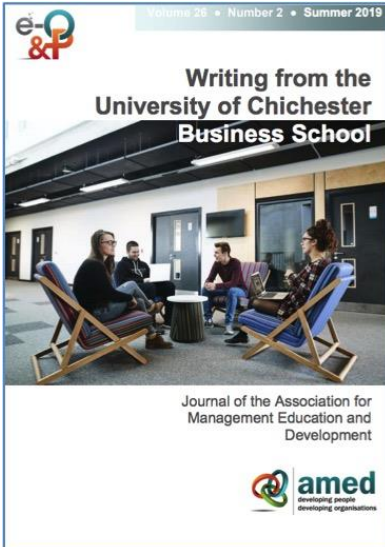
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